

Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse: A Competency-Based Approach

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ABSTRACT

Background: Child sexual abuse is an urgent global issue that requires a collective solution from both developed and developing countries. School-based prevention programmes play a vital role in equipping children with protective skills.

Aim: The study examined the effectiveness of a competency-based sexual abuse prevention programme which aimed at enhancing protective behaviour skills among middle school children in Salem, Tamil Nadu.

Setting: The study was conducted among middle school students from classes VI, VII, and VIII across select schools in Tamilnadu.

Method: A quantitative single-group pre-test and post-test approach was adopted. An initial sample of 350 middle school students from classes VI, VII, and VIII was selected through stratified random sampling from eight schools in Salem. Following the pre-test, 24 students with low protective behaviour skills were selected for the intervention. Of these, 22 students (16 girls and 6 boys) completed the programme and both pre-test and post-test assessments; 2 students dropped out because of frequent absence. Data were collected using a self-developed protective behaviour skills questionnaire and an interview. The competency-based sexual abuse prevention programme included interactive lessons, role-playing, and exercises.

Results: Findings showed significant improvement in post-test scores, indicating the CBSAPP programme's effectiveness. Interactive group activities were more impactful than lecture-based methods. Learners demonstrated increased awareness of abuse types, personal boundaries, consent and assertive communication.

Conclusion: The intervention programme effectively strengthened students' protective behaviour skills, decision making and self-confidence.

Contribution: The supports decision-making, critical thinking, and boundary-awareness skills related to child sexual abuse prevention which may be generalised to all settings.

Keywords: Competency-based sexual abuse prevention programme, Child sexual abuse, protective behavior skills, single-group design, and middle school students.

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse (CSA) remains one of the gravest and underreported violations of childrens' rights in India, with devastating long-term impacts on physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. Approximately, 120 million children experienced sexual abuse worldwide (WHO 2022). Child sexual abuse is a worldwide issue that renders children highly vulnerable (Citak Tunc et al., 2018; Fergusson, McLeod & Horwood 2013) and necessitates timely and comprehensive intervention. Despite growing awareness and legal safeguards, the lack of preventive education and open dialogue around Child Sexual Abuse, particularly among middle

school students, leaves many children vulnerable to exploitation. In a culturally sensitive and conservative society like Salem, Tamil Nadu, addressing this issue requires a structured and age-appropriate educational intervention that empowers students with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to protect themselves. A competency-based approach to CSA prevention focused not only on raising awareness but also on building protective behaviour skills such as communication, self-awareness, and assertiveness decision-making. This model emphasized active learning, participation, and real-life application, aligning with the developmental needs of middle school students. Implementing such programs within school settings has the potential to create safe spaces for dialogue, reduce stigma, and promote a culture of protection and empowerment. Addressing disclosures of child sexual abuse requires the active participation of all communities, as such incidents profoundly affect the safety and overall well-being of the children involved (Ahmed et al. 2021). Teachers need to have both the competence and the confidence to respond to child sexual abuse in an effective and appropriate manner (Capa-Aydin, Uzuntiryaki-Kondakci, & Ceylandag 2018). This paper explored the design, implementation, and impact of a competency-based CSA prevention programme tailored for middle school students in Salem. It examined the efficacy of this approach in enhancing students' understanding of personal safety, recognizing inappropriate behaviour, and seeking help from trusted adults. Through this initiative, the researcher aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on child protection and advocate for systematic, school-based preventive education as a critical tool in safeguarding children's rights.

Need for the study

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a deeply concerning subject that marks millions of children worldwide, cutting across boundaries of caste, class, gender, and geography. Mathews et al. (2015) contended that inadequate collective awareness of child sexual abuse dynamics heightens the likelihood of its persistence and recurrence. In India, numerous studies and government reports have highlighted the alarming prevalence of CSA, with many cases going unreported due to fear, stigma, and lack of awareness. The situation is particularly sensitive in semi-urban and rural regions like Salem, Tamil Nadu, where cultural taboos and limited discourse around sexuality and personal safety further hinder preventive measures. Middle school students are at a critical developmental stage where they begin to navigate complex social environments but often lack the emotional maturity and knowledge to recognize or respond to abusive situations. Despite the presence of legal frameworks such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, there is a noticeable gap in preventive education within the school curriculum, especially in regional contexts. Most children are not equipped with the competencies necessary to identify unsafe situations, assert personal boundaries, or seek help from trustworthy adults. Nadan, Spilsbury and Korbin (2015) argued that a comprehensive understanding of child sexual abuse requires examining the broader contexts of those involved, including their values and belief system. A competency-based approach offered a holistic and child-centered strategy that goes beyond information dissemination. It aimed to build life skills, strengthen self-confidence, and empower students to take charge of their personal safety. Implementing such an approach in the schools of Salem can serve as a preventive mechanism, creating safer educational environments and reducing the risk of abuse. Therefore, there was an urgent need to design and evaluate structured, age-appropriate interventions that can be integrated into school education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gumbo and Mabaso (2025) examined primary school teachers perceived competence in handling Child sexual abuse disclosures and the role of self-efficacy in reporting behaviour which revealed many teachers felt unprepared due to limited training, unclear procedures, and insufficient institutional support. Further, the study highlighted the urgent need for stronger training and supportive systems to enhance teacher confidence and child protection in schools. Protecting children from child sexual abuse is a complex and multifaceted task that requires a combination of interconnected strategies which include public health framework that integrates coordinated primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention efforts (Higgins & Russell 2024; Russell & Higgins 2024). Nguyen, Huynh and Do (2024) assessed a toolkit designed to help primary school teachers teach child sexual abuse prevention in Binh Duong Province, Vietnam. The study emphasized that comprehensive training, strong support, and community involvement are key to effective implementation, fostering a supportive environment for child safety and well-being. Nath and Kaur (2023) identified social,

cultural, and family risk factors for child sexual abuse (CSA) and emphasized the need for greater awareness of childrens' protection, particularly girl children, through their schooling. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicated that child maltreatment is linked to long term physical health problems, mental health disorders, engagement in health risk behaviours across the lifespan. Norman et al. (2023). Pellai, Alberto and Caranzano-Maitre, Myriam (2015) reported sexual abuse significantly impacts the psychosocial development of children worldwide, affecting all demographic, ethnic, and family groups. Melinda et al. (2018) developed 1-hour online training course 'The Enough -Child Sexual Abuse prevention program'! which indicated that participants demonstrated a high level of approval as well as improved knowledge, awareness, and readiness to take action in the future. Implementing evidence-informed child safe standards that outline principles and practices for preventing and responding to child sexual abuse prevention (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018; Keeping Children Safe, 2014; NSPCC, 2017; Saul & Audage 2007) Dance/movement therapy (DMT) was developed by Casey (2018) to address the aspects of prevention of Child Sexual Abuse by building both individual and community resilience through movement and the body which centred around: body awareness, boundary awareness, and communication. Encouraging parents also to engage in ongoing conversations about child sexual abuse can strengthen prevention efforts. Their active involvement in prevention programmes enhances their confidence to discuss personal safety and reinforces programme messages within the family context.

In India, emerging research underscored the effectiveness of school-based prevention programs in raising awareness and enhancing protective behaviors among children (Deb et al 2015; Kacker et al. 2007). However, there remains a significant gap in studies focusing specifically on competency-based approaches that not only inform but also equip middle school students with practical life skills for self-protection. Particularly in regional and semi-urban areas like Salem, Tamil Nadu, there was a lack of localized, age-appropriate, and systematically evaluated interventions tailored to the socio-cultural context. This research sought to bridge that gap by implementing and assessing a competency-based CSA prevention programme, thereby contributing to the scarce body of literature on context-specific, skill-oriented child safety education in Indian schools.

Objectives

- To assess the effectiveness of Competency-Based Sexual Abuse Prevention Programme in enhancing the protective behaviour skills of middle school students.
- To examine the difference between the pre and post test scores of the protective behaviour skills of middle school students.
- To explore the perceptions and experiences of middle school students regarding the Competency-Based Sexual Abuse Prevention Programme.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Research design: The research employed a pre-test-post-test single group experimental design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate the impact of competency-based sexual abuse prevention programme on students' knowledge, awareness, and attitudes toward CSA prevention. The pre-test and post-test assessments were used to measure changes in students' understanding and protective behavior skills before and after the intervention.

Sampling technique and sample size: An initial sample of 350 students from classes VI, VII, and VIII was selected using stratified random sampling from eight schools in Salem. Based on the pre-test results, 24 students with low protective behaviour skills were selected for the intervention. The intervention was conducted with 24 students from class VI at Kalaimagal Matriculation Higher Secondary School, Omalur, Salem. Of these 24 selected students, 22 students (16 girls and 6 boys) completed the intervention and the pre-test and post-test assessments. Two students dropped out because of frequent absence from the programme. Thus, the final completed-case sample used for quantitative pre-test/post-test analysis was N = 22. The study aimed to assess whether the competency-based sexual abuse prevention programme influenced the protective behaviour skills of the participating students.

Selection Criteria

Students selected from Government, Government aided and private schools to ensure a diverse socio-economic representation. Consent was obtained from both parents and school authorities for participation.

Tools used for the study: Questionnaire cum Interview (Protective behaviour skills questionnaire) and competency-based sexual abuse prevention programme.

Personal Data Sheet

A personal data sheet was used to collect demographic information, including sex, locale, family type, parents' educational qualifications, children living with family members, and the source of information on child sexual abuse.

Protective Behaviour Skills Questionnaire

The Protective Behaviour Skills Questionnaire, a self-developed instrument, was constructed and validated by the Project Director. The tool demonstrated good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.82. Content and face validity were established through expert review. The questionnaire comprised 25 dichotomous (Yes/No) items distributed across five dimensions: (i) Boundary Awareness Skills, (ii) Safe and Unsafe Touch Recognition Skills, (iii) Help-Seeking Skills, (iv) Assertive Language Skills, and (v) Interpersonal Safety Skills, with five items under each dimension.

Competency-Based Sexual Abuse Prevention Programme (CBSAPP)

The Competency-Based Sexual Abuse Prevention Programme (CBSAPP) consisted of **30 sessions** organized into **six phases**, with **five sessions in each phase**:

- **Phase I:** Awareness and Warming-up Sessions (puberty, child sexual abuse, myths and misconceptions, handling abuse, and gender roles)
- **Phase II:** Boundary Awareness Skills (sexual predators, body safety rules, setting boundaries, early warning signs, and stranger danger)
- **Phase III:** Safe and Unsafe Touch Recognition Skills (etiquettes, touching behaviours, safe/unsafe/confused touch, unsafe touches, and trusted adults)
- **Phase IV:** Help-Seeking Skills (personal safety, grooming, NO-GO-TELL strategy, online safety, and awareness of the POCSO Act)
- **Phase V:** Assertive Language Skills (self-esteem, assertive communication, the power of saying "No", resisting peer pressure, and the 3C strategy)
- **Phase VI:** Interpersonal Safety Skills (parent-child relationships, peer relationships, empathy, understanding abusive relationships, and developing a safety network).

Programme implementation: The single-group design allowed the researcher to concentrate on each student's development, identify their competencies, and determine whether the intervention influenced the students collectively. A pre-test was administered to all participants, and those who scored low in protective behaviour skills (N=22) were selected for the intervention.

The programme is structured around competency-based learning, which included interactive lessons, role-playing scenarios, and skill-building exercises that focus on communication, assertiveness, and emotional intelligence. The programme is designed to enhance students' understanding of personal boundaries, consent, and strategies for recognizing, avoiding, and responding to situations that could lead to sexual abuse. It focused on equipping students with practical skills and knowledge to help them navigate potential risks and develop confidence in protecting themselves.

Competency-based sexual abuse prevention programme

The Competency-Based Sexual Abuse Prevention Programme (CBSAPP) was developed in alignment with frameworks provided by UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA, the Child Welfare Information Gateway (USA), and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPC). The programme included age-appropriate and culturally sensitive content that respected the morals and values of each child and their family. CBSAPP aimed to help students stay secure at home, with their family, within their community, and online, while teaching them how to report abuse and the proper procedures for doing so.

To implement the programme, children with low protective behaviour skills were selected from the initial sample. Prior to implementation, the programme was validated by experts, including a Psychology professor from Avinashilingam University, Coimbatore, and a counselling psychologist from Transcend Centre, Chennai, both of whom have experience in the field. The programme was conducted among 24 students from class VI at Kalaimagal Matriculation Higher Secondary School, Omalur, Salem. Of these 24 students, 22 students (16 girls and 6 boys) attended the programme consistently and were included in both the pre-test and post-test analyses; 2 students dropped out because of frequent absence.

The sessions were aimed at 40 minutes, over a period of 30 days, using various interactive and engaging teaching methods. These methods included group discussions, round-robin brainstorming, collaborative problem-solving, role-playing, lecture-cum-demonstration, snowball games, inquiry-based teaching, puppet shows, storytelling, the think-pair-share method, talk show activities, and the think-aloud method. These approaches were designed to foster active participation and reinforce protective behaviour skills among the students.

Data Collection

Pre-Test and Post-Test Surveys

Pre-test: A baseline interview cum protective behaviour skills questionnaire prepared by the investigator was conducted before the intervention to assess students' existing knowledge, attitudes, and awareness regarding CSA which included questions on Awareness of CSA and its effects, Knowledge of safe vs. unsafe touch, Awareness of trusted adults and reporting mechanisms and General attitudes toward child sexual abuse prevention.

Post-test: The same interview and the questionnaire were administered after the intervention to evaluate any changes in students' knowledge and attitudes. The post-test also included additional questions on the effectiveness of the whole programme (e.g., how engaging and helpful they found the programme in understanding CSA). Hence, In-depth interview was conducted to gain qualitative insights into their perceptions of the Competency-Based Sexual Abuse Prevention Programme (CBSAPP).

Observations

Observational notes were taken during the intervention to assess student engagement, emotional responses, and participation. These were used to complement survey and interview data.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

The pre-test and post-test data were analyzed using paired t-tests to determine whether there was a statistically significant change in students' knowledge and attitudes following the intervention. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize demographic data and to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the program.

In addition, Differential analysis was conducted for the completed-case subgroup of students who received the intervention under the Competency-Based Sexual Abuse Prevention Programme (N = 22; 16 girls and 6

boys). The pre-test and post-test scores of this group were analysed across key variables such as sex, family type, and parents' educational qualifications to explore significant differences in outcomes based on demographic characteristics. But the research took in to account only data based on sex. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

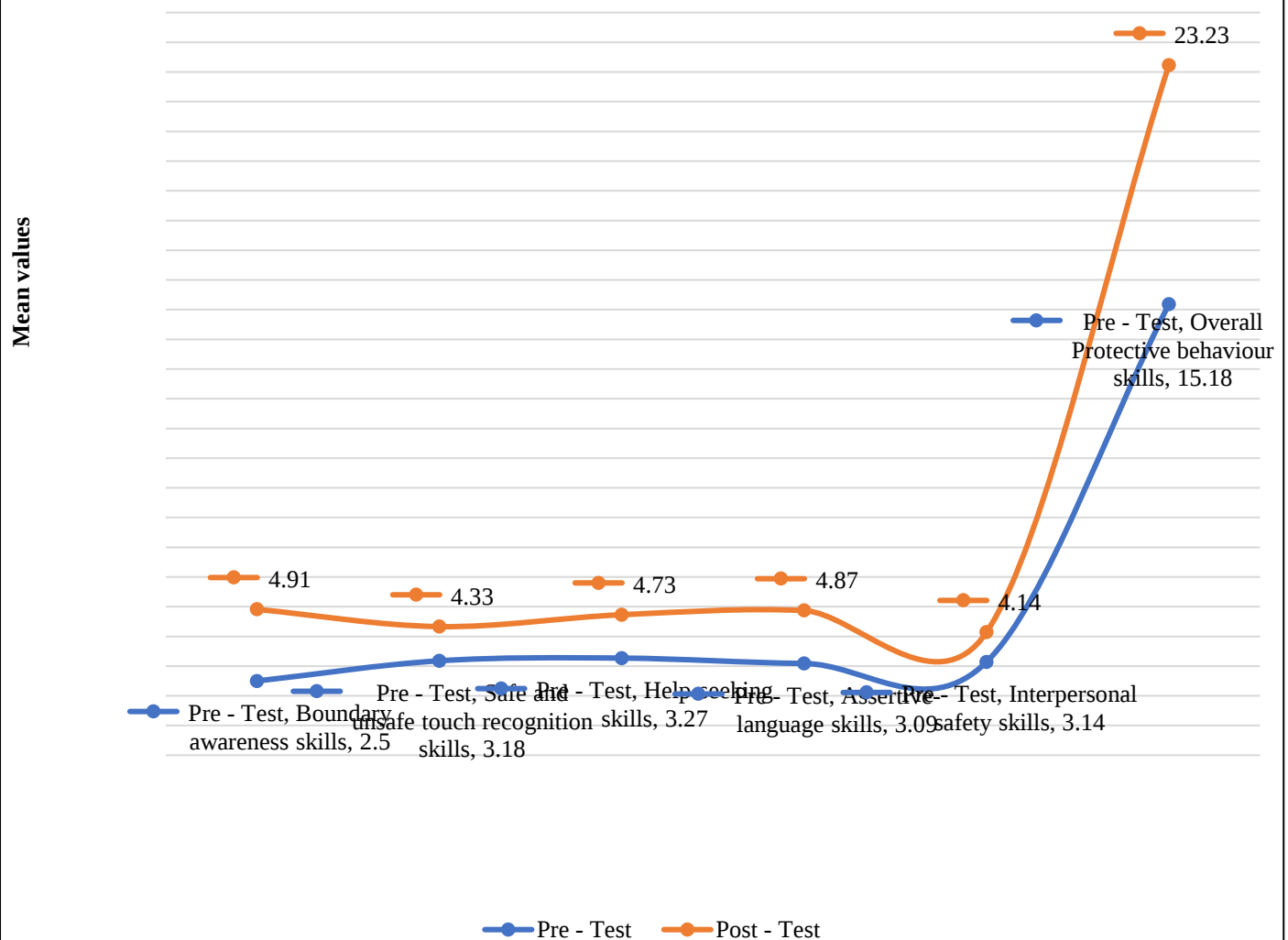
Table 1 Showing the Mean Score Difference of Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores of Protective Behaviour Skills and Its Dimensions

Protective Behaviour Skills	Test	N	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Level of Significance at 0.05
Boundary awareness skills	Pre-test	22	2.50	1.26	21	8.47	S**
	Post-test		4.91	0.29			
Safe and unsafe touch recognition skills	Pre-test	22	3.18	1.09	21	5.57	S**
	Post-test		4.33	0.63			
Help-seeking skills	Pre-test	22	3.27	1.16	21	4.43	S**
	Post-test		4.73	0.55			
Assertive-language skills	Pre-test	22	3.09	0.97	21	7.65	S**
	Post-test		4.87	0.45			
Interpersonal safety skills	Pre-test	22	3.14	1.24	21	2.77	S**
	Post-test		4.14	0.88			
Overall Protective behaviour skills	Pre-test	22	15.18	3.52	21	8.36	S**
	Post-test		23.23	1.54			

The mean scores of dimensions of boundary awareness skills, safe and unsafe touch recognition skills, help-seeking skills, assertive language skills and interpersonal safety skills for pre-test are 2.50, 3.18, 3.27, 3.09 and 3.14 respectively and the mean scores of dimensions of boundary awareness skills, safe and unsafe touch recognition skills, help-seeking skills, assertive language skills and interpersonal safety skills for post-test are 4.91, 4.33, 4.73, 4.87 and 4.14 respectively. The calculated t- value for the dimensions of boundary awareness skills, safe and unsafe touch recognition skills, help-seeking skills, assertive language skills and interpersonal safety skills for pre-test are 8.47, 5.57, 4.43, 7.65, 2.77, and 8.36 respectively which are greater than table value 1.96. Hence, there existed significant difference between pre-test and post-test in the dimensions of boundary awareness skills, safe and unsafe touch recognition skills, help-seeking skills, assertive language skills and interpersonal safety skills.

The pre-test mean scores of overall protective behaviour skills is 15.18 and for post-test is 23.23 respectively. The calculated t- value for overall protective behaviour skills is 8.36 which is greater than table value which reveals that there existed 0.01 level of significant difference between pre-test and post-test score for overall protective behaviour skills. Hence, hypothesis 7 stated that 'There will be no significant difference between pre- test and post-test scores of protective behaviour skills and its dimensions of select Middle school students' is rejected (Fig 1).

FIGURE 1 : DIFFERENCE OF PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST SCORES OF PROTECTIVE BEHAVIOUR SKILLS AND ITS DIMENSIONS



Qualitative Analysis:

Analysis of Students' Response from the Interview

An interview was conducted one week after the intervention with the 22 students who completed the intervention (16 girls and 6 boys) providing insights across six key phases of the Competency-Based Sexual Abuse Prevention Programme:

Phase 1: Awareness/Warming-up Sessions

Students found the interactive methods—such as role plays, discussions, and problem-solving—effective in building understanding of body boundaries, warning signs, and stranger danger. These sessions helped them gain essential competencies like decision-making, communication, and assertive behaviour.

Phase 2: Boundary Awareness Skills

Students reported that this phase enhanced their knowledge of body safety and personal boundaries. The participatory activities encouraged awareness of respecting one's own and others' boundaries.

Phase 3: Safe and Unsafe Touch Recognition

Through games, discussions, and activities, students learned to differentiate safe from unsafe touches and identify trusted adults. They also developed awareness of self-respect and personal safety.

Phase 4: Help-Seeking Skills

Students expressed excitement about learning help-seeking strategies and understanding the POCSO Act. Storytelling and discussions helped them recognize grooming behaviours, internet safety, and the importance of seeking support.

Phase 5: Assertive Language Skills

Students emphasized the value of assertive language in refusing unsafe situations. Brainstorming and role plays helped them practice the "3C approach"—saying "No," making the right choice, and creating a safety plan.

Phase 6: Interpersonal Safety Skills

Interactive methods and videos helped students strengthen their interpersonal skills with peers and parents, highlighting the importance of communication and healthy relationships for personal safety.

Major Findings of the research

- There existed significant difference between pre-test and post-test in the dimensions of boundary awareness skills, safe and unsafe touch recognition skills, help-seeking skills, assertive language skills and interpersonal safety skills and overall protective behaviour skills. The post-test means scores are seemed to be greater than that of pre-test mean scores which revealed that intervention was effective and successful.
- The qualitative analysis showed that students found the group-based activities in the warming-up sessions more effective than traditional lectures, making the program engaging and informative. They gained awareness of different forms of abuse, the importance of setting boundaries, and recognizing early warning signs. Sessions on touch behaviour, personal safety, and the POCSO Act enhanced their understanding of protective strategies, legal rights, and online safety. The 3C technique and assertive communication training boosted their confidence and decision-making skills, while activities promoting healthy relationships with parents and peers were seen as valuable. Overall, the program significantly improved students' awareness, critical thinking, and protective behaviours against sexual abuse.

Ethical Considerations

- **Informed Consent:** Informed consent was obtained from the parents/guardians of the students, and verbal assent was obtained from the students themselves.
- **Confidentiality:** All responses have been kept confidential, and personal information will not be disclosed.
- **Sensitivity:** Given the sensitive nature of the topic, care was taken to ensure that the intervention is age-appropriate and does not cause distress among students. Investigator approached teachers, psychologists and school counselors to provide additional support.

Implications of the Research

The research has highlighted several key educational implications. The implementation of various skills to prevent child sexual abuse was found to be more effective when post-test scores were considered, suggesting that different interventions should be applied in both government and private schools to enhance students' protective behaviour skills. Experiencing sexual abuse, even once, can put children at emotional,

developmental, and academic risk. This training program empowered students to recognize the characteristics of abusers, identify unsafe situations, understand social messages, and refuse inappropriate requests.

The intervention included essential skills such as boundary awareness, safe and unsafe touch recognition, help-seeking, assertive language, and interpersonal safety skills. The aim of the research was to develop a competency-based sexual abuse prevention program that empowers students by changing their perceptions and responses to sexual abuse. It provided opportunities for students to practice and reinforce these protective behaviours.

These protective behaviour skills were taught through various engaging methods, including interactive classes, group activities, games, role-playing, brainstorming, short films, and puppet shows, ensuring the content was both effective and engaging for the students.

CONCLUSION

The 21st century presents growing challenges for children, including violence, abuse, and exploitation especially in contexts like India, where poverty and discrimination persist. Child sexual abuse prevention is increasingly critical, and programs like the Competency-Based Sexual Abuse Prevention Programme (CBSAPP) offer valuable solutions. CBSAPP equipped students with essential skills such as problem-solving, communication, assertiveness, and interpersonal safety. Its success highlighted the need to integrate such training into in-service teacher education, enabling teachers and parents to address CSA through open, supportive discussions and proactive strategies.

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Competing interests

The author declare that she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced her in writing this article.

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