



Enabling safety and freedom from abuse within the school

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Each day, thousands of children across the world face situations characterised by abuse and neglect. The onus of intervention does not lie with any single agency or organisation but is a collective community responsibility.

India is home to 19% of the world's children. A study of 12447 children across 13 states in India showed that young children were most at risk for abuse and exploitation. Two thirds of children were physically abused, over 50% of children had faced one or more forms of sexual abuse and every second child reported facing emotional abuse.

Children spend a large portion of their time in school and schools are nurturing environments whose responsibility encompasses not only academic learning but to also be instrumental in social and emotional development in children. They are also places where the first relationships are formed with peers and adults outside the family and these interpersonal relations play a pivotal role in shaping young people. This makes them inherently vulnerable to the effects of an adverse school environment. It is therefore important for schools to equip themselves to be instruments of positive change and all-round development of children. Their role is particularly important when it comes to the issue of enabling safety and freedom from abuse among children and young people.

The first step towards this would be an attempt to increase awareness among the teachers that

every form of maltreatment is inflicted on school going children and a thorough exploration of the teachers' opinions on abuse related issues must be carried out. It is important to determine and build upon their knowledge of the various forms of abuse- physical, emotional, sexual abuse and neglect, and the short-term and long-term detrimental consequences of such abusive experiences.

Teachers are in contact with children on a daily basis and are ideally placed to recognise physical and behavioural indicators suggestive of abuse. These could be extreme fluctuations in academic performance, intense hostility and anger, being passive, withdrawn, uncommunicative and sudden changes in children's behaviour. The teacher may also be able to discern children at risk for abuse from familial clues when parents consistently blame or belittle the child, see the child in negative light as compared to siblings and seem unconcerned about the child and refuse to discuss the child's problems.

Teachers must be facilitated through workshops in learning how to respond to revelations or discoveries of abuse. It is important for teachers to make the children as comfortable as possible, refrain from exhibiting a strong reaction to the child's disclosure, praise and support the child for revealing what happened to him/her. The child must be reassured that what happened is not his/her fault. The child may be afraid that either he or she will be taken from the home or the

parent may be arrested. If such a fear is expressed, the educator should acknowledge not knowing what will occur. In this respect it should be noted that according to “The Protection Of Children Against Sexual Offences Act 2012” it is mandatory to report the offence to the police failing which it is punishable by law with imprisonment for 6 months or fine or both.

Each school must have a reporting procedure and a clearly defined protocol for dealing with child abuse including physical abuse. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, prohibits ‘physical punishment’ and ‘mental harassment’ and makes it a punishable offence. Schools need procedures to ensure that appropriate people are notified, consultations are held and those who need to know are made aware of the student’s situation.

It is extremely disturbing when a child reports that personnel in the school is involved in abuse, in this case the child needs special protection and it is important to remember that it requires courage to report. The teacher must follow the school policy and procedure in case an allegation is made against school personnel.

Identifying and reporting of child abuse are important to prevent abuse and neglect from recurring but schools must also engage in programs aimed at empowerment of children with developmentally appropriate skills and work to prevent abuse from occurring.

According to a study by TULIR, an NGO in Chennai, out of a total of 2211 child participants interviewed across schools in Chennai, 42% of the children had faced sexual abuse in one form or the other. It is therefore imperative to conduct personal safety workshops in schools on a regular basis. They help children defend themselves, especially against sexual abuse. Personal safety curricula include developmentally appropriate learning about sexual abuse, body ownership, safe, unsafe touch and confusing touch, ways of responding to unsafe touch and making children aware of potential abusers and dealing with bullies.

Although there are criticisms regarding these personal safety education for children that they make the child feel responsible for their own protection and cause them to feel guilty if they are molested, anxiety and fear towards strangers and increased risk perception, most studies indicate that children who had experienced a prevention programme were more likely to use the self-protective strategies they learned on the programme and felt more confident about doing so.

For an effective transition to adulthood, children and adolescents need to gain mastery in certain skills that are indispensable in helping them sail through life. Life skills training is an interactive process of teaching and learning which focuses on acquiring knowledge, attitudes and skills which support behaviours that enable us to take greater responsibility for our own lives; by making healthy life choices, gaining greater resistance to negative pressures, and minimising harmful behaviours. It consists of a core set of skills which are problem solving, critical thinking, creative thinking, decision making, coping with emotion, interpersonal skills, communication, empathy and coping with stress and self-awareness. As life skills education is a dynamic process it cannot be learned or enhanced on the basis of information or discussion alone, it must involve experiential learning methods like drama, games and storytelling where there is mixture of process and content, ability to make connections with learning and the outside world and hone their ability of self-reflection. A study on implication and impact of the NIMHANS model of life skills education program among school children showed better adjustment at school and with teachers; perceived coping was better than control group.

Empowering children by facilitating inculcation of skills through various programmes is critical element in prevention of child abuse but provision of a safe, inclusive and accepting school environment is crucial if we need to help children reach their potential and grow up to be resilient adults. In wake of the Florida tragedy, where a

child committed suicide following cyber bullying and the arrest of two young girls aged 12 and 14 for the crime, it is the need of the day to have effective and comprehensive anti-bullying initiatives at school. Anti-bullying initiatives need a multi-faceted approach involving assessments of prevalence and frequency of bullying, intervention and prevention efforts. Efforts must be made to involve everyone in the community to send a unified message against bullying. Creation of code of conduct, school-wide rules, bullying reporting system are needed which will help in establishing a climate in which bullying is unacceptable. This must be disseminated widely through awareness campaigns. Promotive efforts like establishing a school culture of tolerance, acceptance and respect where positive social interactions and inclusiveness is encouraged must also be carried out alongside.

Having seen the significance of the role schools have to play in prevention of child abuse, it is important that schools develop a child protection policy that addresses the role, responsibilities and practices of a school in relation to child protection. When we formulate interventions in

the best interest of the child, it is important to take the child's perspective in these matters through active involvement and participation of children and recognition as well as prioritisation of their needs and experiences

It is easier for children to develop and learn with the support of strong families and cooperative communities. Schools can conduct activities that help parents succeed and also prevent child abuse and neglect like promotion of parenting skills through workshops for parents on effective discipline, parent-child communication and internet-safety. Schools and communities must work collaboratively in raising public awareness regarding child abuse and neglect. These awareness campaigns must aim at helping the community understand that maltreatment of children is everyone's problem and its prevention is everyone's responsibility.

In the words of Nelson Mandela, "Safety and security don't just happen; they are the result of collective consensus and public investment. We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society, a life free of violence and fear."

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