

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Introduction:

In Pakistan, Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is one of the least acknowledged and yet most serious form of child abuse. There have been a number of cases of Child Sexual Abuse including the brutal rape of a 5-year old in Lahore in September of this year that have caught the media's attention. We know though that as tragic as these cases were, there are thousands of sexually abused children whose cases are unreported and who are unable to get the support and attention they so desperately need.

The biggest hurdles are the lack of awareness of this issue, the non-availability of supporting data specific to CSA and the absence of effective laws for the protection and safety of children.

It is therefore up to us as individuals to raise our voices and play our role as responsible citizens of the state. Together we can ensure that our children and future generations live in a safer and more aware society.

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse is any activity in which an adult or older child uses a child in a sexual way. Child Sexual Abuse is one of the least talked about forms of child abuse. A child may be sexually abused by a stranger or by someone s/he knows. When the abuser is the child's relative by blood or by law, this is called 'incest'.

Examples of child sexual abuse include:

- Sexual touching
- Exposing children to adult sexual activity or **sexual movies/videos/e-mail/photographs**; or having children pose, undress or perform in a sexual way on film/video/computer or in person
- Showing a child one's own sexual organs
- "Peeping" into bathrooms or bedrooms to spy on a child
- Sex talk/comments/jokes with a child
- Oral sex
- Rape or attempted rape

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Myth 1:

Child sexual abuse occurs mostly in the uneducated class and slum areas.

Fact: Research from all over the world has shown that CSA can occur in **all socioeconomic classes and in families** with varying educational levels.

Myth 2:

Boys are almost never sexually abused.

Fact: Boys are as vulnerable to child sexual abuse as girls. While girls are more likely to be victims of incest, in the case of boys, the abuse usually takes place outside the home.

Myth 3:

Sometimes it is the child's fault if s/he is sexually abused.

Fact: Sexual abuse is never the fault of the child. The responsibility of the abuse always lies with the older person, who knows the adverse effects of this act on a child.

Myth 4:

If a victim of abuse talks about his/her experience, it does more harm than good.

Fact: Clinical experience has shown that it is very difficult for the child to forget an experience of sexual abuse. Studies have also shown that children who were given emotional support upon disclosure were able to cope with the abuse better than those who were not given any support.

Myth 5:

Abusers are usually strangers to the child.

Fact: In the majority of cases, abusers are older children or adults known to the child. Many times, abuse occurs by people the child trusts and respects.

Myth 6:

Sexual abuse is usually accompanied by violence or force.

Fact: No violence or physical force is used in the majority of cases of child sexual abuse. Instead the abuser is able to convince the child not to tell by using bribes or verbal threats.

Myth 7:

Very young children are not abused. It usually happens to adolescents.

Fact: Child sexual abuse can and does happen to children of every age. However, 6-10 years is reported as the most vulnerable age.

Myth 8:

Abusers look abnormal and are mentally ill.

Fact: Almost all abusers appear quite normal and are not mentally ill. These people can be rich or poor, educated or uneducated. They may even be people holding important and responsible posts and whom people trust completely. They could be judges, teachers, doctors, nurses or lawyers.

Myth 9:

Often, children make up stories or lie about being abused.

Fact: It takes a lot of courage for a child to come out and talk about a thing like abuse. The fact is that in the majority of cases, children do not report the abuse.

Myth 10:

Women cannot be abusers.

Fact: Women can also be abusers, although the percentage is much smaller than that of men.

Myth 11:

Child Sexual Abuse happens because the abusers are sexually frustrated.

Fact: Individuals who are sexual offenders against children do not seem to be motivated primarily by sexual frustration. In fact, Child Sexual Abuse always takes place when the abuser is or thinks s/he is more powerful than the victim.

EFFECTS OF SEXUAL ABUSE ON CHILDREN

Children who are victims of sexual abuse can be affected in many ways. The nature and effects of abuse vary from child to child and depend on a number of factors such as **the age of the child, the frequency and severity of abuse, the relationship of the abused child to the abuser** and the kind of support a child receives from people around her or him after the abuse. Some of these effects can be **quite severe and can continue into adulthood**.

Possible immediate physical effects

- Difficulty in walking
- **Gastrointestinal disturbances including nausea, eating disorders, ulcers and stomach cramps**
- **Pain, swelling or tearing of tissue**
- Changes in the genital area of the body such as pain, **itching, visible injury, discharge, infection, or difficulty urinating**.
- Bruises, cuts and other injuries on any part of the body for which the cause is not clear and the child cannot explain fully
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs). STIs may occur at the time of abuse and then lie dormant for months or even years, only to flare up in adolescence or adulthood

Possible emotional/behavioral effects in childhood

- Age-inappropriate behavior such as thumb-sucking, scratching and picking at skin or nails
- Self-injurious behavior, tics, enuresis, speech problems
- Conduct disturbances
- Compulsive and inappropriate sex-play and sexual activities, sexually aggressive behavior with peers, adults, toys, animals, and age inappropriate sexual awareness
- Depression and anxiety issues such as fears and phobias
- **Nightmares and sleep disturbances**
- Eating disorders
- Impaired social interaction and academic problems

Possible effects in adolescence and adulthood

- **Anxiety, depression and disassociation**
- Rebellious and delinquent behavior
- Depression and **low self-esteem**
- Eating disturbances resulting in weight loss or gain
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Self-mutilation and suicidal ideation
- Sexual promiscuity, substance abuse and impaired interpersonal relationships

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE PREVENTION: TALKING TO CHILDREN

Research has consistently shown that the child's biggest vulnerability about CSA is his/her inability to speak about this to someone older and trusted in order to get help. Often this is accompanied by our discomfort as parents, teachers or adults to talk about such a sensitive issue with children. Understanding the importance of proactively seeking the required knowledge and skills to communicate with children is one way of playing our roles effectively. Furthermore, educating

children about CSA is a vital tool for the prevention and timely addressal in terms of seeking help if they are ever to encounter such a situation.

In efforts to acquire these skills, we need to accomplish the following goals:

- Give specific, accurate and age-appropriate information about sexual abuse that will enable our children to recognize sexually abusive behavior.
- Teach specific ways to handle potentially dangerous situations.
- Encourage the child that s/he must tell you if anything like that happens.

To meet these goals, we can follow these guidelines:

- Explain to the child, which are the private parts of their body that need to be especially protected.
- Explain different types of touch, like:
 - **Good touch** which makes you comfortable and loved, for example being hugged by Dadi or kissed by Amma.
 - **Bad touch** which hurts you, for example, a slap or a hard push.
 - **Secret touch** which makes you feels uncomfortable and embarrassed, e.g. sexual abuse of any sort or when the abuser asks you to keep the touching secret.
- Explain how to say '**NO**' to any sort of touching that makes them uncomfortable.
- Give unconditional love and support.

HOW TO SUPPORT A CHILD WHO HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED

Parents/Caregivers/Guardians can also be a source of support if they find out that a child under their care has been sexually abused. Blaming the child, showing disbelief, expressing anger towards him/her, being emotionally overwhelmed, etc., are not helpful responses. Some more useful and comforting responses when a child discloses abuse are:

- "I believe you"
- "It is not your fault"
- "You did the right thing by telling someone"
- "I'm sorry this happened to you"
- "I'm sorry it happened"
- "I'll try and help you so it won't happen again"

In case of rape, it is important that a child is taken to a doctor for medico-legal examination so that evidence can be secured for legal purpose. Further can call on Helpline: 0800 22 444