

Child Abuse: Are we doing enough to prevent it?

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World Health Organization (WHO) defines Child Maltreatment as the abuse and neglect faced by children under the age of 18 years.¹ This includes physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Physical abuse encompasses inflicting temporary or permanent damage to a child's physical functioning, for example, corporal punishment, beating, choking, biting and intentionally burning.^{2, 3, 4} Sexual abuse is as engaging children in sexual activities they cannot understand or consent ⁵ including exposing the child to sexually explicit material or using the child in pornography, and rape.^{5,6} Emotional abuse is the ongoing emotional maltreatment of a child. It's sometimes called psychological abuse and can significantly damage a child's emotional health and development. Emotional abuse involves bullying, deliberately trying to scare or humiliate a child, isolating, ignoring them, corrupting or terrorizing.⁷

There is strong research evidence points towards the deleterious effect of childhood abuse, effecting the psychological and social wellbeing, physical health and educational performance of a child.^{2,3} In addition to immediate adverse physical and emotional damage, abused children are at greater risk of becoming depressed, suicidal, aggressive, or withdrawn. Older children may develop substance abuse problems or running away from home. As adults, they are more likely to develop marital and sexual difficulties, depression, suicidal behavior or addictions and even they may have shortened life span.⁸

Similarly maltreated children are more likely to be the perpetrators in future, following the cycle of abuse. Research shows that 90 percent of maltreating adults were abused as children.⁹ Children often don't disclose the abuse in explicit way and thus the goal of identifying the maltreatment is thwarted. Therefore, it becomes essential to pay attention to subtle changes in child's mood and behavior. Sudden and dramatic changes often indicate something that may be wrong. These changes may include the child being withdrawn, quiet or have a bad mood, disruptive or aggressive behavior, excessive crying, fear of certain place or person, nightmares and bedwetting. Drastic changes in academic performance (dropping grades), sleep patterns (excessive or lack of sleep) and appetite (eating too much or too little) may also be indicators of abuse.^{1, 2, 3} In a majority of cases of child abuse, emotional damage is more severe than any physical damage.

The magnitude of child abuse is alarming in our region. The largest number of child labour, abuse, prostitution and trafficking has been reported in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. The largest number of working children in the world, fulfilling the criteria of child labour resides in India¹⁰

Research in Pakistan to this effect is very scarce, mostly descriptive and inconclusive in nature. The available data show that girls predominate as the victim¹¹, and there is steady increase in incidence over the last few years.⁴

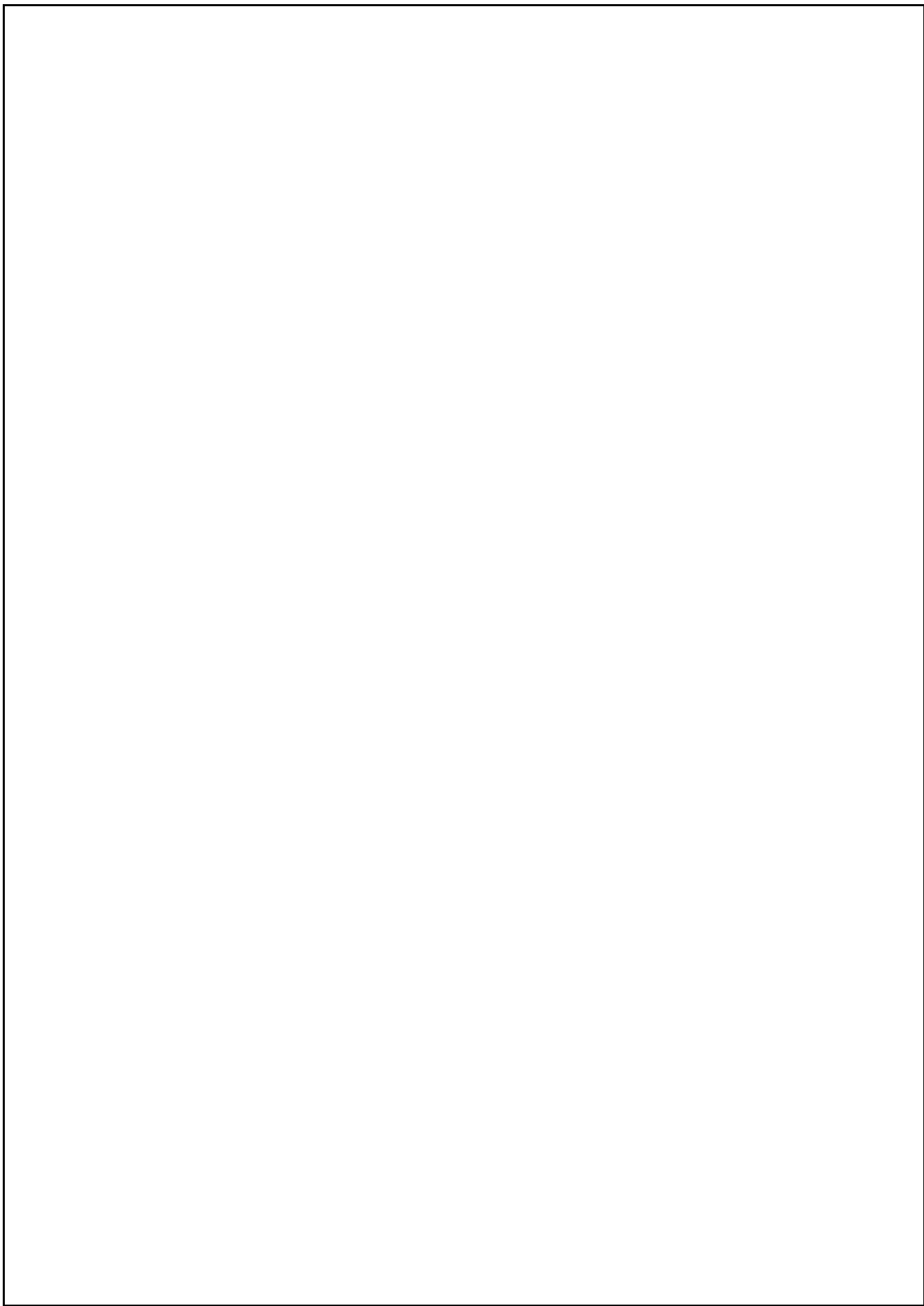
In 2016 the 2nd Amendment of the Criminal Law Bill was approved in Pakistan, placing long overdue sanctions against Child Abuse. This Bill, passed by the National Assembly, raised the age of criminal responsibility from 7 years to 12 years. It provides protection to children from all forms of physical cruelty including corporal punishment. Additionally, it widened its definition of Child sexual abuse to include and penalize voyeurism, exhibitionism and using the child in pornography, whereas, previously only rape was criminalized.¹²

Mental Health professionals and pediatricians play a key role in the path to recovery for children with a history of abuse. Parents and other family members are strongly recommended to seek counseling in order to provide comfort and support to the child's needs.¹³ Psychological treatment like Abuse-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is one such mode of psychological intervention, designed for children who are victim of abuse.¹³

In country like ours with limited resources and scarce child mental health services there is dire need to focus on this grievous problem to reform the laws and develop child-protection services. Similarly quality and meaningful research is required to inform policy and raise awareness about child abuse.

Even though these safeguards will go a long way in protecting children, better we ask ourselves, are we doing enough to prevent child abuse?

References:



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