

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE - PUBLIC HEALTH

# A CROSS SECTIONAL STUDY ON THE PREVALENCE OF CHILD ABUSE AND ITS DETERMINANTS AMONG SCHOOL GOING ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN A GOVERNMENT HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL IN GREATER CHENNAI CORPORATION

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## Abstract

**INTRODUCTION :** Despite reporting of child abuse in India at around 14% to 28% in various researches, only 211 sexual assault cases were booked in Tamilnadu as per the Crime Report, 2016, indicating huge under reporting. Children lack awareness on how and whom to approach in case of an abuse which is compounded by the fact that in a many times, the abuse is perpetrated by the parents and/or close relatives of the child. One of the major problems in Indian context has been the low level of self-disclosure by children, particularly the schoolgoing girls. The Union Ministry of Social Welfare has been taking efforts to improve self disclosure of child abuse through awareness creation by respective school teachers and Community organisations like NGO's, Self Help Groups etc. In spite of all these measures, self reporting of abuse is significantly less.

**OBJECTIVES :** This study establishes the prevalence and determinants of child sexual and physical abuse among adolescent school going girls and explores the reasons for nondisclosure of abuse.

**METHOD :** The study was conducted as a cross sectional study among adolescent girls studying in classes of 9th, 10th and 11th grades in a Government Higher Secondary school in Greater Chennai Corporation. School for the study was selected by simple random sampling. Data was collected from 300 students using a semi structured questionnaire and analysed using SPSS software.

**RESULTS :** Regarding awareness on child abuse, 86.33% children were aware about physical abuse and 93.66% children were aware about sexual abuse. More than 85% children stated that they have already identified the first person to whom they may reveal if they encounter an incident of child abuse. About 13% of children interviewed revealed about child abuse; 9.66% children had suffered from physical abuse and 5.66% had suffered sexual abuse and 2.33% children had suffered both physical and sexual abuse. Among physically abused, slapping was the most common type of physical abuse which was experienced by 82.14% of children and 17.85% of the children had faced serious physical abuse in the form of being locked up in a room, being tied up and suffering burns. Of the 17 children who had suffered sexual abuse, 17.64% revealed been abused more than once. Only 82.14% children among physically abused and 56.52% of sexually abused had disclosed about their abuse that too mainly to their peer group friends. Prevalence of child abuse is statistically significant among children not residing with their parents.

**CONCLUSION :** Structuring proper solutions to address child abuse is the need of the hour. Also, a child friendly social system which encourages the child to reveal abuse at earlier stage and guides to safeguard from getting victimised should be developed.

**KEYWORDS :** Child abuse, Self-disclosure, School going adolescent girls.

## INTRODUCTION

India is a highly populous country with a huge child population. According to the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act which came into effect from 14th November in 2012, a child is defined as a person below 18 years of age.<sup>1</sup> According to 2011 census, about 470 million people in India were aged below 18 years constituting a child population of 41% of India's total population.<sup>2</sup> This huge child population has a vital role to play in shaping future of the country. Hence maintaining child health, both physical and emotional, is crucial for development of the country and hence must be the prime concern of the Government.

World Health Organisation (WHO) defines child abuse or child maltreatment as all types of physical and/or emotional ill treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and

commercial or other exploitation, which results 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.<sup>3</sup>

### Child abuse can be classified into :

(i) **Physical abuse** involving intentional use of physical force against child such as causing physical injury by hitting, beating, shaking, biting, scalding, burning, kicking, poisoning and suffocating.



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(ii) **Sexual abuse** involving engaging the child in sexual activities like fondling genitals, intercourse, incest, rape, sodomy, exhibitionism or pornography.

(iii) **Emotional and psychological abuse** refers to behaviours that harm a child's self-worth or emotional well-being such as name calling, shaming, rejection, withholding love, and threatening.

(iv) **Neglect** is failure to meet basic needs of a child like housing, food, clothing, education and medical care.

Study on child abuse conducted by Ministry of Women and Child Development in India in 2005 reveals prevalence of physical abuse in 69% of child respondents, sexual abuse in 53% children and emotional abuse in 48% children.<sup>4</sup> Various studies in Tamil Nadu shows the prevalence of child abuse at about 14% to 28%. According to Crime Report 2016, Tamil Nadu reports 1583 crimes against children, out of which 1169 were rape cases and only 211 were booked under the category of other sexual assault.<sup>5</sup> This shows huge underreporting of child abuse, particularly non-rape cases, even with implementation of strong provisions like POCSO Act.

Children lack awareness on how and whom to approach in case of an abuse. This is compounded by the fact that in a majority of the cases, the abuse is perpetrated by the parents and/or close relatives of the child. The Union Ministry of Social Welfare has been taking efforts to improve self disclosure of child abuse through awareness creation by respective school teachers and Community organisations like NGO's, Self Help Groups etc. In spite of all these measures, self reporting of abuse is significantly less. This study establishes the prevalence and determinants of child sexual and physical abuse among adolescent school going girls.

## OBJECTIVE

The objectives of the study were to estimate the prevalence of child abuse among school going adolescent girls and to analyse the determinants of child abuse. The study also explores the reasons for nondisclosure of child abuse. Only physical and sexual abuses suffered by any of the participants were mainly focussed on.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted as a cross sectional study among adolescent girls studying in classes of 9th, 10th and 11th grades in a Government Higher Secondary school in Greater Chennai Corporation over a period of 2 months and data were conducted intermittently. Sampling frame was the list of all Girls Higher Secondary schools in Greater Chennai Corporation. The school for the study was drawn at

random using lot method. Sample size was calculated using the formula;  $N = Z^2 \times pq / d^2$ , where P was taken from the proportion of child who revealed about their abuse to an unknown person in a US based study done by Mary L. Paine et al. in the year 2000.<sup>6</sup> Considering an absolute precision of 5%, sample size was computed as 296. Hence the sample size was fixed as 300. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Institutional Ethics Committee of Madras Medical College. Prior permission for the study was obtained from Education officer of Greater Chennai Corporation.

Participants who were willing to give consent were included in the study. Informed assent was obtained from each participant and informed written consents were obtained from their parents. Sensitization session on child abuse was done for all participants simultaneously. Primary data from the participants were obtained by in person interview using a semi structured questionnaire providing data on socio demographic details, level of awareness on child abuse, presence of child abuse, details of nature of abuse if present and its disclosure. The questionnaire was pretested in 10 school going adolescent girls who were not a part of this study and the structure and relevance of questions were validated. Participants were encouraged to fill the questionnaire by themselves. For participants who were unable to read or understand, the questions were read to them without probing and responses were recorded accordingly. The data obtained from the study participants were entered in Microsoft Excel and Master chart was generated. Data was cleaned for any double entry and errors. Cleaned data was exported to Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16 software for analysis.

## RESULTS

The mean age of the 300 children who were interviewed was  $14.21 \pm 1.004$  years. Table 1 shows the demographic details of the children. 94.66% of the children were living with their parents whereas 4% were living with any of their relatives. Rest of the children were living in either hostel or orphanage. 79% of the participants had a nuclear family, 12.66% had joint family and rest of them belonged to extended family.

For the questions related to basic awareness on child abuse before sensitization session, a vast majority of the responses indicated that the children knew what child abuse and the basic related aspects is thereof. About 86.33% children agreed in positive to the question if they knew what physical abuse is and how to identify it if it happens to them. About 93.66% children revealed that they were aware about what sexual abuse is and had been taught about good touch

and bad touch. More than 85% children stated that they have already identified the first person to whom they may reveal if they encounter an incident of child abuse. This indicates that most of the children knew the basics of child abuse.

Table 1 : Socio demographic details of participants

Socio-demographic Characteristics	Categories	Frequency (N-300)	Percentage (%)
Age	13 years	93	31%
	14 years	118	39.33%
	15 years	81	27%
	16 years	8	2.66%
Mode of stay	With parents	284	94.66%
	With relatives	12	4%
	Hostel	3	1%
	Orphanage	1	0.33%
Family type	Nuclear	237	79%
	Joint	38	12.66%
	Three generation	24	8%
	Orphan	1	0.33%
Mother's Education	Illiterate	37	12.33%
	Literate	263	87.66%
Father's Education	Illiterate	14	4.66%
	Literate	286	95.33%
Mother's occupation	Unemployed	99	33%
	Unskilled	184	61.33%
	Skilled	17	5.66%
Father's occupation	Unemployed	23	7.66%
	Unskilled	178	59.33%
	Skilled	99	33%

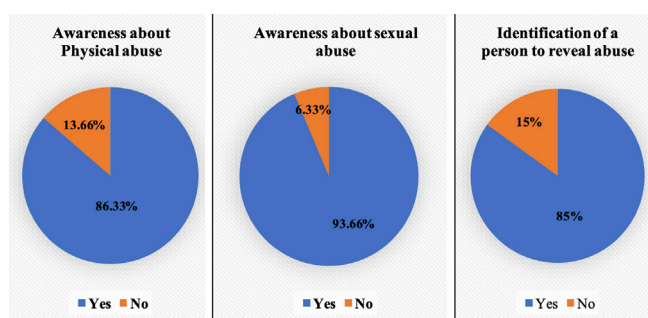


Figure 1 : Awareness level on child abuse

Among the total disclosures by 39 students (13%) on abuse, about 71.79% had suffered physical abuse, 43.58% had suffered sexual abuse and 17.94% children had suffered both sexual and physical abuse. Maltreatment in the form of physical abuse was experienced by 28 children which amounts to 9.3% of the sample studied. On elaboration of nature of physical abuse of these 28 children, 75% of children had suffered from multiple form of physical maltreatment. Slapping was found to be the most common type of physical abuse which was experienced by 82.14% of children. About

32.5% of children suffered abuse in the form of kicking. 17.85% of the children had faced serious physical abuse in the form of being locked up in a room, being tied up and suffering burns.

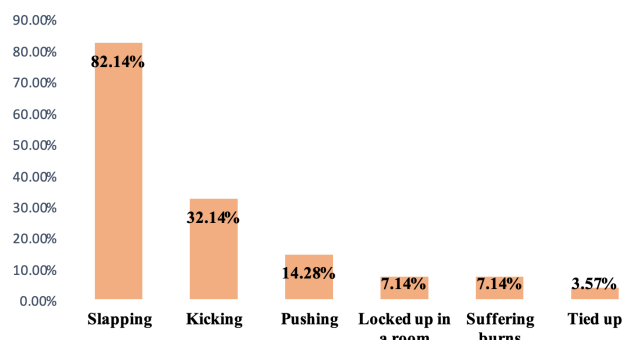


Figure 2 : Type of Physical abuse suffered by the participants

On probing about the periodicity of physical abuse, 1 child revealed that she suffered from some form of physical abuse at least once weekly. 25% of children had undergone such physical suffering at least once every month. About 42.85% children had been subjected to physical abuse once and rest 28.7% report to have suffered such maltreatment occasionally.

Table 2 : Periodicity of physical abuse suffered by the participants

Periodicity of physical abuse	Frequency (N - 28)	Percentage (%)
At least once in a week	1	3.57%
At least once in a month	7	25%
Occasionally	8	28.5%
Happened once	12	42.85%

17 children disclosed about sexual abuse amounting to 5.7% of the total sample studied. 3 children (17.64%) revealed being suffered from sexual abuse more than once while rest 14 children (82.35%) had been exploited once.

Table 3 : Periodicity of sexual abuse suffered by the participants

Periodicity of physical abuse	Frequency (N - 17)	Percentage (%)
More than once	3	17.64%
Once	14	82.35%

Regarding physical abuse, Father was the most common abuser accounting for 37.93% of children suffered followed by Brother who had been the abuser for 20.68% of children suffered. In case of sexual abuse, 3 children (17.64%) were abused by their father. 5 children had been abused by their friend or their sibling's friend. Neighbour had been the abuser for another 3 children and home guardian for 3 children left under the care of relatives or friends.

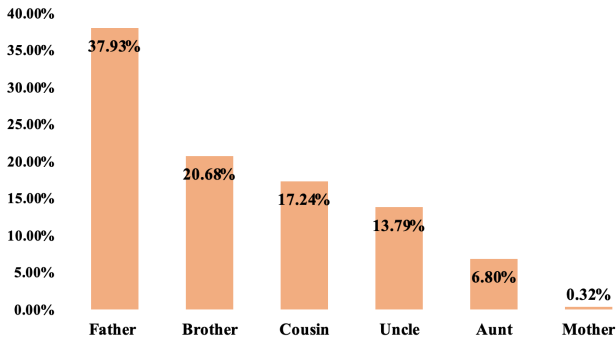


Figure 3 : Abusers of children suffered physical abuse

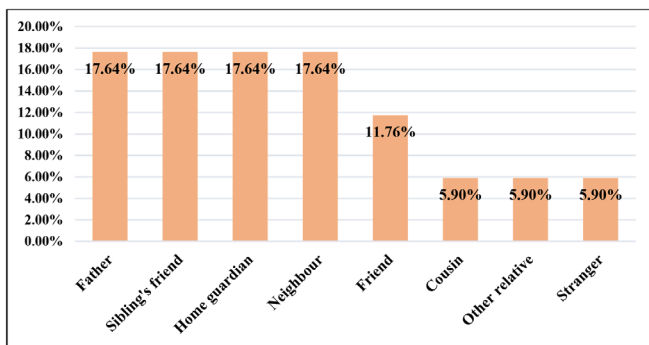


Figure 4 : Abusers of children suffered sexual abuse

When asked about the disclosure of abuse suffered, 23 out of 28 children (82.14%) who suffered from physical abuse had disclosed their state to a third party. 10 children (43.47%) had disclosed to their mother whereas another 13 children (56.52%) had disclosed about their physical abuse to their friends. In case of sexual abuse, only 6 children (35.29%) had revealed about the incidence to others. Again, Mother and Friend were the persons to whom children had confided; with 5 children (29.41%) revealing to their mother and 1 child to her friend.

Children gave various reasons for nondisclosure which has been listed in table 4. About 37.5% of children feared about the consequences of such disclosure.

Table 4 : Reasons for nondisclosure of abuse

Reasons for nondisclosure of abuse	Frequency (N – 16)	Percentage (%)
Fear of consequences	6	37.5%
A sense that disclosing is futile	3	18.75%
Being told by their abuser not to tell	2	12.5%
Fear of not being believed	2	12.5%
Shame	2	12.5%
To protect family members	1	6.25%

On testing for association of child abuse with other independent factors, a statistically significant difference (p 0.00027) was found between children depending on

their mode of stay. Children living with parents had lesser incidence of abuse (10.9%) when compared to others. The only child living in orphanage had suffered from abuse. 50% of the children living in relatives' home and 33.3% of those who resided in hostel had faced some sort of abuse.

Table 5 : Association between child abuse and mode of stay of the participants

Variable	Variable classification	Faced abuse	Did not face abuse	Chi square P value
Mode of stay	With parents	31 (10.9%)	253 (89.1%)	0.00027
	With relative	6 (50%)	6 (50%)	
	In Hostel	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	
	In Orphanage	1 (100%)	0	

## DISCUSSION

The knowledge on child abuse, its effects and availability of child helpline was high among the children studied. 86.33% of the children were aware about physical abuse and 93.66% had good knowledge on sexual abuse and methods to prevent it. A cross sectional study done in Pondicherry to assess the knowledge of child abuse in children revealed that 95.3% of kids were aware about physical abuse and 85% knew what sexual abuse is and the presence of child help line.<sup>7</sup>

Of the 300 children interviewed, 13% of the children revealed that they were subjected to some form of abuse. 9.66% children had suffered from physical abuse and 5.66% had suffered sexual abuse. About 2.33% children had suffered both physical and sexual abuse.

Similar study done for establishing prevalence of child abuse in school environment by Kumar et al. in Kerala found experience of physical abuse in 61.7% of girls and sexual abuse in 6.2% girls.<sup>8</sup> Compared to the prevalence of abuse reported in other studies, the rate of abuse reported is less. Rather than taking this as low prevalence of child abuse, the lower rate reported might be due to lower disclosure of abuse by the children.

Out these 39 reported child abuses, maximum disclosure of the incidence had happened for physical abuse (82.14%) whereas only 35.29% of children had disclosed about sexual abuse. This shows the reluctance among the children for disclosing such bitter experiences even though they had no role in its causation. Children had also listed the reasons for such nondisclosure as having fear of not believing, fear of the consequences to be faced on such disclosure, a feeling of shame to have undergone such abuses, a feeling that they will not receive any futile solution and also threat from the abuser against disclosure. Similar reasons have been elicited for nondisclosure of abuse in a study done by Bhilwar et al on the

childhood experiences of abuse among college students in south India. In that study the reasons listed were fear that parents would get angry, sense of shame and passing the incidence as unimportant.<sup>9</sup> So further studies are required to explore the factors that prevent the affected children from disclosing the abuse at an earlier stage to an appropriate person.

Prevalence of child abuse has been found to be significantly associated with the mode of stay. No one can take care of a child better than their parents. This is proved by the result that incidence of abuse is found to be lesser when brought up under the direct care of parents. Stay in orphanage, hostel or any other's house make the children more vulnerable for being victim of such crimes. But it has to be noted that even people of first-degree relation to the children are found to be the abusers in few instances. Hence a stronger awareness on child abuse including knowledge of nature and types of abuses, methods to tackle it, persons to approach in case of abuse and finally change in attitude to remove the hesitancy in revealing an abuse are the need of the hour. Also, any attempt to safe guard children from such abuses should also include addressing the parents about the seriousness of the mental stress that the child will undergo being a victim of abuse and teaching them to create a friendly environment where the child will disclose immediately without any hesitation.

### LIMITATION

This study was conducted in a particular set up of school which usually caters to children of certain socioeconomic class. Hence for generalizing the results to all school going adolescent girls, further studies in various categories of schools are required.

### SERVICES PROVIDED

- A sensitization session on child abuse was provided to all students of that particular age group.
- Children who disclosed about abuse were counselled by an experienced counsellor. All the incidents of abuse were reported to the Inspector of local All Women Police station. An NGO with experience on tackling child abuses were involved to follow up the children

### CONCLUSION

The present study underlines the fact that child abuses among school going adolescent girls are not uncommon and the gravity of the problem is big enough to structure proper solutions to address this with due importance. Just forming guidelines and passing strict laws will not reduce the

burden. Proper child friendly environment should be created in every school to encourage the children to talk about their problems including abuses. Further studies to find an effective influencer who might encourage the children to disclose abuse at earlier stage and to guide them to prevent from getting victimised are the need of the hour.

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