

## **Parent Education: A Tool to Prevent Child Abuse and to Promote Child Protection**

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### **Abstract:**

Child abuse is one of the major issues that prevail across the globe. Over the past few years, there has been a significant increase in the number of child abuse cases reported. Child abuse can be physical, sexual and emotional. Being a vulnerable group, children are maltreated in various settings like schools, homes and public places. According to the estimates of WHO up to 1 billion minors between 2 and 17 years of age have endured violence either physical, emotional, or sexual in the year 2017. The scenario of parents turned abusers needs utmost attention. The paper traces the possibility of people who were victims of abuse in their childhood exhibiting abusive behaviour as adults and parents. The notion of effectiveness of physical punishment is often misinterpreted by teachers and parents, increasing the possibility of child abuse. Being primary caretakers, parents can play a major role in ensuring child safety and can take preventive measures against child abuse. In this context, the paper derives information from various reviews to establish a relationship between the importance of educating parents on child abuse and well-being of children.

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## **Introduction**

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines child abuse and child maltreatment as “all forms of physical or emotional ill- treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. In the United States, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) uses the term child maltreatment to refer to both acts of commission (abuse), which include “words or overt actions that cause harm, potential harm, or threat of harm to a child”, and acts of omission (neglect), meaning “the failure to provide for a child’s basic physical, emotional, educational needs or potential harm”. The United States Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act defines child abuse and neglect as, at minimum, “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation” or “an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm”.

## **Types of child abuse**

The World Health Organization distinguishes four types of child maltreatment that are Physical abuse, Sexual abuse, Emotional abuse and Neglect.

### **Physical abuse:**

Physical abuse is termed as the intentional use of physical force against the child by making physical injuries in child’s body by hitting, beating, shaking, biting, scalding, burning, kicking, poisoning and suffocating. This results in harm for the child’s health, survival, worth and dignity of child’s development. Physical abuse does not occur in case of isolation but as a result of collection of behaviours which includes authoritarian control, anxiety-provoking behaviour, and lack of parental care and warmth. Physical abuse is physical punishment for a child which intent to harm with or without knowing.

Physical abuse for a child can lead to physical and mental difficulties and problems in future that include re-victimization, personality disorders, post traumatic stress disorder, dissociative disorders, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, substance abuse, and aggression. Physical abuse in childhood has also been connected with homelessness in adulthood.

### **Sexual abuse:**

Child sexual abuse is (CSA) is a child abuse where the child is abused by an adult or elder people or older adolescents for sexual stimulation. Sexual abuse refers to the participation of a child in a sexual act aimed toward the physical gratification or the financial profit of the person committing the act. Different forms of child sexual abuse includes asking a child or pressuring him/her to engage in sexual activities (without aiming at an outcome), offensive exposure of the genitals to a child, showing pornography videos to the child, serious sexual contact with a child's genitals, viewing of the child's genitals without physical contact for example: Making the child to remove his/her clothes or using a child to produce child pornography.

The main effects of sexual abuse to children which includes guilt and self-blame, flashbacks, nightmares, insomnia, fear of things that is connected with the abuse (including objects, smells, places, doctor's visits etc), self-esteem difficulties, sexual dysfunction, chronic pain, addiction, self-injury, suicidal ideation, somatic complaints, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, other mental illnesses including borderline personality disorder and dissociative identity disorder, propensity to re-victimization in adulthood, bulimia nervosa, and physical injury to the child, among other problems.

### **Psychological abuse**

In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) added child Psychological Abuse to the DSM-5, describing it as “nonaccidental verbal or caregiver that results, or have reasonable potential to result, in significant psychological harm to the child”. Psychological maltreatment is a form or the most

“challenging and prevalent form of child abuse and neglect to a child”. Victims that is the child may react to abuser by keeping a distance with abuser, making a keen observation to the abusive words talked by the abuser or fighting back with abuser and insulting them. This all are the emotional reactions shown by a child to the abuser.

### **Neglect**

Child neglect is the maltreatment of a child without providing proper food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child’s health, safety or well-being by the parents or other person who have the responsibility to care the child. It is a failure from the care takers of a child. Sometimes not giving care to the child can be life threatening. This would result in a lack of attention, love and nurturing for the child.

Mainly neglect may lead to the frequent absence in school, begs or steals food or money, lacks needed medical and dental care, is consistently dirty, or lacks appropriate clothing for the weather. Neglected children may experience delays in physical and psychosocial development, possibly resulting in psychopathology and impaired neuropsychological functions including executive function, attention, processing speed, language, memory and social skills.

### **Impact of child abuse on children**

Child abuse can lead to a wide range of consequences and cause adverse problems on children. Even though every child exposed to abuse do not have similar experiences, they will be facing problems in one or another way. Though some children may overcome from those bad experiences sooner, some will take much more time to get out of the bad experiences they had. Family circumstances play a major role in the resilience of a child who was exposed to certain negative experiences. If the child has very poor relationships with the family and friends, he or she may experience issues like social isolation, socio-economic problems, dangerous neighbourhoods and its impacts, and even disability itself may be a great problem for the child. Creating

circumstances to develop the self-esteem and self-determination of the child, high parenting quality, good relationships with peers and teachers are some of the positive factors which can make the child resilient from the problems faced by him/her.

Previous studies indicate that the children subjected to multiple types of maltreatment experience more adverse issues and depict high levels of trauma symptoms than that of the children who have undergone maltreatment of one type. Studies imply that there are more chances that the young children who are subjected to maltreatment are more likely to experience problems in their later life. The chances of more negative outcomes will be based on the intensity of the abuse or neglect faced by the child. Though abuse itself affects the child adversely, it may have different dimensions as the child is subjected to different types of abuses which may be of the form sexual, physical or emotional. Child maltreatment can affect various domains of development such as physical, psychological, emotional, and behavioural and social all of which are interrelated. Children subjected to abuse from their parents and care takers are more likely to experience insecure attachment problems with the people around them. A parent who should be the primary supporter and protector of a child when turns into be an abuser, child experiences difficulty to trust others when in distress. It also adversely affects the child's ability to communicate and interact with others as well as experiences hurdles to form healthy relationships throughout their life. There exists solid relationships between child abuse and the learning disabilities as well as the poor academic achievement of the children. Those maltreated children shows poor educational achievement and delays in language development than the rest of the children.

Complex trauma is one of the conditions associated with children who have undergone multiple type maltreatment. Complex trauma includes multiple symptoms, disorders, and a wide range of cognitive and behavioural problems aroused due to the prolonged trauma specially which occurred in the early life due to an interpersonal element, where sexual abuse can be considered as an example. Complex trauma affects the developing brain and may

interfere with a child's capacity to integrate sensory, emotional and cognitive information which may lead to over-reactive responses to subsequent stress and long-term effects such as cognitive, behavioural, physical and mental health problems (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child [NSC-DC], 2007; Perry, 2001; Streeck-Fischer & van der Kolk, 2000). The exposure to complex trauma can result in a wide range of psychological problems. There is a significant relationship between the child abuse and mental health problems with post-traumatic stress disorder. Maltreated children also exhibit certain symptoms like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorders, anxiety, mood swings and adjustment disorders. Researches show that there exists a strong association between child abuse and depression among adolescents. Eating disorders, including anorexia and binge-purge behaviour may also be associated with child abuse and neglect. Adolescents subjected to abuse will have more tendencies to move towards consumption of alcohol and drugs. Being subjected to abuse, there may arise chances for developing violent and aggressive behaviour among adolescents and an increased risk of imposing pain on others.

### **Myths about child abuse**

There are innumerable myths related to child abuse. Most people believe that child abuse is a term used when deeds of physical or sexual violence are committed against children. This diverts attention from other forms of abuse such as psychological which can scar children for their life. Another commonly held notion is that child abuse is associated with people who are poverty-stricken, drug addicts or illiterates. Abolishing these myths and educating people is essential to curb child abuse.

### **Parents as abusers**

Abuse of children by their own parents is a serious issue. This kind of violence is dangerous as it can proceed for a long time without being noticed. Being naive and immature children trust their parents and would not recognize the justices done against them. Abuse by parents is not always done on pur-

pose. The parents might have been victims of abuse themselves and exercise the same with their children as they do not have knowledge of other ways of parenting. For such parents, their children might trigger emotions and anger that has been repressed for a long time. Those who are suffering from mental health problems, postpartum depression, psychosis, PTSD, alcohol and drug addiction, have higher tendencies to abuse children. Unfulfilled expectations about children, being divorced or separated lack of parenting skills can also be causes of the same. Educating parents can play a significant role in reducing child abuse in the home as well as other settings.

### **Parent education**

Being primary caretakers the role of parents in preventing child abuse is inevitable. It is high time to realize that parenting does not come naturally to all people. A huge number lack the necessary information to handle the challenges of child-rearing. Varying situations and cultural, social, economic factors influence parenting. As many cases of child maltreatment arise due to lack of knowledge and ignorance on the part of parents, parent education can be effective in bringing a solution. There is a need to restore strained relationships and to strengthen families.

Parenting or child-rearing is 'a complex function involving relationships, communication, social skills, practical skills and the acquisition of understanding' (Smith,1997), typically defined in terms of a series of basic children's needs which parents attempt to satisfy. While parenting may come naturally to some, others may need additional support and guidance to understand child development, to respond appropriately to their child's needs, and to cope with the challenges of parenting. Parent education provides caregivers with knowledge, resources, and support to develop parenting skills to enhance child and family well-being. It can also help parents or caregivers learn the tools and strategies to provide a positive and nurturing home environment where their children will thrive physically, emotionally, and cognitively (Children's Bureau, 2019).

The primary goal of parent education is to strengthen families by enhancing the relationship between parents and children. The feminization of labor over the years had a negative impact on children. With both working parents who move amidst their hectic schedules, the psychological needs of children are not met. In low income and poverty-stricken families, the condition of children becomes worse. Several instances of severe neglect and physical abuse have been reported. Abuse of drugs and alcohol by parents is dangerous to children. Divorces and separation have serious underlying problems. Some children are orphaned and left without a home. The condition of those taken by one of the parents is no better. If the parent engages in a new relationship with someone, the child may be neglected or even abused by the step-parent. Parent education seeks to solve latent and manifest issues in families. Experts are engaged to correct the malfunctions and promote positive and enthusiastic family dynamics.

### **Strategies and benefits**

Parent education makes use of social learning theories. These theories would help parents to have an understanding of the developmental stages of their children and how they think, speak and behave in different ages. If they have knowledge of the same, a parent can understand and acknowledge the child's needs in a more systematic manner. This will ensure a healthy environment for the child promoting proper psychological development. As a result, there will be a significant improvement in the behavior of the child which will bring about a more positive parental attitude.

The modern world has increased the burden of parents with an increase in the cost of living. This has concluded in a more stressful life for parents, leading to mental health problems. When they are not emotionally strong they take out their frustration on their poor innocent children. Parents need to be equipped with the skills to manage stress in a constructive way. Special attention and medical support should be given to those who suffer from mental illness. Parents may be made aware of the various counselling services, par-



enting classes that could be accessed during times of crisis.

Parent education should adopt an approach which is culturally sensitive. In several cultures, specifically, the Indian context corporal punishment is seen as a way of correcting children and ensuring appropriate behavior. Parents can be taught alternative child management techniques which are not abusive. Knowledge of positive reinforcement strategies can be useful. Positive reinforcement is defined as delivery of a long-held contingent on a response that increases the future likelihood of that response (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). The change can be brought by first rectifying long-held belief of parents and teachers about corporal punishment. Parents can act as role models for their children behaving and speaking the way they would want their children to behave. This would ensure healthy imitation of the parental characteristics

Research has shown the enormous impact that positive parenting practices can have on a child's social, emotional, and intellectual development, particularly during the early years (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016).

The role of parents in ensuring the protection of children outside the home is inevitable. A parent is the best person to teach children about personal safety. This can begin at a very young age. Exercising authoritative parenting can be helpful. Adopting a democratic approach and respecting the value and dignity of the child is utmost important. Parents can spend quality time with their children and listen patiently. Set boundaries about the time, places and people. Though sexual abuse is a serious concern the majority of parents do not speak about these concerns (Varughese and Prathiba, 2018). It is essential to teach children to be assertive when they are wronged. These techniques of dealing with children can be imparted to the parents through parent education.

The effectiveness of parent education as a role in preventing child abuse and ensuring child protection is being tested in 3 schools. The students have been placed in schools as part of fieldwork. Interactions with the parents re-

vealed their awareness about the impact of various abuses especially verbal and emotional abuse on children. Parents are accustomed to using corporal punishment as a means of correcting children lacking knowledge about the after-effects. They were also ignorant about the psychological trauma caused by arguments between parents. The concept of parent education was presented through the parents-teachers meeting. Awareness classes by experts are being conducted. Various parenting techniques and skills are being slowly imparted to parents.

### **Conclusion**

Child abuse may have several ill effects on children; may be short term as well as long term effects. With the increasing number of child abuses, it is essential to find strategies to prevent them. The literature reviews reveals that parent education can be used as an effective tool in preventing child abuse and ensuring child protection. As primary care takers equipping parents with the necessary parenting skills and awareness grounded in various psycho social theories can make a great difference in the present scenario.

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