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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### EXPERIENCE REGARDING IDENTIFICATION AND HANDLING OF CHILD ABUSE CASES AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS AND SCHOOL BUS ATTENDANTS- A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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#### ABSTRACT

**Background:** School personnel play a vital role in the detection and reporting of child abuse, as they encounter almost all children in the population during their daily work. However, they report relatively few cases of suspected child abuse to child protective agencies. The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate the experiences of primary school teachers and school bus attendants regarding child abuse case detection and handling. **Methods:** Focus group interviews were held among 14 primary school teachers and 14 school bus attendants. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed according to determinants such as knowledge, attitude, self-efficacy, skills, social influences and barriers influencing detection and reporting of child abuse. **Results:** Findings showed that although both groups of school personnel are aware of child abuse signs and risks, they are also lacking specific knowledge and the formal training regarding the detection and reporting guidelines. **Conclusion:** The results suggest that frontline workers are in need of supportive tools in the child abuse detection and reporting process.

## INTRODUCTION

According to UNICEF child abuse is physical, sexual, or psychological maltreatment or neglect of a child or children, especially by a parent or other caregiver. In India, a study on Child Abuse was conducted in 2007 by Ministry of Women and Child development (GOI). It revealed that two out of every three children were physically abused. 53.22% children reported having faced one or more forms of sexual abuse. Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar and Delhi reported the highest percentage of sexual abuse among both boys and girls. Every second child reported facing emotional abuse (<http://www.childlineindia.org.in/contactus.htm>). The history of child abuse treatment and prevention has been written by a variety of disciplines both individually and collectively. Initial research on the scope of the problem and effective methods of intervention can be found in medicine, sociology, psychology and social work thus giving a call for a multidisciplinary approach to handle it. One of the key members of these multidisciplinary teams have been school personnel and caregivers. Thus the present study has taken into consideration the experiences of school personnel like school teachers and school bus attendants. Within schools, teachers play a special role. First, strong teacher-student relationships provide an opportunity for teachers to offer guidance and support to children in crisis. Second, teachers may implement child assault prevention curricula to foster safety awareness and self-protection skills in their students.

Finally, preventing child abuse involves a teacher's own behavior in the classroom (Abrahams, 1992). Thus by virtue of their ongoing and long term contact with children, teachers are most likely to identify suspected victims of maltreatment and to report these children to child protective services, as required by law. Further it is always heard and read about frequent child abuse cases have during the commute of children from school to back to home. Thus making school bus attendant a important source of information regarding the same. However, research shows underreporting of suspected child abuse cases to child protective agencies. Hence in the present study a qualitative approach was taken over a structured quantitative approach to learn about experiences regarding handling and potential barriers of school personnel in depth. Also literature search shows very few studies that had taken up a qualitative approach to gather information regarding child abuse from school personnel. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of primary school teachers and school bus attendants regarding child abuse case detection and handling, to identify barriers that prevent the reporting of suspected cases, and to assess the need for associated training.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present qualitative study was conducted amongst primary school teachers and school bus attendants in two selected schools to assess their experiences regarding handling of child abuse cases.

**Study participants:** A convenience sampling of 28 female adults (14- Primary school teachers and 14- school bus attendants) participated in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from each of them.

**Study setting:** For participants, the focus group discussions were conducted in the school premises of respective schools.

**Procedure:** The choice for the focus group interview method was based on the topic; the handling of (suspicions of) child abuse in daily work. Groups comprised of 7 participants each. In total, four focus group interviews were held; two among primary school teachers and two among school bus attendants. The duration of the interviews was from 45 minutes to 1 hour. Research team consisted of a principal investigator and a moderator. Both had command over Marathi (local language) and English. Moderator was assigned a work of recording field notes. A set of interview topics was used to guide the discussion. Topics were divided into three main topics: cues to action, dealing with signs of child abuse, barriers with regard to detecting and reporting of child abuse. Open ended questions allowed participants to speak freely about their opinions, attitudes and experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Data analysis:** After transcription, the researchers reviewed the interviews several times. Probable themes that could be drawn from the interviews were discussed. Further an in-depth thematic analysis to identify key themes and subthemes was undertaken using grounded theory. Once the framework was identified, it was applied to the data and the specific pieces of data were placed under different themes to which they belong.

## RESULTS

The present qualitative study conducted to assess primary school teachers', and school bus attendant's experiences with child abuse detection and handling. For assessment, 4- focus group interviews containing 2 focus groups of primary school teachers and 2 focus groups of school bus attendants with 7 participants each were conducted. Three main themes and several subthemes were derived. These are presented below.

**Cues to action:** The results showed that teachers became aware of alleged child abuse cases through different cues to action, such as actual signs of child abuse (e.g. bruises) or worrying family situations from different sources. Teachers indicated that the child's own behaviour plays an important role in the awareness process of possible cases of child abuse. According to school bus attendants, signs of abuse can originate from different sources: the child (e.g. physical signs, behavioural signs), the child's social environment, the child's parents, other professionals (e.g. day-care workers, nursery school teachers). Few of the responses from school personnel noted: "The child shows a withdrawn behaviour. He or She sits in one corner of the classroom, stops eating food, cries a lot". "The child abuse case that I encountered few years back, the child seemed to be emotionally disturbed and showed low academic performance than usual". "Bruises due to hitting by someone in the house or outside the house can be seen physically"

**Dealing with signs of child abuses:** Most teachers and school bus attendants felt responsible to act upon these signs and have the intention to report suspected child abuse cases to child

protection services. Asking relevant questions, showing empathy and respectful behaviour towards the child, helps child in opening up. Teachers stated that not all abused children display physical signs, in fact they were aware about different types of child abuse and defined child abuse broadly. Regarding the initial support systems for child abuse reporting, both the groups identified school principal, colleagues, social worker or psychologist in the school as internal sources of support. Whereas police or any official child abuse reporting agencies to be external source of support. One of the school teachers shared her experience,

"A four year old in my class was showing unusually aggressive behaviour, his parents complained to me that he wasn't ready to come to school by school van, I took him in my confidence and asked the reason for this. He opened up that he had by mistakenly spilled water in the van and the van driver had shouted on him badly and slapped him on his face, so he doesn't want to go to the van anymore". "In my opinion, pressurizing children to perform well in their academics, giving them work beyond their capacity or even making them too write so many pages at the age of 3-4 years is a form of child abuse that is happening daily."

In India POCSO (Protection of children from child sexual offences act) is one of the acts passed in 2012 which gives mandatory guidelines for reporting sexual child abuse. However only two teachers out of all had attended the seminars regarding it, all others were clue less. On asking they answered, "I am unaware reading any such guidelines, but if we are given knowledge regarding it, it would helpful to us"

**Barriers in regards to detecting and reporting of child abuse:** In India child abuse is considered a social stigma. On the same lines the results of the present study also stated that both the groups faced various social influences from relatives, friends, higher authorities that acted as barriers for reporting. Some felt that the charges incurred during the procedure of reporting a case (e.g. lawyer fees) are really unbearable, thus considering poverty as one of the barrier. Also the Participants shared that a lack of knowledge regarding baseline rates for categorising a case as abuse or no abuse is one of the major barrier. Few of the responses noted were, "Child abuse is considered a social stigma, in my experience the parents do not want to report the incidence as it would spoil the image of their family in the society." "If influential people are involved in the child abuse, police may be reluctant to take the report, the school higher authorities, trustees or principal would try to curb the issue in order to maintain the image of the school.

"One of the bus attendant told, "If I discuss anything about child abuse to my family and friends they always tell me to remain away from all this. Since in their opinion poor family like us can't afford to waste lot of time and money incurred in procedure." "The culprit might threaten us to harm physically if we lodge a complaint against him. Also in case of lack of evidence the culprit would deny to accept that he is guilty and ask a proof against him.

The guilty from a rich society would curb the case by bribing everyone involved. "Both the groups expressed, "We might have missed a child abuse case due to lack of our expertise in identifying child abuse, training of some kind to all school personnel would remove the knowledge barrier and more cases can be identified."

Table 1. Themes and subthemes derived from responses of school personnel

	School Teachers	Bus attendants
Themes	Subthemes	Subthemes
Cues to action	a)Childs Own Behaviour b)Physical Signs	a)Children's own behaviour b)Actual signs
Dealing with signs of child abuse	a)Attitude b)Awareness regarding types of child abuse c)Support sources for a initial case reporting d)Know how about mandatory guidelines.	a)Attitude b)Awareness regarding types of child abuse c)Support sources for a initial case reporting d)Know how about mandatory guidelines
Barriers with regard to detecting and reporting of a child abuse case.	a)Social influences b)Pressure from higher authorities. c)Lack of knowledge as a barrier	a)Social influences b)Pressure from higher authorities. c)Pressure from Culprits. d)Reporting anonymously

## DISCUSSION

Child abuse and neglect in any form will leave the child with long-lasting scars that may be physical or psychological. These scars damage the child's sense of self, their ability to build healthy relationships with people in society, work at school, or functions in a family. To numb the painful feelings, a child may even fall into malpractices such as alcoholism and drug addiction. However, the exposure of the child to violence during childhood can increase vulnerability of that child to mental and physical health problems such as anxiety disorder and depression, and make victims more likely to become perpetrators of violence later in life (Saxena *et al.*, 2015).

While statistics indicate that the closed walls of a domestic environment are most conducive for child abuse, authorities from Department of Women And Child Development the (Government of India) explain that the first step towards providing a safe environment for students would be for schools to have a Child Protection Policy (CPP) and knowledge about POCSO 2012 ACT for mandatory reporting. While CPP is mandatory in CBSE schools, several private schools from other boards are not even aware of its importance. Most mid-level schools in middle-class neighbourhoods had not even heard of the policy. A few school managements claimed that they did conduct some awareness programmes regarding the issue and that they even had a policy. However, many had no clue on what the policy was. Thus the problems of child abuse and neglect in India needs serious and wider consideration, particularly among the underprivileged rural and urban communities, where child protection systems are not developed—or do not reach. Research shows paucity of literature regarding the problems faced by school personnel to identify and report cases of child abuse. In the present study we performed focus group interviews with 28 school personnel including school teachers and school bus attendants. The present study highlights some of the problems associated with teachers' surveillance role. One vital aspect that we found is the lack of appropriate time and opportunity for reflective observation. It is evident that in the crowded and intense daily work of the classroom, teachers may be unable to engage individual children on a level sufficiently close and personal to notice when a child has been abused. Added to a general lack of knowledge of abuse definitions and shared understandings with regard to policy, it may seem a wonder that any abused children get detected at all. Even when teachers do become suspicious, there are clearly some other issues at work that act as barriers. The present study shows that both school teachers and school bus attendants were cognizant with physical signs of child abuse, as any injury with inconsistent history might finger toward physical aggression going on with the child.

The above results were in consensus with the study conducted by Kaur *et al.* (2016). It was experienced in our study that the participants were not sure with respect to base line rates i.e. at what point a given situation would be considered as abuse or no abuse. This happened partly due to a lack of attention to child abuse issues in their formal education. These results concur with a previous study of Feng *et al.* (2005) which showed that in a sample of 598 kindergarten teachers more than 81% reported both pre-service and in-service child abuse education was inadequate. The present study also highlighted, education is the critical factor in enhancing the ability of professionals to detect cases and increase their confidence and commitment to reporting suspicious cases. Education is essential to increase the probability of mandatory reporting by increasing reporters' sensitivity and their ability to detect or report child abuse cases. The results of the present study are similar to study conducted by Deshpande *et al.* (2015) amongst medical and dental residents of Gujarat. Both the groups were of similar opinion with regard to perceived support from external sources. Both the groups believed that local police was an important support system, especially with regard to safety issues. The police was also considered important in the detection phase of abuse. The above results concur with Schols *et al.* (2013).

In the present study both the groups felt responsible for timely reporting the suspicious cases to the concerned authority which was similar to study conducted by Schols *et al.* (2013) and Saxena *et al.* (2015). The present study reveals that majority of the school personnel were unaware of the appropriate agency to report the child abuse case which falls in line with the findings of study by Kaur *et al.* (2016) conducted among general dentist. The bus attendants were strongly of the opinion that being able to report anonymously would defiantly increase the number cases reported. The results concur with the study conducted by Schols *et al.* (2013) among school teachers. The present study put light on the main barriers for responders not reporting cases that had otherwise been suspicious would be lack of adequate history, possible effect on their practice, and uncertainty about diagnosis which is in consensus with findings of study conducted by Ramesh G *et al.* (2017) among school teachers in Kanpur city. A factor by which few responders were influenced in reporting their suspicions was fear of litigation; Impact on their practice was also a major reason for not reporting suspicious case, which were in line with findings by Deshpande *et al.* (2015), Ramesh G *et al.* (2017) and Schols *et al.* (2013). School bus attendants also found poverty and finance as one of the barrier for not being able to report the case to higher authorities. The present study showed that there is a need for standardized and comprehensive training in child abuse for reporters, and a critical analysis on the dynamics and interactions between the child, mandated reporters, institutional system, community,

and society is imperative which is similar to the findings in the study conducted by Deshpande *et al.* (2015), Kaur *et al.* (2016) and Schols *et al.* (2013). Taking all findings into account, primary school personnel would most likely benefit from a program or method which involves both children and teachers and which is imbedded in the school's structure. Since child abuse detection is not their primary task and therefore they often have limited time and resources to spend on child abuse issues. With regard to the design of a program, the use of interactive techniques such as active rehearsal and modelling is suggested (Feng, 2005). In addition, school support could serve as a motivational factor in the child abuse reporting process. The professional with child abuse prevention in his/her portfolio should be trained in assessing child abuse risk and communicating with parents and care providers of the family. They should also pass on their knowledge and skills to the teachers and assist teachers in managing a vulnerable child.

Child protection is a duty of every single member of the society (Saxena, 2015). Considering the need of the hour to eradicate child abuse from India in the upcoming decade, this study was conducted at ground level i.e. among primary school teachers and school bus attendants, because these are the staff who work close to the community and children. These workers, thus, can have a pivotal role in eradication of child abuse from India. On the basis of a qualitative study, we were not able to make inferences about the causal relationship between the different behavioural determinants. It is unknown how the behaviour determinants interact. In order to obtain an overall perspective on child abuse detection and reporting practices, it is required that future research focuses on other stakeholders such as anganwadi workers, youth care providers, school principals and management teams. One of the limitations with the present study was the experience of the school personnel was not taken into consideration which would add to their experience regarding the encounter of child abuse cases. Also an inherent limitation of qualitative research is related to the generalisability of the study findings. Since we included school personnel who were willing to participate in the study voluntarily, selection bias might have occurred in the sense that the participants of our study could have been more motivated and interested in child abuse prevention than the average public child healthcare worker or teacher. Due to the explorative nature of this study, the results cannot be generalized to frontline workers from other professions. The results are limited by the self-report method, and reporting biases due to social desirability that may affect the methods used given the sensitivity of this issue despite efforts to ensure anonymity.

**Conflict of interest:** None declared

## Key Points

More research in the field of child abuse is necessary to create awareness among the front line workers. In India, more research/reporting is required to study the extent of problem in different settings of India, settings of abuse, quality of life of victims, parental/community education on indicators of abuse and development of support program to victim. It should be made mandatory for all the school personnel to undergo pre-service training in child abuse detection and handling. And they should be certified for the same by concerned authorities.

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