

Original Research Article

Perceptions and Responses of High School Students to Sexual Abuse

Trần Thị Mai Phương^{1*}

¹University of Education, VNU, Hanoi

Article History

Received: 24.05.2024

Accepted: 01.07.2024

Published: 03.07.2024

Journal homepage:

<https://www.easpublisher.com>

Quick Response Code



Abstract: The study aims to assess high school students' awareness and responses to sexual abuse. Survey data were collected from 1,182 high school students at several schools in Hanoi. The results indicate that, in general, high school students have a certain level of knowledge about abusive behaviors and correctly perceive the perpetrators of such acts. However, a significant portion of students still have misconceptions about abusive behaviors and inappropriate attitudes towards sexual abuse. The study also highlights students' reactions in various sexual abuse situations.

Keywords: Awareness, responses, sexual abuse, high school students.

Copyright © 2024 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, many countries around the world are facing and addressing numerous distressing issues in schools. These include student disengagement, dropout rates, suicide, school violence, mental health issues, hyperactivity, bullying, protecting and helping students escape harm, preventing student stigma, and the relationships between families, schools, teachers, and students. In Vietnam, according to the Ministry of Education and Training, the total number of students nationwide is currently around 22.21 million (an increase of 337,937 compared to the previous academic year). This includes 4.42 million preschool children (up by 180,000), 15.08 million general education students (up by 180,000), 0.35 million vocational school students (down by 72,000), and 2.36 million university and college students (up by 38,000). With such a large number of students at each educational level, they face various issues appropriate to their developmental stages.

According to recent statistics from the Reproductive Health Counseling Center at the Central Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital, from 2008 to 2012, there were approximately 80-100 cases of adolescent childbirth/abortions per year. The rate of teenage pregnancies in the total number of abortions at this hospital is about 1-3%. According to the Vietnam Family Planning Association, Vietnam is one of the countries with the highest abortion rates in the world, with 20% of these being teenagers. Currently, Vietnam has 23.8

million adolescents and young adults, accounting for 31% of the population. It is estimated that this proportion will increase by 4.8% in the next ten years.

Moreover, child sexual abuse (CSA) is an alarming issue in Vietnam and many countries worldwide. It is estimated that 1 in 5 children experience CSA; 66% - 93% of CSA cases are perpetrated by someone the child knows, with the highest victim concentration in the 12-14 age group. Perpetrators of CSA engage in contact or non-contact abuse through coercion, threats, or manipulation. Consequently, many children do not realize they are being abused or are too afraid to disclose it, suffering severe physical and psychological consequences. The rate of correct knowledge and attitudes about CSA among students is still low. A study by Đỗ Mai Oanh on 217 female middle school students in Trục Ninh district, Nam Định, in 2014 showed that only 34.2% of students fully recognized CSA behaviors, and 65.5% correctly identified at least one CSA behavior. Similarly, a survey by the 'Growing Up Safely' project (2017) on 133 children (grades 6 and 7) in Cát Bà, Hải Phòng (51% female) found that only 12% of students fully knew the signs of CSA. Education on CSA prevention for adolescents in our country is still quite limited due to cultural, economic, and social barriers. This article aims to understand high school students' awareness and responses to sexual abuse to develop appropriate intervention programs.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

Theoretical research method: This method involves reviewing studies and theories on sexual abuse, focusing on the content relevant to the study.

Survey method using questionnaires: A questionnaire was developed and piloted with two

students from grades 10 and 12 to assess its comprehensibility before being used in the main study.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. Survey Results on High School Students' Awareness of Sexual Abuse Behavior: The level of student awareness of sexual abuse was assessed through questions regarding their opinions on specific statements. The results are as follows:

Table 1: Awareness levels of high school students on sexual abuse behavior

No.	Statement	Awareness Level
		Unaware Number
1	Only girls are sexually harassed/abused.	74
2	If you are sexually harassed/abused, it's best not to tell anyone because it will only make things worse.	41
3	To maintain the relationship, sometimes you need to accept your boyfriend/girlfriend's sexual advances even if you don't want to.	78
4	The perpetrator of sexual harassment/abuse can be someone known to the victim.	174
5	Most perpetrators of sexual harassment/abuse are strangers.	247
6	If friends of the opposite sex deliberately send sexually suggestive images or tell provocative stories despite my disinterest, it is a form of rude joking but still acceptable.	128
7	Others should not hug or touch my body if I don't want them to.	40
8	It is permissible for family members to hug or touch my body even if I don't want them to.	101
9	Most victims of harassment or abuse are to blame for being too careless (e.g., going out late, getting drunk, hanging out with strangers/untrustworthy people, etc.).	150
10	Most people who are harassed or abused behaved improperly beforehand (e.g., wearing revealing clothes, associating with bad friends, etc.).	196
11	The only victim of sexual harassment/abuse is the person being harassed.	293
12	Only touching genital areas counts as sexual abuse.	139
13	The motive behind harassment is always sexual.	350
14	If someone intends to harass/abuse me, avoiding them can prevent the harassment and eventually, they will forget about me.	229

Research results in table 1 show that students have understanding about the signs, behaviors, and perpetrators of sexual abuse through the statements: "Only girls are sexually harassed/abused," "If you are sexually harassed/abused, it's best not to tell anyone because it will only make things worse," "To maintain the relationship, sometimes you need to accept your boyfriend/girlfriend's sexual advances even if you don't want to," "The perpetrator of sexual harassment/abuse can be someone known to the victim," "If friends of the opposite sex deliberately send sexually suggestive images or tell provocative stories despite my disinterest, it is a form of rude joking but still acceptable," "Others should not hug or touch my body if I don't want them to," "It is permissible for family members to hug or touch my body even if I don't want them to," "Most victims of harassment or abuse are to blame for being too careless (e.g., going out late, getting drunk, hanging out with strangers/untrustworthy people, etc.)," "Only touching genital areas counts as sexual abuse," "The motive

behind harassment is always sexual," and "If someone intends to harass/abuse me, avoiding them can prevent the harassment and eventually, they will forget about me."

In the statement: "The only victim of sexual harassment/abuse is the person being harassed," students tended to disagree (37.8%), but the number of students who agreed with this statement was also relatively high, showing little difference (37.4%). Two statements where students have low levels of understanding are: "Most victims of harassment or abuse are to blame for being too careless (e.g., going out late, getting drunk, hanging out with strangers/untrustworthy people, etc.)," and "Most perpetrators of sexual harassment/abuse are strangers." Overall, high school students have knowledge about sexual abuse behaviors and the perpetrators of sexual abuse. However, this knowledge tends to be one-sided and does not fully encompass all the manifestations and risks of being a victim of sexual abuse.

Table 2: Awareness levels of child support hotlines

Hotline Number	Frequency (Don't Know)	Frequency (Correct Answer)	Mean	Standard Deviation
1900.54.55.59	1054	127	0.11	0.35
111	883	299	0.25	0.44
1800.90.69	1097	85	0.07	0.26
113	150	1032	0.87	0.33
1800.16.67	1135	47	0.04	0.19

Hotline 111: National Child Protection Hotline; 1900.54.55.59: Ho Chi Minh City Child Social Work Center; 1800.90.69: Ho Chi Minh City Child Rights Protection Association; 113: Police Department. Most students are unaware of the hotline numbers for child

counseling and support. The two least known hotline numbers among students are 1800.90.69 (Mean = 0.04) and 1800.16.67 (Mean = 0.07). The 113 hotline of the Police Department is the most well-known among students.

Table 3: Indicators of sexual abuse behavior

Behavior	Not Chosen	Chosen	Not Chosen %	Chosen %	Mean	SD
Having sexual relations with someone under the age of 13, even if consensual	155	1027	13.1	86.9	0.87	0.338
Deliberately engaging in behaviors such as touching, fondling, caressing, pinching, hugging, or kissing without consent	378	804	32.0	68.0	0.68	0.467
Coercing or forcing someone into sexual relations when they do not want to	273	909	23.1	76.9	0.77	0.422
Sending pornographic or suggestive images or links to adult websites	562	620	47.5	52.5	0.52	0.500
Making mocking remarks or jokes about someone's body and genitalia	740	442	62.6	37.4	0.37	0.484
Inviting someone out late at night or on distant trips	914	268	77.3	22.7	0.23	0.419

Total N = 1182

Survey results in Table 3 show that behaviors such as: Having sexual relations with someone under the age of 13, even if consensual; Deliberately engaging in behaviors such as touching, fondling, caressing, pinching, hugging, or kissing without consent; Coercing or forcing someone into sexual relations when they do not want to; These behaviors are largely assessed by students as manifestations of harassment and sexual abuse, with mean ratings of 0.87, 0.68, and 0.77, respectively.

In contrast, behaviors like; Inviting someone out late at night or on distant trips; Making mocking remarks or jokes about someone's body and genitalia; These are largely assessed by students as not being

indicators of sexual abuse, with mean ratings of 0.23 and 0.37, respectively.

According to the *code of conduct on sexual harassment in the workplace (2015)* by the ministry of labor, war invalids, and social affairs, sexual harassment is typically identified through three characteristics:

Action: Exhibited through behaviors, words, non-verbal gestures, looks, etc.

Unwanted Will: Manifesting as unwelcome, uncomfortable, or evasive responses towards the person exhibiting the behavior or gestures.

Sexual Implication and Negative Impact: Affecting the environment, academic performance, and mental health of the student.

Table 4: Awareness of victims of sexual abuse:

Knowledge	Frequency	%	Mean	SD
No	Yes	No	Yes	
Yes, I know at least one person in my area who has been a victim	533	649	45.1	54.9
Yes, I know at least one relative who has been a victim	1116	66	94.4	5.6
Yes, I know at least one friend who has been a victim	1032	150	87.3	12.7
No, I have never known anyone who has been a victim	826	356	69.9	30.1

Total N = 1182

Survey results in Table 4 show that most students are aware of at least one person in their area who has been a victim, with a mean rating of 0.56. Sexual

abuse incidents are more frequently encountered by students, as they may know someone living nearby, a friend, or a relative who has been a victim. This

highlights the necessity of designing a program for the prevention of sexual abuse for students.

3.2. High School Students' Reactions to Harassment Situations

Table 5: Action choices when witnessing others being harassed:

Choice	Number	Percentage
Definitely not	9	0.8%
Probably not	47	4.0%
Probably yes	492	41.6%
Definitely yes	634	53.6%
Total	1182	100%

Summary of Findings from Table 5:

The research results in Table 5 indicate that when asked if they would take action to intervene and help if they saw someone being harassed, the majority of students chose "definitely yes" or "probably yes" (53.6% and 41.6%). High school students are generally willing to act to help and protect others in emergency situations. According to the report on the state of Sexual Harassment (SH) from the study "Sexual Harassment among Youth in Schools" conducted by ActionAid and

the Taiwan Fund for Children and Families (TFCF), over 60% of young people admitted to having been sexually harassed at least once. The age of the victims is mostly from 4 to 21 years old, and nearly 50% of the victims faced mental health issues after being harassed. Victims of sexual harassment urgently need help and support from others. For this study, the proportionate responses to actions taken when encountering harassment victims are as follows:

Table 6: Actions taken to help victims of sexual harassment:

Action	Frequency (Chosen)	Frequency (Not Chosen)	Mean	SD
If I have a phone, I will call the police or an adult	723	459	0.61	0.49
I will intervene immediately without thinking	871	311	0.26	0.44
I will run to get someone to help	226	956	0.19	0.39
Other	46	1136	0.04	0.19

3.2. High School Students' Reactions to Harassment Situations

Table 5: Action Choices When Witnessing Others Being Harassed

Choice	Number	Percentage
Definitely not	9	0.8%
Probably not	47	4.0%
Probably yes	492	41.6%
Definitely yes	634	53.6%
Total	1182	100%

Summary of findings from table 5: The research results in Table 5 indicate that when asked if they would take action to intervene and help if they saw someone being harassed, the majority of students chose "definitely yes" or "probably yes" (53.6% and 41.6%). High school students are generally willing to act to help and protect others in emergency situations.

According to the report on the state of Sexual Harassment (SH) from the study "Sexual Harassment

among Youth in Schools" conducted by ActionAid and the Taiwan Fund for Children and Families (TFCF), over 60% of young people admitted to having been sexually harassed at least once. The age of the victims is mostly from 4 to 21 years old, and nearly 50% of the victims faced mental health issues after being harassed. Victims of sexual harassment urgently need help and support from others. For this study, the proportionate responses to actions taken when encountering harassment victims are as follows:

Table 6: Actions taken to help victims of sexual harassment

Action	Frequency (Chosen)	Frequency (Not Chosen)	Mean	SD
If I have a phone, I will call the police or an adult	723	459	0.61	0.49
I will intervene immediately without thinking	871	311	0.26	0.44
I will run to get someone to help	226	956	0.19	0.39
Other	46	1136	0.04	0.19

When intervening to help someone who is being sexually abused, most high school students will call the

police or an adult if they have a phone to seek assistance. High school students, still in their adolescent years, have

not fully developed physically, so seeking help from adults or authorities like the police can help them avoid danger to themselves while still supporting the victim. Additionally, students also choose to directly intervene;

when they see someone in need of help, they do not hesitate but immediately assist. Some students chose other actions and mentioned they would stare, fight back, call first before acting, or shout and rush in to intervene.

Table 7: Reasons for not taking action to help

Reason	Frequency (Chosen)	Frequency (Not Chosen)	Mean	SD
Afraid of retaliation	96	1086	0.08	0.27
Because I do not know the victim well	267	915	0.23	0.42
Because I do not know their relationship with the offender	570	612	0.48	0.50
Perhaps the person being harassed was also indecent, leading to the situation	193	989	0.16	0.37
I do not think I should risk myself for others unless they are very close to me	202	980	0.17	0.38
Other	167	1015	0.14	0.35

Students who chose not to intervene in helping someone being harassed or sexually abused mainly explained their non-action because they do not know the relationship between the victim and the harasser well (Mean = 0.48). Some students provided other reasons, such as fearing the harasser might have a weapon, fear of misunderstanding, or simply wanting to ignore such actions.

IV. CONCLUSION

Overall, the knowledge and attitudes about child sexual abuse (CSA) among students in the survey are quite similar to those in some previous surveys evaluating children's knowledge and attitudes about CSA in various geographical, economic, and social regions around the world. Students' knowledge of behaviors constituting CSA: The proportion of students with correct knowledge about physical contact CSA behaviors is higher than for non-physical contact CSA behaviors. This can be explained by the notion that CSA must involve physical touching of genitalia or having sexual relations with children, often overlooking non-contact CSA behaviors such as staring at children's private parts, coercing or enticing children to view obscene content, or filming and photographing children in the nude. Regarding students' attitudes toward sexual harassment behaviors, most students would seek to intervene and help the victim, which aligns with the attitude choices for victims of sexual harassment mentioned above. One of the common reasons given for choosing not to support the victim is the fear of not knowing the relationship between the victim and the offender, which is significantly more than the reasons related to fear of retaliation.

REFERENCES

- Aspy, C. B., Vesely, S. K., Oman, R. F., Rodine, S., Marshall, L., & Bacchini, D., Concetta Miranda, M., & Affuso, G. (2011). Effects of parental monitoring and exposure to community violence on antisocial behavior and anxiety/depression among adolescents. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 26, 269–292.
- Balachova, T., Jackson, S., Lensgraf, J., & Bonner, B. L. (2004). Parent–child interaction therapy with physically abusive parents: efficacy for reducing future abuse reports. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 72, 491–499.
- Chen, L. P., Murad, M. H., Paras, M.L., Colbenson, K. M., Sattler, A. L., Goranson, E. N., & Zirakzadeh, A. (2010). Sexual abuse and life-time diagnosis of psychiatric disorders: systematic review and meta-analysis. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 85, 618–629.
- Cummings, M., Berkowitz, S. J., & Scribano, P. V. (2012). Treatment of childhood sexual abuse: an updated review. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 14, 599–607.
- Dzimadzi, R., & Klopper, H. (2007). Knowledge of sexual abuse amongst female students in Malawi. *Curationis*, 30, doi: 10.4102/curationis.v30i3.1094
- Jin, Y., Chen, J., & Yu, B. (2016). Knowledge and Skills of Sexual Abuse Prevention: A Study on School-Aged Children in Beijing, China. *J Child Sex Abuse*, 25(6), 686-696. doi: 10.1080/10538712.2016.1199079
- McLeroy, K. (2007). Parental communication and youth sexual behavior. *Journal of Adolescence*, 30, 449–466.
- Muse, F. A. (2013). Selected college students' perceptions, knowledge and awareness of sexual abuse of children.
- Nlewem, C., & Amodu, O. K. (2016). Knowledge and Perception on Sexual Abuse Amongst Female Secondary School Students in Abia State Nigeria. *Res Humanit Soc Sci.*, 6(7).

Cite This Article: Trần Thị Mai Phương (2024). Perceptions and Responses of High School Students to Sexual Abuse. *East African Scholars J Edu Humanit Lit*, 7(7), 212-216.