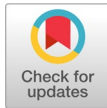


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Cognizance of Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Education among Teachers of Junior Level Schools in Lahore City, Pakistan

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Abstract

The present study aims to uncover the existing knowledge gap regarding the prevention of child sexual abuse by discussing teachers' viewpoint and their classroom practices. A quantitative method was resorted to analyze social and cultural barriers. Three mainstream schools belonging to a franchise system spread over the province was selected and a sample of 141 junior schoolteachers from the three schools participated. The questionnaire was partitioned into three sections focusing on socio-demographics, factual knowledge, and institutional pedagogies. Teachers, being community leaders, with the trust of both parents and children, possess the capability of transcending structural and cultural barriers through educational practices. The analytical data gathered indicates that there exists a huge knowledge gap of prevention in local socio-cultural context across text, audio, and video. Teachers are not being given regular updates on the safeguarding needs of children through the medium of workshops or training programs. It has been suggested based on the findings of this research that introducing preventive strategies in the junior education curriculum could turn the potential future victims into active beneficiaries. In addition, the teachers suggested these training programs would not only help raise their awareness of this serious issue but would also help in its identification. The very fact that child protection is not talked about in parent-teacher meetings indicates the need for a more effective policy to protect children from the threat of sexual abuse.

Keywords: child sexual abuse prevention, teacher training, parenting practices, risk factors, child protection

Introduction

A public health approach to evading Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) often involves prevention programs at the family, community, and school levels (Martyniuk & Dworkin, [2011](#)). First and foremost, parents, as the child's

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primary caregivers and guardians, play a crucial role in the primary strategy to prevent CSA (Wurtele, [2010](#)). Sexual abuse is more probable to be posed by relatives especially closer ones, in such circumstances child protection becomes complicated (Sahibzada & Jamal, [2025](#)). Therefore, engaging families and parents in prevention efforts is essential, as they are close to children and serve as their primary protectors.

According to a research conducted in Cannada, children below 12 mostly face the sexual abuse. Different reports suggest that this form of abuse is increasing at an alarming rate reflecting the much-needed reformation by social institutions (Vandereycken, [2022](#))

Research on preventing the child sexual abuse shows that structured, age-appropriate education programs can significantly enhance children's ability to recognize unsafe situations and enable them to seek help. Overall, prevention is most effective when programs are ongoing, culturally relevant, and delivered by trained facilitators (Subasi et al., [2024](#)).

Family community-based prevention programs are very effective at addressing and controlling CSA. They focus on the interaction between the child and various community stakeholders. It has been found that adults become aware of their responsibility toward society and tend to behave accordingly to help reduce CSA cases. Therefore, peers, adults, and the community must be essential parts of the prevention strategy for CSA (Martyniuk & Dworkin, [2011](#)). Butler and Markman ([2012](#)) argues that teachers can recognize social cues in children, such as classroom participation, emotional behaviour, fear, and anxiety. Teachers with specialized knowledge and a comprehensive approach will be better equipped to support students.

Education on preventive measures clearly explains sexual manipulation and helps identify abuse. It teaches the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, making it easy to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate touch. Preventive education also guides educators to help young students understand the anatomy of their private parts and how to explain any touch, since children need to know that sexual abuse is not always physical, such as in cases of pornography, exhibitionism, or indirect abuse.

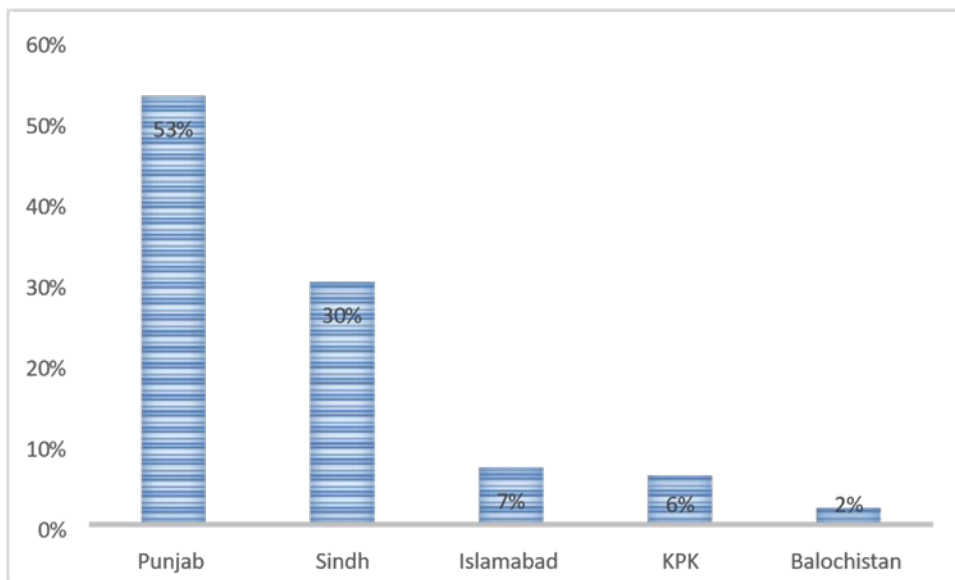
The reported cases in Pakistan are just a small portion of a much larger problem stating, Pakistan ranks among the top ten countries in the world

with alarmingly high rates of child sexual abuse. The February 2020 report from “Human Rights Watch” notes that “more than 3,800 cases of child sexual abuse across Pakistan were reported, but the actual numbers are likely much higher due to underreporting” (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], [2020](#)). The report by the child rights organization Sahil states, “Seven children are abused daily in Pakistan. As many as 1,304 cases of child sexual abuse have been reported by the media in the country, which means that at least seven children are abused every day. The data from January to June 2019 shows that 729 girls and 575 boys were victims of sexual exploitation. Major categories included 378 cases of abduction, 139 of rape, 153 of sodomy, 46 of gang rape, and 88 of gang sodomy, with 12 boys and four girls murdered after sexual abuse (Dawn, [2019](#)).

However, Pakistan’s reported statistics on child sexual abuse are lower than those of India. Research by Geo Media Network reveals, While India’s official crime records suggest that up to 109 children were sexually abused daily in 2018, the rate in Pakistan from January to June 2019 was about seven children per day.

Figure 1

Child Sexual Abuse in Pakistan, July – December 2019



Sahil an NGO in their landmark publication ‘Cruel Numbers 2019,’

which tracked daily reports from 84 national and regional newspapers reported 2846 cases throughout that year across all provinces. 2020 reports stated that eight children are abused per day in Pakistan.

Age- categorized data revealed that the 6-15 years age group is the most vulnerable, and children as young as 0-5 years are also victims of sexual abuse. More boys than girls were reported as victims. Out of the total 3722 reported cases, 2,222 involved acquaintances, and juvenile abusers have also increased. Of the total cases, 64% (1816) were reported from rural areas, while 36% (1030) were reported from urban areas (Sahil, [2019](#)).

Figure 1 shows that out of a total of 2846 cases, 53% are reported from Punjab, 30% from Sindh, 30% from Islamabad, 7% from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), 2% from Baluchistan, and a few reported from Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB).

In response to these concerning statistics, Pakistan's government introduced new legislative reforms in 2025. At the federal level, the Child Courts Bill was approved by the National Assembly's standing committee, establishing child-friendly courts with mandatory psychological support and faster trial procedures. The Child Marriage Restraint Act 2025 sets the legal age at 18 for both boys and girls, criminalizing underage marriages and considering sexual acts within such marriages as statutory rape, punishable by up to three years in prison and a fine.

In the Punjab, the Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act 2015 remains in effect, setting the minimum legal age for girls' marriage at 16. However, the Punjab Child Marriage Restraint Bill 2024-2025 proposes raising this age to 18 and imposing stricter penalties, including a fine of PKR 2 million and 2 years of imprisonment. Additionally, in June 2025, Punjab's Cabinet approved the Child Protection Policy 2025, developed in collaboration with UNICEF and the Child Protection & Welfare Bureau. This policy aims to establish a provincial safety net through community-based response teams, teacher training, and institutional accountability.

Facts about Sexual Abuse

Children face a higher risk of sexual abuse from relatives, especially those close to them (Honor, 2010). Protecting children in such situations becomes even more challenging (Okoronkwo, [2014](#)). Various reports by human rights organizations show that child abuse cases are increasing at a concerning rate, revealing the failure of government and social institutions

to address the issue. A study at a Canadian school found that 60% of sexually abused children are under age 12 (Moulden et al., [2010](#)). Evidence suggests that young children are more vulnerable to all types of abuse, particularly sexual abuse, because they cannot defend themselves or escape (Putnam, [2003](#)). On November 20, 1989, the United Nations held a convention on children's rights, known as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to protect and promote children's well-being. It established a system of social justice and clarified the government's responsibilities toward children. Nearly all countries worldwide ratified this convention, leading to new laws. Articles 19 and 34 were added to the United Nations charter. Article 19 states that it is the responsibility of the state to protect children from maltreatment and abuse, whether physical, emotional, or sexual. In a study conducted by Pakistani National Commission for Child Welfare a sample of 74 children who had experienced sexual abuse was found that girl child is at a higher risk of sexual exploitation, by family members, acquaintances, and neighbours, while most boys in public spaces, e.g., by teachers, madrassah ustad, shopkeepers, or strangers. The perpetrators targeted children who were generally around 10 years old, and due to ignorance and fear, the child often suffers in silence and guilt.

Objectives of the Study

- To analyse the understanding of junior schoolteachers regarding preventive education for child sexual abuse.
- To explore perceptions of the causes of such cases.
- To evaluate educators' understanding of preventive measures.
- To analyse the capability to handle the subject of prevention education on CSA of instructors.

Literature Review

Jordanian schoolteachers were evaluated in research focusing on their role in preventing issues and raising awareness as proactive steps to ensure children's safety. The teachers reported that they felt hindered in talking about preventive education, as in Muslim countries it is considered a taboo subject. Research shows that teachers training in preventive education is essential, as it equips teachers with the necessary professional skills and knowledge. The role of an educator becomes more important when they are trained in preventive education (Al-Zboon, [2016](#)).

In research on *Education, at-risk groups' sensitive issues they face*, Stephen et al. (2019) describes that Education and awareness to help children recognize signs of abuse are the essential first steps for their safety. Until the adults around children, especially those responsible for their care, understand the importance of prevention, the issue of CSA cannot be controlled. Typically, in any sexual abuse situation, there is use of power dynamics (e.g., age, physical size, or position in family or society) between the perpetrator and the victim, there is dynamism in assault (Tsutsumi, 2009).

Similar research was carried out to assess the effectiveness of preventive programs and the knowledge they impart. The reports indicated that young children faced difficulty in understanding and recognizing the inappropriateness of a request, especially when an apparently good person made it. Post-testing findings showed that children as young as 3 years old can learn that a touch is inappropriate even if it comes from a 'good' person (Finkelhor, 2019).

It is important to recognize that guilt can also play a significant role in post-abuse adjustment and may further motivate the perpetrator (Feiring, 2002). Fontes (2010) states that offenders often exploit children's feelings of shame to enforce silence by making children break rules (e.g., going to a restricted place, drinking alcohol, or posing for pornographic photos and videos, and then threatening children that they will get in trouble if they tell anyone about these shameful activities).

Crosson (2014) discusses that educators should be aware of other indicators of any possible sexual abuse as children often draw unusual pictures involving children with no mouths or hands or explicit drawings of sexual acts or genitalia. Mostly, these children tend to stay quiet not only because of threats from the abuser but also because of the fear that, in case of reporting, nobody will believe them. Children who are being abused either by their peers or older schoolmates tend to withdraw.

Such a form of abuse of a teen or adolescent that took place out of some meeting or by another peer is believed to be significantly under-reported to law enforcement, the reason being the victims often feel some level of responsibility for the abuse. The pressure to engage in sexual activity in a relationship is not new, and it goes beyond the repeated sexual requests, and it has sometimes been used to gain sexual compliance (Ullman, 1999).The

1995 discussion on children's traumatic experiences explores different aspects of childhood trauma related to various types of abuse. It was concluded that a considerable number of sexual abuses occur in spaces that view the topic of body awareness as secretive, and sex is considered a taboo topic, people adopt abnormal sexual habits such as paedophilia.

Owing to a knowledge gap, parents and teachers often ignore children's narrative because they lack understanding. Sometimes, children are manipulated through power dynamics. Juvenile offenders under 18 tend to replicate the culture they grew up in, as many have also experienced abuse.

In a study conducted on child offenders in rehabilitation, it was found that among vulnerability is the most significant factor, increasing the risk of such cases of abuse, many a times lack of supervision, lack of guidance on prevention education increases the inability to recognize the danger. Through preventive education, children can become less vulnerable, and the ability to identify and suspect becomes part of their cognitive skills. In a previous study on young children aged 3-5 years, children were asked to identify the bad and the good puppet, by understanding the body language. It was concluded that a child as young as three can be taught to identify and follow body safety rules. In most cases, parents are unaware of body safety rules and thus unable to recognize the signs of abuse. Parental education is also a structural responsibility therefore, to minimize the risk of abuse (Gold, [1999](#)).

Educators must be fully aware and updated regarding this knowledge to guide their students and parents further.

Another study on school programs aimed at preventing familial sexual abuse of children indicates that 7- and 13-year-old children, both boys and girls, are most vulnerable because they are less likely to report abuse. Lack of awareness often leaves them confused. Threats, bribes, or fear keep them silent, also mostly, parents do not believe them. The lack of confidence in assessing the situation comes from the fact that a trusted adult is often involved, further aggravating the situation.

Research Method

150 teachers from the selected private school systems voluntarily participated with consent. Nine responses were incomplete, resulting in a response rate of 94. This sample of 141 teaching staff shows that 75% are female and 25% are male. Age groups were categorized into 5-year



intervals, with the 30-34-year age group standing out among teachers. The data indicates that most teachers are in the prime age group of 30-39. The selected schools follow a consistent approach to teacher training and curriculum systems. The survey was divided into three sections: demographic information, an assessment of educators' knowledge of the topic, and an inferential section examining classroom practices related to preventive education.

Sampling Method

The three schools selected through purposive sampling have standardized curricula, teacher hiring procedures, and training systems across the province, providing insight into the overall teacher-training process. The research participants were chosen using random sampling. The survey was self-administered, designed to be clear, free of double-barrel questions, and easy to understand. The research tool was developed with consideration of the local social and cultural context. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, and consent was secured from both the school administration and the participants.

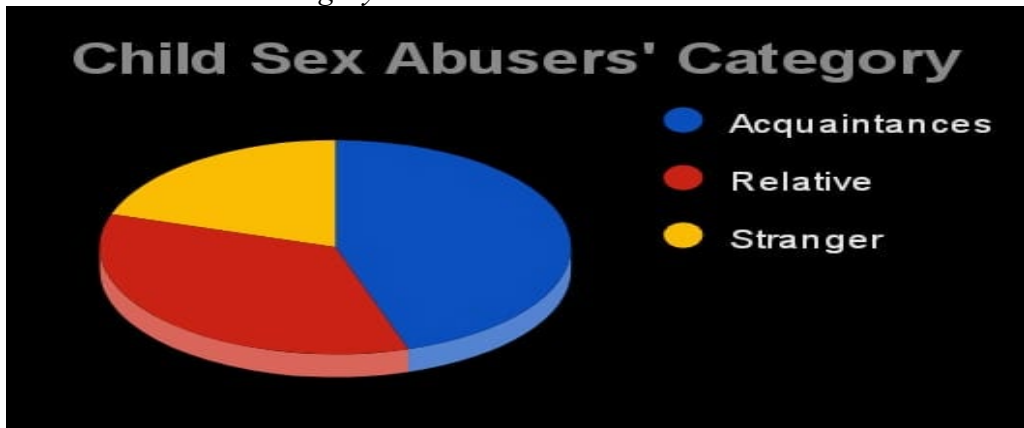
Results

The analysis further explores the causes and signs behind the incident, based on the perspectives of research respondents who work with 7- to 13-year-old children considered at risk of being victimized by a perpetrator. In a localized indigenous setting, the lack of awareness-raising about this serious issue has led to confusion. The increasing number of such cases has generated a sense of insecurity. The main indicators are detailed further in the mentioned tables.

Table 1

Causes of Child Abuse/Sexual

Categories of Response	Frequency	Percentage
Vulnerability of children	50	35.5
Lack of reporting, awareness, and preventive education	20	14.2
A child is easily trusting	11	7.8
All of the above	57	40.4
None of the above	3	2.1
Total	141	100

Figure 2*Child Sex Abusers' Category*

40% of teachers believe that multiple factors contribute to cases of child sexual abuse. From a broader perspective, cultural barriers that increase vulnerability and underreporting stem from a lack of training and awareness about this issue, according to the data above.

Table 2*How Helpful is Preventive Education?*

Response Category	Yes		No		Total	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Owing to preventive education, children will be able to identify	111	78.7	30	21.3	141	100

Table 3*I Discuss with My Students the Privacy of Their Bodies, Be Vocal in Saying No, and Avoid Any Situation of Unnecessary Touching*

Classroom Practice	Yes		No		Total	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Practice the concept of trusting an adult in any situation	47	32.0	—	—	141	100
Children are guided to never receive gifts without permission	57	33.3	36	22.7	141	100
Children are guided not to go alone with others	63	44.7	11	7.8	141	100

Table 4*Classroom Practices by the Teachers to Educate Students on Preventive Education*

Response Categories	Yes		No		Total	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Prevention of CSA material for the children	59	41.8	82	58.2	141	100
The well-being of children and discussions between the teacher and parents	59	41.8	82	58.2	141	100

The data reveals that 78.7% of teachers believe preventive education can help children become less vulnerable and more aware. However, classroom practices vary significantly. Most teachers, 78%, say they have never discussed the secrecy of private body parts with children. Additionally, 58.2% of teachers report they have never used any audio-visual materials in school to educate children about safeguarding against potential sexual abuse. Furthermore, 28% of teachers think children are also responsible for episodes of abuse.

Conversely, 55% believe that children's failure to report incidents is a major cause of sexual abuse cases. These trends show conflicting views: many teachers see children as responsible for their own abuse, yet they also recognize that underreporting helps keep these incidents happening. Most teachers rarely share any audio or video materials related to prevention.

Additionally, the data indicates that children's emotional well-being is never discussed with parents during parent-teacher meetings. The data show that teachers, as community leaders and responsible adults for children's wellbeing and safety, are often unaware of prevention skills to protect children from sexual abuse. This lack of awareness has contributed to victim shaming, which further discourages reporting abuse. Victim shaming results in fewer reports, and at the same time, parents are not informed by responsible institutions about their children's safety and well-being.

Discussion

Pakistan is a developing country facing low literacy rates and cultural stereotypes as barriers to adopting and implementing specific policies, especially those that challenge traditional practices. A report documents that 4,213 child abuse cases have been reported across Pakistan. These cases are

mainly filed through hospitals because these children, who are victims of sexual abuse, were admitted to hospitals due to severe conditions (Sahil, [2024](#)).

The 2023 report indicated that victims' ages ranged from 0 to 5, but the most vulnerable and targeted age group was 6 to 15 years. These figures mainly come from hospital and police reports, so they only provide a partial picture. The overall data suggest that most cases involve acquaintances or relatives as the perpetrators of this sexual abuse. In such cases, both parents and teachers often remain unaware of the situation, as signs of subtle and hidden abuse are difficult to detect without proper training and awareness.

There are very few audio and video educational tools for children. Culturally, it is also not widely accepted to maintain a safe distance or say no to an elder. These practices worsen the problem by leaving children unattended with relatives, cousins, and at home. Staff are perceived as usual. Children who are unaware of their safe spaces and physical boundaries often fall victim to sexual abuse without even recognizing it (Al-Zboon, [2016](#)).

Because prevention methods are ineffective, myths and misconceptions often backfire, causing children to become desensitized to physical touch. They might mistake it for a bribe or see it as a positive gesture. As a result, victims may find it difficult or impossible to report these incidents, especially if the victim is a child, unless others also report the situation. This usually happens only in cases of physical sexual assault, like rape or sodomy. Basic teacher training, clear school policies, and staff training to enforce a zero-tolerance approach to any abuse can help improve safety within the community. Since schoolteachers are viewed as community leaders, their training ultimately influences others (Bhuptani, [2024](#)).

Limitations

This is a sensitive topic; discussing it with teachers and gaining access to classroom practices was very difficult because most schools refused to allow their staff to participate in this research. Data from across Pakistan will help better understand urban and rural differences. Including madrassahs and public schools in this study would be highly beneficial; however, madrassahs could not be added to this research. Still, this study provides a baseline understanding for further exploration and analysis.

Recommendations

- As per the context of a closed society in Pakistan and to create acceptance for child protection education, there is an urgent need to remove the myth that sex education and prevention education are the same.
- Victim shaming needs to be addressed by trained, skilled teachers to raise awareness.
- Audio, video, and published material related to our social setting should be generated for prevention education.
- Parent-teacher meetings and classroom practice should be used for prevention education.
- “Model programs” and “in-service practices” need to be followed for teacher training (Zhao & Zhang, [2017](#)).

Author Contribution

Nabiha Fatima: sole author

Conflict of Interest

The author of the manuscript has no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

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The authors did not use any type of generative artificial intelligence software for this research.

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