



**WORKING TOWARDS SCHOOL AS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR**

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**ABSTRACT**

The school is an institution where children spend their major part of childhood while being groomed as contributing citizens. Increasing incidences of child abuse in the school setting in India has been a major cause of concern. Abuse of a child is something that not just scars a childhood but a whole lifetime. In such a scenario it becomes imperative that the school as an institution takes a proactive stand in ensuring the safety and well being of the child through systemic measures. The paper attempts to explore various protective measures that a school can adopt to assure protection of its young stakeholders.

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**INTRODUCTION**

*We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the fountain of life. Many things we need can wait. The child cannot... To him we cannot say tomorrow, his name is today.*

-Gabriela Mistral

The words of Gabriela Mistral couldn't be truer in a country that houses the most children in the world. More than 50% of India's population is below 25 years. The country adds new citizens every year almost as much as the population of some countries. With each child comes a set of responsibilities-responsibility to ensure that each of their rights is safeguarded; beginning from the right to survival to development to protection and participation. With current birth rate at 22.22 births per 1000, the task at hand only seems to grow by the day (Indiaonlinepages, 2017). The onus of ensuring each of these rights lies squarely with the members of the community surrounding the child.

The guardian of the child is not just the parents who bring forth the person into the world but each individual, each institution in the community; Beginning with the health professionals assisting with the child's birth right up to the members in the educational institutions who work to groom the child as future contributing citizens.

Recent spate of events across the country- be it the throat slitting at a school near the national capital or the persistent sodomy for three years by a school personnel, or gang rape on

the way back from school in remote rural India, each incident that comes to light reveals utter failure at the part of adults to safeguard the rights of our future citizens. Most of the reported events in the recent times seem to originate in and around the institution where the child spends major part of his/her life surrounded by maximum number of adults, majority of whom are trained in working with the children - the school.

**School: the current Scenario**

It seems that the very place that is meant to nurture, groom and develop the child is actually ending up bruising, maiming and breaking them for a long time.

Not very long ago, the family was the primary social institution in a child's life. Over time, with changes in the social fabric like the shrinking family size, working parents, nucleated existence, much of social functions are being outsourced to the school. The school is where now the child, barely into his third year of existence is thrust, to learn values, norms and discipline. Without doubt, in sociological terms the school seems to be transforming into a primary institution, so far as the socialization of the child is concerned. The relevance of this transformation becomes even more significant in the light of the fact that almost two thirds of the man-power in a school is trained and skilled in essential requirements needed in working with children.

Despite such seeming experts around the children, a serious portion of the child abuse reports seems to originate from the schools. Another unpleasant fact is that so far as schools are concerned, the figures are perhaps just a tip of the iceberg. It is a known fact that schools would prevent any such untoward

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incident from being reported to keep its reputation untarnished.

A child is introduced to a school setting at the tender age of three and four. Here they learn to become formally socialized into becoming social beings. The school is the institution where the transaction of the rights of the child is the easiest. For instance, in case of the right to survival, the school is the most convenient to disburse nutritious food through the Mid-Day Meal Schemes and health programmes like the Measles-Rubella vaccine drive recently held at schools in India for their health.

### ***School as a Protective Factor***

The education that is imparted in the school, works to foster the child's right to development including curricular and co-curricular aspects. Without doubt, the school is one formal setting where majority of our children get nurtured, groomed and trained into well-meaning members of society. Similarly, child protection too needs to be an integral component of school system. UNICEF defines child protection as the "strengthening of country, environments, capacities and responses to prevent and protect the child from violence"(ChildlineIndia, 2014)

Recent news reports indicate that the school where the children spend most part of their waking hours amidst people technically trained, may perhaps not be the safest for them. Our social norms allow the child to be taken for granted-somewhere their vulnerability, their developmental immaturity jeopardizes the child's safety. Therefore, it becomes important to establish norms that create environmental conditions that allow the reduction in effects of a stressful life, to ensure that the child is allowed to overcome risks and hazards that may come his/her way and an environment that promotes social and emotional competence to thrive risk scenario. That is, basically on the whole, working to ensure the establishment of the protective factors in school institutions for the mental well-being of children (Kipke, 1999).

### ***Legal Implications***

The school can no longer wash its hands off the fact that they are responsible for almost the complete well-being of the child under their care; their mandate is no longer just education. There are various provisions in the Indian constitution that allows for it. Article 21 that protects the Right to life and dignity includes the child's right to live with respect. The NCPCR guidelines on Corporal Punishment 2007, prohibits punishment in any form including physical or emotional (Rights, 2009). The Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009 ensures the right of the child access to meaningful education including freedom from corporal punishment (India, 2009). Section 29 of the RTE Act states that school authorities must take into consideration "Making the child free of fear, trauma and anxiety and helping the child to express views freely".

There are many provisions that ensure the protective rights of a child in the country. However, what is urgently needed is a proactive stand on the part of the school to ensure that the protective factors are established in an effective manner.

Risk and harm that is feared or experienced by the child is much as a barrier to learning as being hungry or being in poor

health. Recent spate of abuse and maltreatment incidents across the country, all connected to the school has created waves of terror in the minds of the stakeholders.

### ***The Way Forward***

Safeguarding the rights of the child is of prime importance. It needs to be ensured even in the absence of well-meaning teachers in the school. It is high time that systemic changes are made in the school to ensure the safety and protection of the child under any circumstance. Efforts need to be initiated to establish pertinent protective factors in the school system that fosters the rights of the child. The urgent need is to lay down a formal child protection policy at each institution that allows for institutionalizing certain basic parameters for upholding the rights of the child.

A study conducted by Childline India in 2011 revealed that only 10% schools had a child protection policy. In the same study, only 12% of the respondents, principals, had had any training on child protection. 64% schools said that they have taken no measure to ensure safety of the child outside school. 33% of the school resorted to beating the child and 24% used humiliation before peers as a tool to instil discipline (ChildlineIndia, 2014).

Keeping in mind the provisions of the RTE Act 2009 and the NCPCR Guidelines on Corporal Punishment 2007, establishing systems to ensure the safety of the child becomes imperative. An all-encompassing child protection policy that includes orientation for school personnel on the Rights of the child and procedural and code of conduct is high time in making.

A child protection policy reflects the stand the institution has on the rights of the child. It is reflective of the commitment it has on ensuring protection of each child in its care. A good policy should also include:

- Detailed plans of infrastructural provisions and utilizations like access to washroom, first aid rooms and other facilities.
- Orientation and training for each school personnel on code of conduct and the policy.
- Provision and access to school counsellors for each child. The counsellor or the social worker needs to be the integral part of the school system.
- The philosophy and stand the school has on corporal punishments for its children.

Along side a child protection policy, the schools also need to work to create mechanisms that help foster open communication among administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities.

Although teachers are trained on child development principles, they need to be provided professional development and support along with other school staff to enable them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of child.

A school that respects the rights of the child would also work to create decision-making processes that facilitate student, family, and community engagement; academic achievement; and staff empowerment.

To ensure the safety and protection of the child, it is not enough to work with the adults. Provisions should be made to

provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be actively engaged in school.

To conclude, the creation and implementation of a child protection policy and complementary systems can go a long way in ensuring the rights of the child by safeguarding his safety and protection. Moreover, it will allow for nurturance and growth of a fearless, confident and well-rounded personality of children within the school.

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