

RISK FACTORS, PREVENTION AND PROTECTION OF MINORS AGAINST CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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ABSTRACT

Child Sexual abuse has long been a societal menace that has been kept a secret most of the time and recognised as a private social occurrence. In recent times child sexual abuse has been acknowledged as a public issue and has received much attention through research and public debate. However, the provision of specific information to serve as safety guidelines for children and child carers on how to prevent and protect minors from sexual abuse is rather limited and as such public education on the issue has also often been ignored. The provision of knowledge and information on safety precautions will be of immense benefit to children, schools, parents as well as the wider public and serves to reinforce efforts to address the problem. This paper aims to improve prevention and protection for minors who in recent times have come to experience increased exposure to sexual violence and abuse. Taking evidence from experience acquired through social work involving child sexual abuse as well as from documentary sources, the paper presents risk factors with the aim of heightening exposure and information that can contribute to protection of minors from child sexual abuse and intimate violence. The paper provides helpful information to those at risk of sexual victimisation, as well as schools and parents. In conclusion, the paper states that addressing the problem of child sexual abuse requires collaboration and coordination between different state agencies that work with and highlights the pressing need for culturally sensitive safety guidelines for the prevention of child sexual abuse as well other interventions in the form of education and information sharing with parents, guardians and minors who are the potential victims.

INTRODUCTION

Abuse is a forceful, controlling behaviour that coerces a person to do what the abuser wants without regard to her rights, bodily harm or health. (The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, 1995). The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child generally defines a child as any human being under the age of eighteen. Child abuse includes child neglect, child labour and different

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forms of violence against the child (RAPCAN, 1990). Child sexual abuse is an aspect of child abuse.

Schechter and Robergo (1976) defined child sexual abuse as the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children in sexual activities that they do not truly understand, to which they are unable to give informed consent or that violates the social taboos of the family. In the case of abuse, children are used for sexual simulation by an adult or older person (APA Board of Professional Affairs, 1999). Child sexual abuse by implication may involve threat, force, coercion, pressure or manipulation of a child (RAPCAN, 1990). Haugaard and Rappucee, 1981 states that it does not matter whether the child is perceived by the adult to be engaging in the sexual activity voluntarily or otherwise; it is assumed that the child cannot give informed consent because of his or her age, (Bryan, 2005).

A broad explanation of child sexual abuse includes physical and non-physical contact with a child for non medical reasons. Physical or bodily contact involves actual sexual contact such as vaginal or anal penetration between an adult and a minor or any interaction including touching, fondling, kissing, as well as oral sex, and grabbing or pinching a child in a sexual way. Again, asking a child to touch his/her genitals or touching a child's genitals to sexually stimulate the child or the adult are all forms of child sexual abuse.

Abuses which involve physical or bodily contact include indecent exposure of one's genitals to a child, deliberately having sex or masturbating in front of a child, asking or pressuring a child to engage in sexual activities, whether this results in sex or not. Using sexual innuendos about a child's physical development or viewing a child's genitals even without physical contact except for medical reasons, is an abuse. Using a child for pornography is also sexual abuse or having a child to pose nude or to stimulate themselves while being filmed or photographed is sexual abuse. Using a child to produce pornography or displaying sex photographs or pornography to a child or showing sex films are all forms of child abuse. In recent years, the common types of child sexual abuse are the giving of sexual notes or messages using mobile phones and the internet (Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (RAPCAN) 1990; Coker Appiah and Cusack (eds), 1999; Bryan, 2005).

Children may be abused sexually by relatives and non relatives. Russell, (1986) explains that common child sexual abuse cases that occur within families often happen between father-daughter, step-father-daughter, brother-sister and incest committed by an uncle. According to Baker (2002), children are also known to be sexually abused by people who are not family members but who

are known to the victim; however, cases of abuse by total strangers also do occur. Most abusers are men and the majority of victims are girls. Kilpatrick et al, (1992) recognises sexual victimisation of boys as well which usually takes the form of sodomy. However, girls are at a higher risk of sexual abuse from adult men than boys from adult women. Where sexual abuse by natural parents or siblings is concerned, girls are significantly more at risk than boys (Finkelhor et al, 1990; Laumann et al, 1994; Human Rights Watch, 2001). Child sexual abuse can have both short and long term negative social, psychological and health effects on the child.

RISK FACTORS

In this section, we enumerate some of the risk factors drawn from our experience in social work with support from documentary sources. We discuss risk factors with regard to parental attitudes; and we consider non reporting to be a risk factor and we analyse factors that contribute to it.

Parental Attitudes

Cases reported showed that parental attitude in the form of child neglect and inadequate supervision of wards pose as major risk factors in exposing a child to sexual abuse. Some parents are unable to provide adequate supervision for their children either because of work or other reasons. Some parents find the responsibility of bringing up children overwhelming and often neglect or overlook it. Parents also send their children on errands unaccompanied without giving them any tips as to how to prevent potential abuse and most often these children become victims of abuse when they are lured to obscure places where they are defiled. Our experience from our practice support Finkelhor's (1994) observations that children who experience parental inadequacy or unavailability, harsh punishment and emotional deprivation are at a higher risk of being sexually abused. The lower the level of child care, the more children are likely to be sexually abused.

Parents do not often perceive potential harm from perpetrators especially those who are family friends but in almost all cases encountered, majority of the abusers are either from the child's family or are family friends. Baker (2002) emphasises that most perpetrators are family friends who have gained the trust of parents. Most sexual abusers know the child they abuse and most children who are abused by someone outside their family typically know their abuser through contact at school, youth programmes, places of worship in their neighbourhood or recreational centres or the abuser may have visited their homes as family friends. We observe that parents often do not have

any experience with sexual abuse or may have the impression that it cannot happen to their children or it would not occur to them that family members and friends can be potential abusers.

Some parents and guardians wrongly perceive that their children or wards can care for themselves. They therefore allow their children to walk home alone from school or play in the neighbourhood; they would unwittingly send them on errands or leave them alone with adult males at home. Such children are often trapped and sexually abused.

Most often parents and guardians find it very difficult to suspect or detect potential abusers as they lack the requisite information, education and skills. They also often lack information and skills to prevent child abuse or protect minors against its occurrence.

Non Reporting

Rush (1980) describes child sexual abuse as “the best kept secret”. Sexual abuse of children has for a long time been considered a topic not to be talked about and a crime that is hardly reported although it is known to happen. Non reporting is a risk factor because it can perpetuate the occurrence of child abuse and promotes the likelihood of an adult to continue abusing a child if it is not detected and reported. This also makes it possible for perpetrators to go unpunished which may give them the opportunity to continue the abuse.

We identify the following factors as those contributing to non-reporting:

Firstly, parents may come to know of sexual abuses but instead of reporting it, they might readily take compensation in the form of money and allow the offender to go unpunished. Parents must know that accepting compensation for child sexual abuse is in itself a breach of the law.

Sometimes the crime is discovered by an adult but the matter is usually hushed up because they want to protect the family’s honour and pride, as more often than not, perpetrators tend to be members of the family or people known to the family. The reason people who sexually abuse children are not brought to book because it will tarnish the image of families, and parties concerned will choose to remain silent. Abusers get off scott free and is likely to indulge in the act again at some future time, perhaps in another location. Family members should weigh the potential harm and damage it can cause the child against the abstract thinking of compromising a family’s prestige. The seriousness of the matter lies in the fact that child sexual abuse is demeaning to the child who is innocent, ignorant, immature, dependent and therefore very vulnerable.

Victims

Children who are sexually abused find it difficult to report the incident as a result of socio-cultural and religious factors usually associated with the avoidance of the use of sexual terminologies or explicit reference to the genitals. We found that a good number of children who are abused find it really difficult to mention the name of genitals perhaps because these children perceive that they would be seen as “bad”. We therefore argue that cultural and religious attitudes surrounding the discussion of sexuality pose a key constraint for minors reporting sexual abuse.

We also found out that in some instances the minor who are victims are too young to understand what has happened to them and in such cases it is only the critical observation and detection of parents that can make the crime known and perhaps reported.

Sometimes sexually abused victims are not believed and are charged with lying and therefore stigmatised. The other side of the coin is that people who try to have cases of child sexual abuse prosecuted do not have the support of the public, thus, they are also often condemned and stigmatised. Stigma can force people to keep the crime secret and not to report. Sometimes the public and even some professionals discuss the abuse in a manner that implies that victims are at fault or are to be blamed even when it is a fact that in most instances there was nothing the victim could do to stop the abuse.

Victims of child sexual abuse are sometimes threatened with death or similar serious threats by the abuser not to disclose it. Adult abusers often wield power over the child, making the child feel very helpless and can make the child keep the sexual abuse secret. Minors often comply when abusers tell them keep the act secret such that even though they may be going through a lot of trauma, they would not mention the experience to anyone.

Sometimes some children are sexually abused repeatedly that they come to perceive it as normal. Moreover, if the child has experienced some form of pleasure from the sexual experience, or if the perpetrator has enticed his victim with gifts or money it makes it difficult for that child to perceive it as a wrongdoing and will therefore not report the abuse. If the abuse is not detected the child has no option other than to learn to accept the abuse. If anyone suspects that a child may have been abused, it is very important to report it. Non reporting makes a minor to keep on being abuse.

Media

The media also share part of the blame that deters people from reporting the abuse. Sometimes the manner in which the media deal with issues of child sexual abuse may deter parents from making the abuse known. Sometimes information on child sexual abuse is portrayed in a manner that can damage the reputation of the child. Perhaps the media should avoid drawing too much attention to the victim through unwarranted publicity.

Perpetrators

Almost all sexual abuse cases encountered, the abusers were men and the victims female. This is supported by Finkelhor (1994) and Whitfield et al. (2005) who posited that most child sexual abuse is committed by men. Men therefore pose as a potential risk factor and young girls are potential victims. Rush (1980) argues that most adults who engage in sexual activity with children are not mentally disturbed but seek out a child for sexual pleasure because a child, unlike a mature woman can be more easily coerced, lured or forced. Finkelhor and Araj (1986) argue that some adults just find great excitement in having sex with minors or that they just find children sexually arousing and emotionally satisfying. Others have difficulty having emotional and sexual needs met by an adult-adult relationship. Men with such a mental attitude are very difficult to identify in the wider society.

Perpetrators often downplay the seriousness of the crime they commit by creating conditions to make it look as if it was not their fault or to make the crime seem very trivial. Sometimes they use alcohol or illicit substances to justify their actions (Buel, 2002). Men who sexually abuse children come up with a variety of excuses just to minimise or even justify the abuse (Hartley, 1998). In cases where there is no intercourse involved, they may dismiss the seriousness of the relationship on the grounds that it "wasn't really sex". Where intercourse occurs, they maintain that the child was a willing participant who permitted the act (Lauer & Lauer, 2004). The more people are led not to attach seriousness to the abuse, and the more non-reporting occurs, the more perpetrators will not be accountable for their unacceptable behaviour. The public must know that there is no excuse for child sexual abuse; and that it is a crime as serious as murder.

Teachers

The school environment sometimes serves to promote exposure to the risk of sexual abuse. Sometimes teachers present a threat to school children in terms of child sexual abuse and students often become targets for teachers' sexual

misconduct. Teachers often misuse their authority to sexually abuse children, sometimes reinforcing sexual demands with threats of corporal punishment or promises of better grades especially for female students (Human Rights Watch, 2001). To make matters worse, topics on sexuality in the curriculum, specifically on child sexual abuse, are frequently skipped over by teachers. Teachers are sometimes unprepared or embarrassed to teach such topics usually due to cultural and religious reasons. Lack of information and education pose a risk in enabling protection and prevention of abuse among school children.

Healthcare

The health care system can substantiate children's allegations of sexual abuse, yet many clinicians lack the skills and understanding to screen, detect and confirm its child abuse when they are confronted with such cases. Perhaps even more serious than lack of skills and knowledge is healthcare workers' prejudicial and unhelpful attitude towards the victims tending to put the blame on them or not taking their allegations seriously.

Law Enforcement

Many countries have laws prohibiting child sexual abuse against minors but the extent to which these laws are enforced are limited because, even though occurrences are high, only a small number of incidents results in formal legal action. Sometimes the punishment meted out to offenders does not seem to deter other offenders. In most instances when cases are reported, no immediate action is taken. Some legal action can drag on for months, sometimes even years, requiring parents of victims to suspend their economic activities to attend the case in court. Poverty also makes it impossible for many people to pursue legal action. The ineffectiveness of law enforcement agencies in providing appropriate response to child sexual abuse often discourage victims from pursuing criminal justice and thus enable perpetrators to have a field day (Hoyle, 1998).

PROTECTION AND PREVENTION

Under this section we offer some guidelines that can promote the protection of minors and the prevention of abuse.

Detection of Child Sexual Abuse

Detecting child sexual abuse can help reduce the suffering of the abused and protect the victim against repeated victimisation. It can also help to prevent future occurrences and to look for the appropriate support systems to give

assistance to victims (Bagley, 1992). Many children disclose abuse immediately to parents, caregivers and other people they can relate to, otherwise, it is difficult to detect and can easily pass unnoticed. Being able to screen and detect child sexual abuse requires a frame of mind that is critical and suspicious, coupled with some education and information which requires familiarity with the verbal, behavioural and physical indications of abuse. Child sexual abuse can be detected by parents, teachers or even health service personnel. Parents must make it a duty to study and be aware of the mood and behaviour of their wards in order to observe any possible changes in them and thus detect possible abuse.

Once detected, the best thing to do is to empathise, encourage and reassure the victim in order to remove any guilt feelings often experienced by victims of intimate violence. Judgemental attitude by adults towards minors who have been victims of sexual abuse can be very destructive. Buel suggested an example of assuring the victims that, *'She does not deserve to be abused and that everyone knows it is not her fault'* (Buel, 2002).

Once identified, the abused minors should be given some safety tips to help them avoid or prevent further abuse (Bael, 2002). Minors can be advised and assisted to avoid any contact with the perpetrator. Abused children must constantly be under intensive surveillance by parents and guardians. Greater efforts must be put in place to reduce the incident of repeat abuse against minors (Hoyle, 2007).

The Role of Parents

Experience from the writers' past practice and analysis of the risk factors show that parents and guardians will have to play a very crucial role by working conscientiously towards protecting their children as they are particularly defenseless, powerless and vulnerable. The convention on the rights of the child entreats parents to care, protect, promote children's security, wellbeing and welfare. The World Health Organization (WHO) has supported this view by highlighting the importance of a positive relationship between parents and their children as a key factor in protecting young people from sexual risks and problems. A positive relationship can be said to be a healthy interaction and communication between parents and minors. Such a relationship can encourage children to discuss potential threats and could even facilitate disclosure of any abuse. At the same time, parents and guardians must be aware of and be able to identify risk factors as well as have requisite knowledge and information on the characteristics of abusers and strategies used by them to entice children. Institutions must be encouraged to report and seek redress when abuse occurs. Parents must influence and shape their

children's awareness that they are at risk of being sexually abused at any time (Hoyle,2008). Parental guidelines on how to detect potential risks can prevent and minimise occurrences.

From our experience, we suggest the following guidelines for the detection, protection and prevention of child abuse:

- Parents must interact and and discuss children's daily activities with them. Parents must show interest in their children's feelings and encourage them to share their concerns and problems by asking questions such as the following;
Is there anybody bothering you that is making you unhappy? Can you share with me some of the things that has happened to you today/during the week?
- Parents must be able to provide some information about the human body by encouraging children to mention parts of their bodies including their genitals and to impress upon their children that no one other person except they themselves have the right to touch, fondle or manipulate any part of their bodies especially their genitals, their breasts, anus or any other part except for medical reasons.
- Parents must explain to children that people who have NO right to touch their genitals include family friends, and even their own fathers in the case of girls and any other adults they know and profess to be their friends.
- Children should be encouraged to report any adult who make sexual innuendos about their bodies, who tell them they are beautiful or good, give them gifts, sweets or money or send them on errands without their parent's permission.
- Girls should be cautioned to avoid being alone with men in their rooms at home or in obscure places.
- Mothers should not leave their girls alone with male adults, step fathers and even fathers in the home. **(In our practice, most abuse involved girls and in many instances perpetrated by stepfathers and natural fathers!)**
- Parents must be suspicious of neighbours and family friends who show excessive kindness to their children. What every parent must know is that every family friend is a potential abuser and it must be reiterated that leaving young girls with older males, even fathers and step fathers can pose a serious risk to girls.
- Parents must often assess their children for possible abuse by asking questions like
Has anyone try to touch any part of your genitals?(Buel,2002)
Has anyone touched any part of your body?
Has anyone been giving you presents?

Has anyone been telling you that you are a good or beautiful girl?

- Parents must be very suspicious of people who already have a record of child sexual abuse when they come close to their wards or older men who are fond of playing with younger girls.

Many parents have a problem identifying potential abusers or detecting child sexual abuse. The need for national guidelines on risk factors, screening and detection of child sexual abuse is imperative in minimising the risk of sexual violence against minors. We must take the recommendations for child sexual abuse safety plan seriously (ACPO, 2005 ACPO, Guidance on identifying, assessing and managing risk in the context of policing domestic violence, Association of Chief Police Officers, London (2005). Hoyle, 2008)

Legal Provisions and Law Enforcement

The provision of appropriate and unambiguous laws and adequate sanctions can serve as an effective protection and prevention strategy in child sexual abuse. Some child rights advocates have suggested stricter punishments such as life imprisonment or castration to serve as a deterrent. (FIDA, Ghana). According to the Law in Malaysia, the punishment for perpetrators of sexual abuse of underaged children is a maximum jail sentence of 20 years.

The Social Workers and Health Professionals

Agencies that deal directly with child sexual abuse such as social workers and health personnel must be given inservice training so as to be equipped with the requisite knowledge, training and skills to understand, screen and detect child sexual abuse. In the case of screening for sexual abuse, we suggest that this is conducted in private to avoid increasing the risk of harm to victims. Hoyle, (1998) has supported this and suggested that it is helpful to have a policy that requires victims to be examined alone, at least initially. Social workers and health personnel should be familiar with the incidence of child sexual abuse and trends in their area so that they can assist in providing information and education to the public. In the case of Malaysia, most Social Workers are gazetted as Child Protectors, and they should have be trained in prevention programmes for dealing with issues of child sexually abuse. Social Workers must be committed in their roles and responsible for providing information and education to all levels of society, that is, from grassroots up to the higher levels.

Perpetrators

Perpetrators are often not considered as reliable sources of information for the protection of minors. They can be interviewed to find out factors that drive

them to do what they do and to identify strategies they use to induce children. Such information can be a rich resource for formulating guidelines for future protection and prevention strategies. Prevention strategies must aim at efforts at changing the attitude and behaviour of abusers so that they do not continue to perpetuate abuse. Our experience with reported cases show that all the perpetrators are men; we therefore propose that programmes be initiated for men for them to voluntarily attend programmes on child intimate violence and child sexual abuse (Maruna, 2001).

Public Education

Public education on child sexual abuse must be planned and directed towards claiming children's sexual rights. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child has the aim of promoting the recognition that children are also entitled to sexual rights. Child sexual abuse violates the child's right of respect for bodily integrity and autonomy and to dignity and privacy. It breaches the child's right to freedom from violence, torture, inhuman treatment, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. The convention entreats governments to take appropriate measures to prevent children from being induced or coerced to engage in any unlawful sexual activity and sexual practices (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.html>). These aspects of child rights should form a solid foundation for education on protection of minors and prevention against sexual abuse.

There is an urgent need for intensive contact campaigns and public education on child sexual abuse targeting parents, teachers, health services, police, lawyers and the general public. Topics for discussion include risk factors, safety guidelines, screening and detection of child abuse.

Targeting Schools

School children comprise the majority of cases in our encounters with child sexual abuse, and as such, the inclusion of topics on child sexual abuse in the school curriculum has the potential of minimising its occurrence. Teachers must be trained and equipped with requisite skills and knowledge to provide education on safety precautions, screening, detection and how to deal and handle problems of child sexual abuse effectively. Teachers must be targeted for special education on changing their behaviour as most are guilty of the offence themselves with school children as their victims. We recommend stricter sanctions against teachers who abuse school children because these children have been placed under their protection and care.

Targeting the Media

The media is another important source of information and knowledge and education. The media must use its information resources not to castigate victims but to support them in disseminating information on risk factors and precautionary measures and to plan and implement educational programmes for the general public that can help address child sexual abuse.

PLANNING SAFETY GUIDELINES

Safety plans or guidelines usually contain reliable data upon which minors who are at risk of being abused can act. The main purpose of safety plans or guidelines is to improve the protection and prevention of abuse against minors who are potential victims (Hoyle, 1998). Child abuse safety plans or guidelines can provide resources in a form of specific literature on risk factors to make available precautionary measures to take in order to avoid the risk of being sexually abused, reduce the rate and repeated victimisation and to increase reporting (Hoyle, 2008). It may also contain measures for detection and screening the abused. When it is developed, it must be tested for effectiveness.

Research data from different studies can provide knowledge that can inform risk assessment factors, safety guidelines and management procedures to help prevent child sexual abuse. It could cover risks associated with the characteristics, behaviour and circumstances of abusers and those associated with the victim's background. Most assessments are based on information from multiple sources, particularly with regard to data about the perpetrators, collected from perpetrators themselves. We argue for more qualitative research that can make invaluable contribution in managing child abuse. Information could also be gathered from other people such as social workers, probation officers, police and legal practitioners and health personnel with regards to screening and detecting sexual abuse (Campbell, 1995).

The need for multi-agency collaboration and coordination is imperative. Collaboration and coordination between police, legal practitioners, healthcare services, social workers and non-governmental organisations who are working to promote the welfare and well being of children will go a long way to improving content and effectiveness of children's protection programmes. These agencies must work in concert to inform and build upon safety guidelines from time to time, to contribute to increased victim satisfaction and improved responses with regard to the protection of minors and prevention of child sexual abuse.

The involvement of the government at state level is very necessary to provide resources to support research and dissemination of information of research

findings on child sexual abuse. State agencies should be resourced materially and financially by government to implement educational programmes on safety guidelines for child sexual abuse in schools and through the media. Non Governmental Organisations should also be sourced out to plan and implement programmes in various communities to educate people on the negative effects of child sexual abuse. Training and other resources must be provided to the legal services and all agencies dealing with child issues.

CONCLUSION

The protection of sexual rights and prevention against sexual abuse of minors is in consonance with the goals of of the 1989 Convention of the Rights of the Child. A comprehensive approach and protective strategies are needed to reduce risk, by providing access to information, knowledge and education on safety guidelines as well as expanding opportunities for providing safe and supportive environments for minors. Evidence-based information, knowledge and education for addressing issues of child sexual abuse are very necessary. Nevertheless, the responsibility for ensuring that children enjoy freedom from sexual abuse should not be seen as the responsibility of governments and parents alone, but the entire public. We must all look for measures that can contribute to decrease vulnerabilities and advocate for better opportunities in the lives of all children.

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