

Child Abuse and Neglect: Asia Pacific Conference and the Delhi Declaration

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The scourge of Child Abuse and Neglect has received global attention over the past two decades. There is serious concern over the increasing incidence of physical and sexual abuse, child trafficking and child labor. Whereas the consequences of grievous physical and psychological trauma are well recognized, all forms of abusive injury in various settings are believed to have adverse effects on health and development of children. Denial of health care and education is a major form of neglect in developing countries.

NEGLECT AND ABUSE

Neglect is the failure to provide for the development of the child in all spheres: health, education, emotional development, nutrition, shelter, and safe living conditions, in the context of resource reasonably available to the family or caretakers, and which causes or has a high probability of causing harm to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

Child abuse constitutes all forms of physical and or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of relationship of responsibility trust or power. These definitions have to be flexible, and each country would need to identify the pressing issues and take appropriate remedial actions.

CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Although physical and sexual abuse is of much greater concern in economically advanced countries, neglect is widely prevalent in Asian and other developing countries. Deprivation of basic health care and education, and exploitation are more frequent in economically backward

regions, where children in socially marginalized and urban underprivileged communities are particularly affected. In big cities, there are massive problems of street children, exploitation in various forms of employment and child labor. The prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect is difficult to ascertain as its identification requires some expertise and vigilance, and milder forms are mostly disregarded. Physical punishment is a way of life in poor and illiterate communities and corporal disciplinary measures are overlooked. Child sexual abuse (CSA) is reported to be especially common in USA, Europe and South Africa [1]. In India, a recent study carried out by the Ministry of Women and Child Development and involving 12,447 children, reported that 69% were physically abused and 53% were subjected to one or more forms of sexual abuse [2].

CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

India has a very large number of children who do not receive adequate health care and proper nutrition and are deprived of learning opportunities. A sizable proportion is employed in organized labor force and non-formal work. Children of migrant population and street children constitute substantial numbers. Poverty, illiteracy and large families preclude proper care and supervision of children, and adverse societal attitudes perpetuate child abuse and neglect. Centuries old adverse sociocultural traditions and detrimental practices (such as corporal punishment, discrimination against girls, employment and exploitation of children) that deny the child freedom, dignity and development are extremely difficult to dispel.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERVENTION

In recent years there has been global concern over various issues of child abuse and neglect. The UN General Assembly declaration (10th May 2002), signed by 192 countries, mentions that "children must be protected against violence, abuse, exploitation ..." A large number of national and international organizations, UNICEF and

the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) are actively campaigning for child rights and prevention of child abuse and neglect. In our country several Governmental programs have been initiated (some others such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme are being strengthened), which would favorably impact child welfare. These include the right to education that guarantees free primary education to all children, National Rural Health Mission, and Child Protection Services. A National Commission for Protection of Child Rights has been set up with wide responsibilities. Laws and justice mechanisms are being examined to make them child-centric and impose deterrent punishment on perpetrators. The civil society and the elected representatives need to engage and ensure proper implementation of these measures.

INDIAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS (IAP) AND CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Although the IAP has largely been occupied with problems of the sick child, preventive pediatrics, and academic activities, it has been concerned with the wider issues that affect child welfare and development. In 1996, IAP adopted "Comprehensive Child Care" as its motto, and thereafter a Child Abuse, Neglect and Child Labor Group was established to address these problems [3,4]. The membership of the Group includes various professionals, NGOs and others working for child welfare. It has interacted with Government departments and other organizations to advocate on behalf of children. In 2007, IAP organized a series of training workshops on Child Abuse and Neglect issues and also brought out guidelines on pediatricians' response to child abuse and neglect [5]. Several pediatricians have been providing voluntary services in rural and underprivileged communities. Child abuse and neglect issues have been regularly deliberated at IAP its national and regional conferences [6].

ASIA PACIFIC CONFERENCE ON PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Indian CANCL Group, with the help of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, several NGO partners and the National Law University, organized the 9th Asia Pacific Conference on Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect of ISPCAN on October 5-9, 2011, at which 600 delegates from 40 countries participated. A conference outcome document was

prepared, termed "Delhi Declaration 2011", which was adopted by the participants. The Declaration emphasizes that neglect includes denial or deficiency of provision of services such as health care and education. It mentions our concern over the threats to children's right to life before and after birth and throughout the period of growth and violation of many children's right to a caring and protective environment and the unacceptable affront that this inflicts on children's dignity. It urges and asserts the urgent and immediate need to integrate principles, standards and measures in national planning processes to prevent and respond to violence against children [7].

At the concluding session the participants approved the Declaration and took the following pledge: "*We the participants at the 9th ISPCAN Asia Pacific Regional Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, in New Delhi, representing the people of our many countries hereby declare our commitment to these aims and objectives, and pledge ourselves to stand against the neglect and abuse of children and to strive for achievement of child rights and the building of a caring community for every child, free of violence and discrimination*".

The Indian CANCL Group reiterates its commitment and appeals to pediatricians and all others to support its efforts and speak up for children.

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