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Personal Opinion

School Nurses in Child Protection: A need for Capacity Development

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Abstract

Child abuse has been considered a public health and social problem all over the world, including Nepal. Over 88.0% of children encounter some form of abuse within their homes at some point in their lives. School nurses play a vital role in promoting the health and well-being of students, providing essential healthcare services, and addressing various health issues. Their role in safeguarding children by educating children, teachers, and parents, recognizing abuse and neglect cases, and responding with proper mechanisms is vital. However, many school nurses are young and lack experience in child abuse issues, as they have not received any training in child protection. They are not clear about their role in protecting children and seem to lack knowledge and practice in protecting children despite having a good attitude. There is a growing need for capacity development to enhance the effectiveness of school nurses in safeguarding the health of children and adolescents. Capacity development in this field is essential to ensure that school nurses are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to address the complex health challenges facing children and adolescents today. Investing in the capacity development of school nurses, their ability to protect and promote the health and safety of students can be ensured, ultimately leading to better outcomes for the entire school community. This paper discusses about the crucial role of school nurses in protecting children and adolescents and the importance of training, resources, and support for school nurses. We have also discussed the need for capacity development of school nurses to effectively address the diverse health needs of students and create a safe and healthy school environment.

Introduction

Child protection refers to the safeguarding of children's rights and well-being from all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence. There are many aspects of child protection such as health promotion and education including nutrition and exercise; identification and intervention of abuse, neglect, or other threats to children's safety; protection of child rights; coordination and collaboration with different agencies and support systems; education, training, and advocacy and crisis management. School health nurses are trained to recognize signs of abuse, neglect, or other threats to children's safety.[1]

In recent years, Nepal Government has formed a post of school health nurses in every school. The provincial Government as well as local Government has made provision of school health nurses in their local public schools. Some private schools have provision of school health nurses since many years.[3,4] The Government of

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Nepal has prepared their job description. While their role in recognizing and responding to child protection issues is not clearly defined, it does encompass an educational component regarding child and adolescent abuse and harassment.[5,6] Actually, ensuring child protection recognition and response in the school area is one of the school nurse's jobs.[7] Beyond their well-known roles in health care provision, school nurses play a vital role in safeguarding students' rights, ensuring they receive equitable access to education, health services, social security and protection from exploitation. School nurses are positioned at the forefront of child protection efforts due to their responsibility for identifying and responding to suspected abuse. Any form of abuse might have profound and lasting impacts on young individuals, affecting their physical and psychological health, development, and academic performance.[7,8] The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) underscores the importance of promoting children's rights, including their right to education, health care, safety, and protection from abuse and neglect.[2] School nurses, therefore, are in a critical and pivotal position in upholding these rights within the educational setting.

Recent studies underscore the pivotal role of school nurses in recognizing and responding to abuse among students. Their training in child development and their daily interactions with children enable them to identify behavioral changes, unexplained injuries, or other indicators that may be signal for abuse.[8-10] Furthermore, school nurses often collaborate closely with educators, social workers, and law enforcement agencies to ensure comprehensive support and protection for vulnerable students.[9,10] They have to recognize and respond to child abuse and neglect cases in their daily work settings. In our experience, the preservice nursing curricula in Nepal have not included mechanisms for recognizing and responding to child abuse, neglect, and other child protection issues, apart from a brief discussion on children's rights. There is a gap in knowledge and practice of school health Nurses on child protection.[4] By strengthening the capacity of school nurses, educational institutions can better fulfill their duty to provide a safe and supportive environment conducive to learning and holistic development. They can identify and manage properly the school children and adolescents of abuse and neglect even in home and community.

Situation of child abuse and neglect

Abuse of children includes physical, sexual, emotional, and neglect. It is a universal and distressing issue that affects millions of children worldwide. It has been recognized as a global public health and social problem.[11] It is estimated that every year, there are 41,000 homicide deaths of children under the age of 15.[12] An estimated total of 205,153 children aged 0 to 14 years lost their lives worldwide as a result of homicide during the ten-year period 2008–2017.[13] Despite the absence of reliable global estimates for the prevalence of child abuse, it is estimated that 40,150 homicide deaths occur in children under 18 years of age annually.[14] Nearly three in four children aged two to four years regularly suffer physical punishment and / or psychological violence at the hands of parents and caregivers.[14] Likewise, one in five women and one in 13 men report having been sexually abused as children aged 0 - 17 years.[14] The World Health Organization (WHO) estimate each year, between 500 million and 1.5 billion children experience violence globally, while 73 to 150 million girls face abuse annually.[15] The prevalence of severe physical abuse varies from 4 to 16%.[16] WHO also notes considerable variability in reported rates of child maltreatment, with estimates the prevalence of physical abuse in childhood could be as high as 25.0% in some context.[14,17] In the United States, one in seven children has experienced child abuse or neglect in the past year.[18] Over 24.8 thousand child abuse offenses were recorded by the police in England and Wales in 2020 / 21.[19] In 2021, 53,932 cases of suspected child abuse were reported, a 27.6% increase over the previous year. Investigations revealed that 37,605 of these cases involved child abuse in Korea.[20]

Population- based studies from developing countries show much higher prevalence rates of physical abuse.[21] The rate of child abuse is over 83% in New Delhi, India.[22] Two-thirds of children are beaten at home or school every year, and 52% admitted to some form of sexual abuse in India.[23] In Sri Lanka, at one point, over 40,000 children were engaged in prostitution.[24] In Pakistan, between 15% and 25% of children experience sexual abuse.[25,26] In Karachi, Pakistan, 88.7% of school children reported physical abuse, and 17% of 300 school children were sexually abused.[27] In Nepal, nearly half of the children (49.8%) had experienced moderate physical abuse, 21.5% experienced severe physical abuse, and 77.3% experienced emotional abuse.[28]

There is limited information about this problem in low and middle income countries like Nepal. However, the limited research on this area has suggested that physical punishment of children is common across Nepal with varying severity. One in every second child is physically punished. One in every third (33.0%) of children was spanked, hit, or slapped on the bottom, 25.0% were hit or slapped on the face, and approximately 3.0% were beaten up hard.[29]

Physical abuse among children is common across Nepal. It is estimated that 72.5% of Nepali adolescents in the past year experienced some form of physical abuse based on maternal reports.[25] A study found that 49.8% of Nepali children are physically abused, 21.5% experienced severe physical abuse, and 77.3% experienced emotional abuse.[28] Over 88.0% of students reported experiencing child abuse in the home in one or more forms throughout their lifetime[26] and 15.8% were found to be sexually abused.[32]

Role of school health nurses in protecting children and adolescents

Child protection is a burning issue in Nepal. Children in Nepal, regardless of their gender or background, may have faced abuse at home, school, or in the workplace. In Nepal, nurses are the only healthcare professionals specifically focused on addressing the health needs of school-aged children and adolescents. The role of school nurses in child protection recognition and response is crucial in ensuring the safety and well-being of students. School nurses play a key role in identifying signs of abuse or neglect in children and taking appropriate action to protect them. Nepal Government has already formed the post of child welfare officer in every local administrative level and management of school education is also under the same local Government.[33,34] School health nurses are pivotal to link this issue to the local Government. International literature highlights the variety of activities that school nurses may undertake in daily practice to protect children and young people from maltreatment.[9] School nurses are often the first point of contact for students who may be experiencing abuse or neglect. They are trained to recognize the physical and behavioral signs of abuse, as well as to listen to students who may disclose their experiences. School nurses work closely with other school staff, such as teachers and counselors, to create a safe and supportive environment for students. In addition to identifying signs of abuse, school nurses also play a role in reporting suspected cases to the appropriate authorities. They are mandated reporters, meaning they are required by children Act 2075 of Nepal to inform any suspicions of child abuse or neglect to child protection mechanism. School nurses work with these agencies to ensure that students receive the necessary support and intervention. Overall, school nurses are essential in the protection of children and in promoting their health and well-being. Their role in recognizing and responding to child protection concerns is vital in creating a safe and nurturing environment for all students.

The school nurse plays a crucial role in child protection within the school setting. They are often the first point of contact for students who may be experiencing abuse or neglect. The school nurse is responsible for recognizing signs of abuse or neglect, reporting suspicions to the appropriate authorities, and providing support and resources to students in need. In addition to identifying and reporting abuse, the school nurse also plays a role in educating students, parents, and school staff about child protection issues. They may provide training on recognizing signs of abuse, how to report suspicions, and how to create a safe and supportive environment for students. Overall, the school nurse is a key player in ensuring the safety and well-being of students in the school setting. Their knowledge, expertise, and compassion are essential in protecting children from harm and providing them with the support they need to thrive.

School nurses play a crucial role in protecting children and adolescents, but there is a need for capacity development in this area. However, many school nurses face challenges in effectively carrying out their roles due to limited resources, training, and support. Capacity development is essential to equip school nurses with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to address the diverse health needs of students. The school nurses perceived that there was confusion and a lack of clarity in relation to their role and involvement in child protection. Report writing, child trafficking, and legal issues were identified as areas of training needs.[35]

A study done in Nepal reported that most of the school health nurses are young without experience of childhood abuse and have not received any child protection training before taking up their position in the schools. Though they have good knowledge of child rights, physical and sexual abuse, except child neglect and existing legal arrangements, the majority of the school nurses do not have knowledge of the case management process after detecting abuse. The study also reported that there is a gap in knowledge and practice of child protection.[4] By investing in capacity development for school nurses, they can be equipped to protect the health and well-being of children and adolescents. This includes providing ongoing training, resources, and support to help school nurses effectively address health issues, promote healthy behaviors, and create a safe and supportive environment for students.

Currently, there is no structured training package for school nurses provided by the Nepal Government, even though the "One School One Nurse" program has already been implemented.[3] The program has primarily focused on general health and mental health interventions rather than a specific training package on child protection recognition and response (CPRR). For the past few years, the Nepal Paediatric Society (NEPAS) and Paediatric Nurses Association of Nepal (PNAN) have been conducting CPRR training packages for doctors and nurses working with the paediatric population developed by NEPAS in collaboration with other organizations. Therefore, there is a need to develop a structured training package that provides comprehensive training on child protection for school health nurses, enhancing their preparedness to safeguard children effectively.

Conclusions

The provision of school nurses is a very essential and praiseworthy initiative by the Government. There is a great role of school nurses in child health, child protection as well as child safety. Capacity development for school nurses is essential in protecting children and adolescents by recognizing and responding to child protection issues. This can be a very important step which leads to better outcomes for the entire school children and the future of our country.

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