

SOUTH ASIA SOCIAL NORMS & AGENCY LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

CASE STUDY

From the Ground Up: The Reality of Child Abuse in Schools and the Need for Stronger Child Rights Protection

Section 1: Children's perspectives

"Children will get scared when they are scolded. Aren't children like Gods?"

We were in one of our schools in Anekal block, talking to Upper Primary students of grades 6th, 7th and 8th to understand their knowledge about child abuse and perspective towards punishments. The student's statement highlighted the cultural contradiction between our beliefs and practice. Our culture, which compares children to God due to their unconditional love, purity, and kindness, also practices some of the harshest methods of punishment and correction.

In our attempt at producing disciplined children, corporal punishments have been a long-standing practice in our homes and schools. One of the main reasons adults use corporal punishment is because they believe it is an effective way to control behavior.

The internalized behavior and attitude towards children are rooted in the mindset that if you do not hit or scold the child, they will not listen to you. As a result, the prevalence of verbal and physical abuse remains high in Indian schools despite it being outlawed by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE, 2009).

This also affects children's perception of violence and its normalisation. The children's initial responses to the interviewers regarding their opinion about punishment reflected personal normative beliefs that were in contrast to injunctive norms around violence.

Personal normative beliefs of children around corporal punishment pointed to a general dissatisfaction with the practice, and a preference for non or less physical measures for correcting “bad” behaviour.

“Making children do Baskis is wrong. They should use words and talk”*
(Preference for verbal communication over physical punishment)

**Baskis = squats, while holding their ears*

“Baskis is better than hitting as it leaves no pain or marks behind.”
(Preference for less severe forms of physical punishment)

“If they hit the child, will the child's mistake be reversed after hitting?”
(Questioning the effectiveness of physical punishment)

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in the Anekal block (Bengaluru) of Karnataka State of India. It is based on empirical data in the form of voices from the field. The methodology used for the study was an In-depth interview with students in Grades 6th - 8th and Involve team members through the Qualitative research technique. The study and the article aim to highlight the students' awareness of child abuse and to understand the ground reality of Non-Governmental Organizations working with children in government schools to promote child rights and make schools safer environments for children.

We are aware, as per World Health Organization 1999 report; child abuse is defined under the following categories; physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect of a child, and exploitation of children. However, the scope of this study and article is limited to discussing physical and verbal abuse as forms of punishment or discipline in schools or learning spaces.

Moreover, when adults use their power to dominate and control a child, it can create an atmosphere of fear, anxiety, anger, and mistrust among the children (See Box 1.1).

Box 1.1 *Effect of punishment on children*

“I feel let down when adults yell at me or shout, raising their voices,”

“When they hit, I feel very angry and sad. I feel helpless.”

“When punished, the child will repeat the same mistake out of spite and anger.”

These reactions indicate the children's belief that punishment can lead to negative emotional reactions and counterproductive behavior, rather than genuine behavioral improvement.

Despite negative perceptions of punishment, **children did show conditional acceptance of the punishment** (See Box 1.2).

Box 1.2 *Conditional acceptance of punishment*

“It is right to beat a child if they have made a big mistake. If the child is not punished, they will never change.”

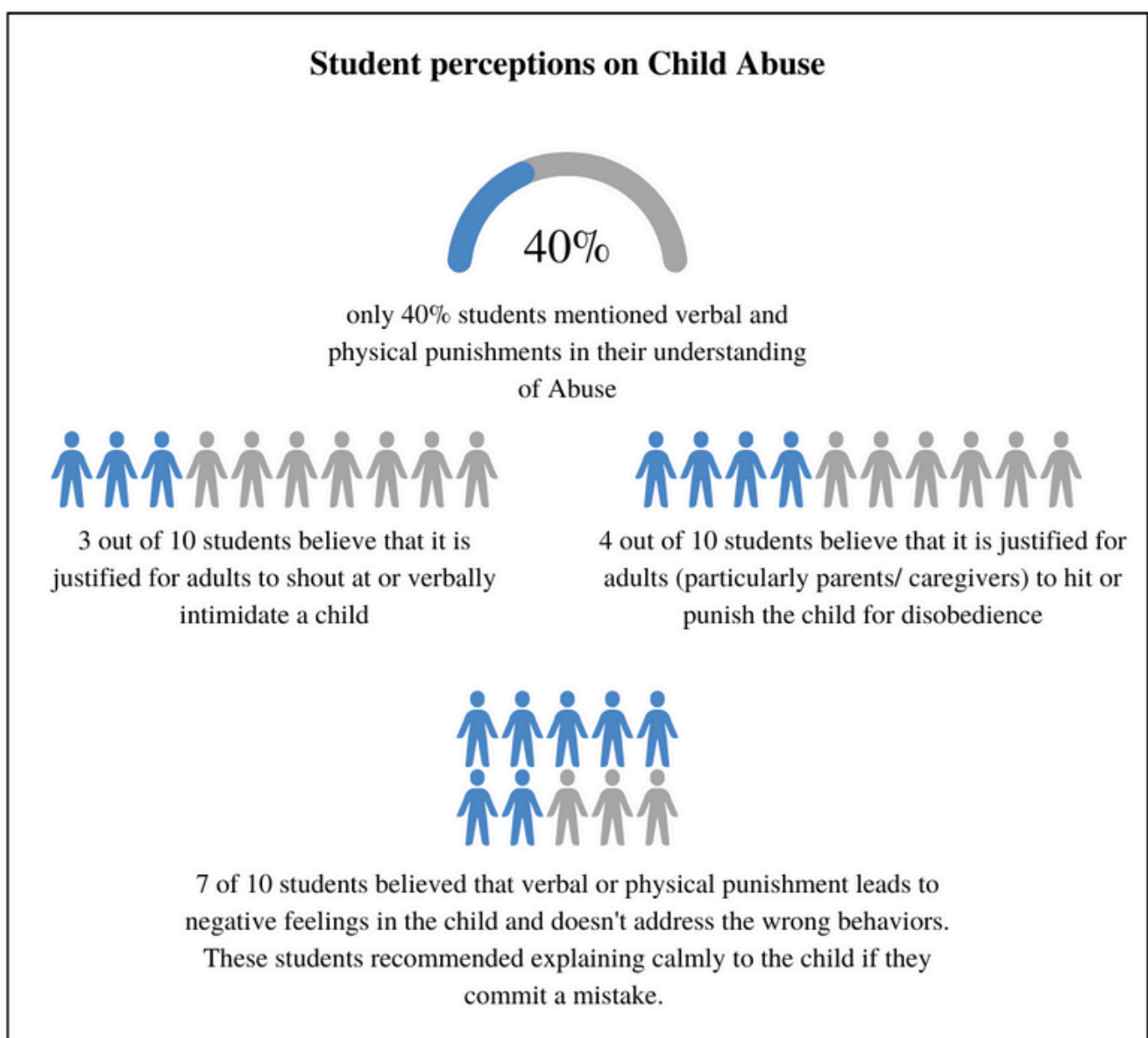
“Adults will only punish a child if they have done something wrong.”

“It is okay to shout at children, but no one should shout without reason.”

This speaks to the internalised behaviour in adults and children regarding discipline and punishment. In Indian culture, most children at home grow up receiving punishments in various forms of physical and verbal abuse from their guardians, justifying the punishment benefit the children. The teachers and children come to the schools with the same attitude and mindset. This normalises abuse guised as a discipline.

Figure 1

Student attitudes on abuse, punishment, and discipline reflecting internalised beliefs



Source: Involve Learning Solutions. March 2023 (unpublished-b). Students' attitudes on abuse, punishment and discipline [Dataset].

The contrast between societal norms and the children's feelings about punishment is stark. While many children accept corporal punishment as a norm, believing it is justified or necessary for correcting behavior, their emotional responses tell a different story (See Figure 1).

The fear, anger, and sadness expressed by the children reveal the deep psychological harm caused by such practices. This contradiction highlights the need to shift societal norms and personal beliefs to protect children's rights and ensure their well-being.

Section 2: Adult's perspectives

The practice of hitting children as a form of discipline has reduced, but most adults still believe *milder* forms of physical punishment are necessary. On the other hand, there are some adults who don't support punishment, but social norms and complacent systems prevent them from taking action.

Our team member sharing her experience of these challenges said:

"If any complaint is raised against the system, do you think I can return to the school? If I report them, I cannot work in the system."

This shows the fear of repercussions from reporting abuse. There is a fear of negative consequences for speaking out against child abuse within the educational system. This indicates the resignation of the status quo due to perceived risks to one's career and professional standing.

Another shared:

"In my 5-6 years of work with government schools, I have not seen a single school that follows any procedures or documents child abuse cases."

This is the reality of our system. This statement underscores how schools struggle to adhere to child safeguarding policies. However, it is not only the system.

While systemic challenges do pose a threat, mindset challenges are even more difficult to address and fuel the status quo of complacent systems. One of the team members, when asked about an incident of corporal punishment, stated:

“I did not hit them with the sticks. I just held them by their ears.”

Here the adult's belief suggests that certain forms of punishment are viewed as mild or acceptable. It reflects a minimization of the harm caused by physical discipline, reinforcing the normalization of such practices.

These beliefs reflect a complex interaction between cultural norms, personal experiences, and the perceived necessity of maintaining discipline through punitive measures. The normalization of physical punishment, even in milder forms, reveals the deep-rooted acceptance of these practices in the societal and educational contexts.

It will take significant work to change the mindsets and attitudes of stakeholders and children around discipline and abuse. But building awareness and establishing clear structures could be a good starting point to safeguard our children from these situations. Providing training and taking sessions for team members directly working with children on positive behavior management still requires much reflection for a mindset shift.

Section 3: Multilevel Child Safeguarding Measures

As an organization working closely with children, we at **Involve** have prioritised having a strong Child Safeguarding Policy. The Child Protection Officer (CPO) of Involve believes, “It is every child's right to have a space where they can express their thoughts and opinions without fear.”

For this it is important to study and shift the norms around discipline and punishment among both children and adults. **It requires effort at the systemic, group and individual level.**

About Involve

Involve began in 2018 with the vision of ensuring all children will have age-appropriate agency to thrive. We believe if we build the agency of students in the school and learning systems, and enable teachers to create such spaces for students, it will lead to more fulfilled and effective learning experiences for students, eventually ensuring students thrive and grow in ways they want to.

Towards this we design interventions that promote student agency through - collaborative learning spaces, co-creational learning, personalized learning, providing equal opportunities and creating a joyful & fulfilling learning environment for children.

The organization works with government schools and communities to create peer learning spaces that lead to students developing knowledge, skills, and mindsets toward expressing their agency. Involve works closely with government schools in Anekal Block in Karnataka, and in Bihar, UP, MP & Chattisgarh in partnership with government and other organizations.

Website: <https://involveedu.com/>

Systemic level

1. Child safeguarding policy document: This policy is important for creating a safe & supportive environment for children through prevention and redressal of abuse. It serves as a guiding principle in all our interactions with children. It describes different types of abuses, expected and prohibited behavior, and actions, reporting & redressal mechanisms for complaints of child abuse.

2. Reporting Procedures: The document has the contact numbers and email IDs through which team members can raise any concerns verbally and complaints in a written format anonymously, post which an inquiry will be carried out.

Group Level

1. Child safeguarding training: It familiarises all the organization's employees with the policy, after which they sign the declaration form. There will also be training conducted each time the policy is updated. In addition to that, need-based training is given to the employees.

2. Contacts sharing: The CPO & Operations Lead's contact details are shared with the school authorities and the students to report any violations they might have witnessed. And the contacts of local organisations and govt bodies that work for the welfare of children are also shared with the team.

3. Awareness session for children: Children are given training on positive behavior management techniques. We also gave child rights sessions to our peer group student leaders, who then conducted these sessions with their learners. They taught them about child rights and key laws for self-protection, in commemoration of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child by the UN General Assembly. This led to children reflecting on real-life incidents of peers dropping out and considering legal steps, such as calling 1098, to help those in need.

Individual Level

Best behavior promotions: Through observation and discussion, we list the best-modeled behaviors our team members exhibit while interacting with students. These behaviors are then encouraged & appreciated serving as models for all the team members.

Termination: Even after having a policy, there are violations that we come across. After a warning, and 1:1 sessions to address the mindset & behavior, if the complaints are raised against the individual again action will be taken to terminate their employment. Recalling one such incident, the CPO shared the procedure followed for redressal:

“During a surprise visit to the school, the Operations Lead saw one of the team members smacking a child on the head. She was called to the office, given an official warning, and made to explain the terms of the child safeguarding policy as consequences of her violation.

After 3-4 months, when the Operations Lead visited the same school, she received complaints from the HM about the same team member using corporal punishment on the students. She was immediately notified not to interact with students. The committee conducted an inquiry in all the schools she had worked in and found multiple cases of corporal punishment. Upon consultation with the committee and the external consultant, a decision was made to terminate the team member's employment.

This incident also underscores the critical need for close monitoring from the team to ensure the adherence to child safe guarding policies & prevent such violations in the future.

As a result of these multi-level strategies, we have seen our team members grow from being unaware of the types and impacts of abuse on children to understanding the importance of upholding their safety and dignity.

Conclusion

Child abuse in various forms takes away the basic right of children to live their lives with dignity and can have a huge impact on their development. Thus, our society needs to be educated on child rights and the signs & prevention of child abuse. Thereby, any individual who comes across any child abuse victims or situations should be able to understand the scenario and seek the right help to safeguard the child.

“I understand my right, and I will stand up for myself and my peers to safeguard our rights.”

Don't you want to hear students say something like this?

While all of us in the education sector work hard to build knowledge, skills, and mindsets in our students, let us not underestimate the power of safe spaces in child development.

When a child feels safe and protected and believes that they have the agency to guide their lives, it gives them the confidence to thrive. In our journey to bring out student voices, let us talk more about child abuse and child rights to raise awareness and take action. Let us fight our own internalized beliefs to ensure all children have safe spaces for learning and growing.

Together we can ensure ALL children have access to these safe spaces in their schools, communities, and homes.

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