

## Child Abuse: Myths and Facts

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### Abstract

Child abuse is defined as any act of omission or commission that endangers or impairs a child's physical or emotional health and development. Children are frequent victims of abuse because they are small and relatively powerless in family hierarchy. It may occur at any place like home to streets with any child of any age like few days to few years by anyone from parents to strangers. A child, who is abused, lives with a sense of insecurity & feels unwanted. He feels cheated and becomes short tempered. There are various myths and stigma attached to child abuse which makes it worse to save them. Child abuse is classified into four main categories namely; physical, emotional, sexual and neglect. Most of the children suffer with more than one type of abuse. All the health professionals need to be vigilant about common signs and symptoms of the abuse while visiting the families in community or while working in any health care facility.

**Keywords:** Child Abuse; Maltreatment; Sexual Abuse; Neglect; Battered Child Syndrome.

### What is Child Abuse?

Child Abuse and neglect is the intentional and non - accidental injury treatment of children by parents, care takers, teachers or other members may lead to temporary or permanent impairment of their physical, mental, psychosocial development, disability or death. Child abuse may occur anywhere like at home, neighbourhood, schools, foster homes, orphanages, hotels, public places, streets etc. Female child abuse takes place more at home & working places while male

child abuse is more common at places like shops, hotels i.e. outside home.

### Types of child abuse

There are four major types of Child abuse

#### Physical Abuse [1]

Actual or likely physical injury to a child, or failure to prevent physical injury to a child, including deliberate poisoning, suffocation, and assaults on children that produce pain, cuts, welts, bruises, burns, broken bones, and other injuries.

It includes activities like beating, burning, poisoning, fracturing, slapping, pinching, twisting ears, beating with stick, arm twisting. Child marriage, child sacrifice, child labour & child beggary are also considered severe forms of physical abuse. Physical abuse is prevalent more among male children.

#### Emotional Abuse [2]

Actual or likely severe adverse effects on the emotional and behavioural development of a child are caused by a persistent or severe emotional maltreatment or rejection or failure of caregivers to meet children's needs for affection and emotional support.

It includes activities like blaming, humiliating, expelling from home and school, comparing with other children, terrorizing, locking in the child in the bathroom, making the child to earn money by working outside or begging. This may occur independently or accompanied with forms of maltreatment.

#### Sexual Abuse [3]

Sexual abuse consists of age-appropriate sexual exploitation of a child for the perpetrator's pleasure

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or benefit. It means actual or likely sexual exploitation of a child or adolescents. The children are developmentally immature for sexual comments, fondling, intercourse, and other forms of exploitation.

It includes activities like forcing to prostitution, fondling, genital viewing, using children as exhibits for pornography, raping, etc. Victims of sexual abuse may be children of either sex though it is more prevalent among female children. Also, children of any age may be sexually abused. Perpetrators usually target vulnerable younger children in order to protect themselves from detection and punishment. They also advantage of their age, power, position and their relation with the family.

### Neglect of Child

This means persistent or severe neglect of a child or the failure to protect a child from exposure to any kind of danger, including cold, heat and starvation or extreme failure to carry out important aspects of care, resulting in significant impairment of the child's health or development, including non-organic failure to thrive. It includes activities like refusing medical attention, keeping out of school, not providing adequate clothing, education, food and withholding love, care, neglecting body & environmental cleanliness and unsafe environment etc. Neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment but receives less attention than other forms of maltreatment.

### Sign & Symptoms of Child Abuse

*Due to abuse, children may present with signs & symptoms [4,5] like*

1. Physical injuries
  - Burns / scalds
  - Brain Haematoma
  - Fractures of various parts
  - Head injuries
  - Bruises
  - Cuts
2. Emotional problems
  - Maladjustments
  - Aggressiveness
  - Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Impulsive & inattentive in the class
  - Truancy

- Indulgence in anti-social activities
3. Signs of neglect
    - Poor personal hygiene
    - Malnutrition
    - Inadequate clothing
    - Not immunizing the children
    - Frequent sickness to child
  4. Signs of sexual abuse
    - A deep sense of loneliness & isolation
    - Depression, anxiety & withdrawal
    - Bed wetting
    - Avoidance of particular individuals
    - Difficulty in concentrating at school or failing examinations
    - Sudden use of sexual words
    - Sexual exploitation/exploration of other children
    - Constant throat and bladder infection
    - Sexually transmitted diseases

### Contributory factors to child abuse

During different developmental stages of child, various factors may contribute the occurrence of child abuse. These, factors may be grouped under following heads [2,4].

#### *Parent's Characteristics [6]*

- Lack of concern about the child
- Attempt to hide the child injury
- Routine use of harsh & age inappropriate punishment to child
- Inability to provide emotionally for himself as an adult
- Unreasonable expectations for children
- Tendency to favour male child
- Drug addiction/ alcoholism among parents
- Mutual disrespect, lack of communication and strained relation between the parents
- Extra marital relations of parent/ parents
- Abused childhood experience of parents
- Mental disease or criminality of parents
- Low educational status
- Limited understanding of effective parenting techniques

- Unwilling caretaker's or parents' resentment to care for the child

#### *Child Characteristics [1,2]*

- Low birth weight babies
- Children of unwanted pregnancies
- Children of parents using drugs and alcohol
- Children with birth defects
- Child of a multiple birth
- Children who take on characteristics of a disliked parent
- Premature children
- Very sick or chronically ill children
- Over active children
- Loneliness
- Dropouts from schools
- Street children
- Unwanted sex of the child
- Stepchildren due to less emotional investment by parents

#### *Family Characteristics*

- Low income
- Social conditions like poverty
- Homelessness
- Large families
- Lack of steady employment of parents
- Lack of resources
- Over crowding
- Broken families
- Single parent; man/ woman headed family
- Chronic unemployment or loss of work
- High stress of parents due to work or family
- Socially isolated families from other relatives or neighbours
- Inadequate housing/ many vacant houses in the neighbourhood
- Step children
- Low status of women favours female child abuse

#### *Community Characteristics*

- Cultural values e.g. approval of physical force and violence as ways to discipline the child.

- War situation
- Terrorism
- Industrialization
- Urbanization
- Greater ratio of children to adults
- Fewer elderly residents

#### *Protection Measures [2]*

- Establish a comfortable & free atmosphere at home congenial atmosphere at home i.e. healthy relationship between parents and others, safeguards children against abuse.
- Teach the child with difference between a good and a bad touch.
- Teach your child how to say 'No' to an older person if he or she touches her in a way that makes her/him feel uncomfortable.
- Teach your child the names of her body parts like breast, anus, and vagina. Make the child comfortable with her own body & do not attach any feeling of shame to it.
- Imparts sex education to them adequately and as per their understanding specially just before they attain puberty.
- Know where your child is all times. Be familiar with your child friends & their daily activities.
- Encourage your child to talk to you on all issues and tell them not to keep a secret about sexual touching or exposure of an adult even if that person is a family friend or relative.
- Be alert to small changes in her behaviour.
- Observe the teenager or adult who is paying an unusual amount of attention to the child or giving her in appropriate or expensive gifts .
- Give your child certain emergency telephone numbers/child help line no. where she can call if they sense danger.
- Pay attention to child's medical needs seek timely and appropriate care.
- Regular medical check-up of children in school.
- Self-help group of parents (An association of parents) can help them to understand children's problems and solutions in a better way.
- Teaching effective parenting technique to parents.
- Training stress coping techniques to all adults and children.

*What to do when your child has been abused?*

*Remember:* Educating a child today means educating family for future.

- A sick / handicap child needs more physical and psychological support of parents and teacher.
- If the child is showing any abnormal/unusual behaviour, be alert.
- Frequent parents teacher meeting help in early detection of any problem child is facing.
- Corporal punishment is banned in school by law.

Child help line telephone number is 1098. they attend to the complaints regarding children. It is a national, 24 hours emergency service for children in need of care and protection. It is a toll free number.

The adult abusing your child is always totally responsible for convincing, deceiving or forcing the child into sexual activity. Moreover, children almost never lie about being sexually abused. If your child discloses her abuse:

**Do.....**

- Support the child
- Accept the individual difference among the children
- Meet the basic need of children like clothing, food, medical care & play.
- Teach the children some self-defence ways like judo karate
- Give timely guidance to the children
- Inculcate discipline in children by showing standards of conduct instead of rules.
- Gather the correct information regarding child rearing practices
- Recognize their achievement and encourage them
- Prevent violence and abuse within your family
- Recognize and make others aware of the serious & multiple consequences of violence/abuse
- Believe the child, what he / she is saying
- Listen to the child patiently and try to understand their view point
- Encourage the child to convey the incident & her emotions to you
- Reassure the child that she was nowhere at fault
- Be sympathetic, understanding, supportive & optimistic.
- Take the stand against abuser even if he is family member or a friend.

- Seek legal help.

**Don't.....**

- Compare the child with siblings
- Threaten the child abuse
- Encourage any social activity of child for meagre short term benefits
- Preach them all the time
- Beat/burn the child
- Make separate class rooms for girls and boys in co-ed. Schools
- Let disciplinary measure interfere with educational activities.
- Punish all the children for one child's mistake
- Feel ashamed, if the child has been sexually abused
- Panic or over react to the information disclosed by the child
- Criticize the child
- Use any suggestions which may make the child feel guilty about the abuse.

All efforts should be based on profound respect of the child, faith in his potential and recognition of his dignity.

**Key points [1,7]**

1. Any abuse of a child is a crime.
2. Every child has a right to be medically examined.
3. Any adult can file a complaint in the police station on behalf of a child. The child need not be present.
4. The child has a right to be in its natural environment, when the police question the child.
5. Child should not be left alone or kept under the supervision of supportive family members or trained professionals.
6. The child has a right not to have its name made public or printed in the media.
7. Corporal punishment is a banned activity in the school.
8. Children cannot be used for pornography.
9. Children should not be compared with siblings or classmate's. comparison does not bring about the desired outcome.
10. All the children need love affection care & protection of parents and other caretaker for their normal growth and development.

11. Infanticide means killing of new born of either sex.  
 12. Children of either sex can be abused.
13. All the children need to be immunized, fed and educated irrespective of their sex.

### Myths and facts related to child abuse [4,8]

Myths	Facts
A child should be encouraged to forget about the abuse, as there are no really harmful effects of child sexual abuse	Children sexual abuse always has an extremely negative effect. If a child is not encouraged to disclose then it may lead to severe behavioural disorders.
Children who disclose the fact that they had been sexually abused and then retract it, are only looking for attention.	Children are scared of their abusers as the abusers being adults are in a position of power so if a child retracts his/her statement then it is because of fear and bewilderment.
Generally children are abused by servants, drivers.	Children are generally abused by members of their family acquaintances and relatives who are in a position of power and authority within the family
Child abuse occurs at night.	There is no fixed time for this child may be abused any time.
Teasing by boys and men is normal and girls should ignore this	No one has a right to harass other even emotionally and girls should report the matter to their parents.
Blaming & terrorizing children in front of their peers is a good tool for desired outcome.	It should never be practiced as it may lead to adamant behaviour.
Children should be threatened to face consequences if they misbehaved	Children should be explained that good behaviour is appreciated by everyone.
Child sexual abuse is not common in India	It is very common in our society. In a study, 75% of women reported having been abused in childhood out of which majority were abused by known people.
Children are rarely abused	Children are the most vulnerable section of our society because of their dependence on elders
Child sexual abuse occurs mostly in poor illiterate families.	Child sexual abuse occurs in all strata of society because children irrespective of their family background are equally vulnerable
Children should not be allowed to play outside as molestation, sexual abuse generally occurs on play grounds or other public places.	Most children are sexually abused inside their homes, and the abuser is either an acquaintance relative or a family friend
Often precocious children (who gain early maturity) provoke sexual abuse by their seductive behaviour	Children can never invite sexual abuse as it is an act of violence. Precocity and seductiveness are adult justifications/ misinterpretations.
Children often fantasize about being sexually assaulted	Children are ignorant about sex and so cannot fantasize about being raped, sodomised or brutally assaulted.
If there happens to be a case of child sexual abuse, the offender is generally a psychopath	Most child sexual abuse occurs in homes, then, should we believe that most homes are infested with psychopaths?
Usually the mother is aware of the fact that her child is being sexually abused	Most mothers are not aware of the fact that their children are being abused the reason being that children are afraid of disclosing their abuse to anyone.
Reporting of child sexual causes more harm than good	If child sexual abuse is not reported then the same abuser may harm other children.

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