

***Three Minute Article for Parents***

## Child sexual abuse: What parents need to know

**Yasodha Maheshi Rohanachandra**  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3671-7674>

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Child sexual abuse is defined as “the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society”. This may include the inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity, the exploitative use of a child in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices, or the exploitative use of children in pornographic performance and materials.

Globally, 19.7% of girls and 7.9% of boys suffer some form of sexual abuse by 18 years. The prevalence of child sexual abuse in Sri Lanka ranges between 14 to 44 per cent, with the rates of sexual harassment being as high as 78.5%.

Although, child sexual abuse is a major public health problem, studies show that parental awareness about child sexual abuse is limited and that myths regarding child sexual abuse are common. Parents often believe that child sexual abuse is a rare phenomenon and most children are abused by strangers. Furthermore, parents often believe that in the case of delayed disclosure, the child was a voluntary participant in the abuse. This lack of knowledge about child sexual abuse may lead to delayed recognition of child sexual abuse.

Globally, most perpetrators of child sexual abuse are male, which has also been confirmed in a study we carried out in Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup>. In contrast to the commonly held belief, majority of the perpetrators are known to the child. This is described globally and was also revealed in our study, where 83% of the perpetrators were known to the child<sup>1</sup>. Literature shows that perpetrators gain the compliance of children by “grooming behaviour”, where the offender pays special attention to the child and gains the child’s and the caregivers trust by using tactics such as gift giving, flattery, gifting money, and meeting other basic needs. Grooming behaviour was described in 20% of the cases in our study<sup>1</sup>. We also found that abuse most often took place at the child’s home or at the perpetrator’s residence<sup>1</sup>, showing that the perpetrator is someone who had easy access to the child. We found non-penetrative sexual abuse to be the commonest form, which may often be undetected by the parents due to lack of physical evidence. Our study also revealed that the mother living abroad is a risk factor for child sexual abuse

and that sexual abuse co-existed with other forms of child abuse such as physical abuse and neglect<sup>1</sup>. This highlights that parental lack of supervision and neglect are risk factors for child sexual abuse.

Given the high prevalence of child sexual abuse and the devastating psychological consequences, all parents should be aware of the importance of supervision, the perpetrator characteristics and the common signs of child sexual abuse, for prevention and early recognition of it.

### Reference

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