

Awareness among parents about child sexual abuse

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Abstract

Childhood is a time to rejoice in innocence, to cherish the little joys life offers. It is the time when children learn to trust, to love, to cuddle and to tug and it is sad to see that this phase is often plagued by numerous social evils like child labour, female infanticide, child marriage, child prostitution, illiteracy or child sexual abuse. Of these there are certain evils that have been talked about, people are aware and a lot is being done. However, Child Sexual Abuse is that big bad monster which is lurking over the children everywhere ready to gulp and ruin the most beautiful period of their life, but is still hushed upon. According to an NGO Arpan 'most children quietly suffer and don't talk about sexual abuse, but we need to talk about it so that we can prevent it and cure it'. This research thus found out that most parents are not aware about CSA. Even among those who have heard about it, not all have educated their children about it.

Keywords: awareness, parents, child sexual abuse

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is one of the most fundamental violations of children's rights and an obstacle to their overall development. Though we expect that children will be protected by the adults in the family, teachers, community and the state, but the fact is that the abusers may be someone from their family, teachers, neighbors, friends etc.

According to the summary of "STUDY OF CHILD ABUSE: INDIA 2007" by India Committee of the Netherlands:

1. 53.22% children reported having faced one or more forms of sexual abuse.
2. 21.90% respondents facing severe forms of sexual abuse and 50.76% other forms of sexual abuse.
3. Out of the children respondents, 5.69% reported being sexually assaulted.
4. Children in Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar and Delhi reported the highest incidence of sexual assault.
5. Children on street, children at work and children in institutional care reported the highest incidence of sexual assault.
6. Most children did not report the matter to anyone.
7. The severest sexual abuse occurred in the age group of 11-16 years.
8. Boys are equally at risk as girls.

These statistics prove that child sexual abuse has become a social problem, an epidemic which is not affecting just one social class or one region but is spreading its wings everywhere.

Review of literature

A family is a group of people who live together and who are expected to perform specific functions, especially in reference to the children involved (Tower, 1999). Role of a family is to provide secure, stable and a constant relationship to the child. The parents are expected to teach the child what the society

expects from them and for that "parents are expected to provide comfort- the comfort of being properly housed, clothed and fed" (Tower, 1999). Apart from this parents also have to ensure emotional well-being of the children. Thus the FAMILY which is the most fundamental unit of a society has a major role to play in this respect.

Communication has an important role in family functioning as it enables parents and children to express their thoughts and feelings. It also strengthens parent child relationship and increases mutual understanding. It will also be interesting to see how the education level and family income i.e. the socio economic status of the family has a bearing on the communication pattern between parents and the children and especially with respect to sex education in order to prevent Child Sexual Abuse.

The idea of sexual activity with a child arouses the deepest concern and even indignation, among all but a small minority. Convention about normal sexual activity may differ from place to place but sexual activities with children are almost universally condemned as a violation of what is normal sexual behavior; the possibility arouses feelings of disgust and horror (Fontaine, 1990).

The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect defines sexual abuse as "any childhood sexual experience that interferes with or has the potential for interfering with a child's healthy development". More simply, a sexual abuse is the use of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult (Tower, 1999). Finkelhor and Korbin constructed an internationally valid definition of sexual abuse: it is 'proscribed, proximate (i.e. it involves contact) and preventable (Fontaine, 1990).

In the United States, Sexual Abuse of a child is defined in the 2000 guidelines as "involving -forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may

involve physical contact, including penetrative (e.g. rape or buggery) and non-penetrative acts. They may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, pornographic material or watching sexual activities or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.”

In India the task of defining Child Sexual Abuse has been both complex and problematic and hence gone through a lot of change. The recent definitions have tried to include a whole gamut of activities that may have any impact on the child. It now includes activities that do not involve physical contact, is more common than anticipated and also affects much younger children than was previously believed. Though the Law of the country has taken cognizance of the changing scenario it needs to be seen if the society and the parents who are a part of this society are equally aware of these or not.

Based on the identity of the perpetrator, child sexual abuse may be divided in to two categories-

Familial Abuse

“Incest is sexual abuse by a blood relative who is assumed to be a part of child’s nuclear family” (Tower, 1999). It would also include role of a surrogate parent like a stepfather, older siblings who is in a powerful situation by virtue of their age or resources.

Extra familial Abuse

It is the abuse perpetrated by someone outside the child’s family. Research also says that children are mostly abused by someone they trust, someone from their close circle of trust.

Fontaine (1990) observes that the consequences of abuse depend on a number of different factors like the age of the child, the duration of the abuse and the relationship between the abuser and the abused. He also goes on to explain that some sexual abuse is violent, in other cases it may be a slow intensification from a gentle start and, although the victims may be coerced, they are not physically abused. He further goes on to state that the reactions of victims to abuse are not uniform as some hate their abusers and are therefore glad or relieved when they ‘leave the house or die’, while some show great affection for the abuser, despite the suffering caused by the abuser. Irrespective of the kind of relationship between the abuser and the victim, a sexually abused child may suffer serious harm. The consequences vary according to the circumstances and the particular child; some may be seriously affected by minor incidents, while apparently survive dreadful abuse over many years (Fontaine, 1990).

According to Mullick (2004), sexual abuse against children not only has a damaging and long term impact on the victim, but also affects the family, community and society. “Like any crime that continues to grow unchecked, sexual violence against children whether within or outside their homes or as an organized trafficking network directly reflects the health of society as a whole”.

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In a nut shell we can categorize the effects as Impact on Children

- Children who have been sexually abused suffer severe trauma; physical, mental, emotional and behavioral
- It can lead to sexually transmitted diseases, HIV or pregnancy at an early age.
- Abused children feel re-victimized if the family or society rejects them.
- Depression, isolation and self-destruction are some of the long and short term impacts of CSA.

Impact on Families

- Inter- family relations may break down.
- Families may abandon the child to avoid social ostracisation.
- Families may be pressured to force the child into the sex trade.

According to the literature associated with the consequences of child sexual abuse, different variables have been studied that might have a bearing on the effects of abuse. These are age at onset of abuse, degree of seriousness of the abuse, duration of abuse, relationship of the abuser to the abused, abuse accompanied by violence, and the way in which help was provided to the abused (Corby, 2000).

Studies have shown that adverse reaction to abuse was experienced by children in the age group 7 to 13 than by younger children 4 to 6 years or older children 14 to 18 years (Gomez- Schwartz et al. 1990). The reason given for the same is that younger children are not aware of the social stigma attached to abuse hence the consequences are less harmful for younger children. A study found that children who were first abused before the age of 10 years suffered from worst short term effects compared to children who were abused before the age of ten years (Adams-Tucker, 1981). This is the reason the researcher chose to study the parents of children between 7 and 12 years of age for the study.

Apart from the entire variable mentioned above, research found out that longer the duration of the abuse, more harmful are the short and long term effects of abuse (Browne and Finkelhor 1986; Gomez- Schwartz et al. 1990). Their study shows that the effects are more harmful and severe for

children who are closely related to the abuser. The reason being gross betrayal of trust by the abuser who was someone known and had more interaction with the child.

Response to abuse is also one of the very important variables that influence the effects of child sexual abuse. Research has found that a negative response from the parent to the damage from sexual abuse can be lessened or sometimes prevented by caring, supportive, and open adults who deal with the issue realistically (Hudson and Skeen, 1987). Children may not disclose being sexually abused because of threats to bodily harm to them or their family, fear of being removed from home, fear of not being believed or due to guilt or shame. Hence, parents play a very prominent role in preventing child sex abuse. Children communicate through words, signs and behavior. We adults need to listen when they speak, and understand what their signs and behaviors tell us. When children don't talk to us about their problems, it may be because we don't listen to them well, or we are not available for them. As parents you are an important part of your child's protection, as well as recovery if they are abused. In case a child discloses abuse it is important to remain calm, listen carefully and never blame the child. Parental support is necessary but professional help should also be sort.

Children are exposed to risks of sexual abuse at the hands of parents, siblings, relatives, teachers, older children, childcare providers, family friends or neighbors, and from strangers on the Internet. Hence, making them aware of the risks will reduce the chances of them being sexually abused or molested. It is not possible to protect a child from the outside world for long, and just as you would warn a child about fire or electrical points, teaching them about inappropriate sexual behavior will keep the child safe.

Objectives

This study tries to study the awareness level of the parents, their perception about Child sexual abuse and steps taken by these parents to educate children about it. It also aims to suggest ways to spread awareness among parents and children about this menace.

Methodology

The study is descriptive in nature using interview schedule as a tool for data collection. Moreover, interview schedule helped the researcher to generate a uniform, comparable and generalizable data along with rich narratives giving in-depth information about certain perceptions people hold regarding issues of CSA.

To see if parents are doing their bit by educating children about CSA so as to prevent it two schools in Delhi were selected. One is a reputed public school which has children from financially and educationally affluent families and another is an MCD school. The head mistresses from the schools were approached so as to take permission to conduct interviews with the parents. The respective heads were briefed about the topic of research and looking at the sensitivity and implication of the research willingly gave consent. Thirty parents each from both the groups were selected for the study due to the constraint of time and resources and also because of the law of diminishing returns (as more respondents would not be able to yield any new, useful information). The participants

were recruited using convenience sampling and snowball sampling technique. A teacher was assigned by the school to introduce the researcher to the parents who had come to pick their children from school.

Findings and discussion

Awareness of the parents about CSA: A True Picture

CSA is well acknowledged in the western countries as an epidemic, a menace which is affecting the entire coming generations in such a way that it leaves a mark on their psyche forever. However in India, though it has been prevalent since time immemorial but had been kept under wraps. Disclosure by the child has been the most difficult part since most of the time the perpetrator has been someone known to the child or someone in the family. Since parents do not speak to the children about it, children feel scared to speak, not knowing how would the parents respond to their complain. Perhaps the reason why parents do not speak to the children is that they themselves are not aware about it. If we do take into account some households where intra familial abuse happens, even in such cases the parent who is not guilty does not know how to respond or help the child. In many cases such abuse is not reported to save the family name. Parents do not realize that a family name or honour is not more important than the child's life. Many NGOs that are working in this field have focused on preventing CSA and the role of parents in educating children about safe and unsafe touches, and also the right to say 'NO'. In the light of the given scenario it becomes crucial to study the awareness of parents regarding CSA so as to ascertain the lacunae in educating and preventing CSA.

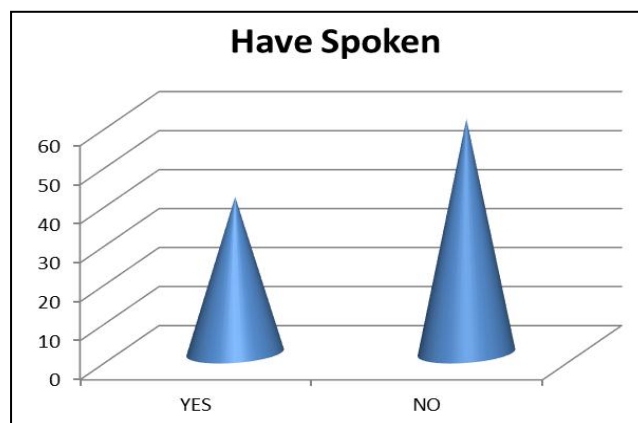


Fig 1: Have spoken regarding child sexual abuse

Knowing about child sexual abuse becomes meaningless if the information is not shared with the children. When asked if the respondents have told their children about CSA, 60% responded in a negative and only 40% responded that they have spoken to their child about it. It is quite an alarming result considering the rate at which this crime against children is spreading its wings in the society. Making the children aware about it is the first step towards protecting the children. However in the light of the given findings it won't be wrong to assume that not many parents would have given the right information in the appropriate manner as a majority of parents are themselves not aware of. According to Arpan an NGO working in this field, aware parents, caretakers and children

can help prevent child sexual abuse. Hence the primary focus for intervention should be in making the parents and the children aware about sexual abuse.

Parents’ perception about discussing about child sexual abuse

Though around 60% parents responded that they have still not spoken to the children regarding CSA, still around 80% feel that it should be spoken about and children should be educated about it. Some responded that children should be in their teens or mature enough to understand such issues. Few even responded that girls should be told only after reaching puberty i.e. after their menstrual cycle starts. These parents do not realize that it might be too late by then as CSA can happen to children of any age group and some basic education is a must. Moreover disclosure by children in case abuse has happened becomes easier if parents have spoken to their children about it. Most of the times children do not realize that what happened to them is an abuse and should be stopped. So if parents speak to their children and give them the confidence children would feel comfortable in disclosing their experiences and hence can be helped.

Who Educates the Child About CSA?

In India the roles in a family are decided on the basis of sex. Males were considered to be the bread winners whereas females were expected to look after the family. With more and

more women stepping into the work field the gender roles however are changing. Couples are striving for an egalitarian relationship. In the light of the changing scenario it needs to be seen if both the parents are contributing towards educating children about sex abuse or is it still the domain of the mothers? Of the 24 respondents who said that they have spoken to their child about CSA, 18 responded that it was the mother who took the initiative of teaching the child about it and 6 responded that both the parents i.e. the mother and the father educate their child about CSA. One respondent who was a mother responded that when her son grows up it would be the father who would educate him. No general trend was noticed regarding education of girls and boys about CSA of the given sample.

Appropriate age to Discuss about Child sexual Abuse

Abuse can happen to a child as old as one month also but it is true that parents cannot be expected to teach children at that age, hence the parents have to be vigilant. However it is highly recommended that it should be spoken about as children have an understanding about their private parts. A basic orientation for self-protection is a must. For parents it is therefore important to be on the lookout for the right opportunity at the right age. Nevertheless deciding about the right age is an issue with the parents who think that children are too young to discuss such issues not taking into account the repercussions of ignoring it.

Table 1: Distribution showing parents perception about appropriate age to educate children

Appropriate Age	Frequency	Percentage
Below 7	8	13.3
Between 7 & 9	1	1.7
Between 9 & 12	14	23.3
Above 12	28	46.7
Can't Say	9	15
Total	60	100

It is rather disturbing to note that about 46% of the respondents replied that the appropriate age to educate children about CSA is above 12 years. Gaining puberty is considered to be the bench mark for parents to start discussing about sexual abuse not taking in to account of the fact that child sexual abuse can happen to a child as old as one month hence is it advisable to wait till so long?

Comfort level of the respondents while discussing about CSA

Research shows in some societies parents still don't feel comfortable discussing about sexuality with their children. For example in Thai society parents have fixed roles and sexuality is a taboo topic in most households. This holds true for our Indian society too, however this trend is changing. But it needs to be seen if the same change can be seen in parents' outlook and comfort level when it comes to teaching children about CSA. Though not all the respondents have spoken to their children about CSA, the researcher wanted to find out the perception of the parents' regarding their comfort level while discussing about CSA.

Around 38% parents responded that they will be very comfortable while educating their children about sexual abuse,

30% said that they will be moderately comfortable, whereas 28.3% respondents replied that they won't be comfortable talking to their children about such issues. This calls for attention as it is very important that the parents feel confident and comfortable while talking to their children. As 38.3% respondents replied that parents play a major role in educating children about sexual issues, hence in the light of the given result it is important that parents feel comfortable while discussing about such issues.

Awareness among parents regarding same sex perpetrators

Research shows that a majority of perpetrators are males however it also points towards the fact that the percentage of women as perpetrators is on the rise. Women are generally not expected to be involved in sexual crimes against children hence the vulnerability against them increases which make it a cause for concern.

It is therefore quite disturbing to note that only 21.7% respondents have spoken about same sex perpetrators compared to 78.3% who haven't. Parents when discussing with their children about the places on their body that nobody should touch, should also mention that they should be cautious

of all, be it same sex people as well as people of opposite sex. Young children are not just susceptible to abuse at the hands of perpetrators of the opposite sex hence it becomes paramount that parents who are educating the children about sexual abuse take into their preview this aspect as well. It is rather alarming to note that around 28.3% respondents haven't heard about same sex perpetrators and that is the reason for not making the children aware about it. Ignorance on the part of parents can have unfavorable repercussions for the children. To top it all, 23.3% respondents did not think it important enough to be told to their child, whereas 45% parents did not respond to the questions which shows that parents still perceive it as a taboo topic hence are either unaware about it or uncomfortable discussing about it or both.

Major Responsibility

Though family is the main agent and source of socialization for the children but parents in some cultures still feel it is an unpleasant topic to discuss. However if we talk about protecting children then parents do not shy away from their responsibility. While around one fifth (21.7%) parents thought that it was the primary responsibility of the school to educate the child about child sexual abuse and around double that number thought that it was the responsibility of the parents as family is the first institution of socialization for the children. However a majority of parents thought that it was a shared responsibility between the parents and the school and both the institutions play a pivotal role in spreading awareness about sexual abuse of the young children.

Need for a special program to educate the parents

As it has been observed that parents themselves are not aware to many issues related to CSA or how to initiate the process of creating awareness in children about this issue as many as 90% agree that there should be a special program organized for parents to educate them so that they are able to spread the required awareness among their children. Around 5% feel that there is really no need for such programs for parents.

Though a very high percentage i.e. 90% parents feel the need for a special program, around 70% agreed to attend any program organized in this regard. Of the total respondents 20% people responded in a negative where the reason given by some was that they wouldn't have time for it. A mother who is working as a domestic help responded "*time hi kahan hota hai, kaam pe se aakar ghar ka kaam hota hai. Aese mei kahan jaa sakte hain*" (there is no time as after work I have to look after my household chores, with all this where can we go?). Community worker should take upon the responsibility of reaching to these people and spreading awareness among them. Though role of parents is very important in educating children but the role of the school cannot be negated and this assumption has been proven correct when 98.3% parents stressed on the role of teachers and the school in making students aware about CSA.

Intervention Suggested

From the various researches that have been conducted in this area, one thing remains certain that a lot needs to be done in this regard. As many as 50% parents suggested that spreading awareness among parents and children would be an effective

tool in checking this menace. It shows that parents realize the importance of spreading awareness regarding this issue and want effective steps to be taken in this regard. Around 7% responded that laws to be made more stringent in this area and punishment for offender to be more severe. One parent stressed on strengthening relationship with the child.

Conclusion

The main aim of this research was to find out about the awareness among parents about CSA and the efforts taken to educate children about it. The research shows that though most parents in the study claim to be aware about CSA but their knowledge is inadequate and faulty. A clear majority of the respondents could not explain what is Child Sexual Abuse? A few replied that when a child is raped it is called CSA, whereas just a handful of the respondents replied that touching the child inappropriately, fondling with the child's genitals, pornography etc. is also CSA. This clearly points towards the lack of awareness and understanding about CSA.

Though we see that the knowledge about CSA is insufficient still it needed to be seen if parents had taken the initiative of educating their children about it so that it could be prevented. The research shows that more than fifty percent of the respondents have not spoken to their children about CSA i.e. about touches and talks that they may find uncomfortable etc. Interestingly, even though most parents in the study have not spoken to their children about it, but a huge percentage of parents claim that children should be spoken to about CSA. This is surely the first step towards spreading awareness and preventing CSA.

When it comes to talking to children about CSA mothers were found to play a major role. Among the people in the study who had spoken to their children about CSA, in maximum cases it was the mother who took the initiative, followed by cases where both the parents talk to their child about CSA. This shows that fathers too need to understand their responsibility and be involved in educating children about CSA.

The research shows that apart from the unawareness among parents another reason for not educating children about CSA is the perception of the parents regarding the appropriate age of the child to teach about CSA. Maximum number of respondents replied that children should be told about CSA after attaining the age of 12 as younger children are not mature enough to understand about such issues and may have a corrupting effect on them. These parents are definitely not aware about the various researches that show that in maximum cases abuse happens much before 12 years.

When talking to children about CSA it is important that the parents feel comfortable, otherwise it might make the situation awkward for the parent and the child. Of the parents in the study a majority replied that they would be comfortable discussing such an issue, followed closely by parents who will not be very comfortable and those who won't be comfortable at all. The comfort level is important as it helps in deciding the strategy adopted by the parents in teaching their children about CSA. Among the parents who have spoken to their children about CSA, a majority have spoken to their child directly explaining the different parts of the body which one should not let anybody touch, how to behave when someone

behaves inappropriately etc. Monitoring as a technique is used by most parents who have not spoken to their children about it.

The research also points towards another very important aspect about which many respondents are unaware i.e. the unawareness of parents about same sex perpetrators. A general perception is that a child is at a risk at the hands of a person of opposite sex, but this isn't true. A child is also susceptible to abuse by a person of the same sex. The study shows that many respondents are not aware about this as maximum number of parents in the study did not respond to the question even and this was clearly the reason for not telling their children to be cautious of people of the same sex also.

Tough family is considered to be the first agent of socialization however when it comes to socializing children about this menace, maximum number of parents replied that it was a shared responsibility of the parents and the school to teach children about CSA, which is followed by parents alone to teach children about it. Teaching children is important not just to prevent CSA but it helps to ensure that children would feel comfortable in disclosing about any abuse they encounter. A clear majority feels the need to have special programs organized to educate parents about CSA and spread awareness about educating children about it. Most of these parents have also consented to attend any such workshop or program.

Another very important finding is that the maximum number of respondents have suggested spreading awareness as the most important intervention that could help reduce the incidents of CSA followed by stringent laws to be made in this regard.

This section puts forward some suggestions by the researcher to spread awareness about CSA so as to help prevent it.

1. Aware parents, caretakers and children can certainly prevent child sexual abuse. Research shows that the parents are not aware about the problem i.e. the different ways through which sexual abuse happens, how to communicate to children about it, how to understand the non verbal cues incase the child is being abused etc. Therefore first and foremost parents should be educated about the different aspects related to this problem.
2. Workshops, seminars to be organized for parents by the school, the different RWAs or NGOs working in the field. Professionals are required to educate parents about teaching children about the private parts where they should not allow anybody to touch. Along with telling them about the private parts they should be taught to shout and say, 'NO' or 'STOP'. Parents should be also be taught how to recognize abuse of the child. Parents should not take lightly of any emotional, behavioral change that is noticed in the child. Most importantly parents should always believe their children. No child would ever lie about being sexually abused. Most importantly, once a child feels that nobody believes him/her, it becomes very difficult for the child to share it again as disclosure takes a lot of courage on the part of the child. One of the most important ways for prevention is to teach children about safe and unsafe touch. Parents should teach children about the different rules for personal safety. Parents should also constantly

monitor their child and be alert to any sign that points towards abuse.

3. Not just parents but even teachers, caretakers should be educated. The current study shows that many respondents are of the opinion that school and teachers can play a very important role in spreading awareness among children. Teachers should be trained regarding this issue. Workshops conducted in the school in the presence of the other children will help.
4. For parents from lower economic strata it may not be possible to attend workshops so NGOs to take up the issue in the community. Social workers working in the community should discuss about sexual abuse with the children as well as the parents. This issue to be taken up on a priority basis in all kinds of communities.
5. The golden rule to prevention is for that the parents should TALK. Parents need to give up inhibitions of any type and talk to the children as it is about the child's safety.
6. People to be made aware about the recent Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Bill. Legal knowledge in this regard helps the victim and the family in taking a proper course to ensure justice is done.
7. Parents should work on building a strong emotional bond with their children. For that it is indispensable for parents to build open channels of communication with their children so that there is no awkwardness or inhibitions in sharing ideas or experiences
8. A compulsory program should be prepared for kids at the kindergarten level itself. Professionals working in this field to prepare elaborate content material for teachers and parents.
9. Most importantly the media and the civil society have a huge role to play in spreading awareness about Child Sexual Abuse. The tremendous success of Satya Mev Jayate, prove that talk shows and blog posts can go a long way in spreading awareness about this social problem that affects millions of children worldwide. The overwhelming response received by the program and the initiatives taken as a result helped to bring to the forefront experiences that were so far neglected and buried deep under. This program created an environment where people were ready to discuss about their experiences. It brought to the public sphere a topic that was till now restricted to the private sphere.

Therefore, awareness on the part of the children can help them in raising an alarm or complaining to their teachers or parents incase abuse happens. Incidents like these and many other can be avoided if we all as parents, teachers and the civil society fulfill our role of spreading awareness about this menace that is corrupting our society.

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