

Original Article

Child Abuse and Neglect; Recognize, Respond and Report: A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Child abuse and neglect (CAN) is a significant global problem with a serious impact on the victims throughout their lives. Dentists have a unique opportunity to address this problem. The aim of this study was to assess the knowledge and prevalence of child abuse and neglect amongst undergraduate students of the Faculty of Dental Sciences, Banaras Hindu University (BHU), Varanasi, and to create awareness about child abuse and behavioural patterns.

Methodology: A cross-sectional study was conducted on a total of 160 BDS undergraduates. A pre-designed and structured questionnaire was prepared and distributed in print format to different batches in the faculty to assess their past experiences and knowledge about child abuse and neglect. Answers to all the questions were kept anonymous. The results were compiled and analysed using Chi-Square tests. Seminars were organized for different batches in the faculty to create awareness about child abuse and behavioural patterns among children visiting them in their day-to-day practice using PowerPoint presentations.

Results: A total of 100 responses were received from the students. Out of 100 students, 41 were male while 59 were female students. Only 21% of students experienced child abuse out of which sexual abuse was the most prevalent form (76.3% girls and 14.6% boys). Only 7% of students in the study reported being physically abused which led to the injuries.

Conclusion: Children who reported an abusive experience usually faced more than one category of abuse, abuse in one category was significantly associated with abuse in other categories. Many children across the country belonging to different backgrounds face various forms of

child abuse and neglect. Without detection, reporting, and intervention, these children may remain victims for the rest of their lives, both emotionally and/or physically. The purpose of reporting child abuse is to identify children suspected to be victims of abuse as well as to prevent them from facing further abuse.

Keywords: Abuse, Child abuse, Neglect.

INTRODUCTION

Children are the best hope for the future. They are the world's most valuable treasure and should be given the liberty to mature in a loving, caring, and healthy environment. But today, the scenario is completely different with an increasing number of cases of child abuse and neglect. Child abuse is not just about red eyes but it's also about ignorance and putting a child in unsupervised and dangerous situations. World Health Organization (WHO) defines child abuse or maltreatment as "all forms of physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and exploitation that results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, development, or dignity".¹ There are mainly four main types of abuse: neglect, physical abuse, psychological abuse, and sexual abuse. Abuse is defined as an act of commission and neglect is defined as an act of omission in the care leading to potential or actual harm.¹

Child abuse is physical, sexual, and/or psychological maltreatment of a child, especially by a parent or a caregiver. It may include any act or failure to act by a parent or a caregiver that results in actual or potential harm to a child and can occur in a child's home or in the organizations, schools, or communities the child interacts with.

Child neglect is a form of abuse², an act of caregivers and parents that results in depriving a child of their basic needs,

such as the failure to provide adequate supervision, health care, clothing, or housing as well as other physical, emotional, social, educational, and safety needs.³ In literature, neglect is further classified into five types: supervisory, physical, medical, educational, and emotional.

WHO defines physical abuse as the “intentional use of physical force against the child that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in harm to the child's health, survival, development, or dignity. This includes hitting, beating, kicking, shaking, biting, strangling, scalding, burning, poisoning, and suffocating. Much physical violence against children in the home is inflicted with the object of punishing”.⁴

Sexual abuse refers to the participation of a child in a sexual act aimed toward the physical gratification or the financial profit of the person committing the act.⁵ Forms of child sexual abuse include asking or pressuring a child to engage in sexual activities, indecent exposure of the genitals to a child, and actual physical contact with a child's genitals.⁶

In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) added Child Psychological Abuse to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), describing it as “nonaccidental verbal or symbolic acts by a child's parent or caregiver that result or have reasonable potential to result in significant psychological harm to the child”.⁷ Some have defined it as the production of psychological and social defects in the growth of a child as a result of behaviour such as loud yelling, coarse and rude attitude, inattention, harsh criticism, and denigration of the child's personality.⁵

Even after reading several books and newspaper articles and knowing about various forms of child abuse and neglect, there is a gap between recognizing the form of abuse and then responding and reporting about it. The objective of this study was to assess the prevalence of child

abuse among the undergraduates of the Faculty of Dental Sciences, BHU, Varanasi, and to find out which form of child abuse is the most common alongwith frequency of reported cases.

METHODS

The cross-sectional study was carried out on a total 160 students after obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee of the Institute. Before distributing the questionnaires, the students were informed about the study objectives and the correct method to complete the questionnaire.

The motto of this questionnaire study was to assess their past experiences, understanding, perception, and awareness on this sensitive topic of child abuse. A predesigned and structured questionnaire was prepared and validated (Figure 1). It included questions under different headings of abuse and was distributed in print format to 160 students of different BDS batches in the faculty and were asked to fill the form by ticking yes or no and to specify at some places. Answers to all the questions were kept anonymous. The results were compiled and analysed using Chi- square tests.

After collecting the data, the students were briefed about the global burden of child abuse by conducting seminars and presentations in order to make them aware of the patterns of child abuse and neglect, how to look for signs of child abuse amongst the pediatric patients visiting them in the daily OPDs, and most importantly how to respond and where to report about it.

RESULTS

A total of 100 responses were received from the students. Out of 100 students, 41 were male while 59 were female students. Their age ranged from 22 to 24 years (Table 1).

It was reported that females talked more about their daily

Table 1: Demographic data of study population

Variable	Category	Mean ± SD (%)
Age	--	22.49 ± 1.69
Gender	Male	41 (41%)
	Female	59 (59%)
No of family members	--	5.06 ± 1.50
Year of study	I	41 (41%)
	II	21 (21%)
	III	16 (16%)
	IV	16 (16%)
	Internship	6 (6%)

A QUESTIONNAIRE STUDY ON PAST CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS:

Age:	Gender:
BDS batch:	Number of family members:
Occupation of Parents:	
Father-Service/Business/Others	Mother-Service/Business/Others

GENERAL QUESTIONS:

- | | |
|---|-----------------|
| 1. Do you talk about your daily activities with your parents? | YES/NO |
| 2. Have you ever heard about child abuse and neglect? | YES/NO |
| 3. Have you ever experienced any form of child abuse or neglect?
-If yes, how old were you then? | YES/NO
..... |

PHYSICAL ABUSE:

- | | |
|---|--------|
| 1. Did your parents scold you? | |
| • Verbal | YES/NO |
| • Physical | YES/NO |
| 2. Did the physical scolding lead to injuries? | YES/NO |
| 3. Has any other family members/guardian/nanny/neighbor/friend raised their hands on you? | YES/NO |
| 4. Has anyone ever kicked/hit you with a hard object? | YES/NO |
| 5. Were you afraid of anyone? Parents/Relatives/Neighbors/Schoolmates/Bus Driver/
Conductor/House help | |

EMOTIONAL ABUSE:

- | | |
|--|--------|
| 1. Did your parents leave you alone at home for longer period of time? | YES/NO |
| 2. Did your parents/family members bully/humiliate you in front of others? | YES/NO |
| 3. How many hours in a day you used to spend with your parents/family? | |
| • Father- | |
| • Mother-..... | |
| • Relatives-..... | |
| 4. Did you like spending more time away from family members? YES/NO | |

SEXUAL ABUSE:

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1. Here are some general statements on child sexual abuse. Do you rather agree or disagree with these statements? | |
| • Some children are sexually abused by older children. | Agree/Disagree/I don't know |
| • Most people who sexually abuse children belong to the child's family. | Agree/Disagree/I don't know |
| • Most people who sexually abuse children do not belong to the child's family. | Agree/Disagree/I don't know |
| • Only girls are the victims of child abuse. | Agree/Disagree/I don't know |
| • Only young children are the victims of child abuse. | Agree/Disagree/I don't know |
| 2. Has anyone ever touched you in an inappropriate manner? If yes, what was your age that time? | |
| • Less than 5 years | |
| • 5 to 10 years | |
| • 10 to 15 years | |
| • More than 15 years | |
| 3. Has anyone ever made you do things against your will? | YES/NO |
| -If yes, did you discuss this with anyone? | YES/NO |
| 4. Have your parents/teachers ever spoken to you about child sexual abuse? | YES/NO |

OTHERS:

- | | |
|--|--------|
| • Have you ever seen your friends/siblings facing the above-mentioned situations? | YES/NO |
| • In future, if you are any acquaintance ever face the above-mentioned situations, Will you report about it? | YES/NO |
| If yes, then where? Family <input type="checkbox"/> Police <input type="checkbox"/> Other Agency <input type="checkbox"/> | |

Figure 1: A predesigned and structured questionnaire on child abuse and neglect.

activities with their parents as compared to males (M = 70.7%, F=91.5%). More than 80% of the students reported that they were not left alone at home by their parents for longer duration (Table 2).

It was also found that the parents physically abuse males

more than females (M = 26.8, F = 10.2). 76.3 % of females reported to have been touched by someone in an inappropriate manner whereas only 14.6% males experienced the same (Table 3 and 4).

67.8% of the females said that their parents/teachers spoke

Table 2: General questions about child abuse

Type of abuse	Questions	Male (%)	Female (%)	p value
General	Do you talk about your daily activities with your parents?	70.7	91.5	0.013*
	Have you ever heard about child abuse and neglect?	73.2	81.4	0.340
	Have you ever experienced any form of child abuse or neglect?	17.1	23.7	0.465

p value < 0.05; significant

Table 3: Assessment of different types of child abuse

Type of abuse	Questions	Male (%)	Female (%)	p value
Physical	Did your parents scold you?	65.9	57.6	0.532
	Did your parents scold you? (Verbally)	63.4	57.6	0.679
	Did your parents scold you? (Physically)	26.8	10.2	0.050*
	Did the physical scolding lead to injuries?	9.8	5.1	0.440
	Has any other family member/ guardian/ nanny/ neighbor/ friend raised their hands on you?	24.4	11.9	0.113
	Has anyone ever kicked/hit you with a hard object?	12.2	6.8	0.481
	Were you afraid of anyone? Parents/Relatives/ Neighbours/ Schoolmates/ Bus Driver/ Conductor/ House help	29.3	25.4	0.819
Emotional	Did your parents leave you alone at home for longer period of time?	17.1	13.6	0.777
	Did your parents/ family members bully/humiliate you in front of others?	4.9	6.8	1.000
	Did you like spending more time away from family members?	36.6	27.1	0.381
Sexual	Has anyone ever touched you in an inappropriate manner?	14.6	76.3	0.001*
	Has anyone ever made you do things against your will?	14.6	25.4	0.221
	Have your parents/ teachers ever spoken to you about child sexual abuse?	46.3	67.8	0.040*

p value < 0.05; significant

to them about child sexual abuse as compared to 46.3% of the males. More than half of the females agreed that most people who sexually abuse children belong to the child's family (Table 3 and 4).

More than 80% of the study population agreed that children are sexually abused by older children and more than 90% disagreed that girls are the only victims of child sexual abuse (Table 3 and 4).

DISCUSSION

The experience of abuse is linked with increased medical costs and several grave health consequences that can extend to adulthood including attachment disorders, behavioural disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, altered neurobiological anatomies, suicidal ideation, risky sexual practices, and sexually transmitted infections.^{8,9}

Table 4: Comparison of perception about sexual abuse among males and females

Questions	Category	Male	Female	p value
Some children are sexually abused by older children	Agree	85.4	83	0.115
	Disagree	0	8.5	
	I don't know	14.6	8.5	
Most people who sexually abuse children belong to the child's family	Agree	36.6	61	0.049*
	Disagree	29.3	15.3	
	I don't know	34.1	23.7	
Only girls are the victims of child abuse	Agree	0	1.7	0.617
	Disagree	90.2	91.5	
	I don't know	9.8	6.8	
Only young children are the victims of child abuse	Agree	14.6	20.3	0.731
	Disagree	80.5	76.3	
	I don't know	4.9	3.4	

p value < 0.05; significant

In the present study, only 21% of students experienced some form of child abuse, while 88.88% in Neupane et al¹⁰ study conducted on Nepalese students and 71.09% in Welson et al¹¹ study on Egyptian students faced different forms of child abuse. In a cross-sectional survey on the prevalence of child abuse in Kerala conducted by Kumar et al¹² it was found that boys reported more abuse than girls across all the categories of abuse (including sexual abuse).

In this study, it was found that sexual abuse was most prevalent, which is in concordance with the study done by Welson et al¹¹ while the study done by Neupane et al¹⁰ states that the psychological abuse was most prevalent. While only 7% students in this study reported to be physically abused which led to injuries, 12.59% students suffered from physical injuries and bruises in the study by Welson et al¹¹ and 65.43% of students faced physical abuse in the study by Neupane et al.¹⁰

Less number of students presented in this study with different forms of child abuse and neglect in their childhood as compared to other studies. This discrepancy in this data may be because the kids in our society hesitate to open up as they have not been taught to speak freely about such issues.

In the routine OPDs of pediatric patients, one comes across many children and by general examination and looking for some of the red flag signs of abuse they can help in recognizing it. A few common signs which should be looked for are:

- A non-ambulatory infant with any injury.
- Injury in a non-verbal child.
- Injury inconsistent with child's physical abilities.

- Multiple injuries, particularly at varying ages.
- Bruises on the torso, ear, or neck in a child.
- Burns to genitalia.¹³
- Caregiver is unconcerned about injury.
- An unexplained delay in seeking care or inconsistencies or discrepancies in the histories provided.

The red flag signs of child abuse include:

- Child wary of adult contact.
- Displays passive behavior or seems frightened of their parents and afraid to go home.
- Seems overly aggressive, violent, demanding, or displaying abusive behavior.
- Exhibit dramatic mood changes.
- Parents seem extremely overprotective of their child.
- Child's behavior may not be consistent with that of other children at the same maturity level.
- It seems that the child is lying about any abuse.

Local examination of oral cavity also helps in the identification of abuse. Therefore the oral manifestations of child abuse may be:

- Lips: Lacerations or scars or rope marks on the corners of the mouth.
- Palate: Any unexplained petechiae or bruises particularly at the junction of the hard and soft palate.¹⁴
- Floor of the mouth: Contusions
- Teeth: Fractured or nonvital teeth that appear to be from nonaccidental trauma, teeth missing or displaced.
- Edentulous patients: Bruises on edentulous ridges or severe lacerations.
- The purpose of reporting child abuse is to identify

children suspected to be victims of abuse as well as to prevent them from facing further abuse.

- Without detection, reporting and intervention, these children may remain victims for the rest of their lives both emotionally and/or physically.
- They may repeat the pattern of abuse with their own children.

A common finding in the studies was that despite knowing and facing different forms of child abuse and neglect, very few of the cases were reported to the law. The reporting is required not only for ethical reasons but also for Section 21(1) of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 that has made it mandatory to report cases of child sexual abuse to the law enforcement authorities. The act was amended in 2019, to make provisions for enhancement of punishments for various offences so as to deter the perpetrators and ensure safety, security, and dignified childhood for a child. The 24 hour toll free emergency number 1098 provides assistance to children in need of care and protection.

CONCLUSION

In this era of 21st century with increasing literacy rates, decreasing discrimination, amendment of strict laws, still children are facing abuse in many forms. The kids and children should open up and speak freely about such issues and hence more awareness should be created. Child abuse is a public health problem that leads to lifelong health consequences, both physically and psychologically. It is important for the clinicians to have a high index of suspicion of child maltreatment since early identification may be lifesaving. When it comes to child abuse, all healthcare workers have a legal, medical, and moral obligation to identify the problem and report it.

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