

ABUSE OF DISABLED CHILDREN & ITS PREVENTION – A REVIEW

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Abstract

A child of any age, sex, race, religion, and socioeconomic background can fall victim to child abuse and neglect. The violence against disabled children is an age-old problem, but the problem still persists. Disabled children are often targeted by abusers, who see them as easy victims. According to researchers, children with physical, sensory, intellectual or mental health impairment are at increased risk of becoming victims of violence. Lack of education, lack of self-esteem and self-advocacy skills, lack of understanding of social norms and appropriate behavior and communication difficulties are strong contributing factors to the high incidence of abuse among the population. This article is reformulation and an editorial outcry about the abuse of the disabled children and it recommends ways of dealing with the newly rediscovered sociomedical problem. We should try to be supportive and helpful to someone you love who is suffering from the effects of child abuse but it will be very difficult and challenging. Just be there by their side to know what they went through and bring up feelings of sadness, helplessness, frustration, and anger.

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Introduction

Vulnerability of disabled children is an age-old problem for which we have documentary records for as long as we have had recorded history, but the problem has been intermittently rediscovered and forgotten.

Cultural, religious and popular social beliefs often assume that a child is born with a disability or becomes disabled after birth as the result of a curse, 'bad blood', an incestuous relationships, a sin committed in a previous

incarnation or a sin committed by that child's parents or other family members.¹

A disabled child is more likely to face violence and abuse at birth and this increased risk for violence reappears throughout the life span. This violence compounds social, educational and economic marginalization that limits the lives and opportunities of these children. Disabled children living in remote and rural areas may be at increased risk of violence.^{2,3,4}

This article is reformulation and an editorial outcry about the abuse of the disabled children and it recommends ways of dealing with the newly rediscovered sociomedical problem.

Disability is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity

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limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations.^{5,6,7}

Disabilities are usually classified as severe, moderate and mild, as assessed by the individual's need for support, which may be lifelong.

Persons in the mild category may be able to live independently and participate in lifelong employment.

Moderate category persons will, most often, need varying levels of support from their families or from community agencies.

The severe category persons are more likely to have very high levels of dependence with many requiring intensive supports as activities of daily living is generally quite limited or non-existent.^{8,9}

Background

The amount of research available on this population is extremely limited, particularly for disabled children in the developing world. The violence against disabled children occurs at an annual rate of 1.7 times greater than their non-disabled peers.^{10,11}

According to UN Enable, around 10% of the world's populations, 650 million people, live with disabilities. Women and girls with disabilities are particularly at a risk of abuse. According to a UNICEF survey, 30% of street youth are disabled. Some countries where Infant Mortality Rates are high, mortality rates for children with disabilities is as high as 80%.^{10,11}

In India children with disabilities mainly comes under the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment. Some of the issues are dealt by the health ministry. But no single ministry has been assigned for the protection of these children, which leads to varying data about occurrence of disability amongst children. In India 1.67% of the 0-19 age group population has a disability and 35.29% of all people living with disabilities are children.¹² Other estimates say that India has 12 million children living with disabilities. Only 1% of children with disabilities have access to school and one third of most disabilities are preventable. 80% of such children with disabilities will not survive beyond the age of forty.¹¹

What is abuse?

Abuse is a general term comprising of several types namely child abuse, wife abuse, husband abuse, geriatric abuse and so on. In the present paper we describe about child abuse.

"Child abuse" can be defined as causing or permitting any harmful or offensive contact on a child's body; and, any communication or transaction of any kind which humiliates, shames, or frightens the child. Some child development experts go a bit further, and define child abuse as any act or omission, which fails to nurture or in the upbringing of the children.

Different types of Abuse in disabled children

Abuse is a significant issue for people with disabilities, and as a group they are regarded as vulnerable people in most jurisdictions. Common types of abuse include:

Physical abuse (withholding food, hitting, punching, pushing, etc.)

Sexual abuse

Psychological or emotional abuse (verbal abuse, shaming etc)

Financial abuse (charging unnecessary fees, holding onto pensions, wages, etc.)

Legal or civil abuse (restricted access to services)

Systemic abuse (denied access to an appropriate service due to perceived support needs)^{8, 10, 12}

Disabled children are vulnerable at

At the home and family

- Infanticide/Mercy Killing
- Physical violence, sexual, emotional and/or verbal abuse of disabled children
- Abuse by support staff within the home

At Educational and Custodial Settings

- Violence in schools
- Violence inside the classroom
- Violence in hostels or boarding

At the workplace

- Forced to work as beggars
- Sent to the brothel for prostitution
- Made to work as a precursor to disability^{13, 14}

Why are disabled children abused?

Lack of education, lack of self-esteem & self-advocacy skills, lack of understanding of social norms & appropriate behavior and communication difficulties are strong contributing factors to the high incidence of abuse among this population.¹⁵ The different systems that operate abuse initially and then continue?

The carer exploits intimate care as an opportunity to abuse.

Ineffective communication between child, carer and parents might contribute. Society's devaluation and diminution of the disabled child's status.

Children with disabilities are known to be at higher risk for abuse, because they may be perceived as “easy victims.” Abuse toward disabled children is less likely to be investigated or persecuted, which means abusers know it is easier to escape consequences even if the abuse is discovered.^{15, 16, 17}

Disabled children may also be targeted for child murder, either because parents perceive them as bringing shame to the family or because adults may be convinced they will be “better off” dead than disabled.^{18, 19}

The Criminal Justice System

The disabled children are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. They often fare far worse than their non-disabled peers. Lack of response to disabled children by the police, judges and court systems further compounds the risks faced by disabled children. Such lack of response is manifested in two ways:

- 1. Inaccessibility of legal services:** In many countries, the criminal justice system is inaccessible to those with disabilities.
 - a. Police stations and court houses that can only be entered by steps are inaccessible to wheelchair users.
 - b. Lack of sign language interpreters for deaf individuals from reporting crimes.
 - c. Lack of explanation and support for individuals with intellectual disabilities or mental health problems
- 2. Inaccessibility of related services:** Domestic violence shelters, drug and alcohol intervention programs, and other community-based programs specifically designed to address behaviors and practices

strongly associated with violence, are often inaccessible to those with disabilities.

Lack of knowledge about disability within the legal system: Charges of violence or rape from individuals with a disability are dismissed by the police or judges who are unfamiliar with disability –with the assumption that a 'misunderstanding' has occurred or that individuals with disability are easily confused. Even more troubling is the assumption that a child or adolescent with disability is unable to tell 'right' from 'wrong' or to decide themselves what they want and do not want done to their bodies. Even when police, lawyers and judges recognize that violence or rape is no less traumatic for the disabled child, it is often assumed that they will not make good witnesses on their own behalf, and they are discouraged to go against the accused/abuser.^{19,20,21}

Society's attitude towards disabilities

Stigma and prejudice allows some members of the community to see disabled children as easy targets of rage, anger or sexual aggression. Throughout the past history, people with disabilities have been viewed as incapable and incompetent in their capacity for decision-making and development.²² Until the Enlightenment in Europe, care and asylum was provided by families and the church (in monasteries and other religious communities), focusing on the provision of basic physical needs such as food, shelter and clothing.

Person Centered Planning and Person Centered Approaches are seen as methods of addressing the socially devalued people, encouraging a focus on the person as someone with capacities and gifts, as well as support needs.

Support and services

The support services are provided by government agencies, non-governmental organizations and by private sectors. Support services are funded through government block funding, through individualized funding packages or privately by the individual. There are also a number of non-profit agencies dedicated to enriching the lives of people living with developmental disabilities and erasing the barriers they have to being included in their community.

Employment support usually consists of two types:

The specific programs to increase the skills needed for successful employment, one-to-one or small group support for the job training, or support after a transition period.

The provision of specific employment opportunities within segregated business services. It include mailing and packaging services, cleaning, gardening and landscaping, timberwork, metal fabrication, farming and sewing.^{8,10}

Support from home and community

The people with disabilities live in the general community, either with family members, in group homes or in their own homes. The support range from one-to-one assistance from a support worker with aspects of daily living such as cooking, cleaning, personal care such as showering, dressing and the administration of medication.

Recognizing the safety issues (such as responding to a fire or using a telephone) or for people with potentially dangerous

medical conditions (such as asthma or diabetes) who are unable to manage their conditions without assistance.

Most programs offering at home and community support are designed with the goal of increasing the individual's independence, although people with more severe disabilities may never be able to achieve full independence in some areas of daily life.¹⁵

Advocacy

Advocacy is an active support for a special cause. Advocacy groups exist in most jurisdictions, working collaboratively with disabled children for change in individuals. Most advocacy groups also work to support people, throughout the world, to increase their capacity for self-advocacy, teaching the skills necessary for people to advocate for their own needs.

Other types of support

Other types of support for people with disabilities may include:

- therapeutic services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, massage, aromatherapy, art, dance/movement or music therapy
- supported holidays
- short-stay respite services (for people who live with family members)
- transport services, such as dial-a-ride or free bus passes
- specialist behavior support services, such as high-security services for people with high-level, high-risk challenging behaviors
- specialist relationships and sex education services

Recommendations

The following recommendations are for families, communities, policy makers, governments, advocates, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or Civil Society Organizations, United Nations agencies, and other stakeholders with an interest in preventing violence toward disabled children.

“Society has created a situation in which children who are disabled are taught to be good victims”, as told by Kennedy so, there should be a collaborative efforts to be made by government, civil society or advocacy to eliminate violence against disabled children. The recommendations for intervention and improvement in services and programs at the different levels to drive these components forward are listed below:

Society level

Needs a shift in values, attitudes and awareness in the society.

Disabled people should be recognized and valued as equal citizens with equal rights.

Individuals recognize and act on their responsibility towards removing the barriers in society

The safeguarding of disabled children should be given utmost priority.

Community level

A choice of safe and accessible community and leisure services.

Effective networks and support systems.

Flexible support in response to the individual's need value for the views of the disabled child.

Policies and practices within schools to safeguard, respect and empower disabled children. These should include for example; intimate care, management of behaviour; recruitment and screening of staff; staff

training and supervision and consultation with disabled children and young people.

Care taker level

Improved co-ordinated and inter-agency planned support for care takers

Holistic assessments of need that attach a value to the child's religious and cultural needs

Raising awareness of care takers to the vulnerability of disabled children, indicators of abuse and of their potential role in safeguarding

Communication with the child and taking the active steps to remove barriers and promote communication

Training, supervision and appraisal of staff.

Individual level

Empowerment of child or young person through seeking their views wishes and feelings, ensuring choice, provision of opportunities

Sex Education and safety and awareness work

Sadly, in a world where the disabled child rarely is treated the same as the non-disabled child, one of the few arenas in which they find themselves on equal footing is as victims of violence. Where is our humanity gone? Where is the respect for the fellow human beings who come in this world as we come, but suffer a lot from the people in the same society? The growing list of shameful acts of violence and torture against disabled children should come to an end. The discrimination between the disabled and non-disabled children should be removed and their rights to dignity, equality and freedom should be insisted by the others in the society.

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