

Are School Spaces Really Safe for Our Children

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As the two back to back incidents of child rape within the school premises – one in Phulwari Sharif in Patna last week and the other in Chhapra district in Bihar just a couple of months back – make their space in the media headlines, they bring back exactly the same sinking feeling that we had a few months ago, when the Kathua case shook the very core of the Indian psyche. It's not that no other incident of child sexual assault happened in between – but just the opposite. Many equally brutal cases have been reported almost on a regular basis – from Unnao, Deoriah, Mujaffarpur and unfortunately, this list can be dragged on endlessly. All of these incidences just go on to prove one single point – child safety lies at the very bottom of all our social agenda as it keeps getting severely compromised every other day at every possible place. Is it that we have become so used to it day by day, that even the nastiest stories of rapes and sexual abuses of children utterly fail to arouse any emotion anymore?

The fact that in both the cases of Patna and Chhapra the headmaster and the assistant teachers were booked as the prime accused demands further attention. Children spend most of their time at home and then at school. Ideally then, both should be the safest places for them. However, ironically, the safety of children is lately most at stake especially in schools. In the study conducted by Ministry of Women and Child Welfare, 2007, it had very clearly emerged that across different kinds of abuse, it is young children in the age group of 5-12 years, who were most at risk of abuse and exploitation. The data showed that two out of every three children were physically abused, 65% of school going children reported facing corporal punishment (that is two out every three) and 53.22% children reported having faced one or more forms of sexual abuse. Moreover, 50% of the times, the abusers were persons known to the child or in a position of trust and responsibility and most children did not report the matter to anyone.

Even at that point in time, most of us were finding it difficult to accept the scenario of child abuse in the country. However, it is more worrying that it has almost become a trend to find cases of abuse, molestation, bullying, and corporal punishment within school premises or in transit to school on a daily basis. To decode the words safety and protection – it must be mentioned that it is everyone's responsibility to make sure children are protected and prevented from any potential harm, abuse or damage.

We take a lot of things for granted when it comes to protecting our children. We still see overcrowded school vans, children crossing roads unsupervised, school buses over-speeding, adults with three half sleepy helmetless children on bikes, open pits and live wires in the school premises, depilated buildings, open water tanks, midday meal being cooked right at the school corridor... and the list can go on and on. Parents still don't think twice before investing blind trust and faith in friendly neighbours to drop their children to school and school authorities still recruit school staff and security personnel without proper background checks. School teachers use corporal punishment affecting children's psyche deeply and everyday bullying in classrooms and school premises seems to have become a norm. The availability of school counsellors or any other mechanism to offer psychosocial care is still a distant dream. The access to most school premises is completely porous

still and stores selling tobacco and other harmful things that children would be tempted to consume are readily available close to schools – everywhere there are potential threats to child safety!

Every child is at the potential risk of harm, bullying, exploitation or physical and sexual abuse. These safety risks can arise from people (adults as well as children), from infrastructure, from activities and interactions of children in their environment and through any other lapse in a safety / security process.

We as adults must understand that the school going age is a very vulnerable period and we have a challenging task in hand to shape our young population. It is time that school safety protocols, prevention programmes, provision of parental and students' counseling become part of the learning environment and is strongly systematized. From the recruitment policy involving background checks to attention on personal safety programs – all of this needs rigorous and systemic work. We must also be ready to take on newer challenges knocking at the door – bullying, exposure to cyber crime, influence of adult and peer behaviour and misinformation being available on fingertips through mobile technology.

In the recent past we have seen a series of guidelines issued by various departments – MHRD, Ministry of Transport and Highways, NIDM etc. After the infamous Gurgaon school incident the Supreme Court has also asked the centre to frame safety guidelines for all schools – public as well as private. National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has also released a Manual on Safety and Security of Children in School in 2017 which largely looks at all the aspects of protection and adopts from various previously existing guidelines. Delhi, Haryana, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Orissa are a few States that have come out with safety guidelines for schools. While this is a welcome step and should be executed in its true spirit without dilution or delay, one should remember that along with the piece of paper, there is another huge battle in the offing – one of changing mindsets and looking at children's protection as serious business. A strong will and rigorous monitoring system is required to implement such safety guidelines.

With this there is a great need to bridge the gap in training and sensitisation among all staff and stakeholders who come in contact with children. The need is that of taking measures at war-footing – conducting trainings and refresher trainings, investing in additional resources wherever required – and not just looking at stronger locks in gates, installing CCTVs and hiring more security personnel. For every safety lapse, we pay a huge price. The amount of investment in minimizing these risks is also huge but that investment cannot wait.

Our programs with parents and responsible adults at CRY – Child Rights and You, emphasizes on the need to communicate with the children and becoming sensible and attentive adults. Parents need to take time out to be with family and get involved with children, not to suspect all but keep watching the child; listen, understand and develop their trust with them; trust them and make them feel most important. It is also important to keep an eye on transportation and all public spaces frequented by children (school buses, tuition centres, hobby classes, playgrounds etc.)

Parents and guardians must stay in contact with the school authorities and teachers. They must also ask for school safety policies and regulations and not hesitate to ask if they have any concerns regarding the safety of children. Attending parent/teacher meetings on a routine basis, talking about the child's daily activities in school surely helps in bridging the gap between parents and teachers. Of course, all of this should be done in a very sensitive and child friendly manner.

We as adults and society fall short in recognising that child abuse essentially consists of a myriad of causes, factors and myths. Thinking that it doesn't happen, trying to sweep it under the carpet, being silent about it, assuming that everyone including the child will forget about it sooner or later, actually proliferate the issue. We must make efforts to understand children, listen to them, acknowledge their discomforts and be aware of legalities related to child abuse. Assuming that the closer circles are safest for children doesn't help and this myth must be broken.

We as adults must build the trust of the child, shed the tendency of silencing the issue and make the child believe that they will be heard and protected after any disclosure of abuse. The solution therefore, lies in prevention of child abuse, equipping schools to ensure safety of children, empowering children, parents and society to avert and stop the acts that has harmful, deep rooted, disruptive and long term effects on the psyche of a child and society at large.

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