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Press Release

Survey on Children's Awareness of Seeking Help in Cases of Sexual Abuse (31 March 2025)

Against Child Abuse (ACA) was established in 1979 and has been committed to eliminating all forms of child abuse in Hong Kong. To promote a caring and non-violent environment for the optimal growth and development of our children through delivering quality services in the areas of prevention, training, crisis intervention, treatment, and advocacy.

According to the Social Welfare Department's Child Protection Registry, 1,504 new child protection cases were reported in 2024, including 522 cases of sexual abuse, accounting for 34.7% of all cases. This is second only to physical abuse. Many of these involved sexual grooming, where perpetrators gain children's trust online before abusing them. Police statistics from 2023 show a 15.4% increase in online sexual abuse cases involving children compared to 2022. The number of such cases rose again in 2024, highlighting a concerning trend.

In light of this, ACA conducted a survey between December 2024 and March 2025, targeting children and parents to understand their awareness of seeking help in cases of sexual abuse. The aim was to improve prevention and support services and to provide child protection recommendations.

The survey collected 196 valid responses from children and 365 from parents. The child respondents were aged 6 to 17, with 40.8% male and 59.2% female. Parent respondents were rearing children aged 6 to 17; 15.6% were male and 84.4% female. Key findings and recommendations are summarized below:

Children's understanding of sexual abuse needs improvement

66.3% of children and 91.8% of parents said they could identify acts of sexual abuse, including both physical and non-physical contact. However, 33.7% of children said they were not aware of which acts constituted sexual abuse, indicating a need to improve children's understanding.

Most children and parents believe strangers are the perpetrators

Among the 196 children, 55.6% said they knew who could be perpetrators. Of these, 80.7% identified strangers, 56% identified coaches, and 50.5% identified neighbors or teachers/tutors.

Of the 365 parents, 68.5% said they could identify perpetrators: of these, 87.2% listed strangers, 77.2% listed teachers/tutors, 76.8% listed neighbors, and 76.4% listed coaches. The results show that both children and parents believe that strangers, teachers/tutors, neighbors and coaches are most likely to be perpetrators.

In reality, perpetrators are often familiar to the child — including parents, relatives, older acquaintances, friends, or classmates. According to the statistical report of Social Welfare Department's Child Protection Registry, most perpetrators are the child's peers. Thus, children

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must learn interpersonal boundaries and self-protection skills. At the same time, parents can pay more attention to their children's social life and help them develop a sense of self-protection from an early age.

Children do not seek help because they feel ashamed and think it is useless

Among the 196 children, 8.2% of children said they would not seek help if sexually abused. Main reasons included feeling shame, not wanting others to know, and believing help would be ineffective (43.8%). Others feared no one would believe them, or that the perpetrators (who might be someone they know) would harm them or their families (31.3%).

Of the 196 children, 41 suspected they had been sexually abused. Only 10 (5.1%) sought help, with half turning to their mothers first. All who sought help reported receiving support, mainly emotional comfort.

Parents do not seek help because family scandals should not be made public

Among the 365 parents, 2.2% of parents said they would not seek help if their children were sexually abused. Of these, 62.5% cited the desire to keep family scandals private, while 37.5% believed it was a one-off incident that would not recur.

Of the 365 parents, 74 had suspected their children were sexually abused, but only 20 (5.5%) sought help from relevant departments or agencies. 90% of these found the experience helpful.

Sexual abuse has long-lasting effects on children's physical and mental development. Without timely and appropriate support, the trauma can persist into adulthood. Parents and caregivers must protect children and take their disclosures seriously without doubting or blaming them, to avoid secondary trauma. Authorities and social services must be contacted for assistance.

ACA's Recommendations

1. Strengthen Legal Protection and Formulate Targeted Regulations

Incidents of child sexual abuse occur from time to time. In recent years, there has been an increasing trend in sexual abuse cases involving grooming children for sexual purposes and children's online activities, and the identities of the perpetrators are more difficult to identify. It is hoped that the government can formulate targeted laws, policies and mechanisms to respond, regulate Internet providers, and require the establishment of a network security monitoring system. Internet service providers and social media companies must assume social responsibility and ensure the safety of children when using their services.

2. Promote Child Protection Policy

It is recommended that the government actively publicise and promote child protection policy and encourage organisations working with children to formulate internal policies so that staff and volunteers understand the principles and boundaries when interacting with children and the procedures and guidelines for handling suspected cases or complaints, so as to protect children from abuse.

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3. Enhance Training for Professionals

Strengthen continuous training for professionals who deal with child sexual abuse, including social workers, medical staff, police, teachers, child care workers, etc., to ensure that children receive timely and appropriate support in the process of seeking help, so as to avoid secondary harm to children.

4. Implement Comprehensive School-Based Sex Education

It is recommended that the government implement a systematic sex education curriculum in schools based on the children's psychological development and needs, including sex education for parents, so that children can learn to protect themselves and make responsible decisions at different stages of their growth. Parents should also learn how to provide family sex education to their children and understand how to properly help their children deal with suspected sexual assault incidents.

5. Strengthen Publicity and Community Education

The government and social welfare organizations need to strengthen publicity and community education to let children and parents know about sexual abuse and online sexual grooming, as well as coping methods and ways to seek help. This will effectively reduce the number of children being sexually assaulted or sexually groomed online.

6. Improve the Sexual Conviction Record Check Scheme

It is recommended that the government consider to allocate more resources to make the scheme statutory. Employers should check conviction records of prospective or current employees and volunteers. Parents hiring private tutors, coaches, or carers should also be able to use the system.

7. Provide Mandatory Treatment for Sexual Offenders

The Clinical Psychological Service Unit of the Correctional Services Department provides treatment groups for sex offenders, but on a voluntary basis only. In view of the fact that some sex offenders re-offend after being released from prison, it is recommend that the government consider empowering judges to include compulsory treatment services in sentencing, especially for prisoners who have committed more serious sexual crimes. At the same time, it is necessary to maintain the provision of specialized post-release supervision for released sex offenders under the statutory scheme, strengthen their after-care counseling and rehabilitation services, and assist them in reintegrating into society and employment through supportive rehabilitation programs, so as to reduce the chance of reoffending and help reduce the risk of children being abused.

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