



ISSN: 0975-833X

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: AN ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Received 08<sup>th</sup> March, 2015  
Received in revised form  
21<sup>st</sup> April, 2015  
Accepted 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2015  
Published online 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2015

##### Key words:

Child,  
Factors,  
Multi-Level,  
Sexual Abuse,  
Child Sexual Abuse

#### ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a widespread problem that can affect victims' well-being and functioning across the lifespan. It is a concern of society because the physical and mental harm endured by children is extremely destructive. Children of many different backgrounds have been forced to engage in unwanted sexual behaviour because CSA is not isolated to one demographic class. In order to help stop this scourge there is a need for a thorough understanding of the factors that place children at risk for becoming sexually abused at various levels. This paper reviews contextual factors associated with CSA. Most studies address individual characteristics and few consider broader ecological contexts. In this paper, the causes of CSA are framed using the ecological systems model.

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**Citation:** Magwa Simuforosa 2015. "Factors contributing to child sexual abuse: an ecological analysis", *International Journal of Current Research*, 7, (6), 17591-17597.

## INTRODUCTION

The contributing factors of child sexual abuse are presented on a continuum from home to school to community and the wider community (see arrows on diagram). Sexual abuse can occur at national level, community level, school level, family level and individual level (Richer, Dawes and Higson-Smith, 2004:62 and Antonowicz, 2010:15). Considering the above expressed views, it would stand to reason that child sexual abuse can occur at any level of the system in which children grow up. The ecological model depicts the different contexts in a child's life. It shows that the child is not only influenced by the home and family but also by school, while the home and school contexts are influenced by the community. Further the community is situated within the broader society influenced by macro-level factors ([http://www.cjcp.org.za/uploads/2/7/8/4/27845461/vac\\_final\\_summary\\_low\\_res.pdf](http://www.cjcp.org.za/uploads/2/7/8/4/27845461/vac_final_summary_low_res.pdf)). At each of these levels there are child sexual risk factors.

## INDIVIDUAL LEVEL FACTORS

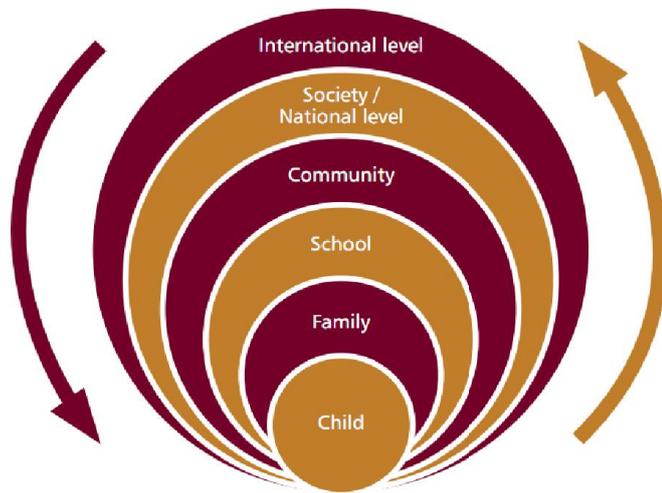
On the individual level, children with disability and experiences of sexual abuse during childhood have higher rates of being sexually abused.

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## Disability

Individuals with disabilities are susceptible to sexual abuse. They have been socialised to comply with the instructions of those in charge (<http://www.uwash.edu>). If the person in charge is sexually abusing the child, this learned compliance will undermine a person's power to seek protection. People with disabilities are often segregated from the general public, which limits their participation in common social settings. This isolation increases an individual's dependence on service providers, or other people involved in their lives. Perpetrators take advantage of this in order to maintain power and control over victims and sexually abuse them. People with disabilities are often not educated about healthy relationships, healthy sexuality, appropriate boundaries, correct names for body parts, legal rights and individual rights such as the right to live life free from violence and this leads to them being sexually abused (Smith and Harrell, 2013:6).

The United Nations Study on Violence against Children found that children with disabilities were frequently victims of sexual abuse in and around the school (Antonowicz, 2010). Research suggests that children, who are perceived as more marginalised and less connected to their parents and peers are at greater risk of being targeted by school staff and other learners for sexual abuse.



Source: Antonowicz (2010:15)

**Figure 1. Levels at which child sexual abuse can occur**

These children as alluded to by Smith and Harrell (2013:6) might be more likely to respond positively to initial friendly luring attempts and might be less likely to report the abuse because of the stigma attached to their conditions. Smith and Harrell suggest that although children are trained to be compliant to authority figures in society including in schools, compliance is stressed to an even greater extent for children with disabilities. In such environments, learners with disabilities are denied to say no to everyday choices such as what to wear, leaving them completely unequipped to say no when someone is trying to hurt them. The authors go further to point out that sexual education is rarely provided in special education classrooms and hence, without such fundamental lessons learners with disabilities have no language to describe what would have happened to them.

### Victim – offender cycle

Irenyi, Bromfield, Beyer and Higgins (2006:8) point out that a commonly held belief is that most males who sexually abuse children were themselves victims of child sexual abuse. The authors say this is referred to as ‘victim to offender cycle’. Dawes and Higson–Smith (2004:77) posit that people who have been abused during childhood are often developmentally damaged, and in order to overcome this early trauma, they become the abusers of the next generation. Many studies have examined personal histories of sex offenders in the hope of uncovering events that may influence the development of a tendency to commit sexual offenses. Jespersen, Lalumiere and Seto (2009:180) and (Mapp, 2011:118).point out that experience of sexual abuse in childhood contributes to later offending. This is also in line with the psychoanalytical theories of Freud and Erikson which state that early life experiences may shape the later life personalities (Ganga, 2013:37). They postulate that there is a unique association between the experience of childhood sexual abuse and the commitment of sexual offenses later in life, the so called sexually abused–sexual abuser hypothesis. Some people, who might have been abused, mistreated or neglected, develop negative feelings about themselves and others.

They may try to gain control over their lives or relieve emotional pain through abusive sexual behaviours (Dawes and Higson –Smith, 2004:74). In schools, some staff members and other older learners sexually harm learners because some of them might have been sexually abused as children. In academic circles the ‘victim to offender cycle’ continues to hold strong appeal despite the fact that the majority of male victims of child sexual abuse do not go on to abuse in later life. One British study examined the future offending behavior of boys who had been sexually abused and found that the vast majority did not go on to commit sexual offences as adults (<http://www.livingwell.org.au>). Men who have experienced sexual abuse repeatedly comment on how disturbing the ‘victim to offender’ idea is to them. They fear being viewed as potential offenders. Counter to this prescription, men who have been sexually abused often express a commitment to protecting and caring for children in their life (<http://www.livingwell.org.au>). Nevertheless the ‘victim to offender’ idea is out there and early childhood sexual abuse may well be a contributing factor in the development of perpetration in educational institutions.

### FAMILY LEVEL FACTORS

At the family level, poverty, single parent headed families and domestic violence can be contributors to sexual abuse of children.

#### Poverty

Globally, researchers have found a strong correlation between poverty and child sexual abuse. Sexual abuse often has its roots in poverty (Antonowicz, 2010:28). Poverty makes parents renege on their responsibility of providing for the needs of their children. A parent can ask of a girl child to look for a capable person to take care of her basic needs. Out of confusion, the child will give in to such a proposition and end up engaging in sexual activities in return for money. In line with this, Mapp (2011:118) asserts that poverty can also create a risk factor for sexual abuse in that children may be tempted to perform sexual acts for a financial reward.

According to Antonowicz (2010), poor school girls may engage in transactional sex, that is, they will offer themselves sexually to teachers so that they get financial support for their education such as payment of school fees or in exchange of presents. In some cases parents may also turn a blind eye to their children’s sexual relationships with teachers or other adults to simply to receive financial support for their children’s education. Dawes and Higson (2004) affirm that overcrowding goes hand in hand with poverty and raises the risk of child sexual abuse. The authors suggest that overcrowding limits the possibility of separation between adults or teenagers and children. In these situations where children share sleeping areas with parents or older children, children might hear or see parents having sex and may want to copy the behaviour. This is because according to Bandura’s 1977 Social Learning Theory, children learn from observing and imitating others (<http://Princeton.edu>), and by nature children are curious, and this can lead to them to sexually abuse others. On the other hand, in situations where parents share one room with their children, if for instance, when the

mother happens to be away for a night or more the father can take this opportunity to sexual abuse child/children. From these examples, it can be noted that in home environments characterised by overcrowding sexual abuse can occur.

### Single parent families

Richter, Dawes and Higson-Smith (2007:457) are of the view that children from incomplete and broken homes are generally more vulnerable to being sexually abused than children from stable home environments. Children raised in incomplete families generally have more freedom to do as they wish because of the lack of parental control. The parents from such a home may have many responsibilities and fail to monitor children fully. These children are often emotionally neglected and feel that the attention of the perpetrator fills a void in their lives. However, in many single parent homes this does not happen for the one parent can spend quality time with the children.

### Domestic violence

Child sexual abuse is directly linked with domestic violence in the family (Opobo and Wandega, 2011:21). Continuous fighting in families has been reported to be greatly contributing to domestic violence leading to separation and divorce in families. Family dysfunction often forms the context within which child sexual abuse occurs. Domestic violence where parents separate or divorce, children are left to stay mainly with father, who many times leaves children with housemaids and houseboys (Opobo and Wandega, 2011) Children in such situations are vulnerable to sexual exploitation by fathers, housemaids and neighbours. Hunter (2010:15) reiterates that children have been shown to be more vulnerable to child sexual abuse following parental separation when they are living with single parents.

## SCHOOL LEVEL FACTORS

Child sexual abuse does occur at school level. The physical environment of the school, educator-child relationship, and peer pressure can contribute to sexual abuse of learners at school level.

### School environment

The physical environment of a school can also contribute to the sexual abuse of learners. The physical environment of a school is crucial to learners' safety and security (<http://www.unicef.org>), but sometimes the environment can lead to sexual abuse of learners. Sexual abuse can take place in toilets, where the toilets are mixed for boys and girls, or for teachers and students. Sexual abuse of learners can also take place in dormitories in the case of boarding schools if the dormitories do not have secured doors. Teachers' houses are another place where sexual abuse can take place. The social expectation or in some instances the agreement between communities and school staff, that children should undertake chores for teachers such as cooking increases the risk of learners being the victims of sexual abuse in teachers' homes (Antonowicz, 2010:27).

### Unequal power relations

Power relationships between elders and juniors that flourish in the home also exist in the school environment. Schools, like any other social context are sites of power relationships among teachers, and students and among students themselves (Jones, Moore, Villar-Marquez and Broadbent, 2008). Javangwe (2008: 8) points out that most of the school based sexual abuse are perpetrated by males on girls. Violence in and around the schools is situated within gender-based norms and gender based socialisation dynamics in which male violence is accepted and which promotes female submission and passivity (Antonowicz, 2010:27). Sexual abuse of children, especially girls may be facilitated by a wide spread belief in the urgency of male sexual relief and use of physical coercion in sexual relations. Boys are socialised into a set of unequal gender and power relations, learn that their power is endorsed by a patriarchal system, which provides an often unquestioned opportunity for them to control and intimidate those who are less powerful than themselves namely children and women. Some girls may accept a certain level of gender violence in the school context because that is aligned with what they experience and have been socialised to accept as normal in the home and community. Sadly, girls' socialisation into obedience and silence, and their realistic fear of breaking such codes, may contribute to their sexual abuse. Sometimes these relationships are articulated in abusive ways. Shumba (2001) asserts that in schools, teachers are in a position of power towards their learners such as assigning grades, and reporting their behaviour to their parents. Child sexual abuse in school settings often involves sexual favours in exchange of good grades. Antonowicz (2010:5) asserts that sex for grades is one of the most reported practices of sexual exploitation, usually involving a male member of staff and a girl learner. Kibarue-Mbae (2011:63) notes that child sexual abuse in school settings involves learners being coerced into sexual activity in return for educational benefits such as payment of school fees as well as to pass or get good marks for tests and examinations. This creates a situation that is conducive for sexual abuse. Teachers exploit their authority, knowledge, and power to achieve sexual ends whilst they need to be 'in loco parentis' or the substitute parent/caregiver. Learners might not be in a position to decline involvement because of teachers' authority. Learners, thus, feel pressured to comply with teachers' demands for fear of negative repercussion.

### Peer pressure

Peer pressure is another factor that can lead to sexual abuse in a school context (Leach, Frisciam, Kadzamira, Lemani and Machakanja, 2003:77-78). Peer pressure and perceived peer behaviour profoundly affect adolescents through group influence. Girls who have engaged in transactional sex (sex in exchange for money or other gifts) for example, encourage others to do likewise, in order to get money to buy fashionable clothes, perfume, and other essentials. Perceptions of sexual activity among peers tend to be wildly exaggerated. Boys, for example, engage in sexually abusing girls or other boys, simply because other peers are doing it and also as a way of proving their manhood. According to Leach et al. (2003), in educational settings both boys and girls want to fit in and go along with others even if the behaviour is not socially

acceptable. Peer pressure from other learners encourages boys and girls to engage in pre-mature sexual behavior where for example, older boys can force themselves on girls or smaller boys.

### **One-on-one adult-child contact**

Education in schools relies on the fostering of positive relationships between educators and learners. Schools are places where all staff can have significant influence in the lives of learners (Grooves, 2011:8) because the relationships involve regular contact over long periods of time. These features make it extremely important that staff understand how to foster positive relationships in ways that do not compromise learners' welfare. Professional boundary violations such as one on one interaction with a child in private settings by a staff member represents a breach of trust, and a failure to follow conduct requirements of employer (Grooves, 2011:11 and Shakeshaft, 2002). Mitchel (2010) asserts that more than 80% of sexual abuse cases occur in situations with one child and one adult. Virtually all sexual abuse of learners take place behind closed doors, in private settings on a one- on one interaction with a school employee or older learner (Hobson, 2012). In the school situation employees such as coaches, teachers, and counsellors constantly have one-on-one encounters with learners. According to Shakeshaft (2002:33) sometimes a teacher takes a learner into a storage room attached to the classroom and engages the learner in sexual intercourse. Shakeshaft gives an example where in one class of boys a teacher would call one at a time while discussing homework and would fondle each boy's penis. Despite the fact that learners can benefit educationally, emotionally and socially from individual attention the risk involved in this practice as can be noted in this discussion might outweigh the benefits.

### **COMMUNITY LEVEL FACTORS**

At this level cultural practices are the main contributors of child sexual abuse. Culture has been identified to be one of the major obstacles to the rights of children in general (de la Vega and Dahlstrom, 2007:13). Culture is defined as shared meanings transmitted from one generation to another (Onyango (2005:5) and is made for, of and by men. Schein (2010:3) expresses the view that culture implies stability and rigidity in the sense that how people are supposed to perceive, feel, and act in a given society, or organisation, has been taught to them by their various socialisation experiences and becomes prescribed as a way to maintain the social order. Various families adhere to and practice different cultures of which some result in child sexual abuse such as child marriages, and virginity testing.

#### **Socialisation and child rearing practices**

Unequal gender and power relations endemic in patriarchal societies in most African cultures go a long way toward explaining why men sexually abuse both women and children. Feminist theorists, like, Betty Denise Thompson (2001), and Ann Oakley (1981) list the unequal gender-based power relations within patriarchal society as an etiological factor of child sexual abuse (Best, 2003:147-148). In these authors' views all women share a bond of oppressive patriarchy that

was enforced by fathers, husbands and a range of other men. Male domination was not only found in public aspects of a woman's life such as unequal access to professions and politics, but in personal aspects such as bodily integrity. The women, for example, are forced to have sex even if they do not want to, and their decisions are not respected or taken into cognisance. A common theme in patriarchal society is the so-called 'uncontrollability' of male sexual urges and the role of physical force in sexual relations (Lalor, 2004). Men are thought to be sexually powerful and as such can be engaged in sexual activity when they wish. Best (2003:148) argues that men in patriarchal societies are recognised as having the status of 'human' because the penis is the 'only symbol of human' status allowed under the conditions of male supremacy. Women are complicit with this ideology in that they accept the second class status that is accorded to them and allow men to use them sexually even without their consent. Men assume that women and children are naturally subordinated to them and are bound to serve their needs. The influence of socialisation and child rearing practices play a role in child sexual abuse. Men are not biologically made to behave abusively towards children or women but through wider ideological and environmental influences. Through socialisation processes they come to believe that they have a right to be sexually sustained by females. In view of this, Dawes and Higson-Smith (2004:66) assert that patriarchal ideology and the process of socialisation have the effect of constructing a notion of childhood that renders the child vulnerable to sexual abuse since young children are socialised into a set of unequal gender and power relations. Another issue noted by Richter, Dawes and Higson-Smith (2007: 62) related to socialisation, environmental influences and child rearing practices is that of children's silence. Cultural scripts regarding respect and obedience to elders make it probable that children do not speak up against abusers who are senior to them. If they do, they may be punished. Under these circumstances, the perpetrator is encouraged to continue sexually abusing children. Thus, silence of children and unquestioned obedience may well have the effect of making them compliant targets.

#### **Child marriages**

Child marriages are a violation of human rights. Many cultures especially African cultures practice arranged marriages, which are often arranged at very young ages (Thompson and Wilkinson, 2010:49). Early marriages represent the most prevalent form of sexual abuse of children. The family deliberately exposes children to sexual abuse. Child marriages are still a common occurrence in parts of Africa, India and parts of Latin America and the Caribbean (Kirton, 2011:190). Parents make marital choices for daughters and sons with little regard for personal implications. Rather, they look upon marriage as a family building strategy or an economic arrangement.

Child wives are more vulnerable to sexual abuse (Cheal, 2008:79). This is so because of the unequal power relations that exists in child marriages as men always tend to be older than girls. Cheal (2008) asserts that child wives have sexual intercourse before the onset of menstruation, early and very painful sex and forced sexual activity with their husbands,

even if they have indicated an unwillingness to do so. According to World Health Organisation, 48% of 15-18 year olds in Bangladesh reported being sexually assaulted by their husbands (de la Vega and Dahlstrom, 2007:13). Forced child marriages give a man licence to impose sex upon a girl, denying her control over her own body.

### Virginity testing

Virginity testing is another sexually abusive cultural practice which involves the intrusive examination of a girl child for the purposes of determining whether she has retained her virginity (de la Vega and Dahlstrom, 2007:11). Virginity testing is mainly practised in rural areas in the home by mothers, aunts, neighbours or at a communal level during ceremonies where the elderly adults insert a finger in the vagina of a girl resulting in some penetration. Other than virginity testing being tantamount to sexual abuse, it exposes the certified virgins at a big risk of being raped and infected by HIV positive men due to the myth that is harboured by some traditional healers who advise their patients to have sex with virgins (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.gov>).

### Myths and prejudices

Myths and prejudices contribute to sexual abuse against children. A man's potency is believed to increase or sexually transmitted diseases are thought to be cured by having sexual intercourse with children (Devasia and Kumar, 2009:71). There have been numerous reports in the media of the so called 'cleansing myth' which suggests that having sexual intercourse with a virgin cleanses the perpetrator of HIV and AIDS infection. The myth of 'HIV and AIDS virgin cure' is prevalent in the community (Thompson and Wilkinson, 2010: 48). The idea that one may cleanse oneself of HIV and AIDS and STDs by having intercourse with a virgin or young girl is frequently referred to as a possible explanation for the apparent increase in the occurrence of child sexual abuse (Laror, 2004).

In some parts of Africa child sexual abuse is justified by some perpetrators as a defence against HIV and AIDS. Kibarue-Mbae (2011:38) alludes to this fact by pointing out that virgin cleansing in relation to HIV and AIDS is a belief buoyed by an old myth that sex with children is a cure for a variety of diseases. This misconception has dramatically increased sexual abuse of children. Traditional healers advise people infected with HIV and AIDS to have sexual intercourse with virgins or young children in order for them to be cleansed of infection. Another issue relating to the HIV and AIDS pandemic is the emergence of an alarming number of Aids orphans and with it many cases of sexual abuse arise. According to Richter et al. (2004:72) there is evidence to suggest that many of these orphans will not have the benefit of growing up in adult supervised homes and will most likely be vulnerable to sexual abuse by neighbours and relatives since they may not have the protection from parents. Sexual abuse has been regarded as the highest form of abuse on orphaned children (Laurence, 2012). Many orphaned children are victims of sexual abuse by close relatives such as uncles, nephews, and grandparents. Without care and support of one or more responsible adults, orphaned children may be vulnerable to sexual abuse.

This is because the relatives will not bother to advise and caution the orphans against the risks, simply because the orphans are not one of their children. The caregivers may not have a keen interest in the well being and the whereabouts of the orphaned children. In addition, as echoed by Richter et al. (2004:72) guardians like grandparents may, due to old age, fail to notice when the orphans engage in sexual risky behaviours. Ferguson (2007) notes that some orphaned learners, especially girls may resort to sex in exchange for money or other material items as survival strategies which may expose them to risks of infection with HIV and AIDS.

### NATIONAL /INTERNATIONAL LEVEL FACTORS

Media exposure at the national level contributes to child sexual abuse. Dehlmer (2009:4) asserts that media refers to the types of devices most commonly used for communication and entertainment purposes, including: Computers (e.g. Internet access, Online Games, and other computer games), Cell phones (e.g. phone calls and text messages), Console Video Games and Television (e.g. television shows and movies shown on television and played on VCRs or DVD players). Each is an influential component in many children's daily lives. As also echoed by MacArthur (2008), the term technology is used to describe a media ecology where more traditional media, such as books, TV, and radio are converging with digital media, specifically interactive media and media for social communication. Opobo and Wandega (2011) point out that media can inform, educate, and influence viewers and listeners. Unfortunately media poses threats to protection of children against sexual abuse.

Current technology allows for unprecedented and easy access to sexually exploitive materials and has provided increased opportunities for individuals to commit sexual offenses. There is a growing problem of sexual images of children being available for viewing and downloading from different media (Louge, 2006:2). According to Dehlmer (2009:3) the growth of technology has changed the world, which in turn has changed the daily lives of children and adolescents. Many learners have access to computers, the Internet, cell phones, video games, and many other forms of modern technology. Despite the fact that technological media has some benefits to learners, using media becomes a risk to them more than most adults realise. Media can contribute to sexual abuse of learners.

Although the internet has positive impacts on modern society such as a tool for social networking and academic enhancement for learners (Louge, 2006:2 and Dehlmer, 2009) it has also caused various societal concerns. Karbek and Parrish (2009:10) posit that text messaging, e-mail, and posting on sites such as Face book and My space are becoming new and prevalent pieces of child sexual abuse. Sanderson (2006:36), Louge (2006: 2) and Dehlmer (2009) also assert that the internet has become a highly effective and profitable means of distributing sexually explicit material as well as a sophisticated channel for compulsive sexual behaviour. According to a survey performed by a London school of Economics (2002) 90% of children between 8 and 16 years of age have viewed pornography on the Internet (Louge, 2006:2). The author further explains that the sex sites were accessed sometimes unintentionally when a child, often in the

process of doing homework used an innocuous word to search for information or pictures. Such free access and exposure to this information by children who have not developed a full maturity could potentially manifest in their sexual activity.

Kids exposed to sexual acts on television are almost twice as likely to initiate sexual intercourse with other kids (<http://www.scanva.org>). Television encourages irresponsible sexual activity. Young children tend to model the behaviour they see. This is in line with Albert Bandura's 1977 Social Learning Theory, which advocates for observational learning. Observational learning also known as vicarious learning; social learning or modelling is a type of learning that occurs as a function of observing, retaining and replicating behaviour executed by others (<http://Princeton.edu>). Some video games also contribute to sexual abuse. Video games like Grand Theft Auto, allows the user to engage in sexual violence. In the game Virtual Valerie, players are invited to act out their fantasies in a virtual world where sexual desires are immediately satisfied. Grapes (2012:18) expresses that children are the most vulnerable to sexual abuse, both because they are in the process of forming their own sense of right or wrong and because they cannot distinguish fantasy from reality. In recent years, it seems that cell phone ownership has rapidly increased among learners (Dehlmer, 2009). Sexting, which is defined as sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs or images via cell phone is one risky impact of this media (O'Keeffe and Pearson, 2011). Based on the views above, it can be said that exposure to media has a strong effect on children because they lack the real life experiences to judge whether something they see on screen is realistic or not.

## Conclusion

The individual is part of the family, school, community, and nation and in these contexts there are many factors that lead to sexual abuse of children. Children with disability are easy targets for child sexual abuse because they are for example, less able to defend themselves and less able to report. Many cases of child sexual abuse occur in school setting. Many of the perpetrators are other peers. Most of the sexual encounters between teachers' and learners are transactional in nature. Unquestioning obedience to authority figures perpetuates the abuse, because it discourages the victim from escaping the abuser. Due to poverty children may share sleeping spaces with sexually active adults. Television, Facebook and other social media, internet and videos are some powerful contributors to child sexual abuse. These electronic media's sexual messages and images are directed at young people who are highly susceptible to engaging in sexual activities.

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