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Abuse is rampant, but under wraps

Mumbai: For a 13-year-old Saki Naka resident, it was nightmarish to return home from school when his mother would not be around. His uncle who had been staying as their guest would not let go of any opportunity to sexually abuse him during two years of his stay with the family.

In these two years, Ankit (name changed) was abused to the extent that he had started doubting his sexuality. He thought he was a

woman and that was why his uncle was abusing him again and again, said a counsellor from a civic-run hospital. Unfortunately, counsellors feel there are many like Ankit in the city, but only a handful even reach a professional counsellor.

A child abuse study by the ministry of women and child development in 2007 revealed that as many as 53.22% of 12,447 children and 2,324 young adults surveyed had faced some or the other form of sexual abuse. It further stated

that about 21.90% of child respondents reported facing severe sexual abuse while 50.76% other forms of sexual abuse. Worse, 50% of abusers were known to the child. Many feel this is where societal pressure seeps in and parents too become reluctant to pursue the matter. Parents are still in denial, and though a steady change in mindset is noticed, majority do not seek any legal action, said Pooja Taparia of Arpan, an NGO working against child abuse.

Child abuse is widespread, say

experts. Social psychologist Chandni Parekh said, "This pervasive evil cuts across all socio-economic backgrounds," adding that there is no specific profile for both victims as well as abusers. Speaking of its prevalence in communities, Parekh said in workshops held in schools, several students send across queries. For instance, a student had asked confidentially if it was normal for a teenaged girl to have physical relations with an aged man, she said. Parekh added that after such workshops many

students have spoken out about abuse.

Harish Iyer, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, felt that certain practices in society need to change. The most fundamental error is to give nicknames to private parts, he said adding that if a child is taught to call eye an eye, then why not teach them about private parts. Sex education can be a key to this problem because they will help children to differentiate between right and wrong touch and behaviour, he suggests. Moreover, he said

the biggest myth was that only girls were abused.

Iyer, in the course of his interaction with victims of child sex abuse, said there may not be many survivors. But even if they kill themselves, the reason behind their death will stay under wraps, he said.

A bigger concern though lies in the neglect of the mental health of victims of child abuse. Parents themselves are reluctant to take them to counsellors or follow up with doctors, said Taparia.