

## Personal Safety Education: A training Module for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse Among Primary Level Girl Children

*Angel Thomas*

Senior Clinical Psychologist, Mar Sleeva Medicity, Palai

*Immanuel Thomas*

Professor (Rtd), Department of Psychology, University of Kerala

### ABSTRACT

Teaching girl children about the ways to avoid childhood sexual abuse can be accomplished successfully in school setting. Personal Safety Education module is a school-based psycho educational programme developed for use in Kerala Culture among primary level girl children. It aims to instruct them on various aspects of personal safety like, body ownership, knowledge about private parts of one's body, sexually abusive situations, attending to the biological alarm while encountering abusive situations, skills related to sexual abuse prevention, and awareness about disclosure and disclosure options. The article intended to familiarize the readers with the nature of the content and the method of implementation of the training programme, which are expected to be helpful for researchers who intend to take up similar programmes in the future.

**Keywords:** Childhood Sexual Abuse, Sexual Abuse Prevention, Personal Safety Education

This article aims to teach about a psycho education school-based training in order to instruct the primary level girl children about Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) prevention. To secure this goal, the article discusses about the need for CSA prevention, goals and content of the present module, the process of training, its outcomes and suggestions for future group work. Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) has been identified as a significant public health issue due to the human suffering involved in child sexual abuse, which included short term and long-term problems experienced by the victims (Rosenberg & Fenley, 1991). The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 years of age have experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence involving physical contact (WHO, 1999). Therefore, CSA prevention has been listed as a priority concern in the western world.

Child directed abuse prevention programmes have been widely adopted by schools in the western world (Tutty, 1997). They have developed their own primary intervention programmes which focus children, parents as well as community as a whole. Jones and Finkelhor (2009) reported that in US, there is a remarkable decline of investigated cases of CSA by child protection services from 1990 through 2007. Similar findings were reported in Canada (Collin-Vezina, Helie & Trocme, 2010) and Australia (Dunne et al., 2003).

According to the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt of India (2007) among the 12,447 children from 13 states of the country found that 53.22% of respondents reported have faced one or more forms of sexual abuses that included severe and other forms. Family is the place where children spend a substantial portion of their leisure time and acquire basic social skills, attitude, and value systems. It is the ideal venue where fundamentals of sexual education can be given to them. But in the Indian scenario, many of the parents hesitate to speak with their children about sexuality. Very often, children do not even realize that they were being abused. Therefore, all forms of sexual abuse that a child faced are not reported to anyone. Also culture specific familial patterns resulted in the creation of a psychological silence among the girl children in their early years of development in the family. The lack of awareness regarding different forms of child abuse and the safety measures available to them prevented girl children from effective self-protection. This indicates that imparting appropriate sex education at early age may be helpful in reducing instances of CSA to some extent.

Currently personal safety education is not included in the academic curriculum in Kerala. Adolescence education and sex education programs are included in the curriculum only at high school and higher secondary levels. This raises serious concern regarding the efficacy of these programmes in empowering the target group, viz., children in their vulnerable period. According to the Ministry of Women and Child development (2007), one or more forms of CSA start mostly at the age of 5 and the vulnerability is highest during 12 to 15 years. This demands our committed effort to create better awareness and confidence among girl children, starting from an early age.

Primary intervention strategy is aimed at creating awareness regarding various forms of child sexual abuse and imparting self-protection skills which can help children escape from sexual exploitation

by adults. A number of programs have reported positive effects resulting from increased awareness (e.g., Finkelhor, Asdigian & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995). In some cases, participants of school-based prevention programs have reported that they could employ strategies which were taught at the programmes (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995). This motivated us to develop a personal safety module for girl children in primary levels which are suitable in the Kerala Culture.

Based on the review of related literature, the focus of school-based CSA prevention is to alter the knowledge and skills of children through group-based instruction on personal safety (Wurtele, 2002). These programs aim to educate and empower children to protect themselves from sexual abuse, avoid unsafe situations and report an unsafe situation to a trusted adult. Prevention programs also aim to improve awareness of parents and community and teach adults skills for protecting children (Sanderson, 2004). The programs generally include skills that could be utilized in the instances of inappropriate sexual advances and encourage children to report past, current or future occurrences of sexual abuse (Kenny et al., 2008). It also tries to educate students about the inappropriate and illegal behaviors of child sexual abusers (Anderson et al., 2004).

The prevention program delivered in class room settings are based on the assumption that children will be able to protect themselves from sexual abuse, if they are taught to recognize instances of abuse and are trained in personal safety skills. It also focused on helping children who were victims of past or ongoing sexual abuse, by encouraging them to disclose these incidents to parents or to other responsible adults (United States General Accounting Office, 1996).

According to Wurtele (2008), the most child-focused programs have three common objectives. They are: a) helping children to recognize potentially abusive situations or potential perpetrators; b) teaching children to try to resist by saying 'no' and removing themselves from the potential perpetrator; and c) encouraging children to report previous or ongoing abuse to an authority figure (Kenny & Wurtele, 2010). These programmes aim to transfer the knowledge and self-protective behaviors learnt by the child in the classroom to real-life situations (Zwi et al., 2007). The prevention programmes also emphasized the fact that abuse is never the child's fault (Wurtele,

2002). So, children are taught not to blame themselves in the event of an occurrence of sexual abuse (Finkelhor & Dziuba- Leatherman 1995).

The prevention programmes further aim at enhancing children's assertiveness (MacIntyre & Carr, 1999). Studies conducted among offenders reported that they target children who they perceive as more compliant and less likely to disclose (Budin & Johnson, 1989). This meant that enhancing children's assertiveness is one of the best ways of preventing sexual abuse (Budin & Johnson, 1989, Conte, Wolfe & Smith 1989; Elliot, Browne & Kilcoyne, 1995). Summarizing the general nature of school-based CSA prevention strategies, it may be noted that they aim to empower children to recognize potentially abusive situations, and teach them strategies such as saying "NO" or yelling and encouraging children to disclose the abuse to a trusted adult (Wurtele & Miller- Perrin, 1992).

There are many advantages of school-based prevention programmes. They are able to reach a significant number of children of every racial, ethnic and socio economic group in a relatively cost-efficient fashion (Renk et al., 2002; Wurtele, 2002). Classrooms provide an opportunity to facilitate discussion and reflections about the programme content which may enhance its effectiveness (Linney, 1989). These well-arranged programs are easy in terms of implementation, which requires little training for teachers/counsellors (Trudell & Whatley, 1988). If successful, this approach will be cost-effective and often beneficial intervention for the individual participants (Daro, 1994). Therefore, a school based personal safety enhancement module is being developed.

### The Intervention Module

Objectives of developing the intervention module

- 1) Helping children to recognize potentially abusive situations or potential perpetrators;
- 2) Teaching children to try to resist by saying 'NO' and removing themselves from the potential perpetrator; and
- 3) Encouraging children to report previous or ongoing abuse to an authority figure (Kenny & Wurtele, 2010)

Taking into consideration the primary objective of developing a school-based intervention programme for empowering girl children against sexual abuse, the investigator felt that the most feasible strategy is to focus on three different determinants of behaviour, viz.,

- 1) Knowledge base (awareness),

2) Attitudes, and

3) Habit patterns

Accordingly, it was decided to develop a multimodal training programme incorporating all these three ingredients.

### Why Girl Children?

According to WHO guidelines for medico-legal care for victims of sexual violence (2003), the key determinants for victimization are female sex; unaccompanied children; children of foster care; adopted children; stepchildren; physically or mentally handicapped children; history of past abuse; poverty; war or armed conflict; psychological or cognitive vulnerability; single parent homes or broken homes; social isolation; and parent with mental illness or alcohol or drug dependency.

All these determinants of victimization couldn't be addressed in a single study. The interest generated based on clinical experience and the increase in the number of girls as victims led me to think beyond the protection approach and therefore, I selected girl children particularly for this study.

### Issues of cultural compatibility

Gender related topics are highly culture specific. Each culture has its own traditions and value systems. An educational programme on gender specific topics developed in one culture may not be suitable in another culture. For example, the method used for sex education in the western culture may not be acceptable in the Indian culture. In view of these facts, the development of a training programme for empowering girl children, suited for our culture was challenging.

While developing the content of the module, the investigator took note of the following:

- The prevailing social structure in Kerala gives a lot of importance for family relationships, especially those between children and parents.
- Openness with parents is promoted as a virtue and a sign of healthy development.
- In contrast with the Western culture which emphasize individual freedom and personal growth, the Indian culture gives more emphasis to family relationships.
- In view of these considerations, the researcher took care to incorporate contents in the

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modules, suitable for empowering girl children, and at the same time, compatible with the extant culture.

Guiding principles in the development of the module

The following served as the guiding principles while developing the intervention module.

- Uphold the Child Rights
- Emphasize the ‘Right to Protection’ of the child
- Incorporate the measures to teach assertiveness among girl children
- Help children come out of the psychological silence created within some families towards the child sexual abuse, where it occurs

The investigator also took special care to correct certain erroneous and stereotypical parental attitudes and practices related to Child Sexual Abuse, viz.,

- Keep silence about sexual abuse
- Promoting unconditional obedience to elders
- Blame the victim for victimization
- The belief that offenders are always strangers
- Parental belief that relatives and friends will always behave nicely to one’s child
- Reporting incidences of CSA is shameful for the family
- Girl’s future will be affected, if CSA has been reported

Structure of each session

Altogether 9 lessons were planned. One hour was allotted to each session. Each session was again subdivided. First five minutes for the review of last week session. Thirty minutes for teaching the concept and twenty-five minutes for the concept-based activity or discussion/ demonstration of the teaching aids of the module. Maximum number of students in each group was fixed as 60.

Content details and process of training

The objective of the programme was to teach children regarding personal safety against sexual abuse. The content presented in each session is as follows:

1. Safety and prevention

Children were taught about safe and unsafe situations. The researcher led a discussion on various safe and unsafe situations (for e.g., safe and unsafe situations with in home environment and outside home, while travelling etc.). The discussion also focused on various protection/prevention strategies from these unsafe situations. Traffic rules were given as an example to understand the concept of prevention strategies. The safety rule was reinforced in children through a role play.

2. Ownership of body and body parts

Children were asked about the ownership of their body. Most children felt that either God or their Parents are the owners of their body. The first part of this session focused on establishing proper knowledge about the ownership of their body. An example was given to children about the ownership of a pencil box bought from a shop by a child's parent and given to the child. Students were asked to identify that whether the owner of that pencil box is owner of the shop, parent or child? Based on their answer, the researcher elaborated the concept of ownership. So, the children realize that they are the owners of their own body.

The second part of the session focused on naming the body parts, especially private body parts. An activity was given to label the names of body parts in the outline of the body presented to the children. After that, charts on which body parts are correctly marked were shown to the children and if required, corrections were made to what they marked. Later the outline of a boy and girl in bathing suits were presented to the children. The idea that the parts of their body covered by bathing suit are considered as private parts of their body was taught to the students.

3. Safe-confusing-unsafe continuum

The aim of this session was to teach students to differentiate between safe-confusing and unsafe nature of various situations. The concept was introduced with the help of traffic signal. The colours used in the traffic signal viz., green, yellow and red and their meaning were discussed. Later green, yellow and red were matched with safe, confusing and unsafe situations respectively. Various situations in the above three levels were given to the participants and were asked to label each

situation with the corresponding colour.

#### 4. Threats towards personal safety

Children were asked to explain how offenders exploit child's personal safety. Children gave some examples during the discussion. These examples were pooled and the researcher classified these into 4 groups viz., touch, words/comments, look and pictures /videos. The concept of safe, confusing and unsafe continuum was integrated into this session. Discussion focused on the concept that the above four classifications have 3 zones- a safe, confusing and unsafe zones (for example, all touches are not safe, but some are confusing and some others are safe). Same is the case with other categories also.

Later part of the session included the threats and offers used by the offender during the exploitation, to keep the victim silent. While 'if you talk about this to your mother, I will kill your mother', is an example for threat, 'if you don't tell this to your parents, I will give you a smart phone' is an example for offer provided by the offender.

#### 5. Touches against safety

This session introduced the topic touches and how they made us feel. It aimed to teach children to differentiate various types of touches: the safe, confusing, and unsafe touches. Children were divided into small groups and a group activity is given to them. Each group was asked to give examples from their daily life for: a) safe touch, b) confusing touch, and c) unsafe touch. Later, representative from each group summarized their examples and the researcher moderated the discussion. Then, they were given with the same act for Hug and Kiss at three different situations, and were asked to label each situation with green, yellow and red. This exercise was given to explain a message that it was not the act but the intention behind each act (hug and kiss) was very important while distinguishing between safe, confusing and unsafe touches.

#### 6. Biological alarm

This session aimed at teaching children about personal space and to identify inner alert or biological alarm while encountering a 'danger' situation. For this purpose, the concept of physical boundary was introduced with examples such as compound wall for our school, home etc. Like the physical

boundaries, everyone has personal space or boundary. It was followed by an experience sharing, by students who witnessed accidents. They were asked to share their physical changes, while they witnessed the accident. Children described the physical changes such as increased heart rate, breath rate, sweating, numbness etc. This experience sharing was followed by a demonstration of crossing the personal space of a friend or a known person. Children reported that they felt uncomfortable and they experienced physical changes such as increase in heart and breath rates, sweating etc. Then, the researcher linked all these concepts together. When one crossed the personal space-even if it is a very close relative or friend, your body informs you through those physiological changes that you are in danger. Therefore, the session emphasized the student to be alert on their own physical changes, when one crosses the personal space.

#### 7. Be assertive

This session taught assertive behaviour to children to prevent themselves from unsafe situations. In this session, the researcher explained the touch rules to children which included a) an older person should not touch your private body parts except to keep you clean and healthy, and b) do not keep secrets about touches. Then, the researcher gave explanations for the touch rules, which included, if someone did touch and you experienced a biological alert, trust on your inner feeling and react in an assertive manner. Researcher reviewed the children about various ways to say “NO” and practice trials were given to them to say “NO” in an assertive manner.

#### 8. Disclosure: No more secrets

This session focused on disclosure and disclosure options. Before going into details of disclosure, the researcher reminded the concepts such as unsafe touch, biological alert and assertive responses and integrated in the following manner: once you are in an unsafe situation, your body makes you alert and you have the right to respond in an assertive manner. After these you cannot ensure your safety, so you should report this instance to a trusted adult- the one who ensure child’s safety. This is followed by identifying the options for trusted adult. It can be a parent or parents, teacher, police officer, psychologist, social worker, district child welfare committees, child lines etc. The Toll- free number of the Childline was also given to the children, i.e., 1098. In order to remember this number, children were asked to rehearse the number in the following manner- Ten, Nine, and Eight.

9. Avoid self-blame- if abused

This session was included based on an assumption that some children in the group have already become victims of CSA. This session aimed to make them realize that sexual abuse is not their fault and it is the fault of the grown-up person.

## CONCLUSION

After finishing the nine sessions, all the participants were evaluated to know whether there was any change in the knowledge, attitude and knowledge of prevention skills. The data were subjected to statistical analysis and results indicated that there was a significant change in all the variables. The report of the study will be published separately.

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