

The Role of Teachers in Identifying and Reporting Child Maltreatment and Abuse in the Virtual Classroom Setup

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the lives of children in multiple ways. Being confined in their homes has not just affected their mental health, but has also made them vulnerable to the risk of experiencing child maltreatment and abuse at their homes. The current pandemic makes this situation challenging because children have minimal or no access to support networks, making it difficult for these victims to seek help or escape. The major group of adults who continue to have access to children are their teachers by means of the continuing online education. Educating teachers to identify signs of child abuse in their virtual classrooms and training them on how and when to report abuse is hence currently imperative. This article discusses the signs of child abuse that could be identified in an online classroom setup and the role of teachers in identifying and reporting such suspected child abuse.

Keywords: Child abuse, COVID-19, pandemic, teachers, virtual classroom

INTRODUCTION

Child maltreatment and abuse including child neglect has always remained a global problem and public health concern. Child abuse has been a leading cause of child death, and has been established to have adverse effects on a child's health and development.^{1, 2, 3}

The International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect compared definitions of abuse from 58 countries and found some commonality in what was considered abusive⁴. In 1999, the WHO Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention defined child abuse as follows: "Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power."⁵

CHILD MALTREATMENT DURING PANDEMICS:

In situations like the current COVID – 19 pandemic, the purview of exposure of a child to

child abuse is currently the homes that children have been restricted to and the perpetrators of this abuse are primarily their parents and caregivers. Children constitute a vulnerable section of society especially during situations of crisis and disasters. Historically, one serious consequence of pandemics has been an increased risk of child maltreatment, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to family violence⁶. India alone saw over 92000 calls to the National child helpline, requesting protection from child abuse, many of which were silent calls by children, within the first 11 days of the imposition of the lockdown in the month of March, 2020 as reported by the National Child line. While data collected prior to the pandemic has also suggested that 93% of the perpetrators are relatives of the victims or individuals known to them, the unique challenge posed by the current pandemic is the lack of access to support networks, making it even more difficult for the victims to seek help or escape⁷. For perpetrators too, parenting stress due to increased time spent with children, while coping with financial stress from the pandemic situation, their own mental illness like anxiety and depression, the possibility of increased substance use, social isolation,

absence of regular support personnel and increased negative interactions with children, (all of which may be present and potentially exacerbated during this pandemic), are associated with an increased risk of child abuse and neglect⁸.

POTENTIAL FIRST LINE CHILD ABUSE IDENTIFIERS:

The first step in helping children who are victims of child abuse is learning to recognize the warning signs of abuse and neglect. The 2 major category of professionals who continue to have, at the very least, virtual access to children currently are teachers and health care professionals of which the former has more frequent virtual interactions with children. Since the opportunity for lengthy history taking and physical examination are both ruled out, it is the need of the hour to establish guidelines and provide training to these professionals to be able to identify signs of child abuse and report it to concerned authorities? Since teachers have the opportunity currently to interact with children daily, albeit virtually, their role in this regard is more crucial, in comparison to health care professionals.

SIGNS THAT COULD HELP IDENTIFY CHILD ABUSE, THAT TEACHERS COULD BE EDUCATED ABOUT ARE AS FOLLOWS:

Teachers need to be educated to base their suspicion of child abuse on the following points -

- 1) A child who frequently misses classes or has sporadic attendance.
- 2) A child who exhibits a change in behavior.

For eg: a child who the teacher has known to be outgoing and one who usually participates actively in the classrooms, but who now shows signs of being withdrawn, lacking in interest, passive, nervous, anxious or fearful.
- 3) A child who exhibits extremes of behavior including being extremely compliant to being overly aggressive or hyperactive.
- 4) A child who seems alarmed when his or her name is called out.

- 5) A child who seems to be stressed specially on multiple occasions and frequently cries when he or she is unable to complete an assignment or follow the instructions given by the teacher.
- 6) Unexplained and repeated bruising or injury of the face and/or hands, especially around the lips, mouth, ears and/or neck (easily visible in virtual classroom setup).
- 7) Multiple injuries that appear to be at various stages of healing.
- 8) Injuries that appear to have a pattern that seem have been from a mark left behind from the use of an object like a belt or being slapped by hand.
- 9) A child who exhibits signs of distress, anxiety and/or fear when his parent or caregiver is mentioned by the teacher.
- 10) A child who behaves either inappropriately infantile or extremely adult like.
- 11) A child who appears overly vigilant or alert as if in prevention of abuse.
- 12) A child who shows signs of discomfort while sitting due to possible injury to the buttocks.
- 13) A child who exhibits anxiety or wariness when an adult caregiver approaches them during the virtual session.
- 14) A child who appears malnourished or has lost considerable weight.
- 15) A child who appears shabby or dirty or unbathed frequently.
- 16) A child who is wearing clothing that is inappropriate for the season, like full sleeves on a hot day.
- 17) A child who seems ill for an extended period, indicating a lack of medical attention.
- 18) A child who displays knowledge of sexual acts inappropriate for their age, or even exhibits seductive behavior.
- 19) Degrading comments made by a parent or caregiver about the child, including belittling humiliating and neglecting the child.

- 20) Indifference exhibited by the parent or caregiver.
- 21) A caregiver or parent might briefly indulge in verbal or physical abuse during a virtual study session out of habit.
- 22) A caregiver or parent who consistently misses interactions with the teachers
- 23) Child might mention episodes of abuse to the teacher with or without realizing that it is abuse.

Since most online interactions between the teacher and child are in the presence of a group of children, the teacher or the school could consider having a scheduled individual virtual interaction with the child to observe the child better. Online activities that could help the teacher observe the child better could be planned. For instance, by asking the children to walk or hop in the pretext of an activity, the teacher could create an opportunity to observe the gait of the child. If and where possible the school could consider scheduling a meeting with the child at school with or without parents as is possible in the current situation, to observe the child more closely and to look for more signs of maltreatment.

REPORTING ABUSE:

It is of utmost importance that if abuse is suspected and if any of the signs mentioned are noted by a teacher, they report it rather than ignore it. It is important here to mention that, legally, teachers do not need to have any evidence to report abuse. Reporting abuse based on reasonable suspicion is not just permitted but encouraged. Virtual classrooms have cancelled out the opportunity of communicating with the child to disclose abuse as the perpetrators could be present at every episode of interaction of the teacher with the child. On the other hand any direct questioning of the parents by the teacher could increase the risk of further abuse to the child or interfere in the investigation that would need to be subsequently carried out by the concerned authorities, hence reporting without personally addressing the issue is suggested.

It would also be advantageous for schools, in consultation with healthcare workers, school

counsellors, social workers and National childcare helplines, to formulate protocols detailing how suspected maltreatment is to be identified and reported to concerned authorities. These protocols could include what information the teacher would need to provide when reporting suspected abuse, and also help decide whether teachers, administrators, and other school personnel could refer all suspicions to the school's counsellor and/or social worker who could then make the report to the National childcare helpline. Regular training of teachers in this regard would be beneficial even after teaching returns to normal beyond just virtual classroom teaching. It could be anticipated that immediately post the return of normalcy and with education being delivered once again in regular classrooms, many families could still be facing exposure to stressors including financial challenges which could ultimately continue to affect the risk of children being victimized by child abuse inclusive of physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Hence the necessity of teachers being aware of this possibility, along with being equipped with the knowledge of identifying and reporting such cases even beyond the virtual classrooms in the era immediately post the pandemic could be considered crucial too.

NATIONAL CHILDCARE HELPLINE:

The childcare helpline in India is 1098. Termed 'Child line', it is India's first 24-hour, free, emergency phone service for children in need of aid and assistance. Child line is a platform that serves as a bridge between the Ministry for Women & Child Development, Government of India, various state Governments, NGOs, International Organizations, the Corporate Sector, Concerned Individuals and Children.

CONCLUSION:

In the current pandemic situation where children are restricted to their homes and with increased exposure of parents and/or caregivers to stressful situations, the risk of child maltreatment and abuse is covert and high. The absence of opportunities for these children to communicate about this abuse openly with other adults is also higher with them being limited to their homes. Teachers are the only points of contact for these

children at the very least via virtual means and hence they serve as important and vital professionals for identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect. Virtual classrooms could very well be here to stay even beyond the pandemic. Because of their frequent and consistent contact with both the children and their families, teachers have a critical role to play in helping victims of child abuse. Hence educating teachers in identifying and reporting child abuse and maltreatment is paramount.

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