

PARENTS PERCEPTION ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE – A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study was conducted to explore the perception on child sexual abuse among parents of school children at a selected rural village. Phenomenological research design was used in the study and the total numbers of 42 samples were used in the study and they were selected through maximum variation sampling respectively. Written and oral consent was obtained from each participant; the samples were assured confidentiality of data. Ethical clearance was obtained from Institutional Ethical committee. Qualitative perception was assessed through semi structured questions through open ended questions for parents through focus group discussions till the data saturation. Seven focus group discussions were conducted .data were transcribed and coding was done for the same. The perceptions regarding child sexual abuse were categorized in to six domains and nineteen themes. The final codings included risk, probability, victim description, belief and protection.

Keywords: Child Sexual Abuse, Perception.

INTRODUCTION

In 2004, World health organization (WHO) declared childhood sexual abuse (CSA) “a silent health emergency” of international importance. It is a worldwide problem affecting children of all ages, socio economic backgrounds of children is the leading source for this issue. CSA is the fastest leading growing problem in all over world. It is a complex phenomenon, in which it is stressful for both child and the care taker especially mother in all aspects of child life. It leads to variety of physical and mental health problems in childhood stages. The effects of childhood sexual abuse will leads to stress during the first few years which in turn end up in critical period for brain development. Child sexual abuse is a peculiar problem in that often the people who are expected to protect and nurture the child are involved. This paradox makes it difficult to accept and much easier to blame strangers for the problem. Child sexual abuse is the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities which they do not fully comprehend are unable to give informed consent to and that violate social taboos of family roles.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A study to explore the perception on child sexual abuse among the parents of school children at selected rural area of Puducherry.

OBJECTIVES

- To explore the perception on child sexual abuse among the parents of school children

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach: Qualitative approach was used to explore the perception on child sexual abuse.

Research Design: Phenomenological research design was used.

Research Setting: The study was conducted in the rural village at Puducherry.

Research Population: Parents of school children of age 6 years to 12 years.

Samples: Parents of school children of age 6 years to 12 years who fulfills the inclusion criteria.

Sample size: The sample size is 42.

Sampling techniques: Samples are selected by maximum variation sampling technique after obtaining the consent.

Sampling criteria:

Inclusion criteria:

- Parents of child of age group of 6 to 14 years.
- Parents of both sexes of male and female.
- Guardians of child of age group of 6 to 14 years.
- Parents who speaks and understands Tamil.

Exclusion criteria:

- Parents with very sick children
- Parents who are not willing to participate.

TOOLS AND DESCRIPTIONS

The investigator developed open ended questions on concept of risk, conceptualization, causes, perpetrator description, disclosure, and parent's role in prevention of child sexual abuse which was explored through Focused Group Discussion.

RELIABILITY OF THE TOOL

The triangulation method was used to assess the reliability of the tool. The methods of data collection such as focus group discussion and in-depth interview were used to assess the reliability of the tools. The both methods results in same final codes. Thus the tool is highly reliable.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Prior to the collection of data written permission was obtained from the Institutional Ethical Committee. The selection of sample was based on inclusion criteria. Each individual subject was informed about the purpose of the study. Informed consent was obtained from the sample both orally and in written form. The subject had the freedom to withdraw the study at any time. No physical or psychological harm involved in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data were transcribed coded and analyzed for the results.

Section A: Description of perception of child sexual abuse among the parents of school children.

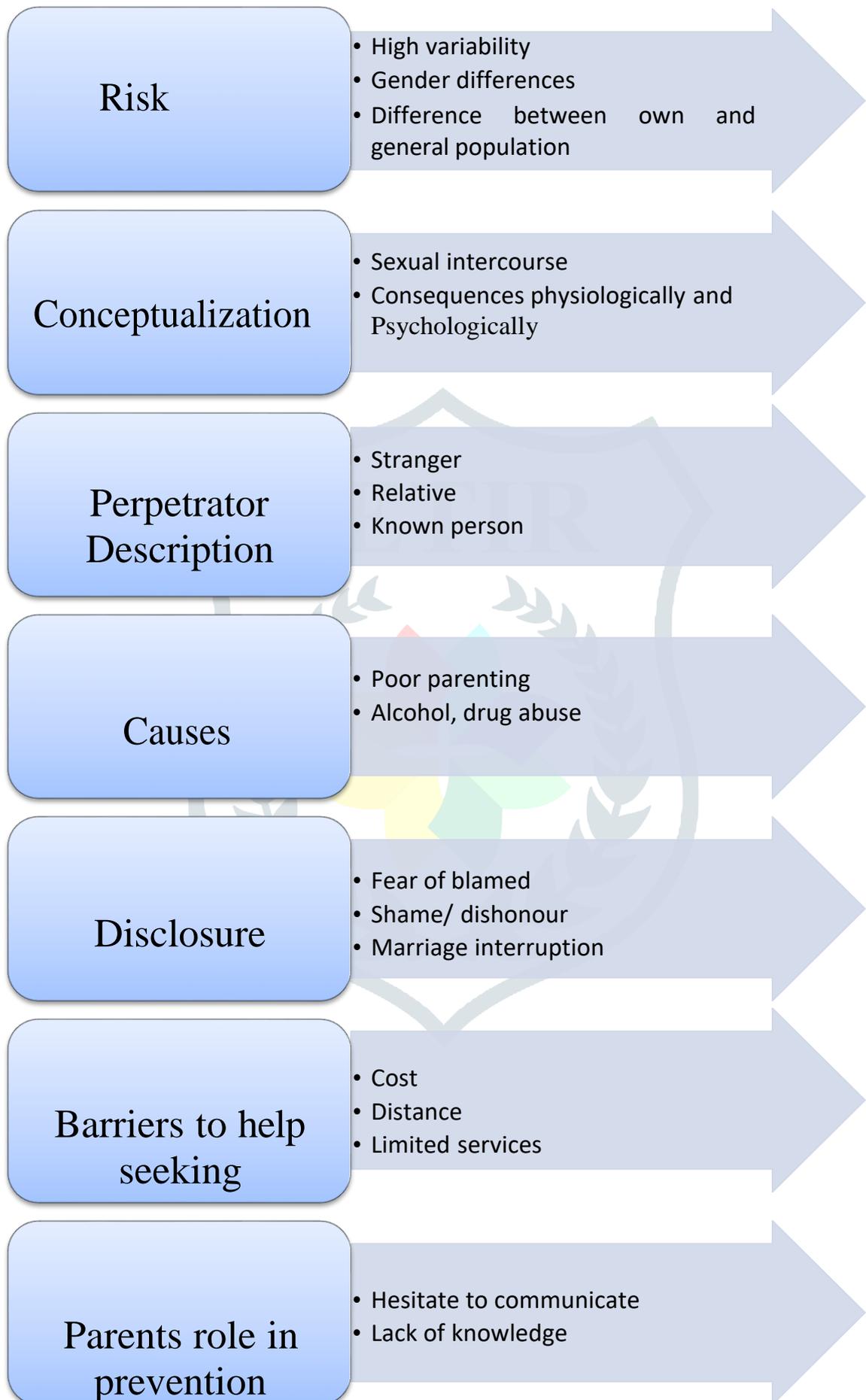
Seven Focus Group Discussions (average of six participants per group; range: 5–7) with a total of 42 parents were conducted till the data saturation. All the participants are recruited through maximum variation sampling.

All the parents ($n = 42$) age ranged from 26 to 41 years. Among all the participants, approximately 36% (15) of participants were fathers, 48% (20) were mothers and 16 % (7) were guardian. Of all the participants, more than half 52% of participants were Hindus, 24% (10) were Christians and 24 % (10) were guardian. Regarding the educational status 26 % (11) of the participants are non formally educated, 26 % (11) of the participants acquired education at primary level, 24 % (10) of the participants acquired education at higher secondary level, and 24 % (10) of the participants are graduates. In concern to the occupational status, 26 % (11) of the participants are unemployed, 26 % (11) of the participants are labours, 24 % (10) of the participants are self employed and, 24 % (10) of the participants are government employees. Labours mainly includes agricultural workers and workers in construction site. Government employees include a nurse, a village health nurse, a social worker, a primary school teacher etc. Self employees include wax business, food industry, coir thread making, small retail shops etc.

Parent's perceptions regarding child sexual abuse were categorized into six domains and

nineteen themes. The identified themes are exemplified with representative quotes. The final coding scheme included major codes such as: Risk, Probability, Victim Description, Beliefs, and Protection.





What is the parent's perception of level of risk of child sexual abuse among general population?

High Variability:

Parents' perceptions of risk in the general population were highly variable.

Despite generally high prevalence estimates, only four parents viewed child sexual abuse as a major risk (Le., overwhelming or immediate threat) facing her child.

Thirty one parents viewed sexual abuse as a moderate risk facing their children (moderate was defined as those who could conceptualize current circumstances in which their children might be at risk).

Seven parents perceived it to be only a slight risk (defined as viewing their child as safe from sexual abuse at this point in time).

“What I am saying means child sexual abuse, that is spoiling the child happens everywhere and it is the major risk in today's life” – (Mother, Primary School Teacher)

“..No no, this won't occur in our society, we won't even hear this type of words.”- (mother, house wife)

Gender Differences:

The quantitative prevalence estimates that parents gave for girls ranged from a low of 1% to a high of 90%, with a mean estimate of 36% and a median of 30%.

The estimates given for boys ranged from 1% to a high of 60 %, with a mean estimate of 25 % and a median of 18%.

“Comparatively girls are at great risk to boys and boys are strong and they cannot be abused” - (father-labour)

Difference between own and General Population:

There was a lack of congruence between parents' perceptions of risk for the general population and their perceptions for their own child.

Although several parents imply that their children are at less risk than other children, four parents stated explicitly that they were concerned about the risk of child sexual abuse for other children, but not for their own.

“Every day many cases are happening and we are reading in the newspaper but we are growing the children safely away from the hazardous people. So our child will not be affected by this type of abuse.”-(Father-Self Employee).

What is the parent's description of child sexual abuse and its impact? Sexual Intercourse:

Overall, participants defined child sexual abuse as sexual intercourse with a child below 18 years of age who has not consented to the act.

They perceived that boys and could be child sexual abused.

However, the majority 88% (37) of the participants were not aware of what really constitutes child sexual abuse and who the perpetrators/survivors are.

“Child sexual abuse is taking the child to some distant places where there is no people and sexually assaulting and sometimes killing and throwing or disposing the dead body somewhere” – (father,labour).

Consequences of Child Sexual Abuse:

Mostly all the participants demonstrated recognition of the short- and long-term consequences of child sexual abuse and cited trauma manifestations such as injuries to the genitalia, including bruises, bleeding or foul-smelling discharges, and acquisition of chronic diseases, such as STIs, HIV/AIDS, fistula and the inability to conceive.

The psychosocial impact of child sexual abuse was perceived to manifest itself as poor performance of children in school, and withdrawal from social interaction.

Who can be perpetrator and how they are treated in society?

Majority of the participants 83 % (35) perceives Child sexual abuse by a stranger, especially the child sexual abuse of a child, was defined as an unacceptable form of violence deserving harsh penalties.

But the child sexual abuse of a child perpetrated by a known person or relative was not normally disclosed to legal authorities as reporting it was seen as putting the family's honour and reputation at stake.

So, when the perpetrator comes from another village or unknown person he will be imprisoned and punished severely. But if he is a relative, like an uncle, cousin or brother, the community peoples are hiding the case.(father –Self employee)

What are the causes of child sexual abuse?

In all the FGDs, almost all the participants expressed deep concerns about poverty and poor parental care that make children vulnerable to several risks including sexual abuse.

Participants across all age groups and of both genders expressed concern that there was poor parental monitoring with regard to girls, especially after they reached puberty when they became more vulnerable to negative peer influences.

This issue was more pronounced when parents would leave their children alone while they tended to the cultivation of their farms.

Some of the parents 29%(12) perceive that when parents recommend girl's use of Western dress – wearing tight, transparent and short clothing – was perceived to arouse men's sexual desire, which will lead to abuse.

Some parents are not concerned about the girls dressing. Girls are wearing miniskirts and it is the reason for the abuse. So girls' clothes are contributing to this (child sexual abuse). (Mother, house wife.)

Alcohol, Drug Abuse:

Approximately half of the participants perceive alcohol and drug abuse as the main cause of abuse.

This (child sexual abuse) is caused by the use of drugs and alcohol ... Old people say they are drinking beer so as to avoid stress, and youth drink beer and smoke marijuana which pushes them to do strange things, not only child sexual abuse, even stealing. (Father, government employee)

Why parents are not disclosing about child sexual abuse?

Majority of the parents 83%(35) perceive that fear of being blamed for both reporting child sexual abuse and the stigmatization of women for the child sexual abuse they experienced was as a powerful hindrance for disclosure of child sexual abuse in this context.

Reporting child sexual abuse and making the act known publicly was perceived to shed shame and dishonor on the family.

As child sexual abuse within marriage was considered to be a private issue and not a crime, it was not likely to be shared with people outside the relationship and was very seldom reported.

If the child sexual abuse victim was unmarried, disclosure would reduce her chances of getting

married.

Women were perceived to suffer the pain and anguish after child sexual abuse in silence, fearing the consequences of disclosure.

When the child gets child sexual abuse, for the mother to disclose such an incident is not easy, it is a shame on her because it's like exposing herself naked in front of society. Sometimes the society expresses views that it was not truly child sexual abuse but the result of negotiations and agreement between the two ... also out of fear that young men would not make them their bride. A man cannot pick a sexual violence survivor as fiancée. (Mother, housewife).

They also perceived that these acts require a response such as reporting the incident to the police or require other complementary services such as health or legal aid.

Child sexual abuse was perceived to be seldom reported due to several barriers that favour the acceptance and non-disclosure of sexual violence.

In general, there are many cases and I can say those which are reported are few compared to those which are happening around, and the big problem is the environments of child sexual abuse normally are very private, one cannot child sexual abuse in an open environment, the environment must favor the thing (child sexual abuse). (FGD, Professionals).

What are the barriers of parents in seeking help in regard to child sexual abuse?

Cost, corruption, distance, limited services, and lack of quality care services were seen by most of the participants as barriers to care-seeking behavior and reporting on sexual violence by survivors.

The police posts and health facilities are scarce and have to cover a wide geographical area and the informants perceived this to be a major hindrance to obtaining care at an appropriate time.

Seeking care was felt to be an additional financial burden as they would need to work extra time in order to meet the expenses of transportation and other services. Informants revealed a sense of frustration with those in the legal sector.

Really to say parents are not aware of the organization or facilities to go for help in this kind of emergency. (Male Guardian).

Cost and corruption are the main constraints for the rural people to approach for help of any organization. (Female Social worker).

What are the parent's role in prevention and management of child sexual abuse?

Across all the FGDs, the participants pleaded for improvement in preventing and managing cases of child sexual abuse at the community level.

Participants conveyed the view that rural communities lack education and this could be a major barrier to seeking justice.

They perceived the need to educate the community across all age and social groups to raise their knowledge on issues pertaining to child sexual abuse, the health consequences, and the importance of seeking care, and the laws that exist to support the survivors or prosecute the perpetrator.

There should be educating sessions for the parents on concept of prevention and management of child sexual abuse such as TV shows, videos, radio messages repeatedly to prevent child sexual abuse.- (mother nurse).

DISCUSSION

The objective of the study was to explore the perception of child sexual abuse among the parents of school children. The following themes has been evolved with the data collection.

THEME 1. RISK

High variability

In this study researcher identified that the Parents' perceptions of risk in the general population were highly variable. Despite generally high prevalence estimates, only four parents viewed child sexual abuse as a major risk as the overwhelming issue facing her child.

Gender differences

In this study it was noticeable that the quantitative prevalence estimates that parents gave for girls ranged from a low of 1% to a high of 90%, with a mean estimate of 36% and a median of 30%. The estimates given for boys ranged from 1% to a high of 60 %, with a mean estimate of 25 % and a median of 18%.

Difference between own gender and general population

In this study it was noticeable that there was a lack of congruence between parents' perceptions of risk for the general population and their perceptions for their own child. Although several parents imply that their children are at less risk than other children, four parents stated explicitly that they were concerned about the risk of child sexual abuse for other children, but not for their own.

The similar study was conducted by **Qian Wen Xie 2015** on the parents' definition of CSA. The results show that parents' definition of CSA included four levels of sexual activities and invoked some additional factors. Parents perceived that CSA risks differed between all children and their own children, between boys and girls, and between poor and non poor children. They insisted that perpetrators were more likely to be familiar rather than strangers. There were some barriers hindering their CSA preventive practice, especially their ability or willingness to discuss CSA with their children.

THEME 2. CONCEPTUALIZATION

Sexual intercourse

In this study Overall, participants defined child sexual abuse as sexual intercourse with a child below 18 years of age who has not consented to the act. They perceived that boys and could be child sexual abused. However, the majority 88% (37) of the participants were not aware of what really constitutes child sexual abuse and who the perpetrators/survivors are.

Consequences physiologically and psychologically In this study the Mostly all the participants demonstrated recognition of the short- and long-term consequences of child sexual abuse and cited trauma manifestations such as injuries to the genitalia, including bruises, bleeding or foul-smelling discharges, and acquisition of chronic diseases, such as STIs, HIV/AIDS, fistula and the inability to conceive. The psychosocial impact of child sexual abuse was perceived to manifest itself as poor performance of children in school, and withdrawal from social interaction.

A similar study conducted by **F.A. Alzoubi, Reem Ahmad Ali, et al., (2017)**, on Mothers' knowledge & perception about child sexual abuse in Jordan. They assessed the mother's knowledge about CSA, their perceptions, knowledge about signs and symptoms of CSA. The findings of the study was Half of the mothers had post-secondary education (49.4%), 36.5% had secondary education. Though only 17% of mothers had started practicing some of the preventive measures. The results show that more than half of mother perceive CSA as a common problem in the Jordanian society. Three quarters (74%) of the mothers indicated that educating children about CSA can prevent it.

THEME 3. PREPETRATOR

Stranger

In this study Majority of the participants 83 % (35) perceives Child sexual abuse by a stranger, especially the child sexual abuse of a child, was defined as an unacceptable form of violence deserving harsh penalties. But the child sexual abuse of a child perpetrated by a known person or relative was not normally disclosed to legal authorities as reporting it was seen as putting the family's honour and reputation at stake.

THEME 4. CAUSES

Poor parenting

In this study it was noticeable in all the FGDs, almost all the participant's expressed deep concerns about poverty and poor parental care that make children vulnerable to several risks including sexual abuse.

Alcohol, drug abuse

Approximately half of the participants perceive alcohol and drug abuse as the main cause of abuse.

A similar study was conducted by **Abeid M 2014** on the Community perceptions of rape and child sexual abuse: a qualitative study in rural Tanzania.

The participants perceived rape of women and children to be a frequent and hidden phenomenon. A number of factors were singled out as contributing to rape, such as erosion of social norms, globalization, and poverty, vulnerability of children, alcohol/drug abuse and poor parental care.

THEME 5. DISCLOSURE

Fear of blamed

Majority of the parents 83%(35) perceive that fear of being blamed for both reporting child sexual abuse and the stigmatization of women for the child sexual abuse they experienced was as a powerful hindrance for disclosure of child sexual abuse in this context.

Shame/ dishonour

In this study Reporting that child sexual abuse and making the act known publicly was perceived to shed shame and dishonor on the family.

Marriage interruption

In this study as child sexual abuse within marriage was considered to be a private issue and not a crime, it was not likely to be shared with people outside the relationship and was very seldom reported. If the child sexual abuse victim was unmarried, disclosure would reduce her chances of getting married.

A similar study was conducted by **Kabwe Chitundu 2018** on the Perception of the Community towards Child Sexual Abuse: A Case of Chawama Lusaka, Zambia .Three themes emerged summarizing the factors associated with non-reporting of child sexual abuse cases which included, fear of family and community breakdown, relationship between the victim and the perpetrator and inadequate service provision by the police which also reflected the community's role in supporting the child.

THEME 6. BARRIERS IN HELP SEEKING

Cost, corruption, distance, limited services, and lack of quality care services were seen by most of the participants as barriers to care-seeking behavior and reporting on sexual violence by survivors. The study findings is consistent with the study of **Felix kisanga 2010** and the study explored perceptions and experiences of key players handling child sexual offense cases in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The informants included public police investigators, magistrates, legal workers, and social workers working with nongovernmental organizations. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Five themes emerged summarizing factors associated with sexual offenses, including community passivity, legal system weaknesses, legal framework inadequacy, and key players' vulnerabilities.

THEME 7. PARENT ROLE IN PREVENTION

Hesitate to communicate

Across all the FGDs, the participants pleaded for improvement in preventing and managing cases of child sexual abuse at the community level. Participants conveyed the view that rural communities lack education and this could be a major barrier to seeking justice.

Lack of knowledge

They perceived the need to educate the community across all age and social groups to raise their knowledge on issues pertaining to child sexual abuse, the health consequences, and the importance of seeking care, and the laws that exist to support the survivors or prosecute the perpetrator.

A similar study was conducted by **Julia Rudolph (2018) and the** findings suggest that parents have a good knowledge of CSA and its risks. However, they do not provide their children with the comprehensive prevention messages recommended by prevention campaigns and many concentrate on abduction dangers. This gap between knowledge and parental communication with children could be due to parents' beliefs that there may be harms associated with education of children about CSA (e.g., such as inciting new fears and worries or reducing trust in others) and that the method may not be effective in protecting children from CSA.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that perception of parents on child sexual abuse is highly variable. Most of the parents perceived the threat to only female children and emphasized that their own children are very safe and away from the threats. In this context, child sexual abuse is the hidden issue and help seeking behavior is very low. Addressing the identified challenges may promote help-seeking behavior.

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