

Knowledge and Perception of Child Maltreatment among Parents of Under 18 children in a Metropolitan City: A Cross-Sectional Study

Saagarika Ayappan¹, Dinesh Kumar Ganesan², Timsi Jain³

¹MBBS Student, ²Associate Professor, ³Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Saveetha Medical College & Hospital, Thandalam, Chennai

Correspondence : Dr Dinesh Kumar Ganesan, Email: drgdineshkumar@gmail.com

Abstract:

Introduction : Child maltreatment is the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation. **Objective :** To assess the Knowledge and perception of Child maltreatment among parents of Under 18 children. **Method :** This was a Cross-Sectional Study done among parents of paediatric patients (aged under 18 years) who attended a private tertiary level hospital. A total of 324 selected parents were interviewed during the study period. The study was conducted in the form of a questionnaire which consisted of 3 parts. **Results :** In the study 96.2% of the parents who participated were aware of the term “child abuse” but among them, 6.1% were unaware of the fact that there are different types of abuse. More than 2/3rd (76.85%) of the parents felt that alcohol influences the behavior of predators of child abuse. Overall, age, education level, and marital status were the statistically significant factors in the current study. **Conclusion:** The parents in our society today are aware of what child abuse is and its influence on children, society, and the community in general but the knowledge related to legislations have to improve.


Keywords: Child maltreatment, Knowledge, Perception, Parents, Protection of Children from Sexual offences (POCSO) act

Introduction:

Child maltreatment is the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes 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.^[1] It is one of the most significant and widespread social problems in the world and it is reported that nearly 3 in 4 children aged 2-4 years regularly suffer physical punishment and/or psychological violence at the hands of parents and

caregivers, and 1 in 5 women and 1 in 13 men report having been sexually abused as a child.^[1]

Violence against children threatens not only children’s survival and health but also their emotional well-being and prospects. Violence against children is widespread and remains a harsh reality for millions of children in India. Over half of the world’s children have experienced severe violence and 64 per cent of these are in South Asia.^[2] Maltreatment to a child can happen in a child’s home, school, or the community in which the child interacts, and it is more prevalent in the urban areas than in rural areas.^[3] Exposure to multiple types and

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repeated episodes of maltreatment is associated with increased risks of severe maltreatment and psychological consequences. It substantially contributes to child mortality and morbidity and has long-lasting effects on mental health, drug, and alcohol misuse (especially in girls), risky sexual behavior, obesity, and criminal behavior, which persist into adulthood.^[4]

Parents play a crucial role in the development of their children. However, changing social, economic, educational, and technological contexts are influencing the lives and roles of parents as well as those of their children.^[5,6] The parents need to have sound knowledge on the issue of Child maltreatment and thus the present study was done to assess the same among the parents of young children.

Method:

This was a Cross-Sectional Study done among parents of paediatric patients (aged under 18 years) who attended a private tertiary level hospital. The duration of the study was 3 months (January-March 2021). The study participants were selected using the convenient sampling method. A total of 324 eligible parents were interviewed for the study during the study period. The data was collected with a questionnaire which consisted of three parts. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of the socio-demographic details of the participants of the study. The second part of the questionnaire tests the knowledge of the participating parents regarding child maltreatment (abuse) and the final part of the questionnaire assessed the perception of the parents about child abuse and related questions.

A total of 14 questions were specific to knowledge and people who correctly answered 7 or more were considered to have 'good knowledge' while others were considered as 'poor'. A pilot study was undertaken to test the validity and reliability of the data collection tool and to identify possible field problems and modifications were made accordingly. The questionnaire was prepared with the help of various subject experts.

Method of Data Collection :

After getting approval from the Institutional Ethics committee, the study was conducted among the study participants. Before the interview, the

nature and purpose of the study were explained and then informed consent was obtained which was followed by a face-to-face interview with each participant to collect data. In the situation where both parents were present, one of them was asked to volunteer for the study. The responses were collected with the help of the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

All data were entered in the Micro soft Excel spreadsheet and analyzed using the SPSS software package Trial version. Results were reported as percentages. A Chi-square test was done to study association. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results:

The study was conducted among the parents attending a tertiary care hospital in Chennai, regarding the knowledge and perception of child maltreatment (abuse). The mean age of the participants was 40 years and more than 90% of the participants were graduates and above. About 90% of the participants were married. More than 80% of the parents had an income of >10,000 INR (Table1).

Table 1 : Socio-Demographic Variables of Study Participants (N=324)

Variables	n (%)
Age (years)	
< 20	11 (3.3)
20-40	61 (18.9)
> 40	252 (77.8)
Gender	
Female	243 (75)
Male	81 (25)
Income	
<5000 Rs. per month	35 (10.8)
5000 Rs-10000rs Per month	15 (4.6)
> 10000 Rs per month	263 (81.1)
Nil	11 (3.5)
Marital status	
Married	286 (88.3)
Unmarried	34 (10.5)
Separated	4 (1.2)

Table 2 : Knowledge about child maltreatment among parents (N=324)

Knowledge related to Child maltreatment	Variables	n (%)
Did you know there are different types of abuse?	Yes	278 (85.8)
	No	20 (6.2)
	Some what	26 (8)
Child abuse is just sexual violence	Agree	18 (5.5)
	Disagree	290 (89.5)
	Not sure	16 (5)
Does abuse include verbal force?	Yes	267 (82.4)
	No	14 (4.3)
	Doesn't Know	43 (13.3)
Children are sexually abused by older children	Agree	206 (63.5)
	Disagree	29 (9)
	Not sure	8927.(5)
Do you think only girl children are victims of sexual abuse	Yes	15 (4.6)
	No	289 (89.2)
	Not sure	20 (6.2)
Do you know about the POCSO Act?	Yes	184 (56.8)
	No	123 (38)
	Some what	17 (5.2)
Does abuse happen only in domestic setting?	Yes	9 (2.8)
	No	304 (93.8)
	May be	11 (3.4)

Knowledge about child maltreatment (abuse) among parents

In the study, 96.29% (312/324) of the parents who participated were aware of the term “child abuse” but among them, 6.17% (20/324) were unaware of the fact that there are different types of abuse done to children. More than half (63.58%) agreed that it was older children that abused ones younger than them and 82.40% believed that it wasn't just physical but verbal abuse too that affected children. It was well understood among 96.29% of the participants that children can get mental problems such as anxiety and depression because of childhood trauma. While

Table 3: Perception about child maltreatment among parents (N=324)

Knowledge related to Child maltreatment	Variables	n (%)
Are you in favor of stricter laws for child abuse offenders?	Yes	230(71)
	No	40(12.3)
	Maybe	54(16.7)
Child abuse occurs only in lower socio-economic strata	Agree	9(2.8)
	Disagree	295(91)
	May be	20 (6.2)
Who are the most common perpetrators of child abuse according to you	Family members	141(43.5)
	Strangers	66(20.4)
	Family friends	63(19.4)
	Male Gender	53(16.4)
	Female gender	1(0.3)
Do you think, it is okay to verbally offend, yell, humiliate or create the feeling of unworthiness in the child as a form of punishment	Yes	4(1.2)
	No	303(93.5)
	Maybe	17(5.3)
Do you think alcohol influences the behavior of parent towards the child?	Yes	249(77)
	No	10(3)
	Maybe	65(20)
In sexual abuse, a child is never responsible	True	205(63.2)
	False	42(13)
	Maybe	77(23.8)

56.79% knew what the POCSO Act was, nearly one third (37.96%) was oblivious to it. On the other hand, more than half (53.08%) did not know about the RTE Act 2009. (Table2)

Perception about child maltreatment (abuse) among parents

The perception among parents regarding child abuse was recorded and it was observed that a vast majority (97.83%) felt that child abuse is a topic of grave importance in society. It was also observed that 90.43% of the participants agreed that physical punishment should not be resorted to when children misbehave, and more than half (63.27%) of the

Table 4: Association between Sociodemographic variables & Knowledge level of Child Maltreatment (N=324)

Study Variables		Knowledge level (Child Maltreatment)		Total	p-value
		Good (%)	Poor (%)		
Gender	Female	203 (83.5)	40 (16.5)	243	0.24
	Male	63 (77.8)	18 (22.2)	81	
Age (years)	Up to 40	66 (24.8)	6 (8.6)	72	0.007*
	More than 40	200 (75.2)	52 (91.4)	252	
Education status	Up to Graduate	75 (28.2)	27 (46.6)	102	0.006*
	More than Graduate	191 (71.8)	31 (53.4)	222	
Income level, monthly	Up to 10,000 INR	39 (14.7%)	11 (19)	50	0.411
	More than 10,000 INR	227 (85.3%)	47 (81)	274	
Marital Status	Married	229 (86)	56 (97)	285	0.027*
	Others	37 (14)	2 (3)	39	
Type of Family	Joint	98 (36.8)	21 (36.2)	119	0.920
	Nuclear	168 (63.2)	37 (63.8)	205	

participants agreed that in cases of abuse it is seldom the child's fault for his or her situation. There were a few (15.43%) parents who had a neutral response as to whether it is always girls who are victims of sexual abuse, but more than half (51.54%) disagreed with this statement. 1/4th (26.85%) of the participants felt that most sexual abuse of boys is committed by homosexual males. More than two thirds (76.85%) of the parents felt that alcohol influences the behavior of predators of child abuse and that about 43.51% of parents think that the perpetrators are family members, in addition, nearly two thirds of the participants feel that there is a need to strengthen the education regarding child and sexual abuse. Around 70.98% of parents were in favor of stricter laws in cases of child abuse (Table 3)

Association between the level of knowledge and Sociodemographic variables

It was observed that 82% (266/324) had good Knowledge of Child abuse as per the scoring in our study and it was observed that Females had more knowledge when compared to males (83.5% vs 77.8%) This difference, however, was not found to be

statistically significant. The level of knowledge was also found to be more among those aged >40 years (75.2%) when compared to younger groups and this was found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The level of knowledge was also found to be higher among Postgraduates (71.8%), married (86%) and parents with Income levels of more than 10,000 INR (85.3%). Overall, age, education level, and marital status were the statistically significant factors with levels of knowledge of child maltreatment in the current study. (Table 4)

Discussion:

Protection of a child is the primary responsibility of a parent as they play a very important role in a child's life. Childhood is an important part of growing up and developing one's personality, qualities, and traits. Any trauma suffered by them at their tender age would affect their adult life and evidence suggests significant associations between sexual abuse during childhood and subsequent mental health problems such as depression, anxiety disorders and suicidal thoughts and behavior.^[7]

Knowledge & Perception regarding maltreatment (abuse)

The current study shows that more than 80 % of the study participants had a 'good knowledge' regarding Child abuse. A study done among Nepalese parents revealed that half of them had 'good knowledge' regarding child abuse.^[8] This contrasts with a study done by Yashika et al in Central India which showed a lack of knowledge amongst parents regarding child abuse, including sexual violence, physical violence, negligence and mental abuse.^[9] The reason for the high level in our study could be because the majority of the current study participants have a higher level of Education. Also in the study, a majority (96.29%) of our participants acknowledged it as a problem in society and this was consistent with the studies in the Middle East countries.^[10,11]

We also observed in the present study that nearly 90% of the participants who were aware of child abuse believe that it does not confine itself to sexual abuse alone and there were other forms of abuse as well. About 90 % of the study participants agreed that physical punishment should not be resorted to when children misbehave. Similarly, in Lopez et al, parents acknowledged using physical punishment to discipline children but reported it as their least preferred method.^[12]

In our study, 10 percent of the respondents responded that boys can also be a victim of child abuse which contrasts with another study by Hendaus et al, where they had the opinion that nearly one forth participants agreed that boys were generally more abused than girls.^[13]

We also observed that more than half (60.80%) of parents agree that family members are perpetrators, which agrees with a Nicaraguan study, which says the most common abusers of children younger than 12 were male family members ,including uncles, cousins, and fathers.^[14] These responses are justified because young children spend most of their time with their extended family who acts as caregivers in the absence of their parents. Nearly 3/4th of the study participants believe that alcohol influences the behavior of the parent

towards the child, and this was in agreement with the OPTIMUS study done in South Africa.^[15]

Laws related to Child Abuse

More than two thirds of the study participants felt there is a need for stricter law in cases of Child abuse. In a study conducted by Yashika Sharma et al only 3% of parents were well informed about the POCSO ACT (Protection Of Children Against Sexual Offences Act,2012) act while 28.5% knew regarding the RTE act (Right To Education Act,2009) but contrastingly we see that in our study 56.79% were aware of the POSCO act and 42.59% were aware of the RTE act.^[9] This can be attributed to the fact the study was done in an Urban Setting and among people who were highly educated. Around two thirds of the participants feel there is a need to address the issue of Child abuse through education at school. This was also seen in China, where 80% of respondents agreed for prevention education in school and were willing to let their children participate, a similar report was also published in Zambia.^[16,17]

In the study age of the parents, education level, and marital status were the statistically significant factors for Child abuse knowledge, in a study done by Devi et al, only the Education of the parents was found to be a significant factor while Gurung et al had age as a significant factor.^[8,18] Yadav et al in Rajasthan reported the age of the mother to be a significant factor.^[19]

Overall, our study being a cross-sectional design and with minimal sample size, the generalizability is limited. Furthermore, exploratory studies are needed to understand more about this burning issue.

Conclusion:

This study has identified that the parents in our society today are aware of what child abuse is and its influence on children, society, and the community in general. Though the awareness is good, the knowledge, especially related to legislations must improve. There is a need for more sensitization programs, especially related to legislation.

Limitations:

The present study is limited to parents visiting a tertiary care hospital; hence the external validity of our study is limited. Further exploratory studies are

required to understand these lacunae in knowledge on child maltreatment.

Declaration:

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Conflict of Interest: Nil

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