



A study on the role of parents in the empowerment of their children against child sexual abuse

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse is one of the major foreboding nightmare of any parent. As much as they believe that their child will never be a victim, the reality is that any child is vulnerable to it. As the maxim goes, 'Prevention is better than cure,' the researcher aims to understand how this issue can be addressed by preventing it from happening. Since parents are usually the primary caregivers, enabling them to empower their children is a focus area for the same.

Through this study, the researcher is trying to investigate, what is that parents lack in terms of knowledge, skills, and confidence in empowering their child against Child sexual abuse. The researcher is also trying to explore the role of a Social worker in building the capacity of the parents in helping them to equip their child effectively against the vicious act of sexual abuse.

Key words: Child abuse, empowering child against sexual abuse, parents awareness on child sexual abuse.

Child Sexual Abuse is one of the most heinous crimes that are committed on children that traumatize them for life. One fails to understand, that rehabilitation of these victims is still only a patch up over the wounds. Though time is the healer, the wounds are old; the scars forever still remain. Through the process of rescue and rehabilitation, it's only the scavenging work that can be done. There is no way to go back and turn time; the damage has already

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been done. While being sexually abused can be traumatic for a child and a child may not be able to forget it all his/her life; but trust, support, love and affection will help them to overcome this dreadful experience and can be normal for rest of their lives. There is lot of secrecy involved around the issue of sexual abuse.

Children are now recognized as legal entities with their own rights and interests, both toward their parents and society. Adults sometimes don't understand the reasons behind the behavior of the child. This leads to a false assumption that children tend to forget easily and their experiences don't have a lasting effect. Children utilize a huge portion of their internal resources to repress feelings that overwhelm them. And when a child is abused or violated in any form by any means then its mankind itself that is threatened, one's very own existence will soon be wiped away.

It's time that one focuses not on the issue of child abuse, but rather develops the strategies and means to prevent it. One always feels that an abuse that had happened could have been prevented. It's only after it has happened does one realize that one saw it coming, but never realized it till it happened. And so then the blame is taken upon oneself for not taking the appropriate steps for it. Yet for each child, the memories are still raw, in spite of all the therapies and care, the hurt is still hidden deep inside somewhere, and the question keeps popping, what if? As it can be seen time and time again, it's the parents who are considered responsible not the abuser himself. Why is it that everyone blames the parent for not taking care of the child? The parents too then become victims of this evil.

Definition of child sexual abuse

The term CSA includes a range of activities like "intercourse, attempted intercourse, oral-genital contact, fondling of genitals directly or through clothing, exhibitionism or exposing children to adult sexual activity or pornography, and the use of the child for prostitution or pornography (Putnam, 2003). There are many ways that child sexual abuse may be defined. Most child abuse occurs within the family. It is a form of child abuse that

includes sexual activity with a minor, one in which an adult or an older adolescent uses a child for sexual stimulation.

Inherent in the various definitions are concepts of violation of trust, abuse of power, the child's inability to consent, the age differential between the abuser and the child, the cognitive, emotional, psycho-sexual development level of the child and the sexual intent of gratification. Thus sexually abusive acts against children encompass a range of behaviors along the non-contact-contact continuum. Children all over the world are prone to this type of abuse and maltreatment and the text of the Convention on the Rights of the Child had to focus on the various conditions faced by these children, be it a child in the developed world, the developing world or even the underdeveloped world.

Risk factors for CSA

Child sexual abuse is not only a physical violation; it is a violation of trust and/or authority. Research suggests that online child sexual abuse can have as much of an impact on a child as abuse that only takes place offline and can lead to the same psychological difficulties (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017). CSA, though considered a taboo, happens to be a very serious problem that demands attention and remedial measures especially for the silence that surrounds the offence. While no child is immune, there are child and family characteristics that significantly heighten or lower risk of sexual abuse. (Singh, M. M., Parsekar, S. S., & Nair, S. N., 2014).

Impact of child sexual abuse

The impact of child maltreatment can be profound. Child abuse has negative outcome in children and adolescents that can extend into adulthood. Abused children often suffer physical injuries and stress that may disrupt early brain development. Children who are abused or neglected are at higher risk for health problems such as depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, smoking, sexual promiscuity, suicide and certain chronic diseases.

Physical signs, include unexplained soreness or bruises around genitals, sexually transmitted diseases, hysterical reactions, temper tantrums, aggressive behavior, and outburst of anger.

Relationship problems: example intimacy issues, having unstable relationships, risky behaviour – such as substance misuse, risky sexual behavior, offending, not concentrating in school; use of sexual words; running away from home. In some cases, older children who were sexually abused, and who abuse younger ones, may not understand that his or her forceful sexual actions towards another child are harmful. But being sexually victimized absolutely does not mean a child will develop sexually abusive behaviors. Revictimisation is being vulnerable to further sexual abuse or other types of abuse (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2017). It is very difficult to detect abuse among children as they tend to hide it due to various reasons. Some of the reasons for hiding a sexual abuse could be that the child does not consider it was serious or wrong. For some reason or the other, they do not want parents or friends to find out about it probably due to fear of being rejected either by family or closed ones or other negative reactions. The children feel scared, and isolated, with no one to help or support them, or they feel there is no one who can protect them or be there to help. They are afraid of being treated differently or stigmatized and may fear that no one will believe what they say. There may also be fears being removed from the home.

The POCSO Act, 2012

- The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 came into force on 14th November, 2012. The Act was passed in the Indian Parliament in May 2012. The POCSO Act 2012 defines a child as any person below the age of 18 years. The POCSO Act requires respect for the dignity and autonomy of the child at every stage of the legal process.
- It provides for child-friendly procedures for medical examination, recording of the statement by the police and Magistrate, as well as during the examination of the child in the Court.
- The Police must also ensure that forensic samples are sent to forensic laboratory at the earliest. They have to inform the child and parents/guardians about support services including counseling and access to legal aid. Failure to report of an offence is punishable with imprisonment of six

months or with fine or both.

- Recording of the child's statement should be done in simple language with the assistance of translator / interpreter /special educator as the case may be. Recording can be done at the residence of child or at the place of his choice. The Statement is to be recorded in the presence of parents or in whom the child has confidence.
- Care and Protection: If the police/ SJPU have reasonable grounds to believe that the child is in need of care and protection, they must immediately make arrangements to give the child such care and protection and also alert the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), the statutory authority vested with this responsibility.

The POCSO Act, 2012, makes it mandatory to report a case of sexual abuse to the police. The Police will conduct the investigation keeping in view all the protective measures, prescribed under the Act.

The Child Welfare Committee (CWC) is the statutory body to deal with cases of those children who are in need of care and protection. In a child sexual abuse case, after preliminary investigations, if it is found that a child is in need of care and protection, case will be reported before CWC, which will ensure that the child is placed in a protective environment. The case should be disposed of within a time frame of one year, as per the provisions of the Act.

Early Detection of Child Sexual Abuse is the Need of the Hour

Early detection of CSA is the need of the hour due to the following factors: it will help the situation to get worse in terms of halting the progress from less severe form to more severe form.

It will help in overcoming the trauma caused by the abuse; it will prevent sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies; early reporting will help in speedy processing and early justice. It will help in separating the perpetrator from the victim and reduce the risk of repetition of the offence; lowers the severity of long-term psychological impact on the victim. Besides, children have to be/should be taught about their right to say 'No'. However,

because of its very secretive nature, many of these cases are left unreported.

Role of parents in prevention of CSA

Though Child Sexual Abuse is a significant issue all over the world, it is still a topic of taboo in India. Few studies document the awareness levels of parents with regards to prevention of CSA. Parents may be the most important group to target with CSA prevention training because they can provide developmentally appropriate education for their children through multiple conversations over time. Additionally, they determine who has access to their child and are often targeted by perpetrators to build a trusting relationship. They know about Child Sexual Abuse but what they don't realize that their child is also at the risk of the same, and that they play an important role in its prevention. In the Indian society even if parents do come to know of it, they tend to blame themselves for not being able to prevent it and yet do nothing to empower their child. Parents in general lack the skill and the confidence that is required to empower their children against sexual abuse. They regularly teach their children about safety in other areas such as wearing a helmet while riding a bicycle, wearing a seatbelt in the car, and looking both ways before crossing the road; yet, safety from sexual abuse is rarely discussed. Parents need to know that current statistics indicate that India has the world's largest number of CSA cases. For every 155th minute a child, less than 16 years is raped, for every 13th hour, a child under 10, and one in every 10 children is sexually abused at any point of time. (Singh, M. M., Parsekar, S. S., & Nair, S. N., 2014). And they need to realize that, that child could be their own child.

Out of the many parental causes of child abuse, the first reason is lack of knowledge among them. (Gurung, L. B., & Bahattarai, S., 2015). If parents have knowledge regarding child abuse, they can detect the signs of it and can prevent its occurrence by educating the child. The researcher has realized the increased incidence of child abuse, its serious long-term effects in life and deficiency of knowledge among parents regarding prevention of child abuse. Families form the heart of the Indian culture but facts also prove that family members are the most common molesters, due to which parents are also

unlikely to believe their child or just hush up the matter without confronting the perpetrator. This positions the child in a more vulnerable and precarious state of affairs and the abuser gains an upper hand and continues with his activities.

Parents, teachers and other relevant stakeholders must be educated, sensitized and provide support to create a safety net around the child. Children are vulnerable to all types of abuse due to dependence on adults and their lack of knowledge about danger and self-protection. The focus should be on safe behavior and skills rather than on the risks and also to re-establish a safe environment after CSA has been revealed. An appropriate response from the adult to whom the child has revealed the abuse is very essential to avoid further psychological damage and also to assure the child that he is not to be blamed for abuse.

Vigilance on the part of parents, and above all the education of children on how to respond to awkward or potentially harmful situations, are still of paramount importance. The main strategy should be encouraging kids to talk to their parents, no matter what. Parents must teach children to avoid child sexual abuse may involve teaching them the concept of 'private zones' and what parts of the body are considered 'private'. It also is to tell them about the different kinds of appropriate/inappropriate, good/bad touching that a child can experience and that it is possible that a person whom the child knows and likes, may try to hurt them. (Hitrec, 2010). Children should be taught to trust their intuition about people and situations. Parents must also explain about healthy sexual development. They should give children the skills to prevent child sexual abuse may involve teaching them the right to decide who can and who cannot touch their body. Children should be enabled to differentiate between "bad secrets" and "good secrets" as secrecy is the main tactic of a sexual abuser. (Soldner, 2015).

The skill and confidence that parents require is another very important factor. Talking about child sexual abuse with one's child may seem difficult, but the possible consequences of not talking with one's child are even worse—that

they may be sexually abused and not know where to turn for help. Establishing rapport with children is foremost which will encourage good communication with children. Teaching decision-making is vital as it allows children to be more confident while taking simple decisions affecting their lives will prepare them for the more difficult choices ahead. Talking about sexual abuse to one's child, believing in them is the first and foremost thing. Parents have to learn to be patient to help the child open up. Making the child comfortable and reaffirming one's child's feelings and being willing to give some space are cardinal skills that parents require. They must choose questions selectively and only ask those questions that will allow the child to tell what happened in his/her own words. They need to learn to avoid asking leading questions and must be careful in the use of words/terminology. They should tell their children what will happen next, as it is important to explain to the child that some secrets must be shared in order to seek help in overcoming a problem. They need to be able to discuss openly about sex and sexual abuse if they need to talk about self-protection. Since the society is not very permissible on talking about the subject openly, attributing the restriction to culture, parents find it very awkward to discuss such topics with their children. Another reason is that they themselves never had anyone who told them about it and so may not know when or how to begin. They may or may not have undergone these kinds of abuses themselves and if they did, they would have kept silent and just borne it for fear of reporting it. Such parents may tend to be over protective of their children but without actually getting into the core of the issues. A lot of parents may also find it embarrassing; given the societal norms that one does not discuss these issues in the open. They may feel shy or constrained when children may ask very intimate questions. Parents do not always talk to their children about body safety early enough. They think kids are too young. It is too scary. But it is never too soon, and it doesn't have to be a scary conversation. It is also crucial that children are encouraged to talk directly. This directness will serve kids well as they grow, too. Silence in the face of sexual abuse often stems from embarrassment and guilt, which in turn come from parents modeling these reactions to sex and sexual topics. So parents should instead model directness, and not worry about being intrusive.

Whether talking about schools, doctors, or churches, the sexual abuses one discusses are most often in the fairly distant past. It is terrible but true that because of shame and embarrassment and misplaced guilt, it often takes years for these trespasses to come to light. And the past was different in terms of public awareness about sexual predators. Today children are taught from a young age that unwelcome touches are not O.K., are not their fault, and should be reported immediately. Yet in the Indian scenario, this does not happen. The stigma associated with sex education leads to parents not educating children about sexual advances or threats, which could protect them from abuse. The Western model addresses this through the concept of “bad touch” which is unacceptable. This relieves the taboo-driven secrecy behind sexuality, and therefore also mitigates child sex abuse to a large extent. It also teaches children how their sexuality works, so that they don’t unknowingly harass others. This communication must be constant, friendly, and frank. Repeatedly guiding children as they grow up and educating about CSA should be an ongoing process rather than a one-time phenomenon. Children should be taught to develop a healthy and balanced relationship based on trust and understanding. Making use of audio-visual aids will be extremely convincing in conveying the message.

Parents must also seek to develop a supportive environment to ensure children’s safety. Good communication with children will facilitate giving children clear guidelines. By doing so, parents can also ensure their child’s safety and teach them how to recognize potential dangers—paving the way for children to speak openly about concerns, doubts or disclosed CSA. The mental and physical trauma faced by the survivor of CSA is unimaginable, especially in a society where blaming the victim is the norm. Despite this, CSA is an issue which is neither addressed nor discussed, but is avoided, neglected, or brushed under the carpet. The ripple effects of CSA can be difficult to pinpoint, even though abuse may affect every area of an individual’s life. These effects might not necessarily be permanent but can be overwhelming. Childhood mental disorders are significantly more common in children with sexual abuse and the risk is higher in boys than girls. CSA can damage the

child's self-concept, sense of trust, and perception of the world as a relatively safe place, irrespective of gender. In most cases, parents are not educated on this topic until after a child has been sexually abused. And "the systems" in place that are supposed to protect children from sexual abuse can only do so much until after an allegation of Child Sexual Abuse has been made. At that point, the child has already been violated. The point is to get educated before a child is violated, so that there is a better chance of protecting children from this crime in the first place.

The proposed study is an attempt to understand the role of parents in empowering their children against Child Sexual Abuse. Most parents worry about how to protect their children in a world that sometimes seems so dangerous. As with any other danger, protecting one's children from risk starts with understanding those risks. The most effective prevention happens before a child is harmed. Children are immediately safer when parents take the time to learn about sexual abuse and its warning signs. Parents who make a commitment to speak up as soon as they have a concern, instead of waiting for certain evidence of harm, play an even more crucial role in a child's safety. But evidence suggests that parents though may have knowledge, they lack the skills to arm their children with the skills that they need to protect themselves, which includes recognizing and reporting the problem of child sexual abuse. It also remains that parents generally believe that their child is safe and are not vulnerable to this problem, and considering the sensitive nature of the topic in the society, parents do not talk about it with their children.

Assumptions:

- i. Parents may know about CSA in general but may not realize that even molestation is a type of Child Sexual Abuse.
- ii. They may not realize that boys and girls are equally prone to CSA.
- iii. Since CSA is a sensitive topic, parents may not be able to openly talk about it to their children.
- iv. By building the capacity of the parents, they will be able to empower

their children against Child Sexual Abuse.

Objectives of the study:

The general objective of the study is to gain an understanding of the role of parents in empowering their children in Child Sexual Abuse. It specifically aimed to know the awareness that parents have regarding CSA and to learn about the attitude of parents towards its prevention. It was also designed to find out about the practices parents employ in empowering their children against sexual abuse and finally to explore the role of a social worker in building the capacity of parents in helping them to empower their children.

Findings of the study:

From this study it was understood that parents do lack knowledge on some important dimensions on Child Sexual Abuse. They also do feel inhibited to discuss with their children various facets of the same. Though they do speak to children about keeping themselves safe, they do not go into the depth of Child Sexual Abuse and the risk factors that are involved. It still remains an awkward topic for most. The study also revealed that a majority of respondents (68.3%) in this study are mothers and all of the respondents are not just literate but also educated. They came from all the strata of the socioeconomic sector and most of them were employed. None of the respondents are from broken families, where parents were divorced or separated.

Awareness of parents on Child Sexual Abuse, a major chunk of the participants of the study know that sexually touching a child or encouraging a child to hear or watch sexual acts, photographing a child in the nude is a form of Child Sexual Abuse. It is interesting to note that 67% of the respondents said that 'Strangers' are most likely to be an abuser, while only 7-8% answered that it is usually a family member or a family friend. Though 81.7% of the respondents are aware that the abuser is very likely to repeat the act and 80% of the respondents hold the molester accountable for Child Sexual Abuse, yet 3.3% and 10% of the respondents hold the child and parents, respectively, as

accountable for the act. A tiny fraction of them (15%) said that there need not be any physical evidence in a child who has been sexually abused, and only 59% of the respondents answered that females can sexually abuse children. 91.7% of the respondents knew that an abuser threatens the child who was abused, not to disclose about it. 72% of the respondents said that boys can be sexually abused while. 18% of the respondents were not aware about this fact. 51.7% of the respondents are aware that children too are involved in sexual abuse. 85% of the respondents know that touching a child's private parts inappropriately is an offence and 90% of the respondents remarked that it is an offence to make a child touch another person's private parts. 81.7% of the respondents know that failure to report about an incident of Child Sexual Abuse is an offence. A borderline majority of 51% of the respondents know that only a female doctor is allowed to examine a victim of Child sexual abuse. 70% of the respondents knew that the identity of a child who was a victim of sexual abuse, should never be revealed during or after the investigation, and if done so it is punishable by law.

Response on the attitude of parents towards prevention of Child Sexual Abuse, only a minimal majority (51.7%) of respondents agree that it is actually necessary to discuss about Child Sexual abuse at home indicating that parents still feel inhibited about talking about sexual abuse with their children.

83.3% of the respondents believe that it is not against their religion to discuss about Child Sexual Abuse. So religion is not a factor for not discussing about Child Sexual Abuse at home. A significant section of the respondents (45 %) felt that discussing about Child Sexual Abuse will frighten a child. 53.3% of the parents felt that Child Sexual Abuse prevention should begin by 8-12 years. Only 5% felt that it should begin by 3-4 years, which is what should be done. These conversations can be initiated as soon as they begin to use words to communicate emotions. About three-quarters of the respondents said that children should not be forced to demonstrate their affection, as it violates their right to own their bodies.

- **Practices parents employ in empowering their children against Child Sexual Abuse,** 46.7% of the respondents always talk to their children about

the 'Concept of Good Touch and Bad Touch' and 5% have never done it.

48.3% parents do explain that a touch from another person, such as a tickle may feel good but it should not be kept a secret from them and 3.3% have never done it.

93.3% of the parents always set boundaries for their children, no parents responded rarely or never having done it, in terms of providing privacy for activities like dressing, bathing, etc. 85% of the parents always do keep a check on their child's usage of technology. There were no parents who rarely or never do it. From this study, it was evident that parents who are better educated feel more confident to empower their children

From the study, it was also inferred that mothers take more initiative to equip their children against Child Sexual Abuse.

- **Role of a social worker in building the capacity of parents in helping them to empower their children**, about 98% of the persons said that children should be educated on Child Sexual Abuse. Of the total respondents, 96% of them also expressed that parents should be taught about Child Sexual Abuse. It is also interesting to note that 95% of them agreed that public awareness regarding this issue has to be increased.

Suggestions based on the findings:

From the above findings, it can be understood that though parents do know about Child Sexual Abuse, yet there are lot of areas in which they need to be provided with information. There is a gap between the knowledge and their practice which has to be considered.

- Parents need to be educated to help empower their children against Child Sexual Abuse. They need to be encouraged to have conversations with their children about their private parts, protecting their body, actions they can take if they receive an unsafe touch, and whom they can tell, identifying two or three trusted adults that they can turn to if they are upset.
- Parents need to be encouraged to reinforce with their children that it is

never their fault if they receive an unsafe touch; the blame always rests with the adult. They need to instill confidence that if something does happen to their child, the parents will be understanding and supportive.

- Parents can do something every day to positively support their children. Every single action taken can have enormous results when it comes to the safety and happiness of one's child.
- They need to discuss about sex not only in terms of abuse, but also as a natural and healthy part of life. Children need to be given the confidence when discussing sexual abuse issues.

Supporting their views and questions will strengthen their trust in parents

Implications of the study

- Social workers can play a major role in developing the awareness and skills of parents related to reducing the risk of child sexual abuse by empowering their children.
- They can lend their expertise at local abuse prevention and parenting programs and identify creative ways parents can be involved with their children's education.
- They can also plan on parenting or child abuse education programs at the workplace, church or other organizations.
- In addition to this, they should conduct researches with parents and children being the key respondents to identify the gaps that may be present in developing skills to combat Child Sexual Abuse.

Conclusion

It is very important to understand and improve public awareness of Child Sexual Abuse prevention, especially for the parents, who are the primary educators of their child. The findings from the study indicate that they

demonstrated a lack of knowledge about certain important sexual abuse issues and discussed only the least threatening topics. However, they do not provide their children with the comprehensive prevention messages recommended by prevention campaigns. This gap between knowledge and parental communication with children could be due to parents' beliefs that there may be harm associated with education of children about Child Sexual Abuse (e.g., such as inciting new fears). This study adds to the existing literature by presenting information that could be useful in designing programs to include parents in Child Sexual Abuse prevention strategies and by conducting researches with parents as the key agents in the protection of children. The findings from this research could be useful in developing Child Sexual Abuse prevention education programs in schools and communities, designed to improve parents' knowledge and practice of Child Sexual Abuse prevention.

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