Role of Parents In Creating A Protective Environment For Children

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ABSTRACT

Any individual under 18 years of age is considered a child as per UNCRC (United Nations Convention for the rights of children). Growth and development of individuals are two distinct terminologies. The proper development of a child will happen only when physical, emotional, sexual, social and cognitive dimensions play a balanced and proper role. Child abuse stands as a major factor affecting the proper development of children. It consists of any type of act of commission or omission which results in some sort of danger or impairment to a child's physical or psychological health as well as development. Child abuse is present in the society in many forms such as Physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and Neglect. The number of cases reported at Child line is steadily increasing these days.14224 cases were registered on crimes against children in 2015 alone (data released by Central Ministry for Women and Child Development in Jul 2016). This figure did not include the cases directly reported in police stations. All forms of child abuse should be considered as violations or denial of child rights. Child rights are defined by the Convention by United Nations on the Rights of the Children (UNCRC). According to UNCRC, the rights of a child are Right to Survival, Right to development, Right to Protection and Right to Participation. Child abuse has far reaching consequences on children, affecting their social functioning leading to psychiatric disorders. The mechanisms to combat child abuse need to be strengthened and models especially to enhance the role of parents to ensure safety of children need to be generated.

The UNCRC specifies the rights that have to be made available to all children to facilitate their development to the full potential, without facing the problems of hunger, neglect by society and abuse. It is important that society should treat a child like any adult person. Studies show that individuals who are physically abused in childhood later show oppositional defiant disorder or behavioral disorder. Abused children show higher rates of psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, sensitivity in interpersonal relationship and dissociation. Child abuse also affects the balanced state of health in a family. The mechanisms to combat child abuse needs to be strengthened and new culturally appropriate simple models, especially enhancing the role of parents and teachers, need to be generated. A study shows that many of the parents do not know about the rights of children, how they are abused or how to educate them to be safe from abuse.

* **Key Words:** child rights, child abuse, effects of child abuse on health, awareness and attitude of parents towards child abuse*

Introduction

United Nations Convention for the rights of children (UNCRC) defines a child as any individual below 18 years of age. Child development takes place in different dimensions such as physical and psychological changes. These changes take place in a child mostly from birth till later adolescence period. All the developments in different life stages are influenced by the preceding stage. In the present Indian scenario and prevailing culture, it is the family that nurture and play, has an important role for the socialization of children. Familial factors strongly affect the appropriate development of a child.

Child development and Child Abuse

There are many factors which support the development of a child. Achieving age appropriate development tasks depend on important factors such as biological factors, bonding of children with others, environment of a child.

Biological factors including gender, health, nutrition, physical activity and development takes place in girls and boys at different rates. Also, children with health or other mental issues develop in a different way. Children have close bond with their parents, siblings and peers at school. They gain the capacity for facing natural risks by spending time and playing with them.

Different dimensions of the environment influence a child's development. An environment without basic needs, culture, opportunities, early attachment, adequate parental income and education, parenting, access to resources and programs and a protective environment affect a child's development. Even if all the favorable factors are available, domestic violence and child abuse can seriously affect the development of a child in different ways.

Rights of Children

The rights of children have been identified by society as a reason for ensuring proper development and favorable environment. All forms of child abuse violate or deny the rights of children. Child rights have been defined by United Nations and United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf). According to the UNCRC, Child Rights include the minimum entitlements and freedoms to all persons below 18years of age without any consideration of gender, color, language, wealth, religion, origins, birth status or ability. These rights are interdependent and indivisible.

Realization of the rights of children is a requirement for the development of children in all their abilities meeting their basic needs and without facing any type of abuse. The identity of a child, like that of any adult person, is very important. Children are not mere property of their parents or helpless objects for showing charity. Hence UNCRC insists that a child must be treated like any other adult individual and as a member of a family and community, with all rights and responsibilities.

UNCRC intended to outline the basic human rights for children. This includes all dimensions of life under four broad classifications:

(i) Right to Survival: This is the right for a child to live. Right for survival is applicable before a child is born. This means the right to survival includes the right of a child in the womb, right for minimum standards of food, clothing and shelter, and the right to live in the society with dignity.

(ii) Right to Development: It is the development that makes a child a perfect human being. Children have the right to all types of development which are physical, mental and social. Emotional development needs care and affection through a support system, mental and social development by way of education system and learning and physical development with proper nutrition, recreation and play.

(iii) Right to Protection: This is the right of a child for protection from all types of abuse and exploitation at all places.

(iv)   Right to Participation: Child's right for participation is participation of a child in decision making in issues related to him/her directly or indirectly and in other social activities. The level of participation varies depending on the maturity of child and age.

The fundamental dignity of children has achieved heightened recognition with the declaration of United Nations Convention and its acceptance by countries across the globe. It is made clear in the convention that the basic qualities of life has to be available as the rights of children for all children without limiting them to a few privileged lot.

Child Abuse

There are many situations in the life of children in which they are not able to enjoy their rights. Child abuse is an act of violence against child. The terms child maltreatment and child abuse are often used in similar meaning, but some researchers refer to child maltreatment as a term to include all forms of child abuse, neglect, exploitation, and trafficking (McCoy, Keen, 2013).

WHO in its World Report on Violence and Health (2002) defines violence on the child as "the intentional use of physical power or any type of force in the form of threatening or real, against a child, by a person or a group of people, that has a possibility for potential harm to the child's general health, life, development or dignity". The United Nation's study on violence against children (2006) relates violence with article 19 of CRC and covers it as "all types of physical or mental violence, abuse and injury, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or improper use including sexual abuse". Definitions of child abuse differs among different societies or groups such as agencies working in the field of child protection, medical and legal professionals, officials in the field of public health and child advocates.

Child abuse includes acts committed, or sometimes omitted, which affects the child's health. Sometimes child abuse can be identified as actions or absence of required actions resulting in problems in a child's health and development (Kids First Foundation, 2002). All types of child abuse are traumatic experiences for children.

Forms of Child Abuse, their indicators and effects

Child abuse occurs in different forms. The abuse of children has been grouped into different categories. Some children may experience abuse as a combination of all these.

Child labor, trafficking, children involved in witch craft, female genital mutilation, child marriage are different types of child abuse. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2001), has categorized child abuse into four classes such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. (i) Physical abuse:

Physical abuse of children is abuse directly on their body which is a common form. It refers to any non-accidental or purposeful use of violence by their parents or caregiver or others causing injury to children. Physical abuse includes hitting, kicking, shaking, burning, slapping, biting, throwing, choking, pinching, shoving, hair pulling, whipping, and paddling. All these can result in injuries, such as dislocations, cuts, fractures, burns and bruises. Most of the physical violence at home against children is with the objective of meting out punishment.

Physical abuse shows physical or behavioral indicators. Physical injury is the most frequently seen physical indicator. There can be very severe injuries, such as multiple fractures, internal body injuries, poisoning often with ligature marks on the ankles, waist and wrists. Behavioral indicators of physical abuse can include the child telling someone about the occurrence of abuse, the child may show lack of esteem, distrusting adults, behavior i.e. either very aggressive or in the other extreme, very passive, fear when other children cry or shout and fear of parents or of going home.

There is a wide range of effects for physical abuse. This can result in great pain for the child and can lead to long lasting physical disabilities, brain damage, slow development and sometimes even death. Physical abuse can also severely affect the emotional and social development of children. They start responding aggressively in many situations.

(ii) Psychological or emotional abuse

Psychological abuse or emotional abuse occurs in the life of a child when a parent or caregiver or some other person purposefully or negligently creates a psychological or emotional environment that may be unfavorable or harmful to a child's daily functioning at behavioral, intellectual, emotional or physical level (Committee on Child Abuse of Hong Kong, 2000). Psychological abuse is any approach or behavior that disturbs the child's mental health or development in social dimension. Children may experience psychological abuse when they are criticized, threatened, belittled (telling them they are "bad, worthless" or have committed "a mistake), deprived, ignored, yelled at, called names, shamed and compared unfavorably with others.

The effects of this abuse on growth and development are very clear. The children who experience Psychological abuse may have long lasting behavioral difficulties. They prefer to remain aloof and may suffer from various mental illnesses. They may not be productive and behave irresponsibly in society. The rate of suicide is high among this group.

(iii) Sexual abuse

Sexual activities between a child and adult person in any form can be termed as sexual abuse. Adult person may be an older person than the child. Offenders exploit their power or authority over the child to satisfy their sexual needs (Australians Against Child Abuse, 2002). Sexual abuse can be with or without physical contact, including different forms of sexual touching such as fondling genitals, breasts or thighs, buttocks as well as oral and genital contact, intercourse or penetration, exhibitionism, child prostitution, group sex, oral sex, or forced observation of sexual activities. Sexual abuse also includes any form of sexual suggestion to children (such as showing pornographic material, exposing oneself) or the using them for producing pornographic materials. It is often difficult to identify sexual abuse among children because of the secrecy associated with this act. Children are often threatened not to talk.

Sexual abuse can be identified from the physical indicators such as bruises and cuts, vaginal or anal bleeding or discharge and, sometimes, pain or itching in the genital area, sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.

We can also identify sexual abused child from the behavior of abused. The child may disclose the incident to someone, be withdrawn, highly anxious, unable to sleep and display sexual attitude or knowledge inappropriate for its age. The child may also repeat certain behaviours such as rocking, thumb sucking or self abuse. Sexually abused child may face difficulty in their relation with other children and adults. There may be changes in their academic performance also. Sexual abuse may have diverse effect at various levels. This can affect children's family life and reproductive capacity. There are chances of sexually transmitted disease and suicidal tendencies.

(d) Neglect

Neglect is a form of abusing a child, which is referred to as purposeful attitude wherein there is failure in providing for their physical needs such as food, protection and development. Neglect includes lack of supervision, hygiene, health care, nutrition, shelter, clothing and education(Australians Against Child Abuse, 2002). Neglect also

involves inadequate provision of food and water, inappropriate clothing for season or weather, abandonment, denial of medical care and inadequate hygiene are also form neglect of a child. Children may not be protected or taken care of adequately and forced to do jobs that are beyond their physical ability, which is harmful.

There can be many physical indicators for neglect. They may be continuously hungry, appear dirty and lack of hygiene. They may not be dressed for matching the weather conditions. The effects of neglect can be dangerous. If children are not supervised properly, it can lead to different type of dangers. Also they can suffer from developmental and psychological problems.

Child abuse has been identified as one of the most significant sources of damage on health in the emotional, physical, and relational dimensions of children. Recently, neurological studies have proved that early childhood abuse changes and damages the brain, thus resulting in long term individual and social pathologies. Abused children are prone to become adult prostitutes or abusive parents. A majority (70%) of psychiatric patients possess history of childhood abuse especially physical or sexual abuse. It has been estimated that one-third of abused children later become abusive parents. These are some of the after effects of abuse of children.

Prevalence of Child Abuse

It is a difficult task to get an exact number of cases of child abuse in India. Child abuse cases remain unreported especially when it happens at home or the abuser is a family member. The cases like child marriage, child labor or child prostitution which happen in public gets more attention. The cases of abuse taking place in institutions such as government or private schools or homes have so far received very little attention. The family system in India and the role children have in this system are another factor. Children in India are taken care of within the family structure and children depend on parents and elders; they remain submissive and obedient in family. The belief that parents and family are the sole caretakers of the child has proved to have unfavorable effects on child protection laws and strategies. Recently the implementation of POSCO act has brought lots of causes related to sexual abuse of children.

The statistics on child abuse are mainly available through government sources. But such information is not complete in itself as it covers only a part of cases of abuses. Official figures by government statistics do not reflect number of actual rates of child abuse. There are many studies conducted by NGOs and other institutions. Such studies

covered only a small region or very less population. However, in the absence of reliable studies on the topic, there is no other choice than relying on such statistics.

The United Nations (UN) in 2006 released the first study conducted by UN Secretary General on violence against Children. This first comprehensive study conducted globally on violence against children covered all forms violence at different areas like the family, educational institutions, institutions for care, work places and communities. The study brought out high rate of homicide, physical punishment at home, forced sexual intercourse and other sexual violence, genital mutilation of girls and child labor.

In India, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) carried out a study in 2007 and found two thirds of the children were physically abused and more than half were sexually abused in India. Every second child was reported to have faced emotional abuse. Many other studies conducted in India prove the prevalence of higher rate of child abuse in India. The number of cases of crime reported in India in 2013 was 58,224. This was 52.5 % more than the cases reported in 2012. The crimes includes kidnapping & abduction (54.2%), abetment to suicide (49.3%), procurement of minor girls (51.3%) and rape (44.7%) also showed considerable increase. 14224 cases were registered on crimes against children in 2015 alone.

Theories on Child Abuse

There are many theories related to child abuse. The attachment theory, Ecological theory are important among them. According to attachment theory, a child's later relationships depends on the bond between the child and care giver. The four types of bonds between child and caregiver are secure, preoccupied type, dismissive or fearful. Ecological theory deals with four systems which are responsible for the abuse of a child. The four systems are family, individual, community and culture. Both the theories emphasize the importance of parents and community as a major stake holder in child abuse.

Child Protection and Prevention of Child Abuse

According to the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), Child Protection means keeping children safe from all types of abuse and protecting their rights. It reiterates that children are vulnerable and vulnerability needs to be reduced through measures of protection. According to UNICEF, child protection prevents and addresses the incidence of all forms of abuse, violence, exploitation, and neglect of children.

Protection also ensures the rights of children for survival, development and participation. UNICEF holds that when child protection fails or is not present, children have more risk of experiencing abuse in various forms, including death, displacement, homelessness, HIV/AIDS infection, educational problems and poor parenting skills later in life. All these result in an unhealthy society.

The factors that affect child protection include the conditions in families and communities. The state and local governments are the main sponsors of prevention activities by providing a variety of prevention related services. Some prevention initiatives are meant for all people. Some of the services are specifically meant only for individuals and families who may be at more risk of experiencing child abuse or neglect.

The programs for prevention of child abuse become more effective when they involve parents in all aspects of planning, implementation and evaluation. The involvement of parents are very important as they are able to make lasting changes when they are strengthened to identify solutions. Generally, activities for prevention of child abuse may include the following: • Public awareness creation campaigns, such as pamphlets, posters, hand books and brochures that promote healthy parenting, child safety, and how to report the cases of suspected abuse of children

 • Skills-based training programs for children that teach them safety and protection skills, especially programs that focus on preventing sexual related abuse

 • Parent education programs to help parents to inculcate in them better skills of parenting and correct their behaviors related to child abuse.

 • Mentor or leadership programs for parents which make parenting role models and assistance to families facing problems.

• Creating support groups of parents in which parents from different families work together in order to strengthen the families and create social networks. This can also create family resource centers which provide services to needy families.

The following protective factors can reduce child abuse and neglect:

• Nurturing and attachment relation between parents and children.

• Knowledge of child development and parenting

• Parental resilience that helps in resolving problems creatively.

• Social connections that provides emotional support and assistance

• Social and emotional competence of children with capacity to positively interact with others and regulate their behavior.

In the past, the efforts for child protection were focusing on developing and transferring interventions targeting, especially, individual parents. This process tried to identify parents at risk who engage in abusing their children. Such parents were provided knowledge and skills to overcome their limitations. These strategies were considered the direct and most efficient to prevent child abuse. However, the strategy has been changed recently by trying to create environments that enhance parent's ability to do the correct thing. Many empirical researches and theories suggest that intervention at the neighborhood level helps to prevent child abuse within families. The two components of intervention that help mostly are development of social capital and coordination at community level. Social disorganization theory suggests that when families engage collectively by supporting one another, child abuse can be considerably reduced.

Details of study conducted

Title: Study on Child abuse with special reference to Kottayam District.

Specific objective: to study the knowledge and attitude of parents towards child abuse and their involvement in child protection measures

Study was qualitative in nature and was intended to know the attitude of parents towards child abuse and their involvement in child protection measures. The data has been collected through five FGDs among parents of school going children. The participants included parents of children who are studying in government, aided and unaided schools. The total number of participant's was 62. The length of each FGD was approximately an hour and thirty minutes. The nature of settings for all FGDs was casual setting where the participants sat in circles. Data were collected by direct observation and documentation from verbal and nonverbal communication expressions. Flexible but focus group scripts were used.

The moderator had informed the objective of the FGD to the participants. The moderator welcomed the participants and explained the purpose of meeting. The moderator assured the respondents of absolute confidentiality and the data would be used only for academic purpose. The data had been collected on the basis of areas given below.

Group Discussion Outcome

Definition of child based on age

Most of the parents were aware of the definition of a child based on age of the child. Some parents said different age limits to be defined as child such as 15, 12 and 6 years.

Child abuse and its reasons

The parents were aware of the child abuse mainly from different media and certain issues heard from public. They were of the opinion that the main reasons for child abuse to were the following: Situation at home, Use of mobile phone, excessive freedom to strangers, less care by parents, inconsiderate attitude of elders and lack of punishments for the criminals.

Most of the CSA (Child Sexual Abuse) cases are reported from familiar people

This may be because of the gifts and promises and excessive freedom given to strangers. When children do not get proper love from home which they get from others, they do not recognize that they are being abused.

Spending time with children

The parents had mixed response for this question. Some of the participants responded they found some time every day to spend with their children. But for many of the participants the busy schedule in life did not allow them to spend time with children. Some of the parents spent time whenever they were free. Most of the employed parents were finding it difficult to spend time with children.

Personal efforts for protection of children: use of mobile, friends, computer, school bus, advice

When the children were young they used to give more attention to such things. But now the children are in higher class; so less attention is given to this aspect. The parents of girls seem to give more attention to this. Many people responded that they did not completely involve themselves in matters regarding their children. Some participants complained that their children do not obey them. A few parents were confident that their children said everything openly about their school, children and all matters related to school. Some parents paid no heed to these issues.

Whether child abuse is discussed in PTA

PTA were conducted on a regular basis. But PTAs discussed only academic matters. Most of the participants shared that there had been no discussions on child abuse in PTA meetings. Teachers summoned them in case of problems. Sometimes counsellors took sessions for parents during PTA meetings and advised them to spend more time with children. They talked about sexual abuse and requested parents not to compare children with others. But, there was no discussions on the issue of child abuse in PTA meetings. The issue of child abuse generally did not appear as a topic for discussion among the parents also.

Do the school/PTA discuss creating protective environment for children

Often the safety of children during travel was a point of discussion in PTA. Also PTA talked about checking friends of children, ensuring good friends and checking bad habits of children. Most of the time PTAs were conducted in a hurry and there was no time for discussion of such topics. So PTA just covered only academic aspects. Often during PTA meeting, parents merely met teachers without any discussions.

Do the child get any training from school

'My child do not share such programs in school, so I am not aware' was the response of some of the respondents. There were classes on self-protection where the children were told not to accept any gifts from strangers and to say NO, according to a few respondents. The responses of participants were not positive in this regard.

Suggestions

The suggestions given by the participant parents to the school authorities and government are summarized as follows:

Classes on child rights and child abuse must be conducted for all parents in all the schools so that they become aware on the topic. There should be meeting with the children also in schools to discuss such types of problems affecting them. Children's committees are to be formed in all the schools for more interaction with all the children. Severe punishments should be given to culprits in child abuse cases without delay. There should not be any political influence. Society should consider all children equal and protect them.

Conclusion

Child abuse is a serious social issue which may give rise to unhealthy individual and society. Prevention and response to violence and abuse are important to ensure children's rights. The approach of UNICEF is to create a protective environment for children based on human rights. This protective environment can be created by strengthening national systems and social change. There are roles for society, parents, school management and children in creating a protective environment for children. Parents have a greater role to play in the protection of children. All the schools should create a protective mechanism which is most suitable for the school. Parents should be made aware of child rights and child abuse. Healthy development of children and their protection can be ensured by also improving their life skills, knowledge, motivation and by supporting all those who are in contact with children especially families, community members, teachers and social workers.

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