

## Prevention of child sexual abuse in China: Knowledge, attitudes, and communication practices of parents of elementary school children

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### Abstract

**Objective:** Active involvement by parents may contribute substantially to the success of school-based programs to prevent child sexual abuse (CSA). In China, little is known about parental understanding of CSA. This study investigated Chinese parents' knowledge, attitudes, and communication practices with their children about CSA.

**Method:** Six hundred and fifty-two parents of Grade 3 pupils of seven elementary schools in Jingzhou city, Hubei province (central China), completed an anonymous questionnaire (response rate = 81%).

**Results:** More than 95% of respondents agreed that elementary schools should provide programs to prevent CSA and were willing to have their children participate in such programs. Although nearly all parents talked with their children about stranger danger, they were much less likely to talk specifically about sexual abuse. Many parents personally lacked basic knowledge about characteristics of perpetrators, the sexual abuse of boys, and nonphysical consequences of CSA. About half (46.8%) expressed some concern that CSA preventive education could cause their children to know "too much about sex." Contrary to expectations from research in western nations, parents who talked with their children about CSA did not have better knowledge or more supportive attitudes to CSA prevention than did parents who said they never discussed CSA with their children.

**Conclusion:** This study confirms and extends two recent surveys indicating strong support for the concept of school-based CSA prevention in China. However, given the apparently low levels of knowledge about CSA, even among

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those who talk about this problem with their children, future prevention programs should include community-wide efforts to educate adults to ensure that parental advice is accurate and hopefully, effective.

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## Introduction

One of the challenges in school-based child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention is to develop programs that engage parents in the educational process. This task is complex both in theory and practice, given variable parental knowledge about sexual abuse, differences in family structures and styles of parent-child interaction, and because CSA often occurs within the home, extended family or familial social networks (Black, Heyman, & Slep, 2001; Molnar, Buka, & Kessler, 2001).

Some research in western countries has examined parents' perceptions of maltreatment and their willingness to talk with children about violence (Daro & Gelles, 1992; Ferrari, 2002; Maiter, Alaggia, & Trocme, 2004) and specifically about sexual abuse (Burgess & Wurtele, 1998; Finkelhor, 1994; Tutty, 1993). Wurtele, Kvaternick, and Franklin (1992) surveyed 375 parents of preschool children in Colorado and found that almost all parents talked with their children about stranger danger, and more than half (59%) specifically had discussed sexual abuse with their children. Demographically, parents who discussed CSA were quite similar to those who did not, although "discussers" were better educated and had more exposure to CSA either personally or through contact with abused friends or acquaintances. Wurtele, Kvaternick, et al. (1992) also found that parents who discussed CSA with their preschool children had much more supportive beliefs about the appropriateness and effectiveness of CSA prevention programs than other parents.

The situation regarding parent-child communication about CSA in China has not been explored in depth. In part, the lack of research may be due to a tradition of sexual conservatism, which includes reluctance to discuss sexual issues openly (Gao, Lu, Shi, Sun, & Cai, 2001) and the belief that CSA is not a significant problem. However, we recently have carried out several studies which show that CSA is relatively common for Chinese children. The prevalence of nonpenetrative abusive experiences is within the expected range from surveys in western nations (Chen, Dunne, & Han, 2004) and the risk of unwanted vaginal or anal penetration, while lower than some countries, is nevertheless substantial (Chen, Dunne, & Han, 2006; Chen, Han, & Dunne, 2004; Tang, 2002). This work also showed that the mental health and behavioral consequences of CSA for Chinese adolescents are very similar to those found among young people in other cultures (Chen & Dunne, 2003; Chen, Dunne, et al., 2004).

The level of awareness of CSA among Chinese adults has been explored in two recent surveys in Hong Kong (Tang & Yan, 2004) and the northern mainland province of Liaoning (Chen & Chen, 2005). Although these two surveys were done independently, there are remarkable similarities in the findings. Tang and Yan (2004) interviewed 1,606 adults recruited in shopping malls and asked various questions about "CSA myths" such as the belief that it is not a common experience, that the victim may bear responsibility and that children who report abuse often cannot be believed. In the study by Chen and Chen (2005), 385 parents of children in Grade 3 in four primary schools completed a brief questionnaire about their knowledge, attitudes, and communication practices about CSA.

Tang and Yan (2004) found that 40.7% of adults believed that “only a few boys are targets of child sexual abusers,” while 34.7% agreed that “if a child does not look disturbed, it is very likely that he/she was lying about being sexually abused” and 33.1% said that if children report CSA from a long time ago, we should doubt whether it really happened. Similarly, Chen and Chen (2005) found that 21.3% of parents did not know that “boys also can be sexually abused,” approximately one in three did not know that females can sexually abuse children and only 40.7% agreed that “children who report being sexually abused can be believed almost all of the time.” Further, more than 7 in 10 parents did not believe that most perpetrators of CSA are people with whom the child is familiar.

There are clear indications that these Chinese adults define sexual abuse in terms of acts that involve physical force and injury. Tang and Yan (2004) reported that 76.6% of adults believed that a “majority of CSA situations involve physical injuries,” while Chen and Chen (2005) found that only 28.1% of parents agreed that “if a child has been sexually abused, there will usually be no obvious physical evidence” (i.e., the great majority may believe there are typical physical signs).

There are some important unanswered questions about parental knowledge and communication regarding CSA in China. Although many adults talk to their children about CSA, many parents also have poor factual knowledge. If communication is to be effective in protecting children, the advice should be accurate. In the USA, Wurtele, Kast, and Melzer (1992) and Wurtele, Kvaternick, et al. (1992) found that parents who discuss CSA have higher education and more sophisticated knowledge and beliefs about CSA prevention than do other parents, but to date no study with Chinese adults has examined this important and necessary correlation.

The purpose of this new survey was to extend research to parents of elementary school children located in central China and to examine for the first time in this population the links between parental knowledge, attitudes, and communication practices with their children.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

The parents of children from 14 third grade classes in 7 schools (2 classes in each school) in Jingzhou city of Hubei province were asked to participate, following support from the school principals. Of the 806 enrolled students, 773 adults responded, with the requirement that there be only one parent from each family. Of these respondents, 121 questionnaires were excluded because the respondents stated they were not a pupil's parent, they did not state whether they were a parent, they did not indicate their child's gender, or missed four or more questions. A final 652 eligible questionnaires remained. The response rate was 84.3% among the 773 participants who were given the questionnaire (80.9% among the 806 enrolled students).

### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was developed based on literature review (Calvert & Munsie-Benson, 1999; Finkelhor, 1994; Finkelhor & Strapko, 1992; Tutty, 1993) and findings from in-depth interviews with parents and teachers regarding CSA in China. The questionnaire had been used in the study by Chen and

Chen (2005), and included items on general demographics, knowledge, attitudes, and protective practices (KAP) regarding CSA.

Correct responses to each knowledge item were given a score of 1, while incorrect or “unsure” responses were scored as 0 (range 0–10). A brief attitude scale simply asked whether parents agree or disagree with aspects of CSA prevention education (range 0–5). Seven questions were asked about parents’ communication practices with their children regarding self-protection, including four items specifically regarding prevention of sexual abuse (range 0–7).

Internal consistency analyses of scales of knowledge, attitudes and practice produced alpha levels of .47, .56, and .60, respectively.

### *Data analysis*

An important, untested hypothesis is that Chinese parents who talk to their children about CSA are more knowledgeable and have more positive attitudes to prevention education than those who do not communicate about this problem. Following Wurtele, Kast, et al. (1992) and Wurtele, Kvaternick, et al. (1992), we divided parents into “discussers” and “nondiscussers” based on the four types of communication. Discussers were those who responded yes to any of these statements: “talked with their children about his/her private parts and said they should not be touched by others”; “if someone wants to see or touch your private parts, you should definitely say ‘No’ and leave at once”; “if sexual abuse happens, parents or other trusted adults should be told”; “had provided books or audiovisual products about CSA to their child.” Independent-samples *t* tests were used to compare the differences between knowledge and attitudes of discussers and nondiscussers.

*Data collection procedure and ethics.* The parents participated anonymously and voluntarily. Questionnaires were completed in the children’s classroom during school guardians’ meetings. Definitions of child sexual abuse and the survey aims and questionnaire response instructions were explained in the first page. The parents were asked to complete the questionnaire independently and not to discuss it with others before or during data collection. The project was approved by the Ethics Censoring Committee for Research Involving Humans of Peking University Health Sciences Center, Beijing.

## **Results**

### *Demographic characteristics of the respondents*

Among the respondents who were parents, there were 256 fathers (39.3%; mean age = 34.1 years) and 396 mothers (60.7%; mean age = 32.5 years); 12.3% of the respondents had graduated from junior high school only, 40.3% had senior high school education, 46.5% had junior college education or higher, while very few (.9%) had only elementary school education or no formal education. Of their children, 46.8% were girls and the average age was 7.9 years, with 93.8% being aged either 7 or 8 years.

### *Parents’ knowledge of CSA prevention*

Parents’ correct responses to the knowledge questions are summarized in Table 1. More than 90% knew that the problem of CSA existed “around the world” and that perpetrators often repeat the offense.

Table 1  
Parents' knowledge of child sexual abuse

Items	Number of respondents	Answered correctly (%)
1. The problems of CSA exists around the world (T)	647	91.2
2. Children are most likely to be sexually abused by? (familiar people)	642	43.9
3. A person who has sexually abused a child will likely repeat the offense (T)	650	90.9
4. Whose fault is child sexual abuse (the molester)	643	83.7
5. If a child has been sexually abused, there will usually be no obvious physical evidence (T)	652	28.2
6. Females cannot sexually abuse children (F)	648	65.7
7. Boys cannot be sexually abused (F)	648	81.8
8. Children who have been sexually abused often will be held back from disclosing by the abuser (T)	650	73.1
9. Children who report being sexually abused can be believed . . . ? (almost all the time)	647	40.6
10. Men sexually abuse children in most cases (T)	647	78.1

The great majority correctly stated that men sexually abuse children in most cases, attributed blame to the perpetrator rather than child, and knew that abused children often are intimidated by the perpetrator not to disclose. In other respects, the knowledge of parents is lacking. More than half of the parents did not know that children most often are sexually abused by familiar people, while one third did not know that females can be the perpetrator and about one in five appeared not to know that boys can be sexually abused. Only about 3 in 10 knew that usually there are no obvious physical signs when sexual abuse has occurred.

#### *Attitudes toward school-based CSA prevention education*

Nearly all parents (97.7%) agreed that CSA prevention programs should be offered in schools, and 95.5% were willing to let their own children learn about CSA in school. Less than one in ten (9.3%) said there was no need for CSA prevention education in school because the child will learn this knowledge anyway as she/he grows up, and few parents indicated that there was no need to conduct CSA prevention education because the problem is rare (7.5%).

Despite these generally positive attitudes to preventive education as a concept, many parents expressed some unease about it, as nearly half (46.8%) said they were worried that CSA prevention education might lead their children to know “too much about sex.”

#### *Parent's communication with children about CSA prevention*

Almost all of the respondents reported that they had talked with their children about stranger danger (see Table 2). Most had warned children about not accepting gifts from strangers, or not to go to other places with familiar adults or strangers without their parents' permission. Communication specifically about sexual issues or what to do if sexual acts occur was noticeably less common. It is also clear in

Table 2

Communication practices of parents regarding child self-protection and sexual abuse

Topic		Percent of daughters	Percent of sons	Percent of total
1.	Talked with their child about their private parts (parts covered by swimsuit/bathing suit) and said they should not be touched by others	63.7	69.0	66.5
2.	Told child if someone wants to see or touch their private parts, they should definitely say “No” and leave at once	62.0	59.9	60.9
3.	Told child if sexual abuse happens, parents or other trusted adults should be told	50.5	43.5	46.8
4.	Told child not to go with others, even familiar grown-ups, unless they have parental permission	94.1	94.8	94.5
5.	Told child not to accept gifts from strangers, unless they have parental permission	98.7	98.5	98.6
6.	Told child that if a person they did not know wanted them to show the way to nearest store, they should not go with him/her	98.7	97.1	97.8
7.	Provided books or audiovisual products about CSA prevention for their child	4.3	4.6	4.5

Table 2 that the great majority of adults did not have access to suitable print or audiovisual resource materials that could be used to facilitate parent-child communication about sexual abuse.

### *Characteristics of parents who talk to their children about CSA*

Associations between demographic characteristics of parents and their knowledge, attitudes, and communication practices are summarized in Table 3. Fathers and mothers had similar levels of knowledge.

Table 3

Associations between demographic factors and knowledge, attitudes, and communication practices

	Knowledge (0–10)	Attitudes (0–5)	Communication (0–7)
Parents' gender			
Fathers	6.91 ± 1.78	4.43 ± .88	4.44 ± 1.42
Mothers	6.74 ± 1.69	4.26 ± .91	4.85 ± 1.22
<i>p</i> value	<i>ns</i>	.022	.000
Parents' education level <sup>a</sup>			
Junior high school or lower	5.68 ± 2.26	4.03 ± 1.20	4.91 ± 1.31
Senior high school	6.64 ± 1.58 <sup>#</sup>	4.27 ± .99 <sup>#</sup>	4.70 ± 1.22
College or higher	7.24 ± 1.53 <sup>#@</sup>	4.45 ± .69 <sup>#@</sup>	4.63 ± 1.37
<i>p</i> value	.000	.001	.207
Children's gender			
Daughter	6.76 ± 1.77	4.26 ± .94	4.71 ± 1.36
Son	6.85 ± 1.68	4.39 ± .87	4.67 ± 1.29
<i>p</i> value	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>

<sup>a</sup> Note: “@” indicates difference ( $p < .05$ ) between college and senior high school; “#” indicates difference ( $p < .05$ ) between junior high and other groups.

Although fathers had slightly more positive attitudes to CSA prevention education for their children, it was mothers who were most likely to communicate with their child about CSA and stranger danger.

Parents' own level of education was strongly associated with knowledge and positive attitudes toward CSA prevention education. However, there was no significant association between parents' education and the extent to which they talked with their children on these issues. It is also noteworthy that the gender of the child was not associated with parental knowledge, attitudes, or communication.

There was slightly better factual knowledge among parents who talked with their children about their private parts and avoiding being touched (6.92 vs. 6.59,  $p = .028$ ), but no other group comparisons regarding knowledge reached significance. Similarly, attitudes toward CSA education were equivalent for both groups, except that the few parents who provided books or audiovisual material reported somewhat less positive attitudes to CSA prevention education (3.85 vs. 4.35,  $p = .005$ ).

It is possible that the item-by-item comparisons could obscure a linear relationship whereby parents who communicated with their children about multiple aspects of CSA had better knowledge than those who talked about only one issue. We grouped parents into those who did not have any communication specifically about CSA ( $n = 124$ ), only one type ( $n = 126$ ), any two types ( $n = 143$ ), or three or four types ( $n = 210$ ). One-way analyses of variance revealed no significant association between reporting multiple communication types and parents' knowledge ( $F = 1.918$ ,  $p = .125$ ) or attitudes ( $F = 1.389$ ,  $p = .245$ ).

## Discussion

One important finding in this study in central China is that there is very substantial support by parents for the introduction of school-based programs for young children to reduce the risk of sexual abuse. This result replicates the positive attitudes toward CSA prevention among parents revealed in a smaller survey in a northeastern province of China (Chen & Chen, 2005). More broadly, results of this study are consistent with other recent Chinese research with adults (Cui, Li, & Gao, 2001; Tang & Yan, 2004) and college students (Li, Cottrell, Wagner, & Ban, 2004) that is showing positive community attitudes toward education programs for the promotion of sexual health.

The findings also provide insight into substantial barriers to prevention efforts in China. Parents' basic knowledge of the nature of CSA was highly variable, with many saying they were unaware that boys can be sexually abused or that females can be perpetrators. The majority of parents appear not to believe that children most often are sexually molested by familiar people. Although research into the contexts of sexual abuse in China (such as the perpetrators, places, and types of molestation) remains to be done, it is clear from research worldwide that most abusers are known to the victim and often to the family (Black et al., 2001; Lalor, 2004; Madu & Peltzer, 2001; Romero, Wyatt, Loeb, Carmona, & Solis, 1999). Other disturbing observations were that many parents believe that young children often should not be believed when they report CSA and that, if CSA actually occurs, there will be obvious physical signs. This is consistent with observations by Tang and Yan (2004) among Chinese adults in Hong Kong, which is one of the most highly educated and affluent parts of the country.

Both this study and a smaller survey in Liaoning province (Chen & Chen, 2005) show that most parents communicate with their young children about general personal safety, although they are less likely specifically to talk about sexual issues. This is hardly surprising, was observed some time ago in the USA (Wurtele, Kvaternick, et al., 1992) and probably exists in most cultures. At one level, it is encouraging to see that so many parents (between 47% and 67%, depending on the specific issue)



reported that they had talked with their child about CSA; however, the value of this communication must be questioned by the comparison of parents who do or do not discuss sexual abuse, because the knowledge of “discussers” appears to be just as poor as those who do not talk about it.

Our research method was not sophisticated enough to move on to the next questions: If parents’ knowledge is so poor, then precisely what is it that the children are being told? Is the communication beneficial? In some countries that have a longer history of CSA prevention education and active programs to raise community awareness (such as Canada, Ireland, and the USA), communication with children about CSA generally or within the context of specific training programs is associated with better knowledge of adults, including parents and teachers (Burgess & Wurtele, 1998; Hebert, Lavoie, Piche, & Poitras, 2001; MacIntyre & Carr, 1999; Wurtele, Kast, et al., 1992; Wurtele, Kvaternick, et al., 1992). Clearly, there is an urgent need in China for comprehensive programs that have parallel aims of promoting children’s awareness and resistance skills and increasing parents’ knowledge and communication skills.

This study has some significant limitations. The measurement of knowledge, attitudes, and communication was relatively superficial. The questionnaire was designed to be simple and easy to administer, as the context of the data collection (school parents’ meetings) precluded use of a more detailed measure. The psychometric properties of the scale would need to be improved before the questions could be used, for example, to assess change over time in parents’ knowledge or communication in response to an education program. Another limitation is that we used a convenience sample of just seven schools in one city, so we caution against generalization.

A more detailed assessment of attitudes is needed to explore parental ambivalence. In this survey, we did not specify precisely the form that preventive education might take or the exact content. About half of the parents of these elementary school children were concerned that such programs might teach their children too much about sex. To gain constructive participation in the future, a better understanding is needed of what specific information, resources and methods of teaching will be acceptable, and hopefully embraced by the parents of young children in China.

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