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Scarred & scared at home

20 per cent of 352 primary schoolchildren from a reputable Mumbai school have faced sexual abuse at home, reveals survey. Parents preferred to remain silent

Alifiya Khan
Mumbai, April 5

THE COMFORT of home and family has failed to offer them a safe abode. Far from it, its mention evokes horror in their innocent minds. Behind that much-touted veil of Indian family values, children are being subjected to the vicious trauma of sex abuse and finally there is proof of it.

A survey in a well-known Mumbai school, catering to the upwardly mobile, shows that one in every five children between the first and fourth standards (age between six and 10), to have faced some form of sexual abuse at home over the past five years.

None of the children made any formal complaint. Often, they are hardly aware of what comprises sex abuse. They confided to counsellors only after prolonged and multiple counselling sessions.

Stories of incest and abuse pouring from across the country, especially after the case of two sisters from Mira Road who were allegedly subjected to sexual assault by their parents and an astrologer, suddenly do not seem so rare or surprising.

Even mothers were found guilty of sexually abusing their young sons, revealed the survey conducted by Arpan, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the city working in the field of child sex abuse.

Beyond denials, the findings match global studies, which have always indicated that the person involved in the crime is almost always one known to the child.

The need to intervene and help these children is felt more in the society and NGOs are planning to start programmes in schools. From this month, Arpan will roll out a school education programme for parents, teachers and students on recognising and preventing the crime.

"Initially, we will target 3,500 children. The programme is intensive and we cannot possibly carry out interventions



ILLUSTRATION: JISHU

ADVICE TO PARENTS

- Teach children to distinguish between a safe touch and one with sexual overtone
- Enable them to talk about sex in a comfortable manner
- Trust children when they report an incident of sex abuse, and immediately investigate
- Assure the child that it is not his/her fault

in more cases with existing teams," said Arpan's founder and Chief Executive Officer Pooja Taparia. "The challenge is to resolve cases after identification. In most cases, even after abuse is reported, caregivers live in denial or don't take action as they don't want

“ Unless it is rape or attempt to rape, parents don't want to create a scene with the offenders, as they are usually relatives... ”
—PUSHPA VENKATRAMAN, counsellor who works with sex abuse victims

to upset the family balance.” Childline India Foundation will also launch a programme from this month in over 40 schools on awareness for parents and children in association with the Parent-Teachers' Association United Forum. “Caregivers, teachers need to be sensitised on the long-term harms of such abuse and children need to be taught effective means of getting help,” said Nishit Kumar, head of communication and strategic initiatives, Childline.

Experts said that it was more difficult to persuade parents to intervene and take a strong stand in cases of sex abuse by a person known to them, and protect their kin. “Most victims try communi-

cating to their trusted ones about it. But often they are put off by lack of interest shown by parents,” said Kumar.

Counsellors who have been working with victims of child sexual abuse agree that parents often ignore the ‘milder’ forms of sexual abuse. “Unless it is rape or attempt to rape, parents don't want to create a scene with the offenders as they are usually relatives. They teach the child various methods to avoid abuse but they won't confront abusers. Sometimes they get angry if the child seeks help from outsiders like teachers or counsellors,” said Pushpa Venkatraman, counsellor who works with child sex abuse victims.

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10-yr-old's Holi horror

EVERY YEAR, Holi, the festival of colour, bring back memories of horror and helplessness in 10-year-old Preeti Sachdev (name changed). A student of Class 3, who had a horrifying experience last year on the day, wishes the day would never dawn again.

Preeti was alone at home on Holi last year when her father's best friend, who was drunk and reeking of alcohol, came visiting. He asked for her father and then, on finding her alone, he asked her to sit on his lap and started fondling her. The girl knew she was being molested but didn't have the courage to escape until her friend came looking for her.

The ‘uncle’ had molested Preeti on two earlier occasions and she had complained to her mother. The parents, obviously not willing to upset social norms or sever the relationship, offered a different non-confrontational solution — stay away from the offender. Preeti had little choice in the matter but to listen to her parents.

YOU CAN GET HELP

Childline India Helpline — 1098 (toll-free number)
Forum Against Child Sexual Exploitation — 23002683
Arpan — 9819051444

SURVEY FINDINGS

352 kids studying in Classes 1 to 4 were surveyed

66% of them (about 232) reported sexual abuse

94% cases (331), victims knew the accused

71% (about 250) were assaulted repeatedly

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Corrections

In 'Scarred & Scared at Home' (April 6, page 3), in the table summarising the survey's findings, we wrongly had percentage signs after three of the four numbers. Those numbers were actually absolute values.