

Research Paper

## Attitude of Mothers Regarding Child Sexual Abuse and their Perspectives on its Prevention in Urban Bengaluru, India: A Qualitative Study

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### ABSTRACT

Sexual abuse of children is a global issue that can have long-term consequences for the child. Between 18% and 50% of Indians are believed to have experienced some form of sexual abuse during their lifetime (Carson et al., 2013). To effectively prevent sexual abuse, it is critical to understand mothers' attitudes and perspectives on prevention. Sexual abuse of children cannot be eradicated without parental involvement. Additionally, the goal of implementation programmes is to ascertain and assess parents' attitudes toward prevention. In this regard, the current study's objective is to better understand mothers' attitudes and perspectives on child sexual abuse prevention. To investigate mothers' attitudes, an exploratory qualitative design was used; eight women living in urban Bengaluru were recruited using a purposive sampling technique. A semi-structured interview was conducted based on two themes that emerged; all data was transcribed verbatim. Braun and Clarke's method of thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The findings of the study indicate all respondents had a positive attitude towards sexual abuse prevention and the need for prevention programs.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Child Sexual Abuse, Prevention, Mothers

**A**dverse childhood experiences can have a substantial and long-lasting effect on children's physical and psychological well-being throughout their lives. Childhood can be defined as the period between the time of conception and the time up to the individual is thirteen years old (Sharma & Gupta, 2004). Not only can a healthy childhood, in which the child is protected from negative childhood experiences, be beneficial to the individual, but it can also have a significant positive impact on the entire community. Child sexual abuse is a serious global issue that affects every country. It is associated with significant psychological consequences, including profound maladaptive outcomes (Choudhry et al., 2018). Sexual abuse of children has been a pernicious menace to society for generations and it exists across all socioeconomic classes. The evidence indicates that a sizable number of sexual abuse cases reported have been committed by a well-known family

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## Attitude of Mothers Regarding Child Sexual Abuse and their Perspectives on its Prevention in Urban Bengaluru, India: A Qualitative Study

member or close friend (Mathoma et al., 2006). As parents are the primary stakeholders in the lives of children, they play a primary role in the prevention of child sexual abuse. Previous review studies conducted on the Knowledge, Attitude and Practices (KAP) of mothers regarding prevention of child sexual abuse have emphasized the role of KAP in prevention. Data gathered through KAP surveys can help to identify the gap in a specific areas (Holman, 2012). 30 percent of the male population in India and 40 percent of the female population have been sexually abused as children. Over half of the abuse occurred before age seven, and more than a quarter occurred before puberty (Iravani, 2011). Another study conducted by Kacker and Kumar in the year 2008 found that the highest number of cases of sexual abuse reported are committed on children between the ages of 5-12 years (Carson et al., 2013). In order to prevent sexual abuse, understanding the attitude of primary stakeholders becomes crucial.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

PubMed, JSTOR, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar were used to conduct a literature review of academic journals, books, and government reports from 1990 to 2021. Search terms used to find studies for the review included "adverse childhood experiences," "sexual abuse," "mothers," and "prevention." The following are a few literature reviews that were used to identify the study's research gap. Codes and themes were also developed based on the review of literature.

- Firoozabadi (2020), conducted a study titled 'The past victim, the future abuser'. The research was carried out by looking through the files of 3694 patients who had been referred to the outpatient private clinic. The aim of the study was to gather information in order to answer questions about abuse, victimisation, substance abuse, and the percentage of patients who were involved in abusive behaviour as adults. The findings of the study indicate that adults who were abused as children were more likely to engage in abusive behaviour and victimisation as adults. The author also points out that mental health professionals and policymakers who address this issue can help create a more peaceful society and prevent intergenerational abuse.
- The majority of studies have concluded that child sexual abuse can be prevented by educating not only children but also parents and teachers (Macintyre and Carr, 2000). Currently the research available in India has been towards understanding Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) and programs targeted towards children. Studies have affirmed that there is a need to have parents involved in the prevention of child sexual abuse (Jacob and Kumar, 2018).
- Kaushik and Daniel (2017) conducted a study titled 'Knowledge and attitude of mothers regarding prevention of child sexual abuse in a selected community of New Delhi'. The study assessed the knowledge of mothers regarding prevention of child sexual abuse and assessed the attitude of mothers regarding prevention of child sexual abuse and prepared a booklet to disseminate information on the prevention of child sexual abuse. 50 mothers were determined by convenient sampling technique. The study revealed that most of the mothers (90%) had inadequate knowledge regarding child sexual abuse. However, majority of them, i.e., 90% showed favorable attitude towards prevention of child sexual abuse.
- Mendelson and Letourneau (2015) 'Parent-focused prevention of child sexual abuse' proposed the involvement of parents of young children through effective communication and monitoring. The study highlights the current strategies for reducing CSA prevalence and their limitations, presents a rationale for parent-

## Attitude of Mothers Regarding Child Sexual Abuse and their Perspectives on its Prevention in Urban Bengaluru, India: A Qualitative Study

focused CSA prevention, and discusses considerations pertinent to development of an effective parent-focused approach.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The current study employed an exploratory qualitative research design to help understand the attitude of mothers in the area of child sexual abuse prevention.

#### *Sampling Technique*

The sample included eight women living in urban Bengaluru, India. The women were identified using a purposive sampling technique. According to Mason, data saturation should be used as a guiding principle when determining the size of the sample. The saturation of the data was used to determine the size of the sample. The inclusion criteria had mothers having children between the ages of 5-11 years. Mothers who were able to read, write and communicate in English and willing to participate in the research and mothers of children living in urban Bengaluru.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The recent review of literature on attitude of mothers towards and their perspectives of child sexual abuse served as the basis for the development of themes. Probes were developed based on the two themes. A feedback session on google meet was used to solicit input from various experts in the field of child sexual abuse, including a psychologist, academician, and gynaecologist for external validity. Following the meeting with the experts, questions for the semi-structured interview were drafted. The semi-structured interview was conducted with eight mothers in order to determine their attitude about child sexual abuse their perspectives on prevention. The interviews were recorded and transcribed after they were completed. Nvivo software was used for analysis. Following the interview, the data was analysed using the thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke.

#### *Ethical considerations*

The participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the study. They were informed that they can choose to withdraw from the study at any point of time and participation in the study was voluntary and their identifying information will be kept confidential. The data will be utilized only for the purpose of research only. Codes were given to each of the interviews. It was informed that there would be no monetary benefit to participation. The mothers were asked to complete the informed consent form. If during the course of the program the mothers reported psychological distress, a referred to mental health professional was given. The data shared by the respondents would be kept confidential. Personal information will be used for research purposes only.

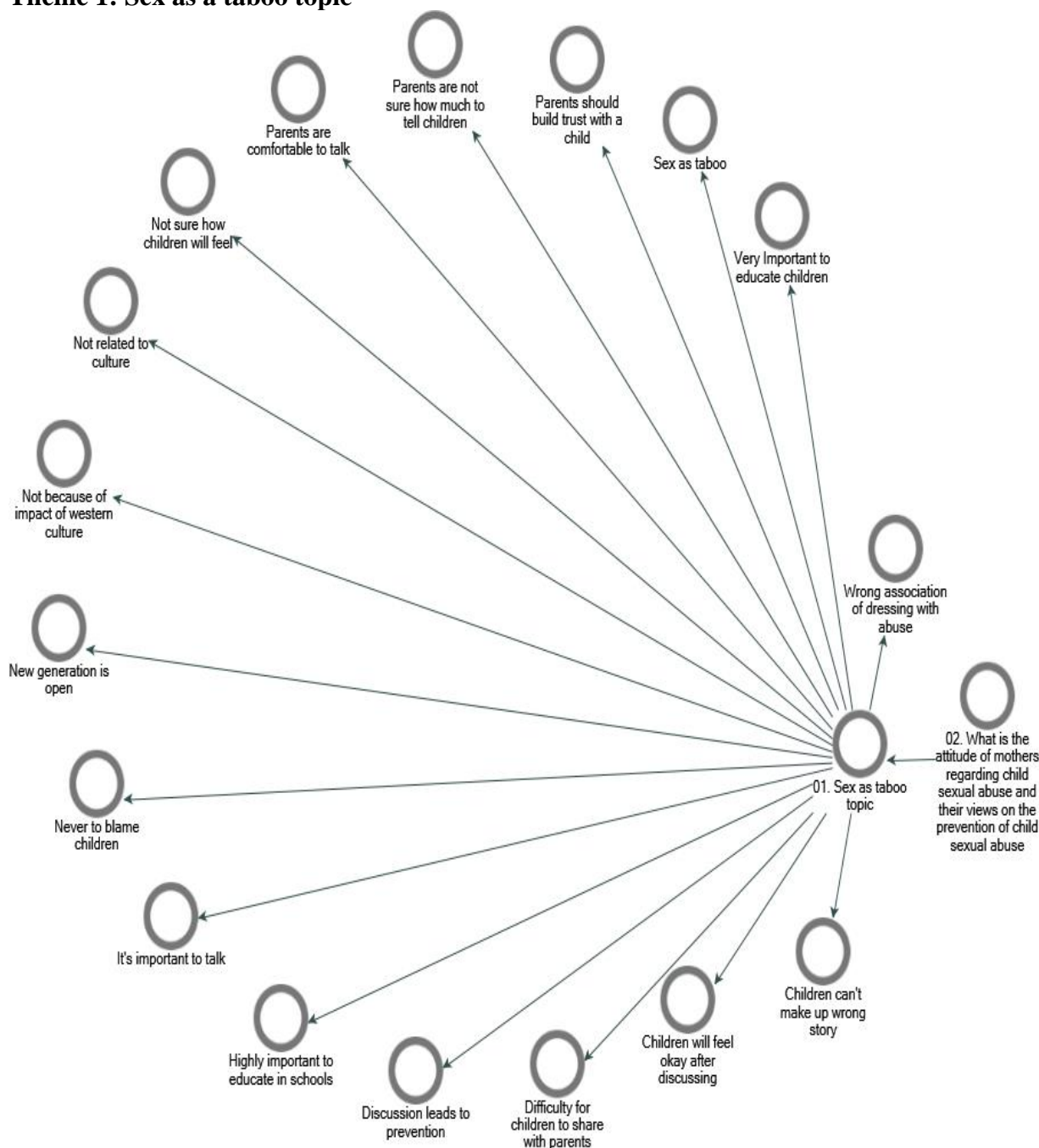
### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The findings were interpreted in the framework of interpretivism and constructivism to better understand the mother's attitude regarding child sexual abuse and how she can prevent it. An analysis of the respondent's views on the role of attitude of mothers towards prevention child sexual abuse comprise two themes, namely:

1. Sex as a taboo topic
2. Early exposure to sex. Based on the interview of the mothers. Initial codes were developed.

## Attitude of Mothers Regarding Child Sexual Abuse and their Perspectives on its Prevention in Urban Bengaluru, India: A Qualitative Study

### Theme 1: Sex as a taboo topic



**Figure 1: Representation of the 1<sup>st</sup> theme with codes**

#### **New generation is open**

This is the first code that has emerged under the theme of sex as a topic, and it is about the current generation being more open to talking about sex than the previous generations. ‘Maybe this generation is like quite open about it and talking about it, but still, I’m not so comfortable to talk in my own house or to my friend or my parents about sex’. As M1 pointed out, the current generation is very open to discussing sex, but she, as a mother, has found it difficult to bring up the subject with her own children, a family member, or a friend. Some respondents believed that the current generation is more open to discussing sex even though it is a taboo topic.

## Attitude of Mothers Regarding Child Sexual Abuse and their Perspectives on its Prevention in Urban Bengaluru, India: A Qualitative Study

### Discussion about sexual abuse could lead to prevention

M6 felt that the more discussions one has at home with their children, the more likely they are to report abuse. *"You're supposed to be more open, you're supposed to talk about it, so children are comfortable talking to you about it"*. M1 responded saying she has spoken to her children about sexual abuse *"If someone touched you inappropriately, you must come and tell mama or your teacher about it"*. M4 also responded saying *"It is very important to talk about sexual abuse as it could lead to prevention"*

### Important to educate children on sexual abuse in schools

M1 emphasized the importance of having the school involved in sex education. M2 and M6, also discussed the role of schools in prevention of child sexual abuse. M1 responded saying *"Very important. Very, very, very important for schools to be involved in imparting education of sexual abuse. You never know. Maybe your child goes out to a school. Also, might we think it's safe, right? But it is not like it is really, the child could also be sexually abuse in a school"*.

### Parents should build trust with the child

M3 responded by saying if children are trusted and parents listen to them. They are more likely to feel safe to talk about sexual abuse to the parent. *"At first point, we need to build the trust in the child that we believe them. Listen to them"*. The other respondents also felt that trust was and communication was a crucial factor for children to report sexual abuse.

### Parents are not sure how much to tell children

Most mothers felt that they were not clear about how much information about sex or sexual abuse must be revealed to the child. M1 responded by saying *"I think now that my daughter is five, I'm ok to talk about it but I don't know how much information is too much"*.

### Clothes have nothing to do with sexual abuse

Most mothers felt sexual abuse has nothing to do with how the child dresses. M1 responded by saying *"Children can be abused irrespective of what they wear"*.

### Western culture

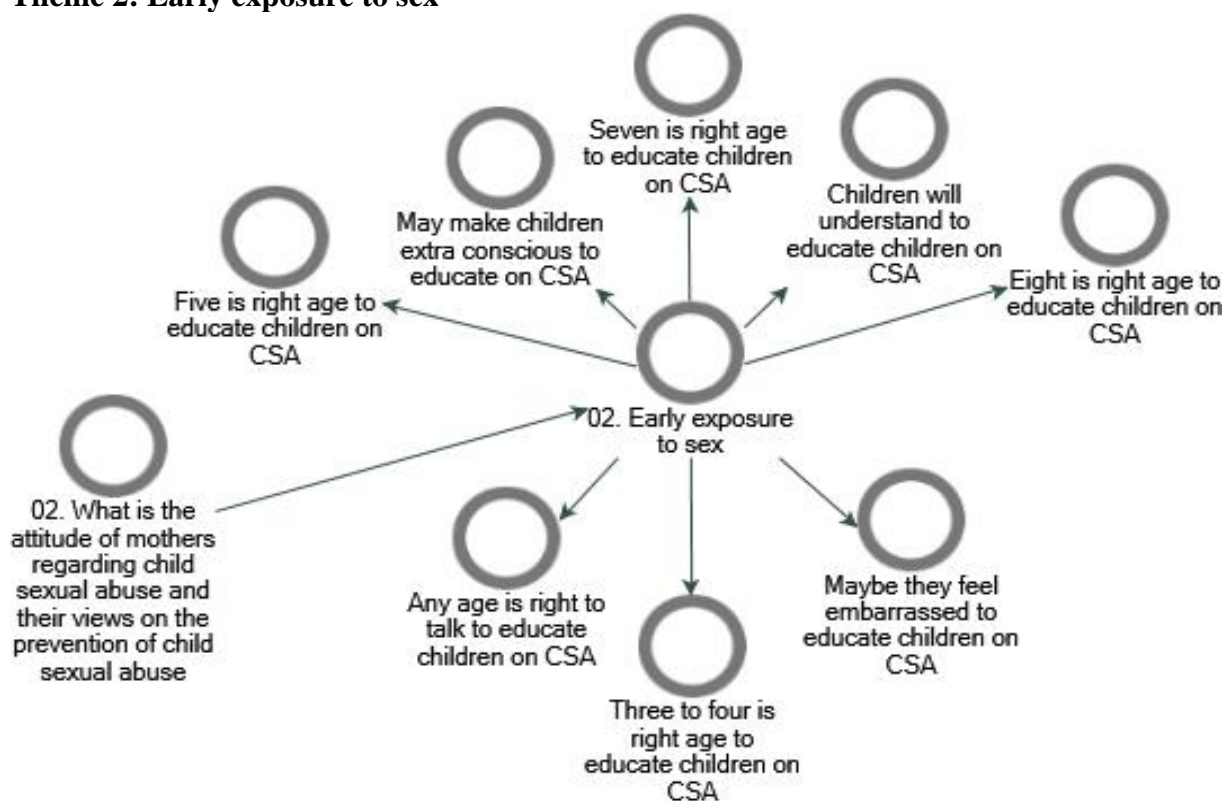
All mothers responded saying western culture has nothing to do with sexual abuse. M6 responded with *"You think people are abusing more because of western culture influence, it does not matter what culture you belong to, people will abuse anyway"*. A few respondents argued that sexual abuse happens across cultures. They narrated examples about abuse happening everywhere, culture had no role to play in rather it was the deviant and perverted mind of the perpetrator.

### To never place blame on children

Most respondents felt that children must not be blamed for sexual abuse. M5 responded saying *"No, no. I don't think children can be blamed but yeah, some people might blame children"*. M8 responded saying *"Children cannot make up stories on sexual abuse but it's better to scrutinize what happened exactly"*.

**Attitude of Mothers Regarding Child Sexual Abuse and their Perspectives on its Prevention in Urban Bengaluru, India: A Qualitative Study**

**Theme 2: Early exposure to sex**



**Figure 2: Representation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> theme with codes**

**Appropriate age to discuss sexual abuse with the child**

The second theme that emerged was early exposure to sex. The majority of mothers who participated in the research expressed concern about not knowing the appropriate age at which to discuss sexual abuse with their children. A few mothers expressed their own discomfort and the discomfort of their children while talking about sexual abuse. M7 responded saying “My child feels embarrassed and uncomfortable when I talk about sexual abuse”. M8 responded saying “*I think six is the right age to talk about sexual abuse with children*”, M4 responded saying “*Seven is the right age*”, M4 responded saying “*When my son was three and four, I slowly started talking to him about sexual abuse*”. M1 responded saying “*Five is when I told my daughter about good touch and bad touch*”. M2 argued saying “*Age is just a number, sexual abuse can be spoken to children at any age*”, M3 suggested “*I think they have the capacity to understand it*”, M2 suggested “*Children will lose their innocence when spoken about sexual abuse*”

Almost all of the eight mothers who took part in the study expressed a positive attitude toward prevention of child sexual abuse, particularly in terms of not blaming children for the abuse, discussion of sexual abuse leading to prevention, and schools playing an important role in educating children about sexual abuse. In a study by Melkwa, parents with a positive attitude towards prevention had a greater role to play in prevention of child sexual abuse. (Pahantasingh et al., 2020).

**Limitations**

The study only looked at educated mothers in Bengaluru. Men can be included in future studies, as fathers are also the primary stakeholders in prevention of child sexual abuse.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, it can be concluded from the study that attitudes toward child sexual abuse are extremely important in the prevention of sexual abuse. Furthermore, education programs can be developed to empower mothers when it comes to talking to their children about sexual abuse. Further research into child sexual abuse is required, with a particular emphasis on its prevention.

## Recommendations

The involvement of primary stakeholders, particularly mothers, is critical in the prevention of child sexual abuse. The respondents also highlighted the involvement of the schools and the community at large to be involved in the prevention of child sexual abuse. Having a favorable attitude towards sex education and not treating sexual abuse as a taboo topic can also play a vital role and creating safe spaces for children to talk about sex abuse, if it were to occur. The respondents also emphasized that the newer generation of children are curious and are more receptive to learning. Therefore, it is crucial for prevention programs to address topics on sexual abuse in schools and mothers to be empowered on knowledge about sexual abuse.

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**Attitude of Mothers Regarding Child Sexual Abuse and their Perspectives on its Prevention in Urban Bengaluru, India: A Qualitative Study**

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***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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