

Child sex abuse **not rare** in city, says **NGO**

DISTURBING TRUTHS Activists find most offenders are not strangers to the victims

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MUMBAI: Workshops conducted in two private schools in the city to spread awareness about child sexual abuse revealed that at least 5 per cent students had been victims of sexual abuse while 11 per cent had experienced "inappropriate behaviour or touches".

"It was very disturbing to find this was happening to some of my students," said the principal of one of the schools requesting anonymity.

"When the children made these revelations, the first step we took was to inform the parents," said Pooja Taparia, founder and CEO of Arpan, an NGO that works towards curbing child sexual abuse. "We had to ensure that immediate action was taken and the children were taken away from the perpetrators."

In cases where the child seemed too disturbed or unable to cope with the problem, Arpan sought help from child counsellors.

The workshops were conducted last year as part of Arpan's Personal Safety Education programme. The statistics, according to activists, reveal that cases such as that of the 12-year-old girl in Sakinaka who was allegedly raped by a cousin and neighbours for two years are not isolated.

Arpan found that in 46 per cent of the cases they have handled in their four years of existence, the offenders were

immediate family or relatives. 53 per cent were known to the family, (friends, neighbours, watchmen,) while only 1 per cent were strangers.

Legal action was largely avoided. In one case, the father of a victim moved out of his joint-family residence as a family member was molesting his sons. In two cases, where the fathers were abusing the children, the mothers filed for divorce as their parents agreed to support them.

In another case, where a man

was abusing his daughter, Tapariya said, he saw it as sexual gratification and not as a negative act. The child's mother had approached Arpan. "The father is still in counselling and feels terrible now that he has realised the impact it has had on his daughter," Tapariya added.

(The names of the two schools have been withheld to maintain anonymity)

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A SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

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POOJA TAPARIA, founder and CEO of Arpan



ILLUSTRATION: JISHU

STATE STATISTICS

RANKED

2nd

According to the Maharashtra Economic Survey (2009-2010), the state ranks second in crimes against children in the country after Madhya Pradesh.

CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN

2,709

CASES registered in 2008

2,702

CASES registered in 2007

RAPE OF MINOR GIRLS

128

CASES registered in 2009

147

CASES registered in 2008
According to city police statistics

ABUSE SYMPTOMS

How to recognise that a child has been sexually abused:

- Social withdrawal
- Eating disorders, anxiety or depression
- Repeated urinary infections
- Hostility or aggression
- Unexplained pain or swelling in genital area
- Passive or overly pleasing behaviour
- Hints, indirect comments about the abuse
- Drop in academic performance



SAFE TOUCHES

- Anything that makes us feel good and leaves us happy and comfortable.
- Holding hands with friends, sharing meals, warm hug from loving parents.

UNSAFE TOUCHES

- Anything that makes us feel unsafe, confused and leaves us uneasy, excited or uncomfortable.
- Touches involving our private parts, touches that are told to be kept secret.

Personal Safety Education

Arpan hopes that its Personal Safety Education (PSE) programme will help make children, parents and teachers more vigilant and reduce child sexual abuse. In the programme's six sessions, children learn the distinction between 'safe' and 'unsafe' touches, how to say 'no' and whom to run to for help. So far, the programme has been piloted in two Mumbai schools for Class 1 to Class 7 students. "Initially parents were hesitant to expose their children to this programme. But at the programme's final round-up meeting, most were grateful," said the principal of one of the schools.

Arpan also conducts sessions with parents to help them identify signs of abuse and teach them how to deal with such situations. "The sessions helped my children talk to us," said a parent of a Class 5 student in the feedback form.

The NGO conducted a survey among 111 parents who attended the PSE programme and found that 84 per cent had a better understanding of child sexual abuse.

Arpan hopes to approach more schools. "Our sole aim is to empower children with the skills to ward off any form of abuse," said Taparia.