

## TULIR - CPHCSA

Tulir - Centre for Prevention and Healing of Child Sexual Abuse is a registered, non government, non profit organistaion committed to working against Child Sexual Abuse in India.

### Our Objectives:

- To support and participate in local, national & international efforts to promote the rights of the child.
- To raise awareness on Child Sexual Abuse.
- To work towards improving policy & advancing practice to prevent and address cases of Child Sexual Abuse with a special emphasis on the psychosocial well being of children.
- To provide direct intervention services in the areas of prevention & healing of Child Sexual Abuse.
- To undertake reasearch, documentation & dissemination of information on Child Sexual Abuse.

## Save the Children

### The vision

Save the Children works for:

- a world which respects and values each child
- a world which listens to children and learns
- a world where all children have hope and opportunity

### The mission

Save the Children fights for children's rights.

We deliver immediate and lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.



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Child



**Save the Children**

Count?



RESEARCH ON

PREVELANCE & DYNAMICS OF

**CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**

AMONG SCHOOL GOING CHILDREN  
IN CHENNAI

Doesnt

Every

# Doesn't Every Child Count?

Research on Prevalence & Dynamics of Child Sexual Abuse  
Among School Going Children in Chennai

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Research and Report by : Tulir CPHCSA  
Supported by : Save the Children Sweden,  
Regional Office for South and Central Asia  
Concept and Design : Alankaar  
Title : Malavika P.C.

Published by:

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## PREFACE

Sexual abuse of children is disturbing, abhorrent and very often an unimaginable crime but the unfortunate reality is that it exists. When children do not feel safe, their other rights are endangered. While it is the responsibility of us adults to be the primary safeguards to care for and protect the interests of children, with the continually increasing incidences of abuse of children being reported, there seems to be a failure in this most basic of obligations.

The United Nations and the Government of India have both recognized the seriousness and pervasiveness of violence against children and are currently in the process of conducting related studies, worldwide and nationally, respectively. At a more local level, to understand the different experiences of sexual abuse faced by children and the issues and dynamics surrounding these events, Tulir - Centre for the Prevention and Healing of Child Sexual Abuse (CPHCSA) with support from Save the Children Sweden, Regional Office for South and Central Asia, undertook this study among Standard 11 school going children in Chennai.

A society's integrity and worth is not based on whether cases of child sexual abuse exist. Instead, it is based on the acceptance of the problem and proactive steps taken to respond in a timely and appropriate way to ensure that every child may benefit from its caring and foresight to truly have the right to feel safe all the time!

- Tulir-CPHCSA Team

## Foreword

"...The damage is particularly severe in the context of sexual abuse, particularly as the stigma and shame surrounding child sexual abuse in all countries usually leaves the child dealing with the harm in solitude. Loss of confidence and belief in the human beings closest to the child can instil feelings of fear, suspicion, uncertainty, and emotional isolation. He or she may never again feel safe or secure in the company of the parent or family member who perpetrated the violence."

- The United Nations Secretary General's Study on Violence against Children

The United Nations Secretary General's Study on Violence against Children is a landmark effort to provide a detailed global picture of the nature, extent and causes of violence against children, and propose clear recommendations for action to prevent and reduce such violence. The study focuses on child sexual abuse as an extreme form of violence that takes place in schools, homes, communities, work places and in institutions. Child sexual abuse also occurs across gender, caste, religious, ethnic, occupational and socio-economic groups.

The recommendations in the UN Study are backed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which specifies the right of every girl and boy to protection.

Article 19 describes the child's right to protection from abuse, and Article 34 describes the child's right to protection from sexual abuse in particular.

With regard to India, child sexual abuse is far more prevalent than society willingly acknowledges. This is because the focus has been more on basic survival needs of health, shelter, nutrition and education. Consequently there has been very little attention paid to the sexual abuse of girls and boys and its impact. Besides, a very superficial understanding of the definition,

compounded by a paucity of knowledge, there seems to be hardly any awareness both among the general public and professional human service providers, regarding the extent and severity of abuse among girls and boys in India. At the same time, non-recognition of abuse due to lack of professional training and non-availability of redressal mechanisms and protocols post abuse, severely hinders appropriate response to child sexual abuse.

With this realisation, Save the Children Sweden, Regional Office for South and Central Asia has partnered with Tulir - CPHCSA to understand and contribute information towards working effectively against child sexual abuse in India. Since it is equally important that this information reaches as many government and non government organisations, schools, teachers, parents, caregivers and also girls and boys, Save the Children Sweden, Regional Office for South and Central Asia supported Tulir - CPHCSA with the printing of a workbook for children based on personal safety education, titled **My Personal Safety Workbook**, for age group 5-10 years which is available in English and Hindi and a booklet for young people which equips them with information and awareness on keeping safe from sexual abuse.

We would like to thank the entire team of Tulir CPHCSA for this successful partnership and all the girls and boys who participated in it. In particular, we would like to thank Y.G. Bhavani, Nepali Sah and Neha Bhandari at Save the Children Sweden, for contributing to this study and publication.

Ravi Karkara  
Regional Programme Manager  
Save the Children Sweden  
Regional Office for South and Central Asia

## Acknowledgements

Tulir-CPHCSA would like to thank all the skeptics, who gave us enough and more impetus to prove them wrong and set the record straight with regard to some of the contextual realities of child sexual abuse.

We would also like to place on record our deep sense of gratitude for the support and cooperation from the following people who were kind enough to share with us their expertise and experience at different stages, of this research study.

Dr S.Ananthalakshmi, Director,  
IDRC-ICCW, TN

Mrs.Andal Damodaran, President,  
Indian Council for Child Welfare, India  
Dr.Daniel S Halperin, Head of the CIMPV,  
University Hospital of Geneva

Dr.Lisa Fontes, Asst. Prof. of Psychology,  
Springfield College, MA, USA

Ms.Loïs Engelbrecht-Consultant

Centers for Prevention and Healing of Child Sexual Abuse-South East Asia

Dr.S.Parvathy, Head, Department of Psychology  
Madras University

Dr. Paul Bouvier, Médecin-Directeur  
Service de Santé de la Jeunesse, Genève

Dr.Shekhar Sheshadri, Additional Professor of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry,  
NIMHANS, Bangalore

Dr.Sherry L Hamby, Associate Professor Dept of Psychology,  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC, USA

The Principals of the 24 schools for granting permission to undertake this study with their students.

And to Ravi Karkara and the team at Save the Children Sweden, Regional Office for South and Central Asia for believing in our vision and helping us work towards making it happen

Finally and most importantly the boys and girls who made this study possible, for their courage and trust they reposed in us.

# INTRODUCTION

## WHY THIS STUDY?

Child sexual abuse is the biggest kept secret in India due to societal denial, ignorance, and silence owing to the discomfort generated out of acknowledgement. It is a universal problem that occurs across gender, caste, religious, ethnic, occupational and socio-economic groups, threatening a child's right to protection as defined under different sections of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Child sexual abuse directly threatens Article 19 (which describes the child's right to protection from abuse) and Article 34 (which discusses the child's right to protection from sexual abuse specifically) of the Convention.

With fear, shame, guilt and the ensuing stigma unfortunately being characteristic features of sexual abuse for boys and girls, the issues of gender stereotypes however cause various differences in the way abuse is perceived by community and the abused children themselves, and the subsequent availability and efficacy of support networks. Abuse of girls is usually kept hidden under the guise of family honour and issues of "purity", while abuse of boys is often ignored to the extent that sometimes it is even considered impossible. Also, because of the widespread ignorance and silence on the issue, a number of myths have taken root and grown in our society and culture. For example "boys do not get abused", "child sexual abuse happens only to children from lower socio-economic families". To debunk such myths the respondents of this study, both boys and girls, were selected from different types of schools, which represented the larger socio-economic spectrum. Moreover there seems to exist a large gap between the number of adult survivors who report retrospectively on the abuse experienced by them as children and current reporting of abuse by children. Neglect of child sexual abuse has happened not only in the sphere of society and community, but in the professional arena as well. Therefore there is a scarcity of empirical information on child sexual abuse within the Indian context, and consequently the indigenous body of knowledge on the subject is very limited.

This research was undertaken by Tulir - Centre for the Prevention and Healing of Child Sexual Abuse based in Chennai with support from Save the Children Sweden, Regional Office for South and Central Asia, in order to address some of the concerns and gaps discussed earlier. With its perceived role being to help break the silence around the issue, dispel certain myths and provide research-based information on the dynamics of abuse, this study aims to inform subsequent action at the levels of advocacy, action and policy, with the following specific objectives:

- To determine the prevalence of child sexual abuse among school going girls and boys in Chennai, Tamil Nadu
- To understand the nature of child sexual abuse with relation to
  - Type of abuse
  - Frequency of abuse
  - Age of onset of abuse
  - Relational proximity of the abuser
  - Process of abuse
- To understand the disclosure pattern of children and accessibility to support systems.
- To contribute to the existing information and knowledge base on child sexual abuse in India.
- To contribute towards improving child protection policies and practice.
- To strengthen the initiative to have a comprehensive law on child sexual abuse in the country.
- To contribute towards spreading awareness and information about child sexual abuse among children, families and the stakeholders in the larger community.

## METHODOLOGY

The target group for this study included all children studying in Standard 11 of schools within the Chennai Corporation Zone limits. Standard 11 students were chosen to represent the school-going population of Chennai as they would have completed studying the human reproductive system, besides having the cognitive ability and social maturity to appropriately understand and answer the questions.

There are a total of 426 schools having Standard 11, within the Chennai Corporation Zone limits, all of which were sent a letter requesting them to allow their students to participate in this study. It was decided that the study sample would comprise of all the 11th standard students from schools that give permission. While many schools were interested, only 24 schools could give permission for data to be collected within the time period stipulated for this purpose, and the study was conducted among 2211 students from these schools. Primary data was collected from the children using a self-reporting anonymous questionnaire, which had been tested and finalized following a pilot study conducted in five schools with 519 students in September. The data for the study was collected between October to December 2005.

Before every data collection session with children, an interactive orientation was conducted with them, discussing child sexual abuse and giving them information on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, especially on articles regarding abuse. Information was also given about available professional support systems such as Tular-CPHCSA and CHILDLINE, and the students were encouraged to tell their trusted adults to seek help in the event of occurrence of abuse. Crucial topics, such as how abuse is never a child's fault, were also emphasized.

Efforts were made at all stages of research to follow strict professional and ethical standards at all times, considering the sensitive topic of the study and the young age of the respondents. The major ethical standards followed were:

- **Confidentiality**

All measures were undertaken to protect the confidentiality of the respondents. The questionnaire did not require the respondents to reveal any personal identification. In case the respondents wanted to speak to the researchers after the study suitable measures were taken to protect their identity. All efforts to ensure privacy and comfort, within the available setting, were provided to the participants.

- **Freedom to Participate**

After attending the orientation programme the children were given a choice as to whether they wanted to participate in the research or not. Their participation was strictly a decision they had to make. Similarly the respondents had the freedom to stop answering the questionnaire at any time in between if they wished to.

- **Informed Consent**

The orientation programme gave the respondents an insight into the background and purpose of the study. They were made aware of the support systems, which were in place in case they wanted to discuss the study further. The fact that they had the freedom to participate or not to participate was stressed upon.

- **Multi-Disciplinary Team**

A multi-disciplinary team comprising of professionals from social work, medicine, law, and education was formed. They had been informed about the purpose of the study and they had agreed to provide appropriate interventions and support for participants who might have sought assistance following the research.

## DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions have been used:

**CHILD:** Any person below the age of 18 years.

**CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE:** Any behavior by an older or more powerful person on a child for his/her sexual gratification. This includes both touch as well as non-touch forms, including, but not limited to:

- Exhibitionism
- Voyeurism
- Making the child touch offender's private parts
- Touching the child's private parts
- Forcing or tricking the child to watch pornography
- Sexual intercourse (vaginal/ anal/ oral)

**NUCLEAR FAMILY\*:** A unit composed of a husband, wife and their unmarried children, where 'unit' refers to "a group of persons who lived together in the same house and took their meals from the common kitchen". This also includes "sub-nuclear" family, which is an unit composed of husband and wife, or a widow/ widower and her/his unmarried children, or a single individual.

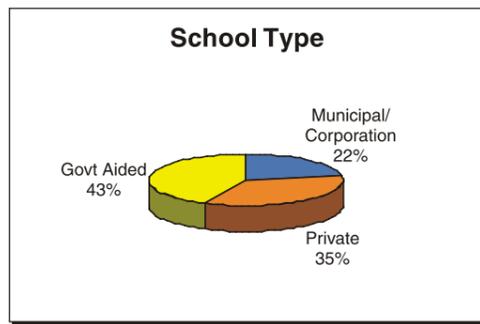
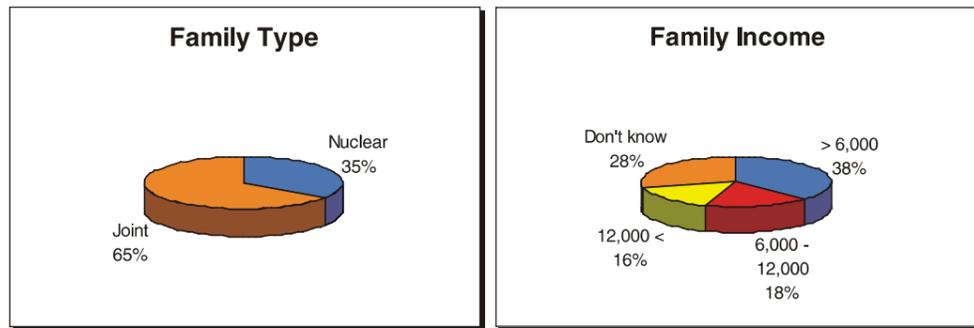
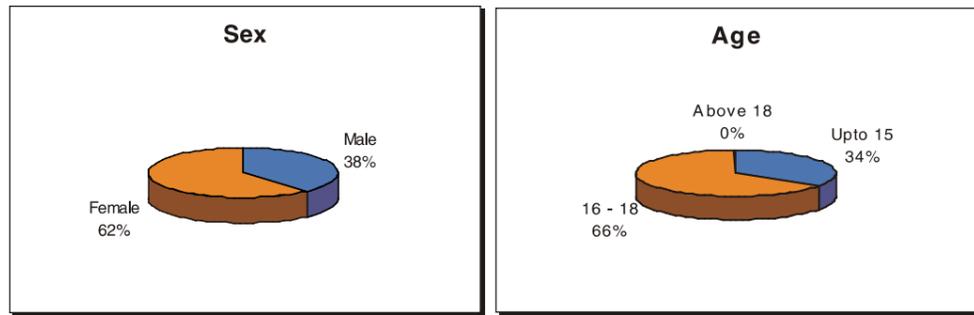
**JOINT FAMILY\*:** When a person belonging to one nuclear family is added to another nuclear family, the latter becomes a "joint family".

\*{Source: Shah, A. M. (March 2, 1996): Is the Joint Household Disintegrating? Economic and Political Weekly, p. 537-542}

The total number of child participants in the research was 2211, of which 847 were boys while 1364 were girls. The participants belonged to a range of socio-economic strata and school types. The profile of the participants was:

Participant category	Frequency
<b>SEX</b>	
Male	847
Female	1364
<b>AGE</b>	
Upto 15 years	753
16-18 years	1454
Above 18 years	4
<b>FAMILY TYPE*</b>	
Joint	748
Nuclear	1403
<b>FAMILY INCOME (per month)</b>	
Less than Rs. 6,000	824
Rs. 6,000-12,000	396
More than Rs. 12,000	361
Do not know	630
<b>SCHOOL TYPE</b>	
Municipal / Corporation school	489
Private school	767
Government aided	955

\* There is a missing value in the arithmetic sum of this category due to no responses by some participants.

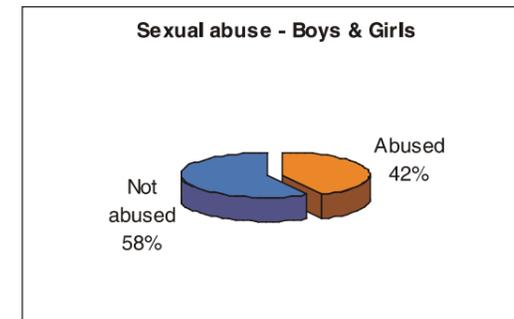
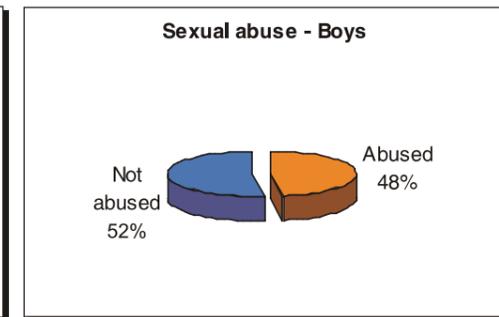
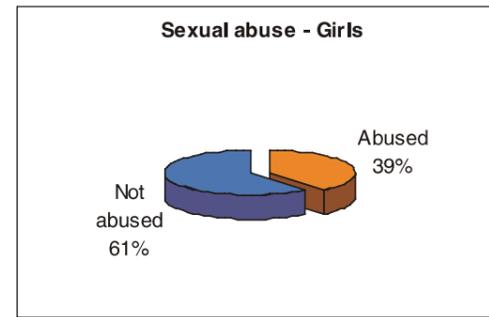


## FINDINGS

### PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE

The results of this study suggest that the crime of child sexual abuse is extremely widespread in its prevalence. Out of a total of 2211 child participants, 939 had faced at least one form of sexual abuse at some point in time, that is, 42% of these children had faced sexual abuse in one form or the other.

	Reported sexual abuse	Total
Boys	405	847
Girls	534	1364
Boys and Girls	939	2211

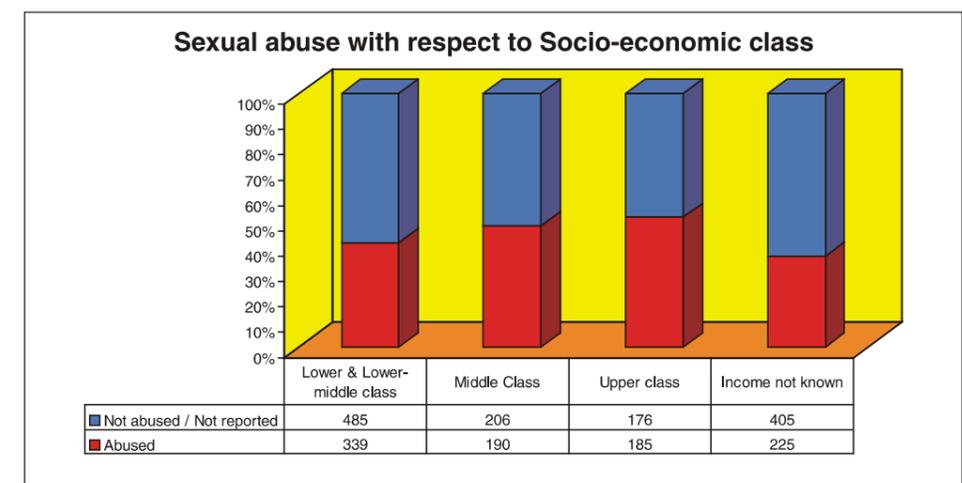


The rate of prevalence of abuse of 42% can also be viewed as suggestive of the prevalence of abuse of children in India, which has a large child population with almost 42% of its total population falling within the 18 years age bracket. When seen in relation with the entire child population, these figures indicate a horrifying and appalling picture of the enormity of sexual abuse of children. At the same time, these figures also challenge the common misunderstanding that child sexual abuse is essentially a "western" problem, and does not happen within Indian society and culture.

The sex-wise distribution of data on prevalence of sexual abuse also present significant results. For instance, it is often believed that boys are not sexually abused - a myth often dangerously reflected in parental, familial, community and professional attitudes. The findings of this study completely refute this. Not only are boys abused, their abuse is extremely prevalent as well, shown by the figures that 48% of boys who participated in the study had been abused. With regard to girls, the results show that 39% of girls had faced abuse. While these findings, when compared, may give the impression that the abuse of boys is more prevalent than that of girls, this may not necessarily be indicative of the larger social realities. The abuse of both girls and boys is highly stigmatized within Indian society. Due to the strongly male-dominant patriarchal nature of Indian society, abused girls are often disbelieved and/or blamed for their abuse, with abuse usually being associated with "loss" of virginity and notions of family honor often playing an extremely significant role in this process. Also, sex and sexuality are taboo topics in Indian society, more so for girls than boys. All these factors may have hindered girls from disclosing about abuse faced by them, even though the questionnaires were anonymous. Also, many children, due to the general silence on the subject of sexual abuse and lack of awareness, may not have been able to relate their experiences of abuse to the questions asked, or may not perceive those experiences as abusive. These factors too may have led to a noteworthy level of under-reporting among all children in general,

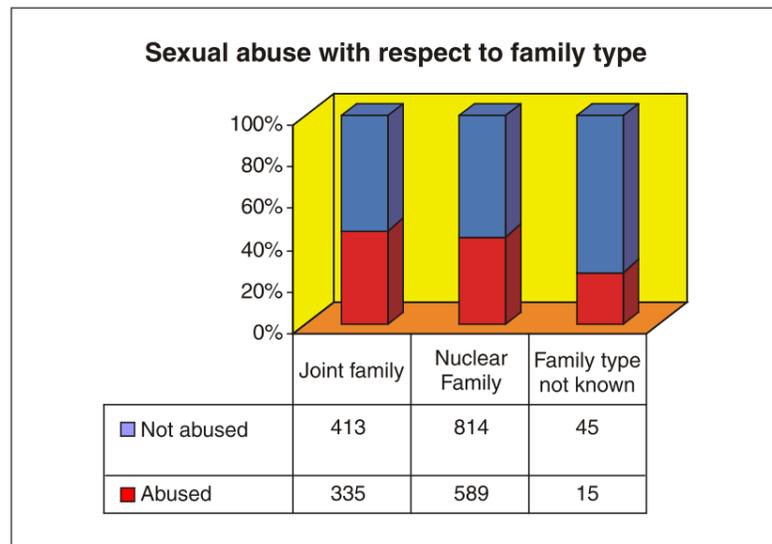
and girl children especially. Also, the limitations of undertaking research on a subject as sensitive as child sexual abuse must be carefully considered. Therefore, it may be stated that though the boy participants of this study reported a higher prevalence rate of sexual abuse than the girl participants, it may not be representative of a wider occurrence. At the same time, the research findings state with conviction that sexual abuse of both boys and girls is widely prevalent.

The results contradict various other myths and popularly held perceptions about child sexual abuse in India, a major one being the extremely common perception that it happens only in poor and illiterate families. The study included children from various socio-economic strata of society, and there did not seem to be any dramatic difference between the prevalence of child sexual abuse between these strata; in fact the prevalence of sexual abuse in upper and middle class was found to be proportionately higher than in lower and lower-middle class, as is evident in the graph below (the criteria used for stratification: family income less than Rs.6,000 per month = Lower and lower-middle class; between Rs.6,000 and Rs.12,000 per month = Middle class; higher than Rs.12,000 per month = Upper class).

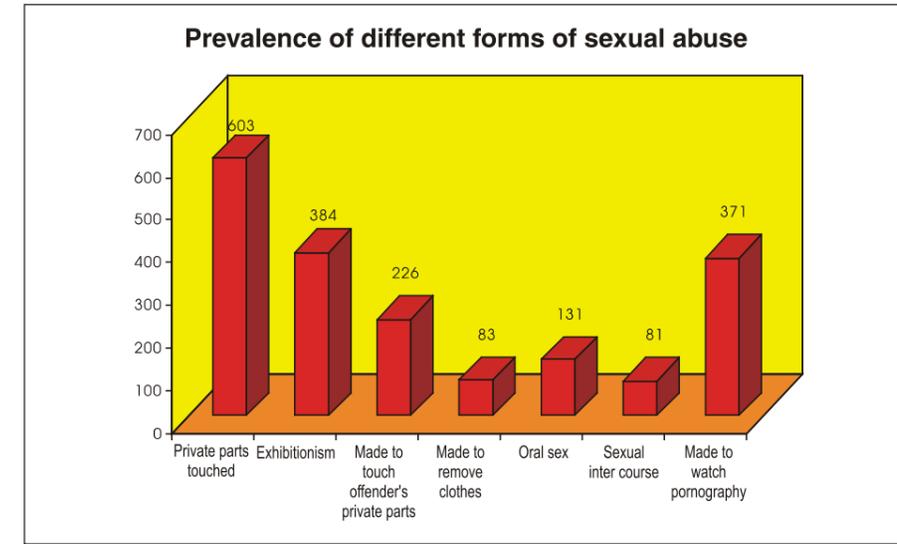


Similarly, another popular myth is that sexual abuse does not take place within joint families, and that it happens within nuclear families only.

This is often attributed to the element of a greater degree of supervision, especially by the elderly, in joint families. However, the results of this study do not endorse this viewpoint, as sexual abuse is found to be as prevalent in joint families as it is in nuclear families. This may be because though the degree of supervision may be high in many joint family systems, the number of people having access to the child is also greater in these families.



The abuse faced by children includes a wide range of activities from non-contact forms such as voyeurism, exhibitionism to fondling, molestation, sexual intercourse, making the child touch offender's private body parts etc, with the study asking children questions about some of the forms of sexual abuse, to estimate their respective prevalence.



*Due to multiplicity of responses, the arithmetic sum of individual prevalence figures for each of the abuse types is more than the total number of children.*

As can be observed, the most prevalent forms of sexual abuse are touching children's private parts, exhibitionism and forcing and/or tricking children to watch pornography. The high rate of abuse in the form of touching children's private parts may also be due to widespread sexual harassment at public places (popularly, though inappropriately, known as "eve teasing").

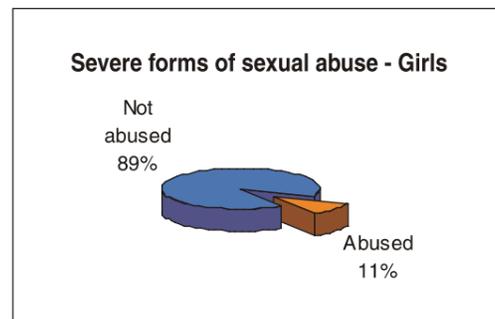
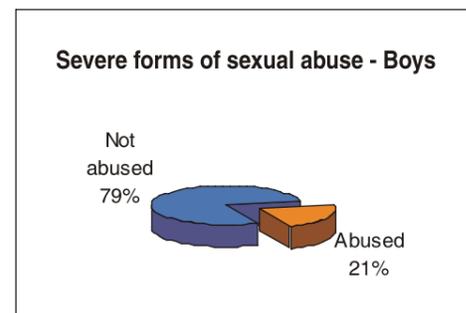
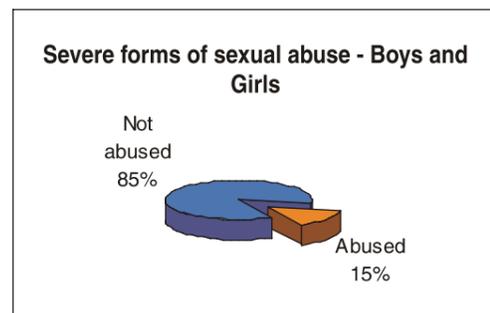
*"A guy of about 17 hugged me from behind while I was walking down the road when I was about 11. I don't remember much about it now but it still disturbs me a lot."* - Girl, 15

*"When I was studying in 10<sup>th</sup> standard, I saw some boys who kiss the other boys for fun and irritate them."* - Boy, 16

## SEVERE FORMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

The prevalence of more severe forms of sexual abuse demands special attention. Though all forms of sexual abuse are serious and deserve concrete action, severe forms may have a higher potential of causing harm in the short and long term. Of the different forms of sexual abuse studied as part of this research, oral sex, sexual intercourse, making the child touch offender's private parts and making the children take off their clothes and looking at them or taking their pictures are considered here as severe forms of sexual abuse.

	Reported severe sexual abuse	Total
Boys	179	847
Girls	146	1364
Boys and Girls	325	2211



It may be observed that the proportion of abused boys is more than that of abused girls for severe forms of sexual abuse as well. Again, it may be noted that the prevalence of abused girls may be far more than that reported in this study, which may not have surfaced because of factors discussed previously.

## THE ABUSERS

*"When I was three years old, one of my uncle's friends took me to the terrace and exposed his penis and asked me to expose my vagina."*

- Girl, 15

*"When I was studying in 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> standard someone stayed in our house. He called me and told me a story and as I was listening he took my hand and made me touch his penis."*

- Girl, 16

*"I was forced to touch a woman's private body parts. She was my neighbour."*

- Boy, 16

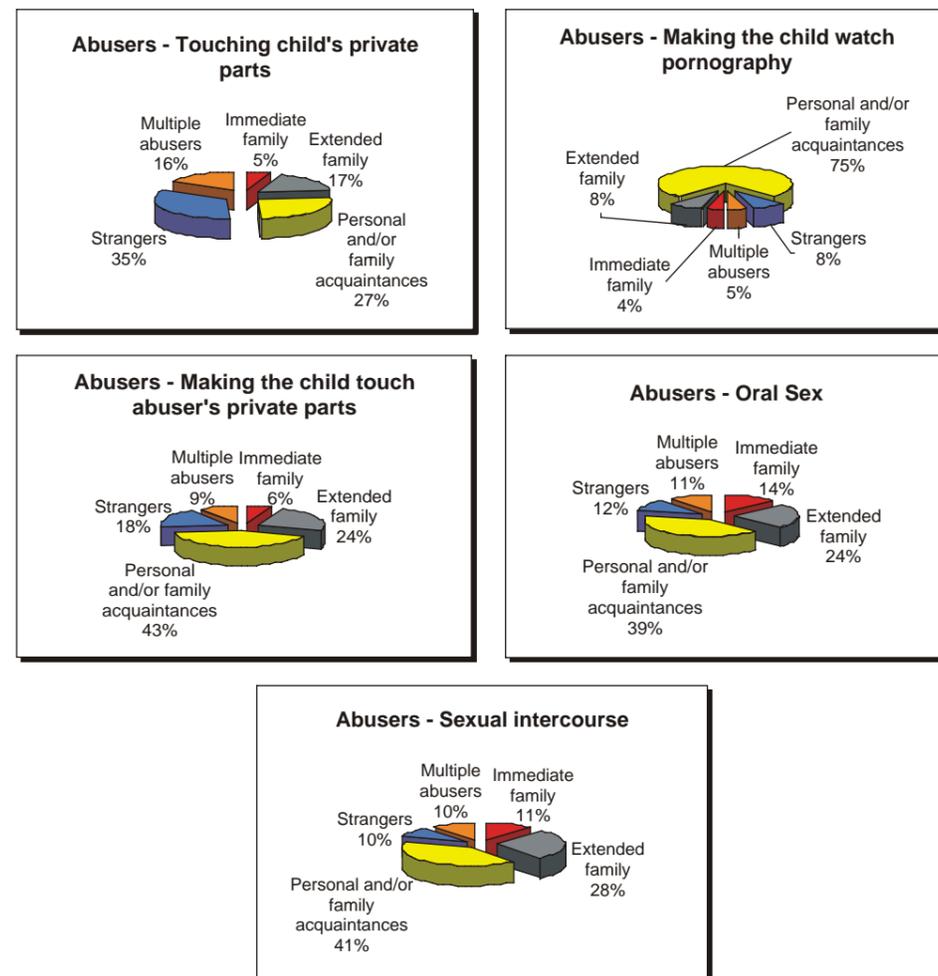
*"My cousin brother tried to have sex with me. This happened when I matured. And he often forces me to do it."*

- Girl, 16

*"It may not seem so bad, but a few years ago, a man stood right outside our school gate and under our classroom window and shouted out foul language and took off his pants. The fact that it was right outside our school made me feel very insecure."*

- Boy, 15

The abusers are often considered to be dirty old men, and "stranger danger" is commonly believed to be the biggest threat to children's safety. However, the data made available to this study supports what has been indicated before by previous studies on child sexual abuse across the world as also demonstrated in our experience, that the abusers are more often than not people who are known to the child. This trend is clearly visible in the graphs below, for each category of abuse:

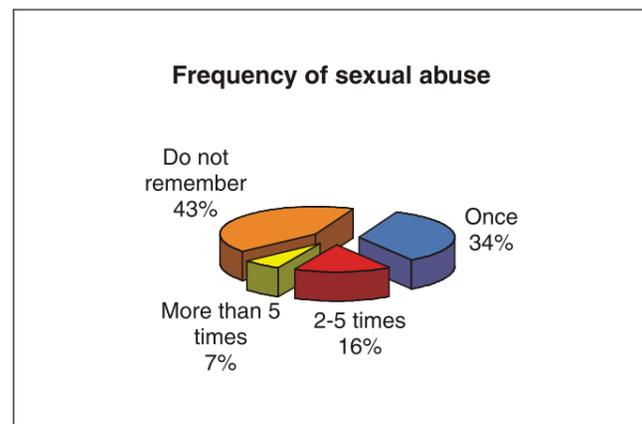


*Immediate Family* : Father, Mother, Siblings  
*Extended Family* : Grandparents, Uncles, Aunts, Cousins  
*Personal and Family Acquaintances* : Such as Friends, Family Friends, Teachers, Neighbours, Domestic Help.

As can be observed from these graphs, the majority of abusers in each form of abuse are people who are known to the child, whereas the strangers are more often than not a minority. The only two forms of abuse where strangers constitute a sizeable number are touching the child's private parts and exhibitionism. Both of these forms of abuse are often part of sexual harassment at public places, which is often perpetrated by strangers, and therefore the percentage of strangers as abusers in these two cases is especially high. However, abuse in the form of sexual intercourse, oral sex, making the child touch abuser's private parts etc., most often requires a greater and much closer access to the child for the abuser to be able to gain the trust and confidence of the child often by building a relationship with him/her over a period of time and then abusing the child. Such access is mostly the privilege of people who are known to the child and who may be in a position of power, authority and trust over her/him. For these reasons, the majority of abusers are people who are known to the child, a fact reflected in the data presented here. Also important to note, with regard to showing children pornography, is the very high percentage of individual and family acquaintances such as friends, neighbors, teachers, drivers and domestic help etc.. The study reveals that a sizeable percentage of participants who selected this option, mentioned that they were made to watch pornographic materials by their own friends. Besides the fact that the participants may have actually been forced and/or tricked into watching such material, the participants may also have included sharing of pornographic materials amongst friends while responding to this question, which is indicative of the high rate of viewing pornographic materials such as books, video CDs and websites by young people today. This demands introspection by communities and professionals as to their role, responsibility and response in terms of young people having to resort to accessing pornographic material for information on sex and sexuality, which is often inaccurate, inappropriate and unhealthy, due to a dismal lack of approachable and informative resources.

## FREQUENCY OF ABUSE

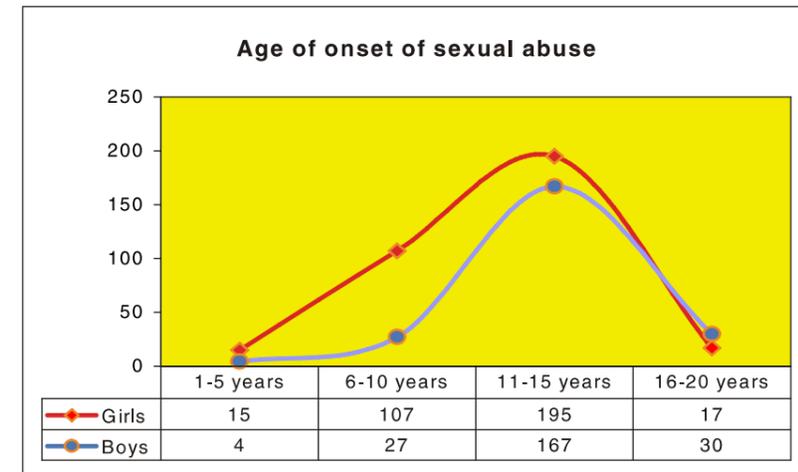
It was found that a vast majority of participants could not remember the number of times abuse happened. A distribution of responses from those who had been abused with respect to frequency of abuse is given below:



The experiences of Tulir-CPHCSA and of other organizations/practitioners suggest that abuse by strangers may be a one-off incident (such as in cases of sexual harassment, exhibitionism by strangers etc.) whilst abuse by known people is very often repeated over a period of time. Therefore, it may be suggested that a majority of those who were abused once may have been subjected to abuse by strangers, whereas those who were abused repeatedly, may have been abused by people they were familiar with.

## AGE OF ONSET OF ABUSE

Participants were asked about the age when their abuse first happened/started. A total of 228 boys and 334 girls who had been abused responded to this question. The trend that emerged from the responses is:

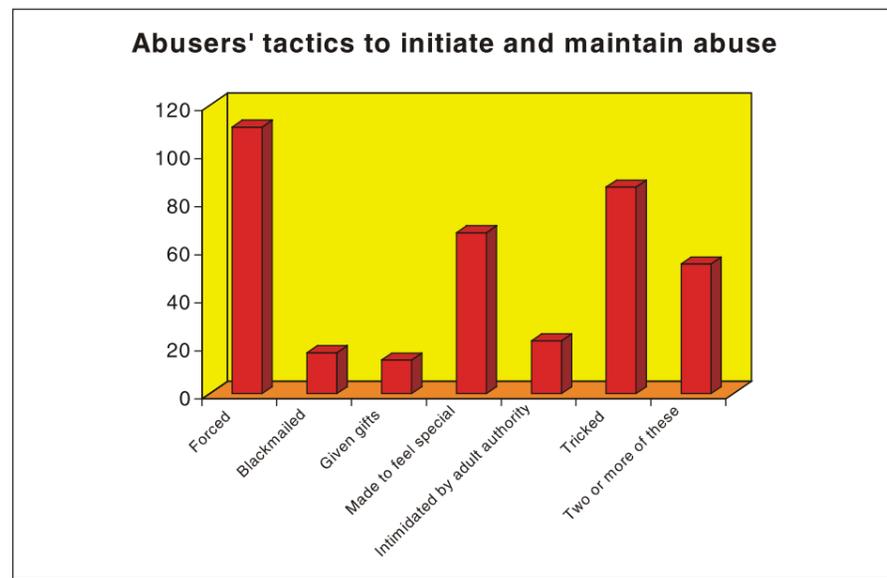


As can be observed here, the age of 11-15 years (that coincides with onset of puberty) is the age of onset of abuse for most girls and boys. However, it is interesting to note that while there is steady rise in the abuse of girls as they advance in age till the age group of 11-15 years, there is sudden jump in the abuse of boys from the age group of 6-10 years to the age group of 11-15 years. This may be analyzed in relation with the earlier discussion on adolescents watching or being made to watch pornography (the study had a large number of boys who said they had watched or had been made to watch pornographic material by their peers). This jump in the onset of abuse may also be linked to a greater access to pornographic material made available through their own peer group.

## SEXUAL ABUSE - "THE METHOD TO THE MADNESS"

As much as it is important to know about the prevalence of sexual abuse of children, it is far more significant to explore its process and dynamics. Various myths and perceptions, along with widespread ignorance on the issue, have led society to believe that child sexual abuse is often an act of "sheer madness" carried out arbitrarily. On the contrary, research and experience has shown time

and over that sexual abuse of children is very often a pre-planned insidious abuse of a relationship by the abuser over the child. The findings of this study also suggest this understanding about how the abuse was initiated and maintained in terms of its process.



The most common tactic used by the abusers against children in order to abuse them is force. Equally relevant to notice in this data are two other often used tactics of abusers - trickery and making the children feel special in order to abuse them and to keep that abuse a secret, besides being blackmailed, given gifts and intimidated. It is important to take note of these tactics because they form the most important part of the process of abuse, and indicate the carefully thought-out path that an abuser often takes in order to first prepare a child for abuse and later to maintain the abuse. This process is known as "**grooming**", and refers to a series of steps an abuser takes, such as gaining access to the child, developing a relationship with the child, making the child feel special by providing special attention and gifts, gradually beginning to touch the child

eventually leading to sexually abusive acts. This process is important from the abuser's perspective since it allows him/her to build a relationship of power, authority and /or trust with the child. This context usually makes it difficult for the child to say "no" to acts of abuse, and the abuser is also often successful in giving the child the impression that s/he is a participant in those activities, and/or that these activities must be kept a secret. However, an understanding of this process is very limited among different stakeholders, leading often to a misunderstanding about the nature of sexual abuse itself, and sometimes even to attitudes and actions which are against the interest of the child, such as disbelieving the child, blaming the child for abuse, or ridiculing her/him for not having disclosed earlier.

## DISCLOSURE AND SEEKING HELP

*"We don't have courage to say that to our parents. But even if we say, it is only half of it, not fully."*

- Girl, 17

Considering the insidious and manipulative nature of abuse, relational proximity to the abuser and the potential for stigmatization within society, disclosing about abuse can be a very intimidating experience for abused children. However, this voicing is an extremely crucial step towards stopping the abuse and at the same time may also contribute significantly towards healing. Unfortunately, the experience of disclosure about sexual abuse is fraught with fears for many children - arising out of the myths, shame and silence that surround the issue. These fears may range from the fear of losing love since the abuser and the child usually share a relationship, fear of not being believed, fear of being blamed and fear of further harm.

*"I was blackmailed by my cousin brother, and he often forces me to do it (have sex) ... .. I was not able to tell this to my father, because he has got a good name in the family. He used to see me in the wrong way. Once I told this to my close friend. She told me, "They won't do it unnecessarily. Your appearance may have made them like that."*

- Girl, 16

*"I am really in a confused state what to do for this. I can't lose their (friends') relationship because they are all affectionate towards me."*

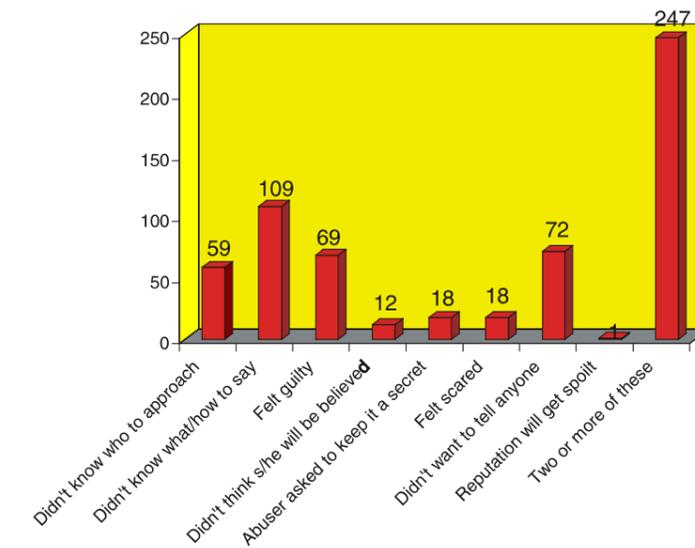
- Girl, 14

*I never told anyone what happened to me in 10<sup>th</sup> standard, because I would be blamed."*

- Girl, 16

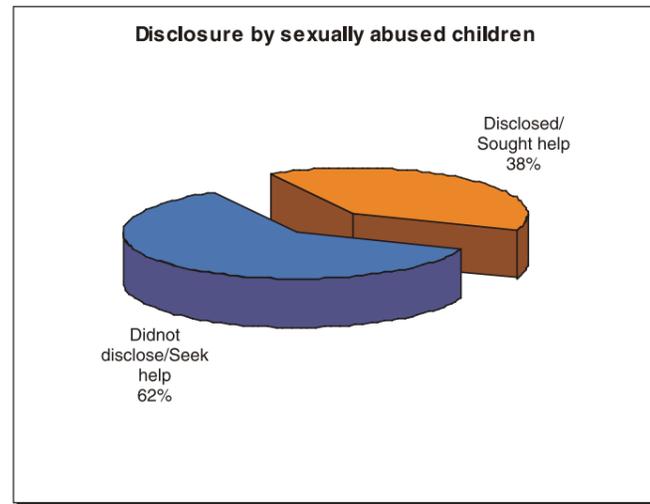
Such apprehensions in the minds of children regarding disclosure of their abuse also suggest that there has been a failure to a certain extent of the adult society and systems to be able to create safe and effective support structures whether in terms of family/community response or professional services for abused children to be able to disclose and have their fears and concerns addressed. Some of the concerns, fears and anxieties that participants had about disclosure were:

**Fears of disclosure**

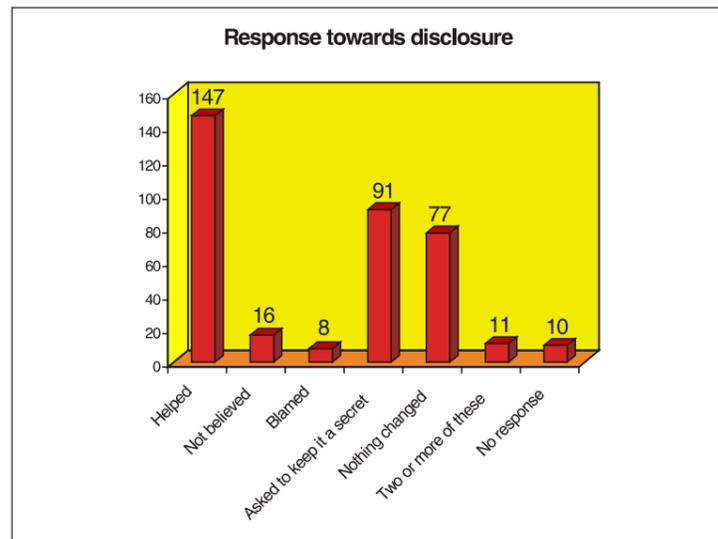


Considering such high prevalence of fears and anxieties among abused children, the fact that most children never disclose their experiences of abuse must not come as a surprise. Out of a total of 939 children who reported to have been abused, only 360 had ever sought help!

As a corollary to these findings, and knowing that adults cannot always be around children for supervision and protection, it is important to discuss the need for children to be provided with age-appropriate and rights-based information on sexual abuse, so they can participate in their own protection. The lack of such information for children often results in them not having the confidence to tell, not knowing whom/where to approach for help, and how to tell - factors which then act as obstacles when it comes to breaking the silence and seeking help.



These statistics should be viewed also in relation with the response these disclosures were met with. While it is most heartening to observe that almost 40% of children who disclosed were helped against abuse in one way or the other, it is equally appalling to note that the others were not helped, but instead were disbelieved, blamed or told to keep it a secret.

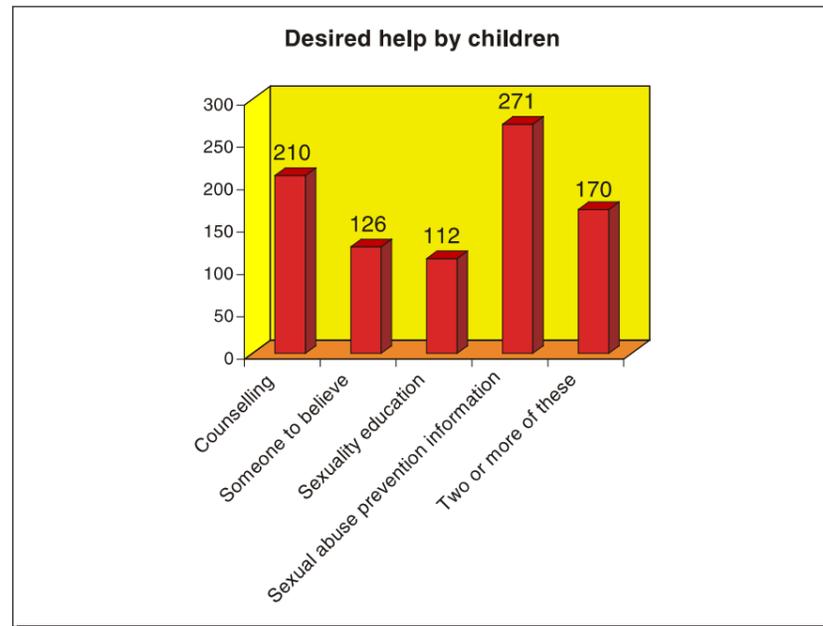


While raising serious concerns regarding the nature and efficacy of support available to children in situations of distress, these figures also try to explain to some extent the severe underreporting of violence against children to the formal appropriate authorities, such as the police.

It was also interesting to find that most abused children disclosed to their friends. Considering the lack of age-appropriate information available to children to understand such violence and participate in protection, and the relative powerless status accorded to children by the larger society, these friends are also usually not in a position to help their friends effectively, which then is reflected in the fact that many children who disclose are not helped and nothing changes with respect to abuse even after the disclosure. After friends, the study showed that many children disclosed to their mothers.

## ASSISTANCE AND INFORMATION NEEDED

As has been discussed earlier, the resources available to children in terms of information on sex, sexuality and sexual abuse are limited, and so are support structures for help in situations of distress. This lack of resources and support was expressed as a concern by the children themselves, when asked about the kind of help or information they would like to receive. Also, these resources and support structures need not always be professional and specialized in nature - the affirming and supportive response by the family, community and friends, being of paramount importance as well.



As is evident, a large number of children want information on protecting themselves against sexual abuse, and on sex and sexuality. In the current scenario, availability of information on both these subjects is severely limited, and many times efforts to meet these needs of children are met with suspicion and lack of active support from the adults. Such an attitude may then result in children turning to unhealthy and inaccurate sources of information on sexuality, or staying fearful, silent and helpless in the event of occurrence of sexual abuse - both of which have surfaced strongly in this study. Also, it is almost tragic to note that the only help desired by many children is that they wanted someone to believe their experiences of abuse, a strong indicator of the usual response of disbelief towards children's accounts of sexual abuse.

## CONCLUSION

Child sexual abuse is one of the most fundamental violations of children's rights and usually an underlying obstacle, to their overall development. While it is expected that children will be protected by adults and systems, including parents, families, teachers, community and the State, our study estimates that at least 42% of our children will experience some form of sexual abuse before they reach the age of 18.

This is because child sexual abuse does not occur in a vacuum. The offenders are usually amongst us. They are family members, teachers, neighbors, friends etc. They use trickery, force or exploit their positions of authority to take advantage of a child's innocence and unconditional love.

Considering that the prevalence rate of sexual abuse is 42% among mainstream child population that attends formal schooling, it is alarming to imagine the prevalence of sexual abuse for disadvantaged and marginalized population groups of children. Groups such as institutionalized children, street and working children and differently abled children are even more at risk of being abused, due to their increased vulnerabilities owing largely to their special circumstances.

Because we as adults have often failed in protection of children, we must now help children, through non-threatening and age-appropriate means, to participate in their own protection. As our knowledge of the aftermath of sexual abuse of children increases, the need to find ways to prevent and to ensure safety of children from victimization of any form is paramount.

Prevention has increasingly gained recognition as the most prudent and cost effective strategy for addressing child sexual abuse. More importantly prevention, through the concept of Personal Safety Education empowers every child to exercise the right to feel safe all the time.

Personal Safety Education is a methodology that promotes the safety of self against abuse. The program is an extension of the safety rules we teach our children, i.e. don't play with fire, look both sides before and while crossing a road, etc.. Besides empowering children to take part in their own protection, it strengthens the ability of those morally and socially responsible for the protection of children, i.e. the State, parents, significant other stakeholders and the larger community.

The focus of Personal Safety Education is based on three integral components - on the provision of accurate age appropriate information to the child, skills to act on that information and self-confidence for the courage to practice skills learned.

While in India we are just beginning to acknowledge the existence of child sexual abuse, Tulir - CPHCSA has the belief and audacity of hope that it will not be before long that society realizes the prevalence with its subsequent significant impact (and accompanying physical, social and health costs). The idea of dealing with child sexual abuse may seem daunting but it should not overwhelm us. The response to child sexual abuse should be handled with a view to increasing awareness, while establishing and implementing sensitive and viable policies and standardized protocols, requiring the convergence of various stakeholder disciplines and systems, to work effectively towards healing abused children's body and spirit.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### - Initiate and execute awareness campaign:

The high rate of prevalence and the dynamics of abuse faced by both girls and boys are in direct contrast to the popular public perceptions, such as "child sexual abuse is rare in Indian society and culture", "boys do not get abused", "strangers are the most common abusers", "child sexual abuse is usually perpetrated by dirty old men" etc.. In order to challenge these misconceptions, and to inform the public about the actual prevalence and nature of child sexual abuse, it is important to initiate and execute a sustained awareness campaign and develop information, education and communication materials targeting these widely prevalent myths.

### - Initiate and institutionalize 'Personal Safety Education'.

Schools have the opportunity and the training to work with large groups of children, especially since most of the "awake" hours of a child are usually spent at school. Recognizing this potential, schools should be encouraged to institutionalize 'Personal Safety Education', a curriculum for children that aims at prevention of sexual abuse by helping children participate in their own protection through age-appropriate information, skills and self-esteem.

### - Sensitize and train frontline workers and professionals:

Professionals at the frontline of working with children, such as teachers, medical professionals, school counselors, police personnel should be sensitized and trained to appropriately respond to child sexual abuse, from prevention, detection and management perspectives.

- Consider parents as main stakeholders for awareness raising campaign:

Considering the importance of family, especially parents in a child's life, parents should be viewed as very crucial stakeholders in the campaign against child sexual abuse. Awareness messages should especially be targeted at them, and parenting groups should be included in the campaign.

- Develop and disseminate rights based child friendly resource materials:

There is a strong paucity of child-friendly and rights-based resources available for children on child sexual abuse and its prevention. This gap needs to be plugged through proactive efforts.

- Advocate for child friendly and holistic legal procedures, protocols and services:

There is a strong disconnect between the prevalence of different forms of sexual abuse and the laws and legal services available to address these abusive behaviors. The law needs to be made comprehensive and holistic to include all forms of sexual violence against children, both boys and girls. The legal procedures and protocols need to be made child-friendly. More efficient and readily accessible legal services need to be made available to children and their families.

- Sensitize NGO sector and civil society on child sexual abuse:

There exists lack of awareness even among the NGO sector on this issue. NGOs and other civil society organizations should be made aware of sexual abuse of children, trained to respond to this issue and helped to address it as a cross-cutting concern within their existing framework of activities with children and adult stakeholders.