

## A study on factor influencing child abuse among institutional children\*

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**Abstract :** An explorative study on child abuse was carried with an objective to study the prevalence of different types of abuse and factors influencing different types of abuse among institutional children. The population for the present study comprised children residing in Juvenile Institutions of Belgaum Division, in Karnataka State. Among 9 institutions, four juvenile institutions were selected for the study. 150 children fulfilling certain criteria i.e., children between 10-16 years; who remembered their childhood experiences and could express freely; who stayed in the institution for minimum of one year and who were able to read and write and were selected. Further, 148 children who were neglected, physically and multiple abused were selected for in-depth study. Information about institution, children and their parents, type of abuse was collected with the help of questionnaire. Data was collected by interviewing teachers and probation officers, by referring to case files of each child. The results revealed that the prevalence of neglect was highest among institutional children. Further incidence of neglect was more among girls while physical and multiple abuses were more in case of boys. Caste, size of family, family structure, alcoholic habit of father had significant influence on different types of child abuse.

**Key words :** Child abuse, institutional children, physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, multiple abuse

### Introduction

Child abuse is old as the history of human kind. In India, awareness about susceptibility of children to neglect and abuse was made with the Passage of Children Act by central government in 1960 which called for protection of children against cruelty and indignity. Nevertheless, child labour, child prostitution, physical assaults, emotional abuse, gender discrimination, practices like child branding, child marriage are still continue to exist in various magnitudes in different parts of Indian society. Nearly one lakh children are on the street, 11.28 million children are child laborers, 4,614 victims of child rape (up to 16 years), 70,000-1,00,000 child prostitutes from six cities and 17,892 (13,854 boys and 4128 girls) juvenile apprehended cases and the number of cases registered under IPC were 9,267 (Anon, 2000). This indicates that child abuse exists in different forms and is accepted as a way of life by the family, society even perhaps by children. National seminar organized by National Institute of Public Corporation and Child development (NIPCCID) on child abuse defines child abuse and neglect 'as the intentional, non-accidental injury, maltreatment of children by parents, caretakers, employers or others including those individuals representing governmental / non governmental bodies which may lead to temporary impairment of their physical, mental and psycho-social development and disability' (Anon, 1998).

Child abuse is a socio-psychological phenomenon and the causal conditions arise from interaction of child, familial and environmental factors. Generally it has been found to be an inter play of low income status, negative marital quality, unmanageable stress, social isolation, cultural attitude (Gelles and Cornell, 1990; Vondra, 1990). Even representative surveys

showed that child abuse did occur more often among families of low socioeconomic status (Straus and Gelles, 1990). But the documentation of child abuse in various walks of life is limiting in Indian context and studying the extent and nature child abuse in regional context is absolutely necessary. With this background the present study was carried out to study the background characteristics, prevalence of types of abuse by the parents/ caregivers and factors related to types of child abuse among institutional children.

### Material and methods

The present study was carried out in the year 2002-05. The population for the study comprised children residing in Juvenile Institutions of Belgaum Division, in Karnataka State. Among 9 institutions, four juvenile institutions (i.e., two for boys and two for girls) were selected for the study. Totally there were 255 children of which 150 children fulfilling following criteria i.e., children between 10-16 years; who remembered their childhood experiences and could express freely; who stayed in the institution for minimum of one year; who were able to read and write and availability of their academic records in the institution were selected. Out of 150 children, 148 children who were neglected, physically and multiple abused were selected for the detailed study. Information about institution, children and their parents, type of abuse was collected with the help of questionnaire. Data was collected by interviewing teachers and probation officers, by referring to case files of each child.

### Results and discussion

The background characteristics of children are presented in Table 1. It is evident that 52.03 per cent of children were between 13-15 years and the remaining 47.97 per cent of

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Table 1. Background characteristics of institutional children

Sl. No.	Characteristics	Category	Number (148)
1	Age	Younger (10-12 years)	71 (47.97)
		Older (13-15 years)	77(52.03)
2	Gender	Boys	53 (35.81)
		Girls	95(64.19)
3	Caste	Forward caste	-
		Other backward caste	4(63.51)
		SC/ST	4(36.49)
4	Family size	Small (<4)	17 (11.49)
		Medium (5-7)	122(82.43)
		Large (>8)	9(6.08)
5	Educational level		
	a) Father (N=103)	Illiterate	27 (26.21)
		primary (up to 4 <sup>th</sup> std)	76(73.79)
	b) Mother (N=120)	Illiterate	81(67.50)
		primary (up to 3 <sup>rd</sup> std)	9(32.50)
6	Occupational level		
	a) Father (N=103)	Unemployed	21(20.39)
		Laborers	27(26.21)
		Semi skilled workers	44(42.72)
		Skilled workers	11(10.68)
	b) Mother (N=120)	Unemployed	65 (54.17)
		Labourers	33(27.50)
		Semi skilled workers	22(18.33)
		Skilled workers	-
7	Parental existence	Mother only	11 (7.43)
		Father only	15(10.14)
		Both parents	71(47.97)
		Father and step mother	19(12.84)
		Parental non existence	32(21.62)
8	Alcoholic habit of father	Alcoholic	85 (57.43)
		Non alcoholic	63(42.57)

Figures in the parenthesis indicate percentages

them were between the ages of 10-12 years. Gender wise distribution indicated that 35.81 per cent were boys and 64.19 per cent were girls. The family background information revealed that none of the children were from forward caste families. Relatively higher proportion (63.51%) of children was from other backward castes followed by schedule caste/ schedule tribe (36.49%) and other backward (18.24%) castes. Further, with regard to the family size, majority of them were from medium size family (82.43%) and less children were from small (11.49%) and large (6.08%) size families. The literacy level of the parents indicated that 26.21 per cent of fathers and 67.50 per cent of mothers were illiterate respectively. Whereas nearly three-fourth (73.79%) of fathers and one-third (32.50%) of mothers respectively had only primary education. The occupational level of parents indicated that 20.39 per cent of fathers were unemployed, 26.21 per cent were laborers, 42.72 per cent were semi skilled workers and 10.68 per cent were skilled workers. In case of mothers, more than half (54.17%) were unemployed, 27.50 per cent were laborers and the remaining 18.33 per cent

were semi skilled workers. Data on parental existence revealed that about 7.43 per cent of them had only mothers, 10.14 per cent of them had only fathers, 47.97 per cent of them had both parents, 12.84 per cent of children had reconstituted family with step mother and 21.62 per cent of children had no parents,. Further 57.43 per cent of fathers were alcoholic and 42.57 per cent were non alcoholic.

Data presented in the Table 2 reveals prevalence of different types of abuse among children. The prevalence of abuse revealed that neglect was found to be highest followed by multiple, physical and sexual abuse among institutionalized children. The reason may be that almost all children in the study were from culturally deprived background and their family environment is characterized by parental deprivation, low caste and unemployment, low educational and occupational status of parents, large family and alcoholic fathers (Table 1). Here child abuse is not an isolated phenomena or a personality defect of the parents, rather normal parents are socialized into abusive

Table 2. Prevalence of types of child abuse among institutional children

Sl. No.	Institutions	Types of abuse				Total (150)
		Neglect	Physical	Multiple	Sexual	
1.	Gadag	13(36.11)	11(30.56)	12(33.33)	-	36(100)
2.	Hubli	45(57.69)	15(19.23)	16(20.51)	2(2.56)	78(100)
3.	Khanapur	8(47.06)	5(29.41)	4(23.53)	-	17(100)
4.	Saundatti	7(36.84)	4(21.05)	8(42.11)	-	19(100)
	Percentage to total	73(48.67)	35(23.33)	40(26.67)	2(1.33)	150(100)

Figures in the parenthesis indicate percentages

Table 3. Association between gender and types of abuse among institutional children

Sl. No.	Gender	Types of abuse			Total	Per cent to total 148	Chi square value
		Neglect	Physical	Multiple			
1.	Boys	21(39.62)	16(30.19)	16(30.19)	53(100)	35.81	3.37 NS
2.	Girls	52(54.74)	19(20.00)	24(25.26)	95(100)	64.19	
3.	Total	73	35	40	148	100	

Figures in the parenthesis indicate percentages

NS- Non significant

child care practices through the interaction of cultural and familial influences.

The study revealed no significant association between gender and types of abuse (Table 3). However, the prevalence of different types of abuse indicated that neglect was comparatively high in girls as compared to boys. While physical and multiple abuses were slightly higher in boys as compared to girls. The possible reason may be attributed to the prevailing socio-cultural practices and socio economic conditions. Differential treatment to girl child exists since time immemorial. This attitude has become normative trend in many families irrespective of caste, creed, religion and class.

Table 4 depicts influence of familial factors such as caste, family size, educational and occupational level of parents on types of child abuse. The results indicated significant association between caste and types of abuse. The percentage analysis showed that multiple abuse of children was significantly high in schedule castes/schedule tribe families while neglect was significantly high in most backward caste families. This may be because of the social and economic family deprivations generally more common in backward caste and schedule castes schedule tribe families. The results are in conformity with the findings of the study conducted by Harnath and Deviprasad (1995) and Subrahmanyam and Sondhi (1990).

Further results indicated significant association between family size and types of abuse (Table 4). The percentage prevalence indicated that neglect of children was significantly high in small and medium size families, while physical abuse of children was significantly more in large size families. The reason for abuse in the form of neglect in small and medium size families may be attributed to stress caused due to single parenthood. Most of these families might be either small or medium due to

early family disorganization such as desertion, separation, divorce or death of either of the parents and it was observed that some mothers were devotees. While in case of large families, physical abuse was predominant due to presence of both parents coupled with problems like low socio-economic status, more number of children and alcoholic habit of fathers. The results similar to the present study were found in the study conducted by Jaya and Narsimhan (2003).

Further, the study revealed no significant association between educational as well as occupational level of parents and types of abuse (Table 4). This indicated that the types of child abuse were almost same irrespective of the educational and occupational level of parents. However, the percentage prevalence indicated that neglect of children was most common type of abuse among all these families compared to other types of abuse. A non significant result was mainly attributed to homogeneity in the sample. Secondly, most of the parents might have experienced economic stress due to unemployment, uncertainty and work interruption in employment, low wages due to illiteracy or low education. This condition affects psychological well-being of parents. They become irritable, tense, emotionally unstable and pessimistic about future which increases their tendency to be punitive and inconsistent in disciplining children. Therefore poverty is considered as a major link between parenting and abuse. The finding is in line with the earlier studies of Harnath and Deviprasad (1995). Gelles (1992) also found that overall severe and very severe violence towards children was more in households below poverty line and poverty had greater impact on women's risk of abusive violence towards children.

Data presented in table 5 shows significant association between parental existence and types of abuse. The percentage prevalence indicated that neglect of children was significantly

Table 4. Association between familial factors and types of abuse among institutional children

Familial factors	Category	Types of abuse			Total	Per cent to total	Chi square value
		Neglect	Physical	Multiple			
Caste	SC/ST	21(38.89)	3 (5.56)	30 (55.56)	54 (100)	36.49	46.23**
	Other backward castes	52 (55.32)	32(34.04)	10 (10.64)	94 (100)	63.51	
	Total	73	35	40	148	100	
Family size	Small(<4)	13(76.47)	4(23.53)	-	17(100)	11.49	24.88**
	Medium (5-7)	59(48.36)	31(25.41)	32(26.23)	122(100)	82.43	
	Large(>8)	1(11.11)	-	8(88.89)	9(100)	6.08	
	Total	73	35	40	148	100	
Educational level of parents							
Father	Illiterate	12(44.44)	10(37.04)	5(18.51)	27(100)	26.21	2.24 NS
	Literate	33(43.42)	19(25.00)	24(31.58)	76(100)	73.79	
	Total	45	29	29	103		
Mother	Illiterate	33(40.74)	23(28.39)	25(30.86)	81(100)	67.50	3.31NS
	Literate	22(56.41)	6(15.38)	11(28.21)	39(100)	32.50	
	Total	55	29	36	120		
Occupation level of parents							
Father	No occupation	11(52.38)	5(23.81)	5(23.81)	21(100)	20.39	1.79 NS
	Labourers	12(44.44)	8(29.63)	7(25.93)	27(100)	26.21	
	Semi skilled	19(43.18)	14(31.81)	11(25.00)	44(100)	42.72	
	Skilled	4(36.36)	5(45.45)	2(18.18)	11(100)	10.68	
	Total	46	32	25	103		
Mother	No occupation	32(49.23)	18(27.69)	15(23.07)	65(100)	54.17	2.41NS
	Labourers	16(48.48)	9(27.27)	8(24.24)	33(100)	27.50	
	Semi skilled	10(43.45)	5(22.72)	7(31.81)	22(100)	18.33	
	Skilled	-	-	-	-	-	
	Total	58	32	30	120		

Figures in the parenthesis indicate percentages,  
NS- Non significant

\*\* Significant at 0.01 per cent level,

Table 5. Association between parental factors and types of abuse among institutional children

Parental factors	Category	Types of abuse			Total 148	Per cent to total	Chi square value
		Neglect	Physical	Multiple			
Parental existence	No parents	16(50.0)	6(18.75)	10(31.25)	32(100)	21.62	31.85**
	Mother only	6(54.55)	2(18.18)	3(27.27)	11(100)	7.43	
	Father only	13(86.67)	1(6.67)	1(6.67)	15(100)	10.14	
	Both parents	37(52.11)	21(29.58)	13(18.30)	71(100)	47.97	
	Reconstituted parent (step mother)	1(5.26)	5(26.32)	13(68.42)	19(100)	12.84	
	Total	73	35	40	148	100	
Alcoholic habit of father	Non alcoholic	59(69.41)	12(14.12)	14(16.47)	85(100)	57.43	32.24**
	Alcoholic	14(22.22)	23(36.51)	26(41.27)	63(100)	42.57	
	Total	73	35	40	148		

Figures in the parenthesis indicate percentages

\*\* Significant at 0.01 per cent level

high in single and in both parent families while multiple abuse of children was significantly more in reconstituted families by step mothers. Similar results were reported by Harnath and Deviprasad (1995), Nalinadevi and Shweta (2000). The neglect of children in both and single parent families might be attributed to reasons like low SES, more number of children and lack of social support system in the community. Further, children living in homes headed by single parent especially mothers experience multiple deprivations. Absence of father not only lowers family's social status but also lowers its economic status. The women who head the homes are often psychologically distressed. So, parenting in such women who experience high emotional distress is generally characterized by diminished nurturance, less affectionate and sensitive towards children, rely less on reasoning and inconsistent in disciplining children. Further, in case of reconstituted homes, step mothers usually assume the child training and disciplinary roles of the real mothers and fathers assume passive role. Generally, step mothers resent to support the children of the first wife and further when children do not obey or follow their instructions they try to control them by using punitive measures.

Further significant association was observed between personal habit of father and types of abuse. It is evident from the percentage analysis that neglect was significantly more in children whose fathers were non alcoholic while multiple abuse was significantly high in children whose fathers were alcoholic. The reasons for the neglect of children in case of nonalcoholic parents may be attributed to various stressful family conditions such as poverty, disorganized family, marital conflicts, social

isolation, lack of social support, congested living surroundings and low moral values. Addiction to alcohol is a common feature of fathers in many disadvantaged families and such fathers usually spend most of their income on drugs or alcohol rather than meeting the needs and demands of their family members. This becomes a cause for family disputes and conflicts which reduces parents concern towards family members and when they are in drunken state, they lose sense, good judgment, thinking, display anger and become violent when faced with considerable demands of dependent family members.

Hence the present study suggests that there is a need for intervention efforts to reduce the prevalence of child abuse in socio-culturally deprived families. The continuity of child abuse can be prevented to certain extent by creating awareness among parents. In this regard institutions can make efforts to contact parents and design educational programmes to improve their parenting skills. Further, successful prevention of child abuse also require implementation of immediate social policy and programmes that can improve or alleviate conditions responsible for child abuse. The children in the present study were from multi-problem families characterized by poverty, single parenthood and large family size, alcoholic habit of fathers, lower caste and low SES status. The intervention of child abuse also requires provision of remedial and supportive services such as employment opportunities, job-training facilities, affordable housing and health care, financial assistance to single parents and support services like subsidized day care, pre school services, primary and high school services for children are necessary to supplement the parental role.

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