

# **The Critical Need for School-Based Interventions to Safeguard Children Against Sexual Abuse**

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## ***Abstract***

In conjunction with the constitutional guarantees, India has a sturdy legal apparatus and commitment to a multitude of international covenants to address and ensure child protection. However, it is contemptible that incidents of child sexual abuse are rampant across the country. This paper argues that schools, as pivotal social spaces for children, can play a key role in sensitizing children, parents, teachers and communities to this serious and much stigmatized issue. It is suggested that teachers should be capacitated and trained to provide age appropriate sexual health education to children as well as to recognize the warning signs of any kind of sexual assault or abuse on children. Efforts must be made to diminish the socio-cultural stigma around this matter through constructive discussions in the classroom in an inclusive and child friendly manner. The capacity-building initiatives for teachers and ancillary school staff could be facilitated through networking with government and non-government organizations, which can organize orientation programmes and workshops on these concerns from time to time. Furthermore, it is imperative that a potentially abusive situation does not occur or fester within school premises. For this, it is recommended that safety concerns through use of security cameras, meticulous investigation and police verification before recruitment of staff and safe transportation must be duly addressed.

## ***Keywords***

children, child sexual abuse, school, child protection, teachers

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### **Background**

India has several constitutional guarantees focusing on child protection coupled with a sturdy legal apparatus and commitment to a multitude of international covenants. The National Policy for Children, 2013, identifies childhood as a worthy and an integral part of life, and directs the state to “create a caring, protective and safe environment for all children, to reduce their vulnerability in all situations and to keep them safe at all places, especially public spaces” (GoI, 2013: 9). It also mandates it to “protect all children from all forms of violence and abuse, harm, neglect, stigma, discrimination, deprivation, exploitation including economic exploitation and sexual exploitation, abandonment, separation, abduction, sale or trafficking for any purpose or in any form, pornography, alcohol and substance abuse, or any other activity that takes undue advantage of them or harms their personhood or affects their development” (GoI, 2013: 9). The Ministry of Women and Child Development, in the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2011–2016), has also explicitly mentioned the stringent steps that are needed for prevention of child sexual abuse. However, despite the best intentions and plans in place and notwithstanding the two most comprehensive national legislations for the protection of children, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000 and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act 2012, the number of instances of child sexual abuse has risen sharply.

Child sexual abuse is a crime committed against children, wherein their vulnerability and powerless position is taken advantage of by the abuser. According to the World Health Organization, “Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violates the laws or social taboos of society” (WHO, 1999: 15). Likewise, the United Nations has defined child sexual abuse as “contacts or interactions between a child and an older or more knowledgeable child or adult (a stranger, sibling or person in position of authority, a parent or a caretaker) when the child is being used as an object of gratification for the older child’s or adult’s sexual needs. These contacts or interactions are carried out against the child using force, trickery, bribes, threats or pressure” (UNICEF, 2012: 16). The activities

involved in child sexual abuse could embrace the actual sex performance, indecent touching, fondling of genitals, exposure to offensive pornographic material or exhibitionism, and being forced to play a part in sexually stimulating actions (Putnam, 2003). The offender usually violates a relationship of trust with the child and may victimize children for a sense of power or a sense of pleasure or the abusers could also be alcoholics, psychopaths or paedophiles. Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman (1994) argue that boys are more liable than girls to have experienced violence to genitals while girls are more likely than boys to have experienced other types of sexual abuse.

Wihbey (2009) estimated the global prevalence of child sexual abuse, based on meta-analysis of 65 research studies across 22 countries and assessed that 7.9% of males and 19.7% of females universally faced sexual abuse before the age of 18 years, attributing low prevalence rates to underreporting. It is notable that children often become targets of sexual abuse due to their vulnerability, lack of knowledge regarding abuse and their inherent apprehensions or fears in disclosing the nature of abuse. It is extremely difficult for them to discuss and divulge the event due to trauma, shame or guilt associated with it. Several studies (Krug et al., 2002; Putnam, 2003) suggest that in a great majority of cases, the perpetrator is known to the child. The children belonging to a lower socio-economic status, those coming from disturbed families as well as those with physical or mental disabilities are most vulnerable. It is apparent that secrecy about the abuse is enforced by the perpetrator through threats and denial. Moreover, there is a labyrinth of factors that perpetuate stigma around this issue. If children do divulge their abuse, the testimonies of parents or other adults often overrule the descriptions narrated by children. Sahay (2010) underlined the multifarious familial and social factors that force the victims of child sexual abuse to remain silent. Abuse of girls is typically concealed on the pretext of preservation of family reputation and due to concerns around vaginal virginity or purity, while abuse in the case of boys is usually overlooked, to the point that at times it is even considered not possible. It is a pity that the question of child sexual abuse has always been cloaked in silence and not alluded to in public forums, although it is known to occur

in schools, child care institutions, religious and charitable establishments and also sometimes in the child's own abode.

### **The Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse in India**

India houses more than 472 million children, encompassing nearly 39% of the country's total population. This is also the largest number of minors in any country and makes up almost 19% of the world's children (NIUA, 2016: 3). Although child abuse as an issue is considered by some to be a relatively new phenomenon, the problem has existed for a long time. It has been confirmed that there is very little information on child sexual abuse in India due to multiple reasons like a lack of acknowledgement or denial by society, poor disclosure, underreporting and the socio-cultural stigma attached to this issue. All this suggests that the malady of child sex abuse could be more pervasive than is usually reported (Deb and Mukherjee, 2009).

In a 1996 survey, conducted in 11 schools by Samvada, a Bangalore-based NGO, it was found that among 348 girl students, 83% had faced eve-teasing and 13% had been sexually harassed, when they were less than 10 years old. This left them with standing scars such as depression, anger, helplessness and a deep-rooted distrust of men (Virani, 2000). There has also been a study conducted by an international non-profit organization, Save the Children (2005), which looked at the pervasiveness of child sexual abuse among school-going children in Chennai. It observed that in a sample of 2,211 children, almost 42% had to bear one form of sexual abuse or another, as a minimum, and their gender-segregated data showed that about 48% boys and 39% of the girls reported being sexually abused. The study concluded that sexual abuse of school-going young children was repeatedly found to be a deliberate exploitation of a trust relationship by the abuser.

In a significant report released in 2007 by the Ministry of Women and Child Development of the Government of India, based on a survey spanning 13 states with a sample of 12,447 children, it is clearly pointed out that 21% of the participants had been subjected to severe forms of sexual abuse, but most children chose to keep quiet and did not even mention it to their parents. Almost 50% of the abusers were individuals

familiar to the child or found trustworthy by the child (GoI, 2007). Behere et al. (2013) found that a total of 33,098 incidents of child sexual abuse and 7,112 cases of child rape were reported in the nation in the year 2011. The authors further reported that every second child is being exposed to one or another form of sexual abuse and every fifth child faces critical forms of it. CHILDLINE India Foundation (CIF), the nodal agency of the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development for managing the CHILDLINE 1098 phone service across the country, also points out that India has one of the world's largest numbers of sexually abused children. It clearly reveals in its website data that a child below 16 years of age is raped every 15<sup>th</sup> minute, a child below 10 every 13<sup>th</sup> hour and one in every 10 children sexually abused at any point of time ([www.childline.org.in](http://www.childline.org.in)). These figures illustrate that due to the malady of child sexual abuse, the safety and well-being of children is being threatened countrywide.

Lately, the proliferation of news articles has also highlighted the epidemic proportions with which child sexual abuse occurs in the country - Two minors detained for sexual abuse on a student ([www.indianexpress.com](http://www.indianexpress.com), August 14, 2015); One in every two children victim of sexual abuse, says survey ([hindustantimes.com](http://hindustantimes.com), May 16, 2017); Murder of schoolboy raises spectre of child sexual abuse in India ([www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com), September 9, 2017); Four year old girl sexually assaulted in a Bengaluru school ([www.indianexpress.com](http://www.indianexpress.com), September 13, 2017); Sexual assault on a Nigerian student in a school in Noida ([business-standard.com](http://business-standard.com), October 27, 2017); Needed: Strict law enforcement to combat online child sexual abuse ([timesofindia.indiatimes.com](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com), November 22, 2017) and so on. The reported child rape cases increased from 2,113 in 2001 to 12,363 in 2011 and went up by almost 44% nationally, following the enactment of Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 (National Crime Records Bureau [NCRB], 2015). The increased media attention and reporting brings this deeply buried and uncomfortable question of child sexual abuse to the fore. As the media plays a prominent role in cultivating public opinion, it should take care not to report such events to generate sensation but to analyse the issue from a proper perspective and help to build a vision which rejects such crimes.

### **The Consequences of Sexual Abuse for Child Victims**

Child sexual abuse has been emphasized as a serious medical, developmental, and social problem (Kempe, 2013). Irish et al. (2010) found child sexual abuse to be associated with higher rates of physical health conditions, including gastrointestinal, gynaecological, and cardiovascular problems and obesity. The psychological consequences of sexual abuse in children are well documented and range from “chronic depression to low self-esteem to sexual dysfunction to multiple personalities” (American Psychological Association., 2001). Studies concur that the victims may develop long-term adverse mental health complaints such as dissociative responses related to post-traumatic stress syndrome, cognitive distortions, nightmares, flashbacks, eating disorders, sexual aggression, substance abuse, venereal disease and extreme nervousness associated with sex. Some male victims may themselves become the sex abusers (Child Sexual Abuse, 1993; GoI, 2007). It has also been noted that the victims of child sexual abuse felt embarrassed, disgusted, unhappy, depressed, tormented, guilty and sometimes suicidal (Priyabadini, 2007; Carson et al., 2013). During abuse, a child gets an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and loss of self-control, which transfer into all spheres of his/her life. Thus, it cannot be denied that child sexual abuse is a heinous crime with devastating consequences on the physical, psychological and social well-being of the abused child. This continues to affect them further into adulthood.

### **The Need for School-Based Interventions**

According to Boudreaux and Lord (2005, cited in Pinheiro, 2006: 50) “infants and young children are more likely to be victimized by their primary caregivers and other family members because of their dependence on these adults and limited independent social interactions outside the home”. However, as children grow, they develop a sense of autonomy or independence and remain outside the home or away from the immediate family for a considerable amount of time. Therefore, grown-up children are also likely to be victimized by people at spaces outside their domestic domain. With schools being important social spaces where children spend substantial time, even these institutions are not immune to the evil of child sexual abuse. It is thus the responsibility of school management to

ensure the safety and security of children on their premises and to provide a conducive and happy learning environment. Although Indian boards like the ICSE and CBSE have documented customary regulations and guidelines that their affiliated schools are supposed to follow in compliance with the POCSO Act 2012, a lack of disciplinary ramifications and governmental apathy allow such rules to remain redundant without ever being applied. A case in point is the adolescent reproductive and sexual health (ARSH) education programme promoted by the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). This led to a major controversy in 2007 and a consequent ban in schools across several Indian states ([www.timesofindia.indiatimes.org](http://www.timesofindia.indiatimes.org), June, 2014). In addition, a national level study by CHILDLINE in 2011 echoed that to formulate and implement the Child Protection Policy is an important responsibility of the schools beyond legislative compliances. It was in place in only 10% of the sampled schools ([www.childline.org.in](http://www.childline.org.in)).

It is also evident that the existing mechanisms concerning child sexual abuse give exhaustive measures post case incidence but that only a few, if any, deal with prevention. The widespread prevalence of this problem contradicts the existence of imperative legislation and its instruments, which have noticeably not been able to foster any concrete preventive measures. Therefore, the key lies in deterrence or prevention and preparing children and society with the essential ways to thwart an act that has entrenched, harmful and sustained negative effects on the psyche of the children. School, being a pivotal setting for the holistic development and nurturing of a child, can play a distinct role in breaking the vicious cycle and patterns of abuse against children. As an institution, it can give a requisite platform to children, their families and commune, to hone their abilities and understanding on matters related to gender, sexual and reproductive health and suppositions around child sexual abuse as well as to discuss and resolve these issues in a productive manner.

### **Suggestions for Specific School Interventions and Actions**

The prevention of child sexual abuse necessitates a multitude of collaborative efforts and strategies by various stakeholders. They include

teachers, parents, school management committees, community welfare associations, healthcare professionals, the police, government and the children themselves. According to Wurtele (2009), the prime purpose of schools is to educate and hence they are a rational choice for teaching children about sexual abuse and its prevention. Duane and Carr (2002) concur that such school-based programmes and interventions may also work by raising awareness, sensitizing and bringing information to the most important members of the children's social systems, i.e., parents, family, peers and teachers. Some of the interventions and actions that can be taken at school level to tackle the problem of child sexual abuse have been collated. These are based on the review of published research, guidelines, policy and curriculum initiatives adopted in countries like the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia and Germany, as well as the services and programmes designed by several Indian non-government organizations and agencies like TULIR - Centre for prevention and healing of child sexual abuse, CHILDLINE India Foundation, and Arpan.

- First and foremost, it is vital that children are empowered to recognize potentially abusive situations as well as suspicious and predatory behaviours by themselves. In the contemporary era of advanced information technology, easy media reach and social networking, it is inevitable that children are exposed to an ocean of information that they cannot fully comprehend. Thus, apart from parental engagement, a structured, age appropriate, sexual and reproductive health education programme must be a part of school curriculum. It should focus on personal safety, distinguishing between safe and unsafe touch, as well as all biological, social, psychological and cultural aspects related to sexuality and gender. This will enable development of a strong sense of self and equitable relationships among children.
- In addition, any such programme must be conducted by trained, competent and sensitive people who provide adequate information to children and adolescents in a sensible and age sensitive manner. For this, services of organizations like the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development (NIPCCD) or experienced doctors, lawyers, social workers and counsellors, can be sought. In continuance of this, all initiatives must endeavour to diminish the stigma



around child sexual abuse in an inclusive and child friendly manner. This will give children a platform to express and articulate their feelings related to specific unacceptable adult behaviours and will psychologically equip them to report abuse, if any, without any inhibitions.

- Likewise, it is vital to train both in-service as well as pre-service teachers, through conducting special programmes and interventions directly addressing the issue of child sexual abuse. A standardized teacher training module should be developed and adopted covering a broad spectrum of child protection issues. The contents in the module could draw from research studies, best practices and reports of consultations involving different educators and other stakeholders. The ‘Guidelines for the Prevention of Child Abuse’ drafted and released in 2014 by the Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights (DCPCR) as well as the information booklet for health care professionals titled ‘Child Sexual Abuse - Prevention and Response’ developed through a joint initiative by UNICEF- Indian Medical Association (Sagar, 2014) could serve as foundation materials.
- The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2009, Rule 60(1) also states that “Every institution shall have systems of ensuring that there is no abuse, neglect and maltreatment and this shall include the staff being aware of what constitutes abuse, neglect and maltreatment as well as early indicators of abuse, neglect and maltreatment and how to respond to these”. The teachers must be aware of taxonomies and provisions under the POCSO (2012) legislation, especially Section 19, which makes it mandatory to report, even if there is a likelihood of such an offence. The staff should also know how and to whom to give testimony in an incident of abuse. The teachers must also be trained to recognize the warning signs of child sexual abuse or any erratic or unusual behaviour shown by the child and to respond to any intended or unintended disclosure made by the child. Although CBSE notifies its affiliated schools about legislative guidelines, from time to time, a detailed user manual for educators needs to be published, suitable for the Indian context.
- It is extremely important to have a caring and nurturing environment at school, sensitive and conducive to children’s well-being. Along with

teachers' support, peer sharing and learning must be encouraged. There should be no ragging or bullying and children must be made aware of 1098—the child help line number—and must be given suitable training and orientation on the complaints and reporting mechanism followed at school. A complaints box must also be positioned at a prominent spot inside the school premises, easily identifiable by children and grievances could be looked into by a committee of teachers or the counsellor. Children should be trained on adopting and practising certain cautious behaviours, for instance, staying in groups, not mingling with strangers or visitors, and also sharing with teachers or school counsellors any uncomfortable or intimidating situation that they encounter at school or outside.

- Child sexual abuse is unquestionably a complex predicament that schools cannot be expected to tackle single handedly. Plummer (2013) also notes the importance of building networks and collaboration with counselling services, non-governmental organizations, the police and legal system for the prevention of child sexual abuse. Thus, the schools must keep the contact details of the nearest local police post, hospital and the zonal Child Welfare Committee. In case any sexual misconduct against a child comes to their notice, the school may report the matter to the family and police and thereon facilitate therapeutic or counselling services for the child and his or her family with the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), or Social workers of the Police Department. This should be carried out in a child-friendly space with adequate provisions for safety and protection of privacy for the aggrieved child. Preserving confidentiality of the victimized child and his/her family and providing them with guidance and support must be ensured. In case of any health related emergency due to the misdemeanour, it must be ensured that the child is soon taken to a nearby hospital for immediate medical attention and treatment. Besides, the schools can provide infrastructural and training support to organize workshops or meetings for sensitizing parents from time to time.
- For the safety and protection of children, the schools must also strive to augment campus vigilance and observe certain cautions in their overall administrative functioning and day-to-day working. All gates of the school

building should be duly manned by security personnel. Additionally, planned installation, proper positioning and regular monitoring of security devices and cameras must be carried out for caution and prior prudence. In terms of building and structural details, the corridors and landings should be well lit with convenient exits. Dead-end foyers and staircase hideaways should be eliminated, and restrooms should be conveniently located as well as maintained separately for boys and girls and at a suitable distance from each other.

- A meticulous investigation and police verification must be carried out before recruitment of any of the teaching or non-teaching staff. No candidate with a criminal record of sexual and/or physical violence should be recruited for any position at school. All selected candidates must also provide a written and signed affidavit to confirm information pertaining to his/her character and background. The background of instructors or other professionals for extracurricular activities, if hired, must also be scrutinized.
- Identity cards must be prominently worn by all staff and students. Trespassers should not be allowed inside the school and all visitors must be put on record. They can be issued one time use official passes for specific work. In case of a visitor seeking to meet the child or take him/her outside the class or school building, the credentials must be verified by the concerned teacher by calling the parents or guardians of the respective child. The parents could also be issued with identity cards so that for those who pick up their wards at the time of dispersal, young children could be handed over carefully to the adults/parents/caregivers after due identification by the school personnel.
- For schools that provide a bus transport service to students, a trained and experienced female attendant or teacher must always accompany children throughout the route, along with the driver and the conductor, until the very last child on board is dropped back home safely. Any complaint of harassment or bullying reported or seen in the bus must be addressed without delay. It should be ensured that parents also make arrangements to pick up their children from bus stops themselves or through trustworthy escorts. Initiatives like intra-school carpools by parents themselves could help to counter the risks posed by commercial

vehicle drivers. Similar safeguards must also be observed during travel, picnics and outdoor activities.

### Conclusion

This paper concurs with the view that schools are pivotal social spaces for children. It is crucial to consider them as partners in preventing, identifying and responding to the malaise of child sexual abuse. The educators can play a key role in sensitizing children, parents and communities towards this serious and much stigmatized issue through an active engagement of all stakeholders and bringing about concomitant changes in attitudes through informed interventions, in collaboration with concerned agencies. It is irrefutable that trained teachers can channelize their resources and creativity to impart functional skills to children for the prevention of abuse. The schools can certainly play an ever-evolving role in addressing several of the concerns related to the safety and protection of children against sexual abuse.

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