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Prevalence of child abuse in Kerala, India: An ICAST-CH based survey



Manoj Therayil Kumar^{a,b,*}, Nilamadhab Kar^c, Sebind Kumar^d

^a Institute for Mind and Brain (InMind Hospital), Thrissur, Kerala, India

^b Keele University, UK

^c Black Country Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, Wolverhampton, UK

^d Govt. Medical College, Alappuzha, Kerala, India

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ABSTRACT

Background: Child abuse is a major concern in India with frequent reports of extreme maltreatment and fatalities. A dearth of robust and methodologically sound studies has resulted in ambiguity regarding the extent of child abuse in the general population.

Objectives: To estimate the one-year and lifelong prevalence of exposure to violence, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect using a validated instrument—the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) Child Abuse Screening Tool – Child, Home Version (ICAST-CH).

Participants and Setting: Adolescents (n = 6957) attending randomly selected schools in one city in Kerala, India.

Methods: Cross-sectional survey using self-report instrument.

Results: The one-year prevalence of any abuse was 89.9% (95% CI: 89.1–90.7) suggesting that child maltreatment was widespread. Physical and emotional abuses were also very common. Although sexual abuse was least common, a considerable proportion of adolescents reported it; one-year prevalence of sexual abuse was 16.7% and lifetime prevalence was 19.9%. Boys reported more abuse than girls across all the categories of abuse (including sexual abuse). Abuse was more frequent in the higher age groups and classes at school. Abuse was also more frequent in nuclear families and families that reported alcohol use. Children who reported an abusive experience usually faced more than one category of abuse; abuse in one category was significantly associated with abuse in other categories.

Conclusions: Abuse of children is alarmingly common. There is an urgent need for improving the awareness surrounding this issue as it is a major public health challenge faced by the country. The priority should be on setting up easily accessible support services for children.

1. Introduction

Childhood abuse is a major stress that affects young individuals and it often has a lifelong negative impact. A range of physical and mental health problems are associated with childhood abuse; these include common mental disorders, PTSD, self-injurious behaviour, personality pathology, psychosis, and sexually transmitted diseases (Bourgeois, Lecomte, & Daigneault, 2018) Charak & Koot, 2015; Liu, Scopelliti, Pittman, & Zamora, 2018; Fernandes, Hayes, & Patel, 2013; van Duin et al., 2018). Additionally,

* Corresponding author at: Institute for Mind and Brain (InMind Hospital), Thrissur, Kerala, India.

E-mail addresses: mkumar2@nhs.net, manojtherayil@gmail.com (M.T. Kumar), nmadhab@yahoo.com (N. Kar), sebind@gmail.com (S. Kumar).

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childhood abuse is associated with early mortality in adults (Bellis et al., 2015; Kelly-Irving et al., 2013). Prevention and early recognition of all forms of child abuse and identification of the settings in which abuse occurs are crucial given the serious and long-lasting negative effects.

Global studies suggest that 25 to 50% of children experience physical abuse; around 20% of girls and 5–10% of boys experience sexual abuse (World Health Organization & International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse & Neglect, 2006). Nearly 20% of the world's children, i.e., 440 million children, live in India. Child abuse, particularly sexual abuse, is a major concern in India (Moirangthem, Kumar, & Math, 2015; Singh, Parsekar, & Nair, 2014). Though the magnitude of potential abuse is huge, only a few Indian studies have used robust methodology and standardised instruments. Therefore, the results of most Indian studies cannot be compared with findings elsewhere. Prevalence of sexual abuse reported in India in children and adolescents ranges from 3.4% to 36% (Banerjee, 2001; Hasnain & Kumar, 2006). Prevalence of physical abuse varies from 21.9% to 42.6% and prevalence of emotional abuse varies from 20.9% to 37.9% (Daral, Khokhar, & Pradhan, 2016; Deb & Modak, 2010). Neglect has been reported by 40.1% of girls (Daral et al., 2016). In a sample of runaway boys, domestic violence was reported by 62%, physical abuse by 72%, and sexual abuse by 35% (Bhat, Singh, & Meena, 2012). A National sample study reported that two out of three children were physically abused. Additionally, 53.2% of children reported facing one or more forms of sexual abuse with 21.9% facing severe forms of sexual abuse. Furthermore, 5.7% of the respondents reported being sexually assaulted (Kacker, Varadan, & Kumar, 2007). Differences in study population, methodologies, and tools explain the huge variation in reported prevalence.

Currently, there are no published studies from India that evaluate abuse in home settings using internationally validated instruments. We report the results from a large cross-sectional survey covering a geographically defined area in India; our survey uses internationally validated questionnaires.

2. Methods

The various forms of child abuse were assessed through a cross-sectional survey of school going adolescents; an internationally validated instrument was used for the study.

2.1. Study site

The survey was conducted in Thrissur, a city in the southern Indian state of Kerala. The city has a population of around 316,000 (according to the 2011 census) with an average literacy of 97% ("Thrissur City Population Census, 2011 | Kerala," 2011; Thrissur City Population Census, 2011 | Kerala, 2011). There are 39 high schools in Thrissur Corporation with around 15,150 students studying in classes 8–10.

2.2. Participants

All the schools in the city were listed and the random number generation function in excel was used to select 50% of the schools on the list. All students enrolled in classes 8–10 (last 3 years in high school which is equivalent to year 9–11 in the UK) who attended the selected schools on the day of the survey were eligible to participate in the study.

2.3. Survey procedures

Prior to the survey, all the high school teachers were trained on child protection issues. Local arrangements were also strengthened to provide support to any child who sought help after the survey. Each school had an identified teacher to support a student seeking help. Teachers were assisted by a resource team comprising psychologists and psychiatrists.

Students and parents were provided with information about the survey beforehand in the local language (Malayalam). The anonymous nature of the survey was highlighted and respondents were also specifically advised not to give any identifiable details. Students could opt out of the survey by not participating or by returning blank forms.

The survey was conducted during school hours in the classroom setting. On the day of the survey, teachers read out standard information about the survey in each classroom. The survey took 15–20 minutes to complete. Students were provided information about the support services at their school and direct access to a local child helpline.

2.4. Measures

International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) Child Abuse Screening Tool - Child, Home Version (ICAST-CH) was used for the survey. It was developed by ISPCAN in association with WHO and UNICEF. ICAST assesses all forms of abusive experiences in the home environment. The ICAST tool is designed for use with individuals aged 11–18 years. The questions cover various types of verbal abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect over the lifetime of the respondent and during the past year. ICAST-CH has the following dimensions: exposure to violence (7 items), emotional abuse (8 items), neglect (6 items), physical abuse (9 items), and sexual abuse (6 items). ICAST-CH is an internationally validated tool and has been shown to identify high rates of child victimization in all domains with moderate to high internal consistency (Zolotor et al., 2009). Children and adolescents answer the questions themselves once confidentiality and anonymity is assured by teachers.

The ICAST-CH was translated into the local language (Malayalam) following standard translation procedures including back

translation by bilingual experts; the process involved psychologists and school teachers. The translated version was piloted among a group of students. Issues identified during the process were addressed using the consensus method.

In addition to the items of ICAST-CH questionnaire, we added few specific questions about different type of abuses, e.g. sexual abuse experiences outside home, during travel, while on phone or internet. As poor school performance is often the cause of abuse at home, we asked specifically about physical or emotional abuse in relation to it.

The survey also included data on socio-demographic variables such as gender, age, religion, family type (nuclear or joint), accommodation (own, rented, living with relatives), parental occupation, and socioeconomic status of the family.

2.5. Ethical approval

The Education Department of the Government of Kerala granted approval to conduct the study. The project was considered as a non-interventional survey and was approved by the institutional ethics committee of the OpenMind Centre, Thrissur, Kerala. Individual school authorities and parents were given advance information about the study. The pre-survey leaflets and the data collection form highlighted the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymous nature of data collection, options to opt out, and available support systems. This was reiterated verbally by the teachers and research assistants before the data collection process.

2.6. Data preparation

Data was entered into excel and checked for accuracy. The data entry was re-checked for randomly selected records. Issues regarding encoding, interpretation, inconsistencies, and inaccuracies of data were addressed by corroborating with documentation in the survey papers. Missing values were not included in the analysis.

2.7. Analysis

All abuse-related questions in the scale had four categorised responses – “many times”, “sometimes”, “never”, and “not in the last year but this has happened”; the rater was required to select only one option from those listed above. The responses were categorised into one year and lifetime prevalence. Responses of “many times” or “sometimes” were included in the “one-year prevalence” category and responses of “many times” or “sometimes” or “not in the last year but this has happened” formed the “lifetime prevalence of abuse” category. Internal consistency of the translated scale for this sample was measured using Cronbach’s alpha. All analyses were performed using SPSS version 24.

3. Results

There were 6957 participants in the survey. There were 2071 (30.1%) males and 4810 (69.9%) females in the final sample and the gender data was missing for 76 participants (1.1%). The mean age (SD) of the participants was 13.9 (1.12) for males and 13.7 (0.99)

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

Variables	Categories	Male %	Female %	Total %
Age categories	up to 13	38.0	45.8	43.5
	14-15	55.5	52.5	53.4
	16 and above	6.5	1.7	3.1
School Year / Class	8	38.6	35.8	36.7
	9	33.9	32.9	33.2
	10	27.5	31.3	30.2
Religion	Hindu	47.1	51.5	50.2
	Muslim	6.7	4.1	4.9
	Christian	45.9	44.2	44.7
	Others	0.3	0.2	0.2
Family status	Nuclear	40.6	54.9	52.6
	Joint	59.4	45.1	47.4
Accommodation	Own	81.8	84.4	83.6
	Rented	14.1	10.8	11.8
	Relatives'	2.7	2.9	2.8
	Other	1.4	1.8	1.7
Employment status of father	Unemployed	2.2	3.1	2.8
	Employed	97.8	96.9	97.2
Employment status of mother	Unemployed	66.3	66.9	66.7
	Employed	33.7	33.1	33.3
Socioeconomic status	Lower	44.5	43.2	43.6
	Middle	47.3	46.1	46.5
	Upper	8.2	10.7	10.0

Table 2
One year and lifetime prevalence of different types of abuse in different genders.

Categories of abuse	One year prevalence				Lifetime prevalence			
	Male	Female	Total	95% CI	Male	Female	Total	95% CI
Exposure to violence	48.3	47.7	47.9	46.7–49.1	59.3	57.0	57.6	56.5–58.8
Physical abuse	73.1	69.8#	70.8	69.7–71.9	76.1	73.0#	73.9	72.9–75.0
Emotional abuse	78.2	69.4†	72.0	70.9–73.1	79.5	70.8†	73.4	72.3–74.4
Neglect	68.1	65.1*	66.0	64.9–67.1	69.3	65.9#	66.9	65.8–68.1
Sexual abuse	30.9	10.8†	16.7	15.8–17.6	34.2	14.0†	19.9	18.9–20.9
Any Abuse	91.5	89.3*	89.9	89.1–90.7	92.6	90.4#	91.0	90.2–91.7

Figures are in percentages; CI: Confidence Interval *P < 0.05; # p < 0.01, †p < 0.001.

for females. None of the students refused to participate in the survey and none of the forms were returned completely blank.

The sample characteristics are provided in Table 1. Nearly half of the students were from joint families (47.4%). The vast majority were living in own homes (83.6%). Two-thirds of mothers were unemployed while 97.2% of fathers were employed. Regular alcohol or drug use by a family member at home was reported by 10.8% of the participants. Alcohol use was most frequently (88.1%) attributed to the father.

Table 2 lists the one year and lifetime prevalence of abusive experiences for both genders. Abuse is categorised as exposure to violence, emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. If abuse was reported in response to at least one item from the set of questions pertaining to a particular abuse category, the response was considered positive for that category of abuse. We also evaluated the frequencies of “many times” and “sometimes” responses for individual items listed under the different categories of abuse (Table 3). Internal consistency of the Malayalam version measured by Cronbach’s alpha was 0.873 for the whole scale; the Cronbach’s alpha for subscales for different categories of abuse was: exposure to violence 0.483, physical abuse 0.703, emotional abuse 0.771, neglect 0.625, and sexual abuse 0.818.

3.1. Categories of abuse

3.1.1. Exposure to violence

Nearly half of the students (47.9%) reported some exposure to violence in the past year; witnessing arguments and fights of adults were the most common forms of exposure to violence. A considerable proportion of adolescents observed adults fighting (21.3% “sometimes” and 6.1% “many times”) and 8.9% students were exposed to occasional burglary. Males and females did not differ significantly on exposure to violence.

3.1.2. Physical abuse

Hitting, beating, or slapping with a hand was the commonest physical abuse at home. Nearly half (47.4%) of the respondents experienced this “sometimes” and 15.6% experienced this “many times”. Other common forms of physical abuse were: hitting with a stick, belt, or other objects; and pulling hair, pinching or twisting ears.

3.1.3. Emotional abuse

Shouting about poor performance in school examinations is reported as the commonest form of emotional abuse and is experienced by around half of the adolescents. Shouting, name calling, and shaming were other common forms of emotional abuse. Bullying by other children (at home) was also common and was reported “sometimes” by 22.7% of the respondents and “many times” by 7.7%.

3.1.4. Neglect

More than half of the adolescents reported occasional experience of spending time at home without adult supervision. Another common form of neglect was the feeling of not being loved (i.e. no one helping, supporting, and looking after when it was most needed); this was reported by 15.4% of respondents. A considerable minority (10.4%) of children occasionally felt that they were not important in their homes.

3.1.5. Sexual abuse

Feeling upset by others (at home) speaking in a sexual way was reported by 7.2% of respondents. Similar experience outside the home was reported by 5.7% of respondents. Sexual touching while travelling by bus (5.0%) and while being outside the home (4.1%) were other commonly reported experiences. Forced sexual act was reported by 2.7% of boys and 0.5% of girls.

It was observed that the presence of abuse in one modality was significantly ($p < 0.001$) associated with abuse in other modalities for both one year and lifetime prevalence. Fig. 1 presents the prevalence of different types of abuse in one year and their associations with other types of abuse.

Fig. 2 depicts the proportion of adolescents who have experienced different types of abuse during their lifetime. While nearly one in 10 adolescents had not experienced any abuse in their lifetime (9.0%), a considerable proportion (12.2%) had experienced all the five types of abuse in their lifetime. About 29% of participants reported experiencing four types of abuse. Most children had multiple

Table 3
Frequency of abuse in the last one year (“sometimes”, “many times”) in different genders.

Categories and items of abuse	Male		Female		Total	
	Many times	Sometimes	Many times	Sometimes	Many times	Sometimes
Exposure to violence						
Threatened by adults who use alcohol/other substances	1.6	7.9	0.5	4.2	0.8	5.3
Witnessed adults argue	6.0	21.6	5.3	24.7	5.5	23.8
Witnessed adults fight	6.5	18.3	6.0	22.5	6.1	21.3
Witnessed adults use/ threaten with implements	1.3	2.4	0.8	2.3	0.9	2.4
Murder in neighbourhood	1.6	3.5	1.5	2.9	1.5	3.0
Riots in neighborhood	1.3	3.2	0.5	2.4	0.8	2.6
Experienced burglary	4.0	9.7	2.7	8.6	3.0	8.9
Range of frequency	1.3–6.5	2.4–21.6	0.5–6.0	2.3–24.7	0.8–6.1	2.4–23.8
Mean frequency	3.2	9.5	2.5	9.7	2.7	9.6
Physical abuse						
Pushed or kicked	4.3	11.7	2.5	10.5	3.0	10.9
Hit with hands	16.7	44.3	15.1	48.7	15.6	47.4
Hit with stick / belt/others	10.6	28.4	4.2	19.0	6.1	21.8
Suffocated	0.6	2.2	0.1	0.9	0.3	1.3
Burned	0.9	2.4	0.2	0.9	0.4	1.4
Kept tied or locked	0.4	1.6	0.1	0.9	0.2	1.1
Pulled hair/pinched ears	8.1	22.1	4.6	19.9	5.6	20.6
Forced to do home chores	1.1	4.8	0.8	3.6	0.9	3.9
Threatened with knife	0.3	1.8	0.2	1.0	0.2	1.2
Punished physically (for poor exam performance)	3.2	16.8	1.2	9.6	1.8	11.7
Range of frequency	0.3–16.7	1.6–44.3	0.1–15.2	0.9–48.7	0.2–15.6	1.1–47.4
Mean frequency	4.6	13.6	2.9	11.5	3.4	12.1
Emotional abuse						
Shout	9.4	29.8	7.0	29.7	7.7	29.7
Name calling	15.3	29.7	6.3	19.6	9.0	22.6
Shamed in front of others	5.3	21.6	3.8	17.7	4.2	18.9
Being told as ‘better dead’	3.3	7.5	3.1	8.9	3.1	8.5
Threaten to abandon	2.7	5.4	1.0	2.8	1.5	3.6
Locked out of home	2.2	8.4	0.4	2.7	1.0	4.4
Threatened to hurt or kill	3.6	8.5	1.2	6.5	2.0	7.1
Bullying by other children (home)	9.5	21.1	6.9	22.7	7.7	22.2
Shouting (school performance)	13.8	43.0	8.6	39.5	10.1	40.5
Blaming (for poor school performance)	4.7	18.7	2.8	15.8	3.4	16.7
Range of frequency	2.2–15.3	5.4–43.0	1.0–8.6	2.7–39.5	1.0–10.1	3.6–40.5
Mean frequency	7.0	19.4	4.1	16.6	5.0	17.4
Neglect						
Deprive food	1.2	3.6	0.5	2.5	0.7	2.8
Wear torn clothes	0.6	5.6	0.3	1.9	0.4	3.0
No care when sick	1.3	3.9	0.4	3.9	0.7	3.9
Spent time alone	13.7	47.4	10.5	48.2	11.5	48.0
Felt not cared for	1.8	7.8	1.5	9.0	1.6	8.7
Felt not important	2.4	8.7	2.0	11.1	2.1	10.4
Felt no one loves	2.6	9.6	2.9	13.9	2.8	12.6
Range of frequency	0.6–13.7	3.6–47.4	0.3–10.5	1.9–48.2	0.4–11.5	2.8–48.0
Mean frequency	3.4	12.4	2.6	12.9	2.8	12.8
Sexual abuse						
Sexual talk	5.1	11.1	0.7	2.7	2.0	5.2
Sexual writing	2.0	3.4	0.2	0.9	0.8	1.6
Sexual pictures/videos	3.3	6.7	0.2	1.0	1.1	2.7
Show sexual organs	1.2	2.7	0.4	0.9	0.7	1.4
Touch sexual organs	1.5	4.5	0.5	1.3	0.8	2.3
Make sexual video	0.9	2.1	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.8
Force sexual act	0.9	1.8	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.8
Kiss against your wish	1.2	2.0	0.2	0.7	0.5	1.1
Sexual talk (off home)	3.5	9.3	0.5	2.2	1.4	4.3
Sexual touch (off home)	1.9	4.4	0.4	2.7	0.9	3.2
Sexual touch (Bus)	1.1	4.6	1.0	3.8	1.0	4.0
Sexual advance (phone)	1.2	1.6	0.3	0.7	0.6	0.9
Sex books (off home)	3.1	6.4	0.0	0.4	0.9	2.2
Internet sexual advance	2.9	5.2	0.1	0.3	1.0	1.8
Range of frequency	1.1–5.1	1.6–11.1	0.1–1.0	0.2–3.8	0.4–2.0	0.8–5.2
Mean frequency	2.1	4.7	0.3	1.3	0.9	2.3

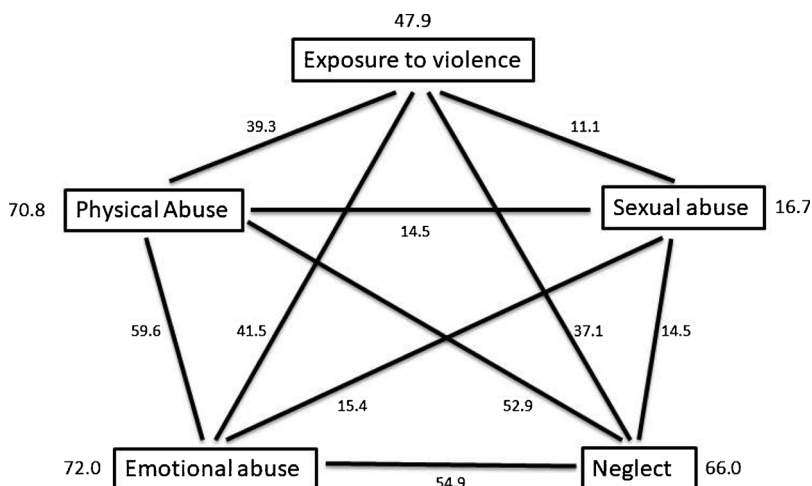


Fig. 1. Associations between different categories of abuse (one year prevalence) Figures are in percentages P < 0.001.

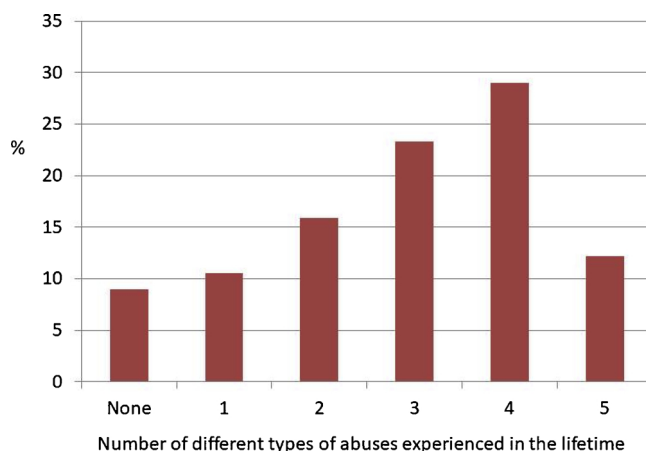


Fig. 2. Number of different types of abuses experienced by the adolescents in the lifetime.

types of abusive experiences.

3.2. Abuses in different sociodemographic categories

As observed in Table 4, boys reported all forms of abuse more frequently than girls. The gender difference in prevalence figures was statistically significant in all categories except the exposure to violence. A higher proportion of older adolescents (i.e., those in higher classes at school) reported abuse. Abuse was reported significantly more frequently by adolescents from religions other than Hindu and those from nuclear families. There was no difference based on accommodation, employment status of parents, or socioeconomic status of the family.

Regular alcohol use by adults in the family was significantly ($p < 0.001$) associated with the report of abuse; prevalence figures of abuse comparing adolescents with or without such family history are 98.0% versus 88.9% (one year) and 98.8% versus 90.0% (lifetime), respectively.

3.3. Predicting factors of abuse

The variables were analysed using binary logistic regression to identify factors that predict abuse. Lifetime abuse experience was dichotomised as “abused” or “not-abused”, irrespective of the type of abuse experienced by a respondent. Only a small number of adolescents belonged to the category “other religion” and this category was excluded from calculations. Lifetime abuse was significantly related to regular alcohol use at home, Christian religion, and nuclear family; the odds of abuse were less in the lower years at school compared to the higher years (Table 5).

Table 4
One-year prevalence of abuse in different sociodemographic groups.

Variables	Categories	Not abused	Abused
Gender*	Male	8.5	91.5
	Female	10.7	89.3
Age#	13	12.5	87.5
	14–15	8.9	91.1
	16 +	4.8	95.2
	8	12.7	87.3
School Year / Class#	9	10.2	89.8
	10	7.2	92.8
	Hindu	12.1	87.9
Religion#	Muslim	10.0	90.0
	Christian	8.1	91.9
	Others	0.0	100.0
	Nuclear	8.3	91.7
Family structure#	Joint	11.2	88.8
	Own	10.2	89.8
Accommodation	Rented	10.3	89.7
	Relatives'	7.8	92.2
	Others	6.4	93.6
	Unemployed	12.1	87.9
Employment status of father	Employed	10.0	90.0
	Unemployed	10.0	90.0
Employment status of mother	Employed	9.9	90.1
	Low	9.6	90.4
	Medium	10.6	89.4
Socioeconomic status	High	9.8	90.2
	Absent	8.6	91.4
	Present	10.7	89.3
Grandmother*	Absent	9.7	90.3
	Present	10.1	89.9

* P < 0.05.

P < 0.01; Figures are in percentages.

Table 5
Binary logistic regression of predicting factors for lifetime abuse experiences.

Variables	Reference category	Compared category	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% CI for EXP(B)	
									Lower CI	Upper CI
Gender	Females	Male	0.365	0.236	2.397	1	0.122	1.441	0.907	2.288
Age categories	Up to 13	14-15	0.156	0.217	0.517	1	0.472	1.169	0.764	1.788
		16 and above	1.177	1.037	1.287	1	0.257	3.244	0.425	24.775
Class	10	8	-0.571	0.281	4.133	1	0.042	0.565	0.326	0.980
		9	-0.451	0.212	4.498	1	0.034	0.637	0.420	0.966
Accommodation	Other	Own house	-0.196	0.609	0.103	1	0.748	0.822	0.249	2.715
		Rented	-0.161	0.644	0.063	1	0.802	0.851	0.241	3.009
		Relatives	0.448	0.800	0.313	1	0.576	1.565	0.326	7.499
Religion	Hindu	Muslim	0.212	0.324	0.428	1	0.513	1.236	0.655	2.333
		Christian	0.598	0.152	15.529	1	0.000	1.819	1.351	2.449
Family	Joint	Nuclear	0.307	0.141	4.743	1	0.029	1.359	1.031	1.792
Alcohol use at home	No	Yes	1.391	0.424	10.773	1	0.001	4.018	1.751	9.221
Job status of father	Employed	Unemployed	0.625	0.478	1.705	1	0.192	1.867	0.731	4.769
Job status of mother	Employed	Unemployed	-0.028	0.153	0.034	1	0.854	0.972	0.720	1.312
Socioeconomic status	High	Low	-0.090	0.241	0.139	1	0.710	0.914	0.569	1.467
		Middle	-0.148	0.241	0.377	1	0.539	0.862	0.538	1.383
Constant			2.459	0.686	12.862	1	0.000	11.688		

CI: Confidence interval.

Table 6
Abuse and age category of abusers.

Perpetrator age group	Male Adult	Child/adolescent	Both	Female Adult	Child/adolescent	Both	Total Adult	Child/adolescent	Both	p
Emotional abuse										
Shout	69.2	23.1	6.8	53.1	36.2	8.0	58.1	32.1	7.6	0.000
Name calling	21.7	70.4	7.9	45.0	42.0	13.0	35.3	53.8	10.9	0.000
Shaming	41.2	41.9	16.8	51.4	29.1	19.5	47.9	33.5	18.6	0.000
Being told better dead	46.0	39.6	13.4	43.1	36.5	17.0	44.0	37.4	15.9	0.180
Threatened to abandon	87.8	5.1	7.1	86.1	6.0	8.0	86.8	5.6	7.6	0.888
Locked out of home	60.5	31.5	7.6	50.9	36.4	9.8	56.0	33.8	8.6	0.059
Threatened to hurt or kill you	78.1	13.0	8.9	88.1	6.7	5.3	84.0	9.2	6.8	0.004
Average	57.8	32.1	9.8	59.7	27.6	11.5	58.9	29.3	10.9	
Physical abuse										
Pushed down	46.1	45.8	8.1	38.7	54.0	7.3	41.2	51.1	7.6	0.051
Beaten by hand	84.1	7.1	8.8	82.1	9.2	8.7	82.7	8.6	8.8	0.112
Hit by stick/belt	92.8	2.3	4.9	91.0	3.3	5.7	91.7	2.9	5.4	0.314
Suffocated	31.1	50.8	18.0	55.6	33.3	11.1	44.4	41.4	14.3	0.018
Burned/scalded	80.0	7.8	12.2	82.8	11.5	5.7	81.4	9.6	9.0	0.255
Kept tied	64.2	20.8	15.1	69.6	23.2	7.1	67.0	22.0	11.0	0.415
Pulled hair/pinched/twisted ear	68.2	20.3	11.5	61.2	26.8	12.0	63.5	24.6	11.9	0.008
Forced to do home chores	86.8	5.7	7.5	87.2	3.2	9.6	87.0	4.1	8.9	0.516
Threatened with a knife	46.7	35.6	17.8	61.7	33.3	5.0	55.2	34.3	10.5	0.078
Average	66.7	21.8	11.5	70.0	22.0	8.0	68.2	22.1	9.7	
Sexual abuse										
Sexual talk	7.8	87.1	5.1	39.9	51.3	8.8	19.6	74.0	6.5	0.000
Sexual writing	7.1	83.9	8.9	24.0	64.0	10.7	13.9	75.9	9.6	0.004
Showed sexual pictures	12.9	80.6	6.5	50.7	40.0	9.3	22.6	70.2	7.2	0.000
Showed sexual organs	20.0	67.1	12.9	64.4	31.7	3.8	44.4	47.6	7.9	0.000
Touched sexual organs	22.0	68.2	9.8	66.7	26.0	7.3	43.5	47.8	8.6	0.000
Made sexual video	14.3	73.0	12.7	75.0	6.3	18.8	26.6	59.5	13.9	0.000
Forced sexual act	13.7	72.5	13.7	55.9	41.2	2.9	30.6	60.0	9.4	0.000
Kissed against wish	23.9	63.4	12.7	58.9	30.4	10.7	39.4	48.8	11.8	0.000
Sexual talk (off home)	8.3	86.8	4.9	42.3	46.2	11.5	19.5	73.4	7.1	0.000
Sexual touch (off home)	23.4	67.2	9.5	63.9	28.8	7.3	47.0	44.8	8.2	0.000
Sexual touch in bus	58.3	31.5	10.2	74.6	13.5	11.9	69.0	19.7	11.3	0.000
Sexual talk over phone	18.6	62.7	18.6	56.6	22.6	20.8	36.6	43.8	19.6	0.000
Sex books	5.2	89.6	5.2	23.8	61.9	14.3	7.0	86.9	6.1	0.001
Sexual advance through Internet	5.7	88.0	6.3	35.0	40.0	25.0	9.0	82.6	8.4	0.000
Average	17.2	73.0	9.8	52.3	36.0	11.7	30.6	59.6	9.7	

4. Perpetrators

Table 6 lists the age group of the perpetrators of abuse (adults, children/ adolescents, or both) for both males and females. The age group of the perpetrator varied across the different types of abuse.

5. Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in India that uses a well-recognized and validated tool (ICAST-CH) to explore abuse at home. The sample was representative of the school going adolescent population. The results suggest that abusive experiences are widespread in all the different categories of abuse. While emotional abuse was the most common category of abuse in the past year, physical abuse was most common during life time. Sexual abuse was least common amongst all categories; however, a considerable proportion of adolescents reported experiencing sexual abuse. Abusive experience in one modality is significantly associated with abuse in other modalities. Therefore, routine assessments must explore all modalities of abuse.

5.1. Prevalence

Almost 90% of adolescents in our study reported some form of abuse. This is comparable to the 91% reported from a Taiwanese study (Feng, Chang, Chang, Fetzer, & Wang, 2015). However, the figures from our study are higher than the figures reported elsewhere. For example, a study done in four countries (Cambodia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Swaziland) found that 78% of girls and 79% of boys experienced abuse before the age of 18 (Ravi & Ahluwalia, 2017).

5.2. Exposure to violence

Lifetime exposure to violence was reported by 57.6% of the adolescents in our study. In a survey that used the same tool, the figures for lifetime exposure to physical violence in Balkan countries varied between 50.6% and 76.3% (Nikolaidis et al., 2018). The pilot study of the ICAST (Home) instrument among 600 children from four countries (India, Columbia, Russia, and Iceland) found that half of the respondents were exposed to violence (Zolotor et al., 2009). In a study in Saudi Arabia, 50.7% of the respondents reported one year incidence of exposure to violence (Al-Eissa et al., 2015); this is comparable with the 47.9% reported in our study.

5.3. Physical abuse

One year prevalence of physical abuse reported in our study was 70.8% ; this is considerably higher than the 57.5% reported from Saudi Arabia using the ICAST (Al-Eissa et al., 2015). Similarly, the lifetime prevalence of physical abuse reported in our study (73.9%) is much higher than the 36.6% reported from China (Ji & Finkelhor, 2015) and the 44% reported in a retrospective ISPCAN based Italian study that focused on 18–24-year-olds (Prino, Longobardi, & Settanni, 2018).

5.4. Emotional abuse

Lifetime prevalence rate of emotional abuse reported in our study (73.4%) is comparable to the 64.6% reported in the Balkan countries (Nikolaidis et al., 2018), 74.9% reported in Saudi Arabia (Al-Eissa et al., 2016), and 62% identified in a retrospective report in Italy (Prino et al., 2018). However, the figures are considerably higher than the estimated figure of 18.4% for emotional neglect reported in a meta-analysis (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2013).

5.5. Neglect

Lifetime prevalence rate of neglect reported in our study (66.9%) is in contrast to that reported in the Balkan countries (83.2%) and Saudi Arabia (50.2%) (Al-Eissa et al., 2016; Nikolaidis et al., 2018). However, the figures are considerably higher than the 16.3% reported for physical neglect in a 13-study meta-analysis (Stoltenborgh et al., 2013). The neglect reported by the respondents in our study is much higher than the range (24%–47%) reported in the four country pilot study (Zolotor et al., 2009).

5.6. Sexual abuse

A meta-analysis of studies around the world suggests that the prevalence rates of childhood sexual victimization hovers around 12.7% (Stoltenborgh, van IJzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). The one year prevalence in our study (16.7%) is similar to that reported from Taiwan (15%) (Feng et al., 2015). Lifetime experience of sexual abuse among females reported in our study (14%) is comparable with that recorded in a large South African study (14.6%) using the same survey instruments (Ward, Artz, Leoschut, Kassinjee, & Burton, 2018). It is also comparable to the meta-analytic figure for studies from Europe (13.5%) and China (15.3%) (Ji, Finkelhor, & Dunne, 2013; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). However, the proportion of males reporting sexual abuse in this study (34.2%) is very high compared with other reports i.e., 14.3% (South African study) and 5.6% (the summary figure from European studies) (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011; Ward et al., 2018). Although reported figures vary greatly around the world, child sexual abuse is common in all communities and needs further emphasis.

The proportion of males reporting sexual abuse was considerably higher than females; one-year prevalence figures were 30.9% versus 10.8% and lifetime figures were 34.2% versus 14.0%, respectively. This contradicts usual reports where self-reported sexual abuse is more common in females, (Bebbington et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2014; Subramaniyan, Reddy, Chandra, Rao, & Rao, 2017; Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2014; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). However, higher prevalence in males has been reported in other studies from Kerala and elsewhere (Al-Eissa et al., 2016; Krishnakumar, Satheesan, Geeta, & Sureshkumar, 2014; Kumar, Kumar, Singh, & Kar, 2017). Given the psycho socio cultural implications of sexual abuse, there is a possibility of under-reporting by both genders. However, sexual abuse may be a particular issue for boys. The notion that fewer males are sexually abused is often a myth as societies and systems may not have conditions that are conducive for males to talk about the abuse (Holmes, Offen, & Waller, 1997). Conceptions of male superiority and the expectation that they will outgrow the experience prevent men from reporting and seeking help for sexual abuse. (Subramaniyan et al., 2017). Males were more likely to face sexually abusive experiences from other children or adolescents while females were abused more often by adults. This may be related to the segregation of the sexes, particularly during adolescence, and limitations in the opportunities for interactions with opposite sex.

5.7. Risk factors

5.7.1. Gender

In contrast to many previous studies, our survey found that more boys than girls experienced abuse in all categories and the gender difference was statistically significant in all categories of abuse except exposure to violence. Similar gender differences have also been reported by others. For example, a study found that the rates of exposure to violence, psychological abuse, and neglect were significantly higher for girls and the rate of sexual abuse was greater for boys (Al-Eissa et al., 2016). A higher rate of sexual abuse was also reported among Taiwanese male adolescents (Feng et al., 2015). It is possible that in sociocultural contexts where girls are more

protected, boys may be more exposed and vulnerable or the rates may be changing over time.

5.7.2. Age and grade

Adolescents in higher classes at school reported abuse more frequently. A considerable proportion of adolescents in all the three high school years included in our study reported abuse. However, the proportion of students who were in the 10th standard and had reported abuse was significantly higher. It is possible that higher grade students were more open to reporting their experiences. Rising age and the accompanying freedom may increase the possibility of conflict between adolescents and others at home. The likelihood of exposure to vulnerable situations may also increase with age and this may contribute to having more abusive experiences.

5.7.3. Alcohol

Alcohol use in adults has been associated with the physical abuse, psychological abuse, and neglect of children (Esser et al., 2016). This has also been re-established in our study; the regular use of alcohol significantly contributed to the abuse of adolescents. A study of abuse in school environments had similar findings (Kumar et al., 2017).

5.7.4. Nuclear family

Previous studies have suggested a link between family structure and child maltreatment (Nlewem & Amodu, 2017; Tomison, 1996). In our study, a higher proportion of children from nuclear families (adolescents living with parents and siblings) experienced abuse when compared with children from joint (extended) families. Presence of grandparents and other extended family members may act as protective buffers that reduce stress and conflict within families. This may also reduce opportunities for abuse at home. Interestingly, fewer adolescents who had grandmothers living with them reported abuse.

5.7.5. Religion

There was a significant difference in the report of abuse across different religious backgrounds. Abuse was least frequent among children of Hindu religion. However, the overall proportion of abuse remained high for all the religions. Factors that contribute to the variations based on religious background are unclear from this study.

5.7.6. Other factors

Our study did not find socioeconomic status, family accommodation, or job status of the parents to be significantly associated with the report of abuse by adolescents. Some studies have reported lower odds of physical abuse and neglect if mothers were housewives and higher odds if there were excessive arguments between parents and if there was a history of maltreatment in parents (Daral et al., 2016).

5.7.7. Perpetrators

It was interesting to observe the age groups of the perpetrators. A little over half (54.7%) of the perpetrators of emotional abuse and most (69.8%) of the perpetrators of physical abuse were adults. In contrast, more than half (59.6%) of the perpetrators of sexual abuse were children/adolescents.

Among male respondents, adults were the perpetrators of sexual abuse in 17.2% of the cases. In female respondents, adults were the perpetrators of sexual abuse in 52.3% of the cases. Majority of the perpetrators for males were children/adolescents; for females, little less than half (47.7%) of the perpetrators were adolescents. In a recent study from Sri Lanka, teachers and parents were found to be the most frequent perpetrators of physical and emotional abuse (Chandraratne, Fernando, & Gunawardena, 2018). A systematic review found that household members and peers were the top two perpetrators of physical and emotional abuse (Devries et al., 2018); this is similar to our observations. Adults and biological parents have been found to be the most frequent perpetrators of physical abuse (Tyler & Cauce, 2002).

5.7.8. Cultural issues

Some of form of verbal and physical abuse may stem from deep rooted cultural norms regarding disciplining children. In Kerala, 62% of mothers reported using severe verbal discipline and 50% of mothers reported using severe physical abuse (Nair et al., 2009). Parents in Kerala are heavily involved in their children's education and great importance is given to examination performance. Abuse related to school performance is the commonest emotional abuse item reported in our study. Compared to other Indian states, Kerala has more nuclear families, smaller family sizes, and a greater proportion of employed mothers. This could partly contribute to a higher number of respondents reporting neglect by being left alone at home. In socio-centric cultures, leaving older children alone at home is not always considered to be unlawful or unacceptable.

Professionals and members of the public do not have adequate awareness of the issues surrounding child abuse—especially about its prevalence and impact (Poreddi et al., 2016). This creates many hurdles in the effective recognition, evaluation, and management of child abuse. Most abuse is not reported and even when abuse is reported the response from family members, carers, and law enforcement agencies appears to be inadequate (Sharma & Gupta, 2004). There is an urgent need for a multipronged approach that involves conducting awareness campaigns and establishing support systems that can be easily accessed especially by children and adolescents and the broader public.

5.7.9. Strengths

Our study has the largest sample size amongst Indian studies that investigate abuse in home settings. The survey was preceded by teacher training and establishment of support structures in schools; the goal was to ensure that appropriate help was provided to respondents affected by abusive experiences. This facilitated safe exploration of difficult topics like sexual abuse. Most children found it easy to understand and respond to the questionnaire which was administered in the local language.

5.7.10. Limitations

Our study was limited to abusive experiences in home settings. Therefore our findings are likely to underestimate the true prevalence of abuse in a wider social setting. Participants were high school students and hence the findings may not be generalizable to all young people in that age group or to students of all age groups. Our sample is drawn from a state with the highest human development index in India. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to school children in different socioeconomic and cultural strata from other states in India.

5.7.11. Conclusions

Although exposure to violence, abusive experiences, and neglect in the home settings are mostly “occasional” experiences rather than “frequent”, a considerable proportion of adolescents have encountered such abuse. With the exception of exposure to violence, all the abusive experiences are significantly more frequently reported by boys rather than girls. Similarly, enrolment in the higher classes at school and nuclear family background were significantly associated with abuse. Regular alcohol use at home was a modifiable factor that contributed significantly to the abuse experience.

The spectrum of abusive experiences is very wide and this necessitates multi-layered interventions that focus on the family environment and the quality of the relationship adults have with children. The prevailing popular notions of abuse relate only to extreme forms of sexual and physical abuse. The wider dimensions and expressions of abuse need to be highlighted in awareness programmes. Child abuse is a considerable societal and health-related burden that must be tackled by providing positive parenting training based on rights based approaches, improving reporting systems, and building integrated support structures.

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