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Preventing Child Abuse: Integrating Safety Education into Teacher Training Programs

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ARTICLE INFO			ABSTRACT
Article History:			<i>The study explores the importance of safety education and examines how teachers apply strategies to prevent child abuse in public primary schools. A qualitative research design was used, involving semi-structured interviews with eighteen (18) school heads selected through purposive sampling. The findings highlight that school heads play a central role in preventing child abuse by promoting hygiene practices, encouraging modesty, and teaching preventive habits such as handwashing. They also address sensitive issues like self-touch behaviors and create safe spaces for discussing children's curiosity about their bodies. The main challenge reported was the lack of adequate knowledge and skills among teachers. The study recommends that institutions develop and improve learning platforms, implement real-life scenario-based activities, and strengthen teacher training to enhance safety education in schools.</i>
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1. Introduction

Children represent the future and the essence of society. They carry the potential for progress, innovation, and positive change. Their innocence and curiosity remind us of the need to invest in their well-being, education, and safety. Promoting children's rights, ensuring access to quality education, and protecting them from harm are essential for building a fair and prosperous society (Walker, 2022).

In Pakistan, cost-effective and research-based professional development programs are recommended to help teachers create safe learning environments (Siddiqui et al., 2023). However, antisocial behavior remains common in schools, and the education system tends to prioritize academic results over student well-being (Ahmed et al., 2022). Throughout history, children have faced abuse, neglect, and inhumane treatment, often rooted in harmful social, cultural, and emotional factors (Rukhsana et al., 2023).

Research shows the importance of improving the capacity of professionals to protect children from abuse and neglect (Amy et al., 2021). Early detection and prevention, including the role of health and social workers, are key to reducing harm and supporting victims (Halli et al., 2020; L. Tufford et al., 2020). Preventive measures should include expanding community resources and integrating child protection education at all levels (Risser et al., 2020). Participation in school-based child abuse prevention programs has also been linked to lower abuse rates (Gibson & Leitenberg, 2000).

As of 2026, child abuse prevention remains one of the most pressing challenges facing education systems worldwide. Despite decades of policy development and awareness campaigns, the gap between policy intention and classroom practice persists, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where teacher training programs have not yet integrated safety education as a core competency (Rashid et al., 2025). The growing body of evidence from 2024 through 2026 has shifted the conversation from whether teachers should be trained in child protection to how such training can be systematically embedded into pre-service and in-service curricula. This study responds to that shift by examining the perspectives of school heads in Punjab, Pakistan, on integrating safety education into teacher training programs to prevent child abuse.

1.1 Problem Statement

The problem of child abuse at schools is very serious because of the impact it has on the lives of children; it is related to their safety, emotional state, and learning, referring to the skills of education. A substantial number of teachers fail to recognize the symptoms of abuse, as they are not properly prepared to identify a potential case of abuse or prevent and react to it. Despite including certain aspects of safety education in some teacher training programs, these steps are most of the time narrow and do not provide practical measures that can be employed to prevent instances of abuse. There is a missing link in the knowledge regarding how to systematically integrate safety education throughout the teacher training process to inculcate safety education skills and knowledge in educators. This gap should be addressed in order to safeguard weak children and provide some security in the school.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This research study is significant since it deals with critical topic, which directly includes the children's safety and health within schools. The study is informative in providing suggestions on the relevant practice guidelines that can enhance the preparedness of teachers to respond to and prevent child abuse by learning about safety education as part of training teachers. The results could assist the educational authorities, policymakers, and training institutions in developing more detailed training programs that comprise knowledge and practice as well. Such improvements can bring a safer learning environment, more trust between the students and the teachers, and a reduction of cases of abuse in the schools in the long-term perspective.

1.3 Objectives of the study

1. To explore the current role of safety education in teacher training programs at the Public Primary School level.

2. To identify practical strategies for strengthening safety education within teacher training programs.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What is the current status of safety education in teacher training programs at the Public Primary level?
2. What strategies can be implemented to improve the effectiveness of safety education in preventing child abuse?

2. Literature Review

A notable expansion in research on school-based child protection, particularly in South Asia. Rashid et al. (2025) documented the persistent challenges facing early childhood education in Punjab, identifying the lack of safety education in teacher preparation as a critical weakness. Their narrative review called for systemic reform rather than piecemeal interventions, a recommendation that aligns with the broader international consensus emerging in this period.

Hussain et al. (2025) provided updated evidence on the landscape of child abuse in Pakistan, demonstrating that physical neglect remains the most prevalent form of maltreatment, with compounding effects on children's cognitive development. Their socio-legal analysis underscored that teachers are often the only point of contact between vulnerable children and protective services, making their training a matter of urgency.

Internationally, the post-pandemic period brought renewed attention to the role of schools in detecting and reporting abuse. Research following the COVID-19 school closures has highlighted that when teachers lack formal training in recognizing abuse indicators, a significant proportion of cases go unreported (Walker et al., 2022). This finding has driven policy reforms in several countries, including the introduction of mandatory child safety modules in teacher certification programs across parts of Europe and Southeast Asia.

Alam et al. (2024) emphasized that the limited scale of existing Pakistani research constrains the development of evidence-based interventions. Their study, examining high-profile cases of child sexual violence, reinforced the need for school-level preventive measures that go beyond legal reform and include direct capacity building for educators.

Fatima et al. (2023) identified lack of awareness among teachers and caregivers as a primary barrier to reporting suspected abuse in Pakistan. This finding has been corroborated by subsequent work showing that even where reporting policies exist, teachers lack the confidence and procedural knowledge to act on their suspicions.

A notable development in the 2024-2026 period is the emergence of research on digital and simulation-based training tools for child protection. Studies from high-income contexts have demonstrated that scenario-based virtual training significantly improves teachers' ability to identify abuse indicators and follow reporting protocols, compared to traditional lecture-based approaches. This evidence directly supports the recommendation made by school heads in the present study for simulation-based learning platforms.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the integration of safety education into teacher training programs for preventing child abuse. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and suggestions.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population for this study included 55 public primary schools and a total of 1,050 teachers in Multan, South Punjab, Pakistan. From this population, 18 school heads were selected using purposive sampling. This sampling method was chosen to ensure that participants had relevant knowledge and experience related to safety education and child abuse prevention.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. The interview questions were designed to gather detailed insights into participants' views on the role of safety education in teacher training programs. The instrument was reviewed for clarity and relevance before use.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the study to protect participants' rights and well-being. Before the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their participation was voluntary. They were also told that they could withdraw at any stage without penalty. Interviews were conducted at times convenient for the participants, and all responses were treated as confidential. No ethical issues arose during the research process.

4. Data Analysis

This section presents the qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews with 18 school heads. The results are organized into key themes that emerged from participants' responses, supported by visual representations and selected quotes.

Teacher Training Program for Preventing Child Abuse



Figure 1: Preventing Child Abuse

Figure 1: Cloud map query explored the teacher training program for preventing child abuse. Further, it presents the suggestions of heads about different types of training requirements that can

prevent child abuse. The more frequently used words are in bold and make a cloud around the word training. These words are abuse, teacher, child, education, safety, prevention, program, etc. Some of the responses are presented here. One of the respondents said, "I think Safety education can be effectively integrated into teacher training programs through simulations, collaborations, and by developing practical skills to promote a safe educational environment."

abuse	child	prevention	programs	address	addressing
		agencies	confidence	confidentiality	cultural
					curriculum
training	education	building	effectively	guidelines	identification
					identify
		case	ensure	integrated	integration
					interactive
teacher	safety	collaboration	equipped	integrating	legal
					ongoing

Figure 2 Word Tree Map

Figure 2 of a word tree map illustrates the most frequently used words for the type of training for preventing child abuse. Major words are abuse, training, teacher, safety, etc. Some of the responses are presented here about training needs. The word roots presented concepts related to safety education and child abuse prevention are effectively integrated into teacher training programs to ensure teachers are well-equipped to identify and address potential abuse.

Child Abuse Prevention strategies in the classroom

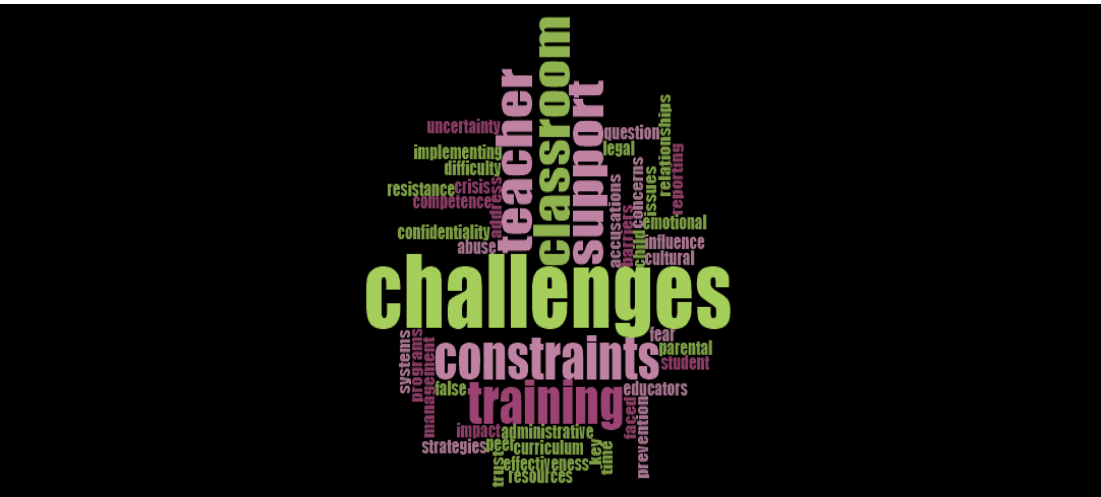


Figure 3: Strategies for the classroom

Figure 3 reveals the theme of the heads' perspectives on implementing strategies in the classroom for preventing child abuse. The most frequently used words are in bold, making a cloud around the word challenges. These words are classroom, teacher, support, constraints, and training. The theme that emerged from these word clouds indicates the challenges faced by educators in implementing child abuse prevention strategies in the classroom.

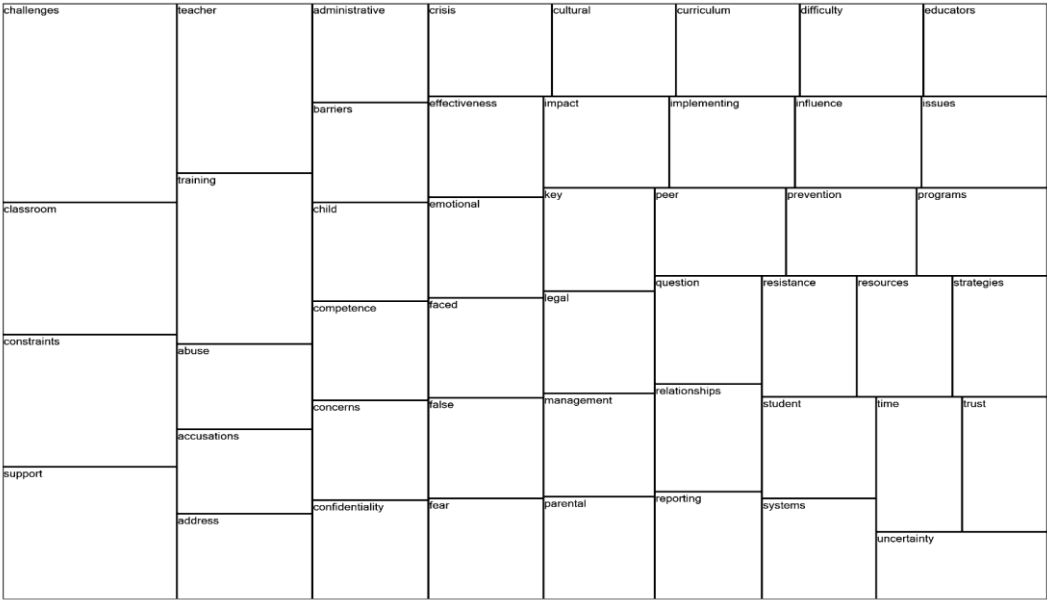


Figure 4: Challenges in Preventing Child Abuse

Figure 4 of the word tree depicts the most frequently used words related to challenges faced in implementing strategies for preventing child abuse in the classroom, as described by heads. Major words are effective, challenges, support, abuse, students, and strategies. Some of the responses of the respondents are presented here. One head expressed his opinion in the following given remarks: "According to me, the main challenges include lack of training, ineffective reporting mechanisms, as well as the societal stigmas surrounding the issue of child abuse in society."

Knowledge and Skill help heads respond to cases of suspected child abuse.

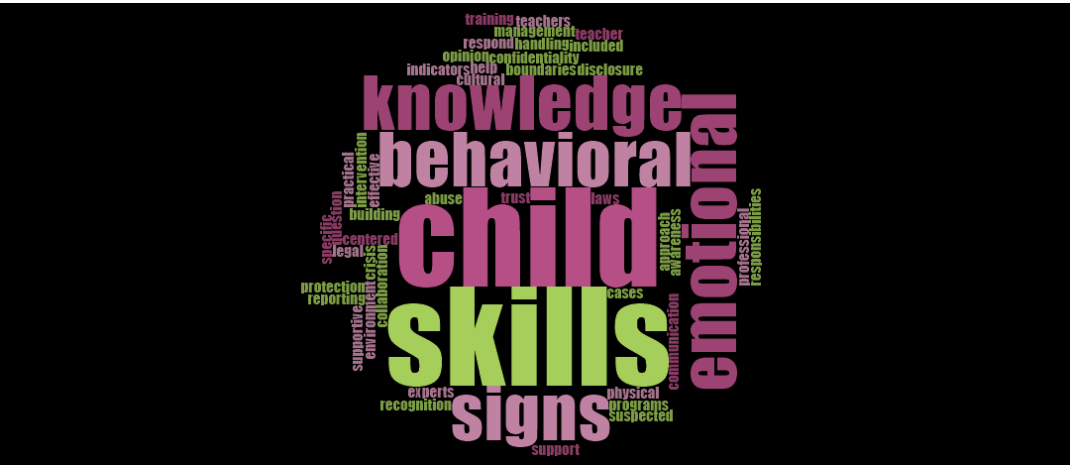


Figure 5: Knowledge of Suspected Child Abuse Case

Figure 5 presents the perspectives of heads related to Knowledge and specific skills of teachers for suspected child abuse cases. The most frequently used words indicate that the main issues highlighted by the heads are knowledge and specific skills. One of the respondents said, "I think Teachers must possess skills to recognize signs and provide emotional support to students in an effective manner".

child	knowledge	boundaries	confidentiality	crisis	cultural	disclosure	effective	environment
		building	experts	intervention	laws	legal	management	opinion
skills	signs	cases	handling	physical	protection	question	recognition	reporting
		centered	help	practical	respond	support	supportive	suspected
behavioral	abuse	collaboration	included	professional	responsibilities	teacher	training	
	approach							
emotional	awareness	communication	indicators	programs	specific	teachers	trust	

Figure 6: Specific Skill and Knowledge

Figure 6 shows a summary of some specific skills and knowledge that are included in teacher training programs. Some of the responses are presented here. One of the heads highlighted the issues in the following words. Teachers should possess skills to identify and recognize abuse signs, communicate effectively, and maintain confidentiality. They should also know reporting procedures, emotional support techniques, and collaboration with authorities." Therefore, some of the issues on which teachers expressed their concerns during the discussion were the lack of knowledge and specific skills.

Effectiveness of Safety Education within Teacher Training Programs



Figure 7: Effectiveness of Safety Education

Figure 7 presents the effectiveness of safety education. The more frequently used words are in bold and form a cloud around the word training. These words are effectiveness, feedback, learning, surveys, impact, teacher, etc. The emerging theme from this word cloud indicates the suggestions for training and the effectiveness of safety education.

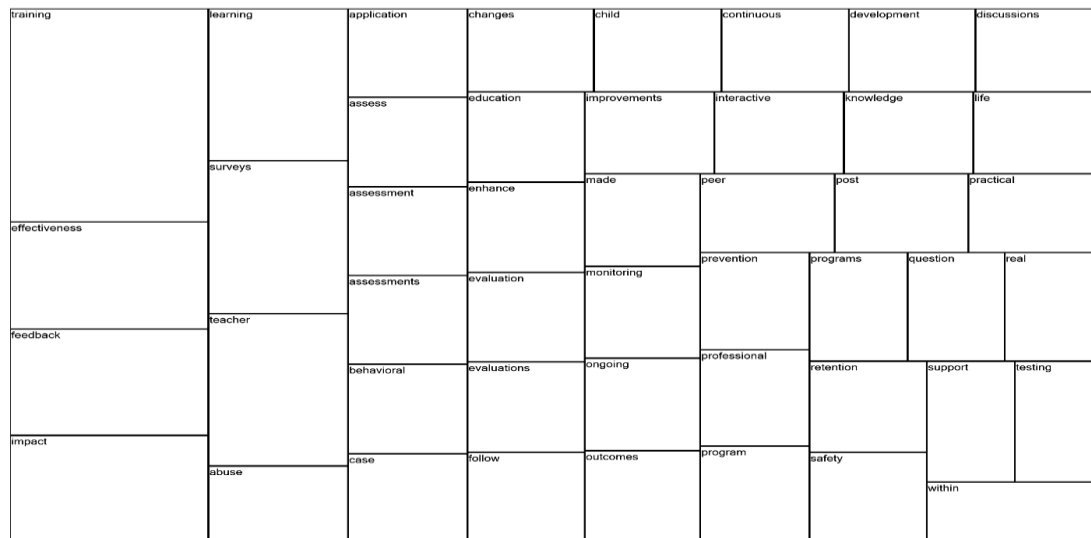


Figure 8: Child Abuse Prevention Training

Figure 8 of the word tree map presents the most frequently rated and important words used effectiveness of safety education. Major words are training, effectiveness, feedback, and impact. This tree map indicates the words focused on by the teacher, such as child abuse prevention training and the effectiveness of safety education. In this context, some of the respondents' quotations are presented here regarding the suggestion for child abuse prevention training. One of the respondents stated. "Inclusion of safety education is essential to respond to safety concerns and to promote a culture of safety".

5. Discussion

The findings from the school heads in this study reported that limited teacher knowledge and skills are the primary obstacles to effective child abuse prevention. This directly mirrors Fatima et al. (2023), who identified lack of awareness as the leading cause of underreporting in Pakistan. The consistency across studies separated by three years suggests that this barrier remains unresolved at the policy level.

Participants emphasized that training must go beyond theoretical knowledge to include simulations, role-playing, and hands-on strategies. This aligns with the international evidence cited in the literature review showing that simulation-based approaches outperform traditional methods. However, the present study adds a contextual dimension: school heads in Pakistan face resource constraints that may make high-tech simulation tools impractical, pointing toward low-cost, low-tech alternatives such as guided role-play and case discussions.

While the literature on Pakistani child abuse (Fatima et al., 2023; Alam et al., 2024) acknowledges cultural barriers, the school heads in this study provided specific mechanisms through which stigma operates, including reluctance among parents to permit discussions of bodily safety and institutional pressure to avoid "controversial" topics. This granular insight extends the existing literature by showing how stigma functions at the school level, not just the societal level.

The literature (Rashid et al., 2025; Karjalainen et al., 2021) suggests that clear policy frameworks enable effective teacher training. However, the school heads in this study reported that even where policies exist, implementation is undermined by weak reporting mechanisms and lack of follow-

through from higher authorities. This gap between policy and practice is less emphasized in the existing literature and represents a contribution of the present study.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how safety education can be integrated into teacher training programs to prevent child abuse. The findings show that while safety education is recognized as important, there are still gaps in its implementation. School heads identified the need for more practical training to help teachers detect warning signs, respond effectively to suspected cases, and create safer school environments. They also reported several challenges, including limited training opportunities, weak reporting mechanisms, and social stigma.

Addressing these barriers will require schools and policymakers to work together to design clear procedures, provide adequate resources, and strengthen collaboration between all stakeholders. In the long term, improving safety education in teacher training can contribute to better protection for children and a more supportive educational environment.

7. Limitations

This study has certain limitations:

1. The research was limited to public school heads in Multan, South Punjab, Pakistan. The findings may not be generalizable to other regions or educational settings.
2. Data were collected through self-reported interviews, which may involve response bias.
3. The study reflects only the views of school heads; future research could include perspectives from teachers, parents, and policymakers for a more comprehensive understanding.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Specialized Teacher Training – Develop targeted training programs tailored to the needs of different categories of teachers. Include scenario-based activities that allow teachers to practice responding to child abuse situations.
2. Improved Access and Equity – Address issues of equality and accessibility by ensuring all schools have the resources needed for safety education.
3. Practical Learning Platforms – Establish real-life, simulation-based learning platforms to enhance teachers' skills and confidence in preventing and responding to abuse.
4. Mandatory Inclusion – Make child safety education a compulsory component of both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs.

9. Suggestions for Future Research

- Future studies could expand this research by including teachers, parents, and students to gain a more complete picture of safety education needs in schools.
- Comparative studies across different regions of Pakistan, or between public and private institutions, could reveal variations in training practices and effectiveness.
- In addition, longitudinal studies could examine how integrating safety education into teacher training programs impacts child protection outcomes over time.

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