THE EXTENT OF CYBER EXPLOITATION AND SAFETY OF CHILDREN IN KERALA

**MAJOR RESEARCH PROJECT
SPONSORED BY**

NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
NEW DELHI

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REPORT OF STUDY ON THE EXTENT OF CYBER EXPLOITATION AND SAFETY OF CHILDREN IN KERALA

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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10.05.2022   Principal Investigator

DISCLAIMER

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADGP	-	Additional Director General of Police
ADHD	-	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
CAP	-	Children and Police
CCPWC	-	Cyber Crime Prevention against Women and Children
CCL	-	Children in Conflict with Law
CCSE	-	Countering Child Sexual Exploitation
CDPO	-	Child Development Project Officer
CNCP	-	Children in Need of Care and Protection
CRC	-	Convention of Child Rights
CSAM	-	Child Sexual Abuse Material
DCPU	-	District Child Protection Unit
EBP	-	Evidence Based Practice
ECPAT	-	End Child Prostitution and Trafficking
FGD	-	Focus Group Discussion
ICDS	-	Integrated Child Development Scheme
ICPS	-	Integrated Child Protection Scheme
ICT	-	Information and Communications Technology
IAMAI	-	Internet and Mobile Association of India
IFSW	-	The International Federation of Social Workers
ISRA	-	Information Security Research Association
JPHN	-	Junior Public Health Nurse
KII	-	Key Informant Interview
KITE	-	Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education
NCC	-	National Cadets Corps
NCMEC	-	National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children
NCPCR	-	National Commission for Protection of Child Rights
NCRB	-	National Crime Records Bureau
NGO	-	Non-Governmental Organisation

NSS	-	National Service Scheme
ORC	-	Our Responsibility to Children
POCSO	-	Protection of Children from Sexual Offences
SPC	-	Student Police Cadets
UNICEF	-	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	-	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
W&CD	-	Women and Child Development

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Technological innovations revolutionize societies and transform them in multiple domains viz. IT, education, trade and commerce, recreation, infrastructure and governance. As the society transforms, it brings out new challenges, one of them could be the internet crimes against children and adolescents. The crisis during Covid 19 has added fuel to the fire as the internet usage has become a necessity. However, this has predominently been manifested in the victimization of children online in the form of paedophilic behaviours, Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) and trafficking.

This is the background upon which the study on cyber exploitation and safety of children in Kerala is formulated. Specific objectives of the study are:

1. To find out the type and extent of online use, abuse and exploitation faced by children and adolescents in Kerala.

2. To study the existing internet safety measures and its application for the safety of children, including strategies adopted by stakeholders such as parents and school authorities.

3. To study the perceptions of parents and significant others about online abuse and online safety of children and adolescents in Kerala.

4. To study the subjective experiences of child/adolescent victims of online exploitation and its impact on their life.

5. To come up with recommendations on strategies to prevent cyber abuse and promote cyber safety among children and adolescents.

The study utilized a mixed method approach with concurrent triangulation design. The stakeholders of the study includes children (boys and girls) who belong to the age group 9 to 18 years, parents who have children in the above said age group and teachers who engage with children in the classes 6 to 12, and those who work with the children including school authorities, Police personnel, school counsellors, Cyber experts, and social workers under Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS).

The study has covered 6 districts under 3 regions - South, Central and North. The sample included respondents both male and female from rural as well as urban areas. Thus quantitative data collection accounted for 1538 samples, 1231 from children and 307 from

parents. Qualitative data collection involves Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) among children and parents, in-depth interviews (of key informants) and case studies.

The report of the study is structured under introduction, background and review of the existing literature; methodology; type and extent of online use, abuse and exploitation faced by children and adolescents; internet safety measures available, adopted, implemented for the safety of children; perception of parents and significant others about online abuse and online safety; analysis of the cases of online exploitation faced by children and adolescents and its impact on their life; and recommendations on the strategies for the prevention of cyber abuse and for promoting cyber safety among children and adolescents in Kerala.

The study looked into the literature available on the cyber exploitation and safety of children at global, national and regional levels. Many of the studies have pointed out that the Internet has become a networking or social consolidation function for people who likely to be engaging in sexual abuse of children. Internet pornography, including Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), can be used by sexual offenders to lower the inhibitions of their targets, thus facilitating the victimization of children (Lanning, 2010). The National Crime Records Bureau found that since the last 3 months, more than 25,000 child porn contents have been uploaded to various social media platforms in India.

Under the chapter on the type and extent of online use, abuse and exploitation faced by children and adolescents in Kerala, it is noted that 96.7% of the children covered under the study use the internet and social media, which has increased in recent years and have become technologically dependent and addicted to it. 49.7 % use their own gadgets and 49.8% use the gadgets of their parents for accessing the internet and social media. 97.1% of the children use mobile phones to access the internet and social media. 47.46% of the respondents revealed that their average screen time is less than 2 hours, which is the majority. The remaining 40% respondents indicated 2-5 hour usage, 10.3% respondents as 5-8 hours and only 2.29% respondents indicated more than 8 hour usage. While triangulating / equating it with the data collected from parents and key informants, it is noted that the screen time might be higher than the same, as the majority of the children and adolescents try to keep them online as far as possible.

Majority of the children use WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, Facebook and Snapchat and many of them use multiple accounts especially on Instagram which increases their vulnerability as well as risk towards cyber abuse and cyber exploitation.

The section on internet safety measures available, adopted, implemented and its application for the safety of children speaks about the existing safety measures including mechanisms and programs by the Kerala Police and Cyber Cell; awareness programmes organized for children on cyber safety measures by various stakeholders like National Service Scheme (NSS), Student Police Cadets Project (SPC), Our Responsibility to Children (ORC) Project, and other projects like Psycho-Social Counselling Project by Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) under Women and Child Development Department. It also talks about various applications / platforms available and used by parents to monitor the online use and abuse.

In the chapter about the perception of parents and significant others about online abuse and online safety of children and adolescents in Kerala, parents perceive this as a problem rather than a threat but think that they cannot do anything about it. Many parents shared their pride in knowing that their wards are technologically advanced compared to them. Majority of the parents are unaware about the threat and the dark world behind the cyber world where children are getting abused and exploited. Some common forms of abuse are game addiction and fraudulent activities, seasonal relationships and traps, forming / being part of fan clubs, sexual exploitation, engaging in unlawful activities, etc.

While analysing the subjective experiences of children and adolescents of online exploitation and its impact on their lives, the study could categorise various emotional and behavioural responses that are exhibited by these children. This is an indicator of how it has affected them psychologically, behaviourally and socially. Following the discussion, the effect of these problems on their lives was also discussed. There are quite a number of personality as well as environmental factors that have contributed to the problems presented. This can be classified as biological and personal factors, familial factors, environmental factors, communication etc.

Highlighting the need to develop measures to prevent cyber abuse and promote cyber safety among children and adolescents, the study has delineated multifaceted strategies for prevention. The child, parents and family members, institutions for children, the neighbourhood / community, and the technology itself have a role to play. The study concludes with a proposal that details the programmes to equip the child, capacitate parents, enrich the family environment, adapt to updated technology, regular surveillance, law enforcement and initiate system linkages, system development and research for evidence based practice to engage children in a healthy manner.

Chapter – I

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Every right for every child – the Convention on the Rights of the Child conceived this as recognizing the right of every child to develop to their full potential. Any thought or act against it impedes the recognition of inherent dignity and worth, growth and development. As children are the future citizens, it is very much essential that they should be nurtured in a very conducive environment to realize their full potential and mould them to be productive and responsible citizens who contribute back to society. Society is a dynamic entity that undergoes changes over time. Technological innovations revolutionize societies and transform them in multiple domains be it, education, trade and commerce, recreation, infrastructure and governance. As the society transforms it brings out new challenges; earlier challenges take new shape, form and dimensions. One such transformation is what we have been witnessing off late – the internet crimes against children and adolescents. Surprisingly this pandemic crisis has added fuel to the fire when internet usage has become a necessity. However, this has primarily and prominently been manifested in the victimization of children online in the form of paedophilic behaviours, Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) and trafficking. Any computer facilitated sexual exploitation of children is termed as internet crimes against children (Alexy, Burgess and Baker, 2005). The risk and prevalence of these crimes as a social problem in contemporary society is a hindrance to achieving the goals of protecting and promoting children's rights – the right to survival, development, participation and right against exploitation. This calls for the attention of social work practitioners, educators and policy makers to seriously look into the issue and to proactively address and prevent this menace in order to promote children's growth and development.

Children being the most valuable assets of our country have to be nurtured for the nation's development. India has always been in the forefront in investing in the growth and development of this young cohort, moulding them as responsible future citizens. This motto finds realization in protection and promotion of children's rights – right to survival, right to development, right to participation and right against exploitation. Investments in ICT and

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advancements in technology have always been priorities for India as a developing nation. Today, technological advancements have brought the world to our fingertips. In 2016, the estimated figure of children using mobile phones is 134 million in India (UNICEF, 2016). With the expansion of broadband facilities in 2017, the internet has become easily available and accessible to the common man. Neoliberal capitalism or market economy has facilitated the proliferation of the largest market for internet access through smart phones. Above all, the present pandemic crisis has brought the biggest bloom of electronic gadgets when life itself has gone virtual and the internet has become a necessity rather than choice. This is phenomenal in providing this young segment with ample learning opportunities. Yet, it poses a serious risk of making them vulnerable victims of online trafficking, cyber bullying, sexual solicitation and predation, online fraud, pornography and violence (UNICEF, 2016). This definitely curbs their right to life, growth and development. There is empirical evidence that this exposure and victimization of children are associated with self-harming, criminal behaviors and severe mental health conditions. These risk factors which impede children's right to survival, development, participation and protection from exploitation have to be addressed in our journey towards socio-economic development and prosperity.

The online attacks have been a major concern in developing India. Since last decade this has been the attention of policy makers and administrators because evidence shows the multitude of the cases reported and unreported. With the crisis, world faces due to Covid-19 pandemic, it is even alarming as the data of the India Child Protection Fund depicts a sharp spike in child porn search (Parihar & Atreya, 2020). Online crime has been acknowledged as the second biggest impact of this pandemic. The by-product of increased digital usage during and after lockdown is unimaginable spike in darknet usage (Child pornography spiked during lockdown, 2020). A total of 66 minors took their lives in Kerala from when the lockdown was announced on March 25, 2020 ("Lockdown blues driving kids to suicide?" 2020). Online child trafficking, Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) and online gaming were found behind these self-harming behaviors (Ganesh & Jose, 2019). The unsafe and risky online/cyber environment around our young minds is found to be hindering their rights to live and develop to their full potential. The biggest challenge seen and experienced in this pandemic crisis is that in the process of bringing our lives back to normalcy, virtual platforms have become indispensable. While this virtual platform opens an array of learning opportunities, the magnitude of the threat it poses to these young minds cannot be disregarded.

The magnitude of the problem in contemporary society has been recognized and acknowledged by social scientists globally. The empirical evidence stating the length and breadth of the problem state its relevance in the current context. The UNICEF's longitudinal study during the timeline 2006 to 2014 reported that in India 10 percent of children, either boy or girl, experienced sexual violence between the age of 10 – 14 (Parihar & Atreya, 2020) and WHO worldwide survey estimated that 73 million boys and 150 million girls experienced various forms of sexual violence (Murray et al., 2014). The highest prevalence rate among Asian countries was found to be in India and a significant coverage was for online offences. The wide range of opportunities the internet provides in the development context correspondingly paves way to the sexual exploitation of children through children's obscene images. From mental health issues and socially deviant behaviour to social problems including terrorism, the social and psychological impact this creates on the individual, families and ultimately on the society at large deserves micro and macro level attention and intervention.

Therefore, protecting our young generation from this growing menace is the need of the hour. Social media and print media reports of children committed suicide during pandemic-induced lockdown was a spur to delve deep into the topic how online exploitation and cyber safety issues affect children's right to survival and development. Mitigating these risks and providing a safe environment requires an in-depth understanding of its prevalence and victimization these young minds face. The research problem has originated and formulated from this base.

1.2 Background of the study

Upholding, protecting and promoting the rights of children have always been among India's top most priorities. India has been in the forefront in ratifying UNCRC in 1992 and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000 brought in all parameters to preserve children's rights and dignity across the country. Even though we have well established mechanisms that make credible social and economic investments in this young generation's future, equally we are faced with challenges posed by these advancements on their well-being. Pandemic and lockdown has upended the pattern and way of life, succumbing to the world of the internet to connect to the educational and social world. Literature shows evidence of children becoming more prone to online grooming and sexual coercion. In 2014, India topped among the 254 countries for cyber bullying (India Legal,

2019). India being the largest consumer of web-based products, 38% of web content is linked to child sexual abuse (Parihar & Atreya, 2020). When national figures are daunting, statistics shared by the Countering Child Sexual Exploitation (CCSE) team of the Kerala Police said that after the lockdown kicked in, the number of pedophiles and child porn viewers has increased considerably. The team could trace only 150 predators through IP address tracking, the report says the actual number of people who are into this depravity is much more and yet to be traced ("Kerala pedophiles footfall on cyberspace increases during coronavirus lockdown", 2020). This is not something negligible and cannot be undermined. Our children are at high risk in this cyber world.

With the advent of online learning and day-long indispensable access to online resources due to Covid-19 pandemic, the victimization of children and adolescents through online abuse and exploitation is virulent. Even though we have national figures stating this menace, little has been explored within the state of Kerala. News reports during lockdown included domestic violence, abuses, cyber bullying, gaming and it's after effects which include self-harming behaviors and even suicides ("Lockdown blues driving kids to suicide?", 2020). Children are being taken away from the real world, lose touch with reality and plunge themselves in high risks and pathological mental statuses. The current statistics is only based on the number of cases reported and the number of porn sites searched. There is much more to be explored and intervened beyond this. Also, according to the survey of national and global statistics, not many studies have been conducted after 2015. In this context, an extensive research based intervention is required among the children and adolescents, their families and significant others and the larger context like policy makers and administrators to make a state wide action plan to address and prevent this issue of cyber abuses and provide a safe educational and entertaining platform for our children. This will be a means to the realization of our goal – to protect and promote the rights of children – the future citizens of India.

From this background, the researcher has tried to find an answer to the following research questions.

1. What is the extent of internet use and abuse among children in the state of Kerala?
2. What are the kinds of cyber exploitation faced by children in the state of Kerala?
3. Whether the people in the immediate environment of these children are aware of

these issues? If yes, to what extent is their awareness/ignorance? What is their awareness on the safety measures?

4. If such issues are reported, whom and where to report/seek help?

5. How do parents, teachers and caretakers perceive the gravity of the problem?

6. What are the unsaid stories of the child victims of cyber exploitation in the state of Kerala?

7. What are the existing mechanisms to ensure cyber safety of children in the state of Kerala? How do they function?

Our constitution proclaims children's rights and states that the nation shall take all measures to safeguard them. Right to life, development, participation and right against exploitation are means to achieve this goal. Exploitation of children in any form hampers their right to survival, well-being and development. Finding answers to the above research questions will provide a comprehensive understanding of the extent and magnitude of cyber exploitation experienced by children in the state of Kerala, the level of awareness on these issues of those people in the immediate environment of the child and the existing mechanisms and its implementation effectiveness. The study will create awareness among the respondents about the chances and circumstances that lead to the cyber exploitation of children and adolescents in the state of Kerala. The findings can be utilized to create awareness among larger segments of the population - children/adolescents, parents, teachers and others who are in the immediate environment of children and would suffice to formulate policies/legislations and develop policy level interventions among these target groups. These policy formulations as well as micro and macro interventions look forward to preventing online abuse and exploitation of children and adolescents to a very great extent, thus moving towards the realization of protecting and promoting the rights of children, the biggest asset of our nation.

1.3 Review of Literature

Internet safety issues among children and youth is a global concern. A study conducted at Centre for Technology Innovation, Brookings, USA online exploitation among children and youth happens in the form of cyber bullying, sexual solicitation and unwanted exposure of sexual content. They found that there existed a power imbalance between the bully and the bullied. A bully possessed a greater familiarity with the internet than does the victim. The prevalence rate was as high as 72% in 2014. A study conducted by ECPAT international on

Violence against children in cyberspace found that in Philippines, profit-making ventures known as cybersex dens involve adolescents and adults performing sexual acts in front of a web-camera in accordance with the instructions of a viewer who pays by credit card. The study explains the harmful and devastating effects of cyber bullying leading to suicides. The study also comments on this exploitation from the Rights perspective -the rights of a child to be protected from harm. International jurisprudence also explains that a State has a duty "to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being". This is applicable in the national context too pertaining to countries like India.

Studies have found that there are two main forms of this online exploitation. The first involves using the Internet to traffic and/or collect Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). The second involves the widely publicized problem of adult men soliciting sex from minors on-line. In the United States, the instant sharing and distribution of porn images has taken its shape of crime and criminal behaviour even a decade and a half back. Reports found that an international Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) ring called the Wonderland Club insisted its members to share at least 10,000 new child sexual abuse images for procuring membership (Durkin and Delong, 2012). Data gathered from a national sample of law enforcement agencies found that most of the offenders were men above the age of 25 and 70 % of them were single men (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2011).

Results of the second Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS2), of adolescents identified risk factors that are associated with receiving aggressive online sexual solicitations (Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2007). These included being female, visiting chat rooms, sexting, and sharing personal information with individuals they meet online. Teens that regularly use the Internet are an especially appealing target for sex offenders. Internet pornography, including Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), can be used by sex offenders to lower the inhibitions of their targets, thus facilitating the victimization of children (Lanning, 2010). Studies have also pointed out that the Internet has become a networking or social consolidation function for people who are interested in sexually abusing children.

While the cyber world has become a positive catalyst for innovation, education, and economic growth, it has also enabled perpetrators hassle free to produce access and share child sexual abuse materials. Also it helped abusers to find like-minded offenders; and reduce their risk of detection. And as connectivity expands, an upsurge of online sexual crimes committed against children have also witnessed. ECPAT and Interpol survey stated that in a sample of a million images & videos of child sexual abuse, 56% of victims were

prepubescent. Younger children and boys were more likely to suffer the most severe abuse, ECPAT (https://www.ecpat.org/what-we-do/online-child-sexual-exploitation). Also, the Internet has made possible a subcultural network of pedophiles and other adults with a sexual interest in minors (Holt, Blevins, & Burkert, 2010). The Internet has paved the way for sex tourism and child prostitution. For many years, sex tours in Southeast Asia have been promoted via the Internet (Hughes, 2000). McCabe in 2008 found that purveyors of child prostitution can easily place advertisements complete with a physical description of available children to potential consumers online. All these are profound menaces of cyber abuse on children. The World Bank Group had analyzed the legislative responses of 17 Asian countries to fight Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), online grooming and cyber bullying and suggested to strengthen the national legal framework to curb online exploitation of children (Song, Janice Kim. 2015). This shows the gravity of the issue despite actions taken. Furthering this unchecked will definitely have a deleterious impact on the society.

In India, a study conducted by UNICEF in 2016 stated that mobile internet surfing was 23% in 2015 with 76% of online chatting and 73% of social networking (UNICEF, 2016). That was a growth percentage of 77% from the previous year. This is quite alarming as today, 5 years down the lane; it was projected to reach above 400 million. This shows the velocity and magnitude of the problem. The study found that it took a decade for India to move from 10 million to 100 million internet users, but just 3 years to reach from 100 million to 200 million and just one year to reach 300 million. If in 2015, this was the case; we can imagine the rate of growth of the internet consumers in India. A systematic survey done by Parihar & Atreya, 2020 revealed that the internet traffic from India has increased by 95 percent during the lock down especially in the cities of Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Mumbai and Kochi. These cities have been red flagged as hotspots for child porn. The National Crime Records Bureau found that since the last 3 months, more than 25,000 child porn contents have been uploaded to various social media platforms in India. Indian Council of Medical Research reported that there is increasing demand for violence flavoured pornographic content. It was shocking to know from the report that 18 percent of individuals exhibited explicit intent for videos where children were choking, bleeding, tortured and screaming. The report states that the demand for this kind of content reached 100% during the lock-down. The online surfing for the content of child porn has increased in India during the last one year, according to National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), USA. Our kids are not safe online: cybercrimes against children are on rise and how to check them is a billion dollar question

(Ganesh and Jose, 2019). We have also witnessed casualties of our technology- games like PUBG took those children's lives in no time.

According to the 'Digital in India' report by the Internet & Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) reported that India had over 504 million active users in November 2019 with 227 million internet users from rural and Kerala stood the highest with 56% internet penetration.

Kerala had an alarming surge in the navigation of child porn sites especially during and after lockdown. The security cameras in the city apartments were found harvested child sexual abuse material. Kerala Police Cyber dome has identified that child sexual abuse materials have been downloaded and traded via social media platforms (Anand, 2020). The Kerala Police with its operation coded P-Hunt-20.2, a covert online surveillance operation, has arrested 41 people and 350 are under police surveillance (Child porn content: 350 people in Kerala under police surveillance, 2020). They have been found to be those who have been searching, uploading, downloading, disseminating and trading pictures and porn videos of children. But the sources say that these nuances are only the tip of the iceberg. There is a lot more to be dug up that is the need of the hour.

According to the National Crimes Record Bureau, in 2020 over 400% rise in cybercrime cases against children in India. Based on this report, the top five states reporting cybercrime against children are Uttar Pradesh (170), Karnataka (144), Maharashtra (137), Kerala (107) and Odisha (71). As per the data, in 842 cases of online offences, 738 cases were about publishing or transmitting materials depicting children in sexually explicit acts. (Business Standard, 2021)

The Times of India, 2022- The cybercrime against children increased by 261% in 2020 but just one person was convicted of the 116 arrested across the country for the most common offense in the first pandemic - induced lockdown in India according to the NCRB Report. Based on cyber experts, not only an increase in the child viewership of digital content was witnessed but also creation of objectionable videos during lockdown. Another reality is that most of such content has been recorded by a family member, a neighbour, or acquaintance. The newspaper article pointed out that financial desperation is one among the factors that make minors more vulnerable to cybercrimes. It mentioned that in some cases, it led the victims to create and sell exploitative content. Many children fall victim to online grooming by people known and familiar to them, their family members or relatives which led to pornography and online sexual exploitation.

1.3.1 Effect of COVID-19

Due to lockdown and closure of schools, limited opportunity for socialisation has affected the psycho-social well-being of children. It leads to increased loneliness, mood to conduct disorders, substance abuse or anxiety disorders. (Business Standard, 2021)

During COVID pandemic, the Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) industry in India has grown. Bath, 2021 has reported that the demand for violent child pornographic material on the internet has increased by up to 200 percent. And as per the report of research on child sexual exploitation, children are more vulnerable to sexual predators. Metro cities such as Kolkata, Mumbai, New Delhi and Chennai along with other capital and tier-2 cities have been identified as the hotspots for Child pornography. (Bath, 2021)

1.3.2 Cyber Crime

According to the U.S Department of Justice, cybercrime can be categorised into three; crimes in which the computing device is the target, used as a weapon and used as an accessory to a crime. In this as a target means to gain network access, as a weapon means to launch a denial of service attack, as an accessory means computer to store illegally obtained data. Due to the overuse of phones, privacy and expectation for life and achievements are reduced. By using pc, attacks are done by cyber terrorism like hacking, spam, virus, credit card fraud, trafficking in porn, posting obscene photograph, sending fake emails to induce personal data, misusing personal information, digital piracy, concealment, and counterfeiting, altering information for either profit or political objectives, violating privacy by stealing identity. Offenders use false identities in chat rooms to lure victims for private meetings that end up in abuse and exploitation like trafficking and sex tourism. Exploitation, Pornography, Trafficking, Kidnapping and Morphing are the types of cybercrime against children. (Bhardwaj, 2020)

To address the issue of cybercrime, iProbono in collaboration with the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and Dr. Karnika Seth, produced a legal Toolkit on Cybercrime against children. This is the first initiative taken by the NCPCR (a statutory body established under the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights (CPCR) Act, 2005) to address the existing knowledge gap on cybercrimes. The Toolkit helps all the stakeholders working in the field of child protection including the police, investigators, social workers and others working with online child sexual abuse survivors. And also demystifies our understanding of cybercrime and provides simplified definitions of twelve criminal offences

including cyber bullying, sexting and online child trafficking amongst others and analyses the applicable legislation. Then it attempts to clarify the law surrounding the issue by providing precedents, case studies and analysis as examples of the current methods incorporated by the Investigating Forces to handle cybercrime cases. (iProbono & Seth, 2018)

1.3.3 Usage of internet and support system

As per the Pew Research Center, the age group between 13-17 more than half of (56%) teens spend online several times a day and 12% report once a day use. Only 6% of teens report going online weekly, and 2% go online less often. (Lenhart, 2015)

With the increased penetration of digital technology the dark side of the internet has become a medium for targeting child victims and since this new technology has several players, often law enforcement agencies are at a loss on a way to give relief to the victim. For better and clear understanding of cyber-crimes against children UNICEF has made a status report titled 'Child Online Protection in India' is accessible at www.unicef.in. Cyber law expert, Prof. Karnika Seth's book titled 'Protection of Children on Internet' is also a pioneering, brief and helpful guide on online safety of children written with a special target on India. The Commission has taken a variety of steps to safeguard the children from sex offences. As a path breaking initiative, a POCSO E-button has been developed to facilitate children to report cases of sexual abuse online on to the Commission and that we will use this arrangement for tackling the burgeoning problem of cybercrime against children. (Seth, 2017)

Under the scheme of 'Cyber Crime Prevention against Women and Children (CCPWC)' by Ministry of Home Affairs an online Cyber Crime reporting portal, (www.cybercrime.gov.in) has been launched to enable public to report complaints pertaining to Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)/ Child Sexual Abuse Material, rape/gang rape imageries or sexually explicit content. This portal can be used to facilitate the public to lodge complaints anonymously or through Report and track options and also to spread awareness, issue of alerts/advisories, training of law enforcement agencies, improving cyber forensic facilities etc. These steps help to prevent such cases and speed up investigation. Another action taken by the Government has launched a cybercrime awareness campaign through twitter handle (@CyberDost) and radio across the country. (Press Information Bureau, 2019)

The third most serious crime in the world is Human trafficking. In the present scenario, Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) and sexual exploitation of children has become the most noticeable human rights violations. That means a sexual harassment by an adult for monetary

gains to the trafficker. And children can be used both as commercial and as sexual tools. The main challenge in combating the sex offense against children is their lack of awareness because the children involved do not understand that they are being exposed to non-consensual or coerced sex. The emergence of the internet and varied social media platforms has created new avenues for human rights abuses against minors. Moreover, there are several regulations in place to combat this issue however they are usually ineffective. (Bath, 2021)

In 1989, the Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC) ensured safer access to the internet with the freedom and choice of children and overall democratization in learning. The recommendations from experts and agencies include digital parenting, parental mediation, education and training of children in schools, and robust information-technology laws and regulations, Internet-safety rules and practices should be included in the school curriculum and teachers'-training programmes, and parents should be made aware of them. (Muttreja & Vajpeyi, 2021)

The government must introduce comprehensive sex education in the school curriculum. It will create a safe, positive, non-judgmental space for children, adolescents, and young people to access information in an age-appropriate manner, based on evidence instead of morality. (Muttreja & Vajpeyi, 2021)

To address the lack of availability of accurate information on sexual and reproductive health and raise awareness on consent, and violence the Population Foundation of India launched a chatbot 'SnehAI' powered by artificial intelligence. It provides adolescents a platform where they can get information on a range of issues that affect them. And also seeks to equip adolescents with information and resources to identify and report online abuse. Such initiatives need to be adopted or scaled up by the government for children to access the right information at the right time and be safe from online CSEA. (Muttreja & Vajpeyi, 2021)

Under Section 67B of IT Act, 2008 prescribes "punishment for publishing or transmitting material depicting children in sexually explicit acts, etc. in electronic form. To distribute and circulate child sexual abuse material (CSAM) internet has provided paedophiles and child sexual offenders with an anonymous agency. Other innovative strategies are required to combat online Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) along with legal reforms. Therefore, in addition to legal reforms, other innovative strategies are required to combat online Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). The Indian law on Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) does not specifically mention and deal with "pseudo-photographs" as has been the case under

the Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) laws in the UK. To define the term 'pseudo-photograph' as   an image that is created by computer graphics, which appears like a photograph, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994 amended The Protection of Children Act, 1978 in the UK and the same has been incorporated. Moreover, Section 67C imposes a responsibility on the intermediaries to preserve and retain such offending material. Mukherjee, (2020) points out the pivotal role played by the intermediaries in the availability and hosting of online Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM).

A common practice for combating technology facilitated crimes against children is to formulate multi-agency partnerships at strategic level. To bring together different agencies from multiple countries to work on specific child exploitation issues the groups such as the Virtual Global Task Force (VGT), the Financial Coalition against Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) (FCACP), and the International Association of Internet Hotlines (INHOPE). Such initiatives aim to harness the concepts and resources of multiple entities, leading to more strong policy and programme initiatives. For example, forums for information-sharing and joint problem-solving are commonly adopted practices for combating online child abuse and exploitation. Working groups sponsored by private entities, individual States, and regional and international coalitions represent necessary opportunities for detailed technical information exchange. The INTERPOL Specialist Group on Crimes Against Children, for instance, brings together global experts to share best practices. Individuals involved benefit from opportunities for developing informal relationships that will facilitate quick and simple cross-border cooperation in the future. Regional coalitions have also emerged, in April 2009, national coalitions and NGOs from seven countries such as Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama adopted a declaration following a seminar on the development of comprehensive strategies to combat Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). And these seven countries also adopted a declaration on the development strategies to combat Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). (UNODC, 2015)

1.3.5 Game Addiction

The Momo Challenge is a game popular in the US, Argentina, France, Mexico and Germany. It claimed its first victim soon after it made its appearance in 2018. A 12-year-old girl committed suicide in Argentina. Basically, it asks the players to inflict self-damage (and record it at every stage) and in the final stage, it asks the participant to commit suicide. Another case is that a 16-year-old student hanged herself as, allegedly, she had reached the

final stage. According to reports, the girl was besotted with the game and even reached its last stage (Ganesh & Jose, 2019).

The researcher has traversed through the secondary data and found that the following initiatives have been taken so far to combat and address the issue.

- CCPWC (Cybercrime Prevention against Women and Children) scheme of Govt. of India provides grant-in-aid to set up Cyber Forensic Lab cum Training Centre in all states (https://www.mha.gov.in/division_of_mha/cyber-and-information-security-cisdivision/ Details-about-CCPWC-CybercrimePrevention-against-women-and-Children-Scheme).

- The Kerala police have a special unit CCSE (Counter Child Sexual Exploitation) which is dealing with preventing online child exploitation and Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). The unit is working in close contact with the Interpol Crimes against Children and the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC), using Interpol software to trace culprits (https://keralapolice.gov.in/page/ccse).

- Cyber dome is a technological research and development center initiated in a private-public partnership model, to facilitate technology augmentation for effective policing by developing a cyber-threat resilient ecosystem. Cyberdome envisages to make a collective coordination among the government departments and agencies, academia, research groups, non-profitable organisations, individual experts from the community, ethical hackers, law enforcement agencies and other private organisations to protect each and every citizen from cyber exploitation in the country (https://bprd.nic.in/).

- With the aim to protect children in Cyberspace, Kid Glove, launched in 2015 is an initiative by Kerala Police along with ISRA (Information Security Research Association) to create awareness among teachers, parents and children. CBSE has launched a cyber-safety manual during lock down for students of class 9 to 12 covering topics such as digital access, digital literacy, digital rights and security, digital etiquette, etc. This manual aims at developing safe online habits among them. As part of this, Cyberdome has come up with a number of digital games with attractive titles to promote safe and healthy internet practice among children (https://www.kidglove.in/about-us/).

- c0c0n, previously known as Cyber Safe, is the longest running conferences in the area of Information Security and Hacking, in this part of the Globe. The Conference is

organized by a Conglomerate of Government and the Industry, led by ISRA - (a registered non-profit organization in the area of Information Security), The Society for the Policing of Cyberspace (POLCYB) and supported by Kerala Police, IT Mission, ISACA, null, GTec and a host of other International and National Organisations working in the area of Cyber Security. c0c0n is aimed at providing a platform to discuss, showcase, educate, understand and spread awareness on the latest trends in information, cyber, hacking and hi-tech crimes. It also aims to provide a hand-shaking platform for various Corporate, Government organizations including the various investigation agencies, academia, research organizations and other industry leaders and players, for better co-ordination in making the cyber world a better and safer place to be.

- Kerala Police has also come up with a number of other initiatives including BODHINI – helpline to report any kind of online crimes, exploitation and seek legal help. BODHINI has internet safety tips disseminated through IEC strategy to parents, children and teachers (https://keralapolice.gov.in/page/bodhini-child-safety).

- National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), an independent statutory body for the protection of Child Rights, in its mandate is committed to ensure that all Laws, Policies, Programmes, and Administrative Mechanisms are in consonance with the Child Rights perspective as enshrined in the Constitution of India and also the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Child is defined as a person in the 0 to 18 years age group. NCPCR manages POCSO – e box - an online complaint management system of any kind of violation of rights experienced by children. The 'Legal Toolkit for Investigators' – Child Victims of Cyber Crime – a legal tool kit, is a handbook intended to disseminate information on cybercrime related laws and to build awareness on the 'virtual realities' and its impact on human lives.

- The government has launched its own game application for children - 'cyber trivia' in a bid to counter incidents of cyber-crimes against children due to dangerous games like 'blue whale' and 'momo' challenges. The app is based on a behaviour modification technique under which we use a system of rewards and punishments to encourage positive behaviour and discourage negative behaviour (The Economic Times, September 24, 2018).

- Considering the gravity of the issue, even with little empirical evidence, the state run Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education (KITE) published a cyber-safety

protocol in February 2020. The protocol mandated secure password protection to all educational institutions and recommended to conduct a cyber safety audit every two years. But when the pandemic slammed into our lives, our lives upended and despite all these precautions this menace continues to aggravate in the days to come. 'Kalapila', the programme conducted by KANAL – an NGO working for child welfare in Thiruvananthapuram found that children face exploitation online. As part of that they have intervened with awareness and training sessions for 500 children in 20 schools of Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam District. This is evidenced to be a drop in the ocean. There is much more to be explored. The risk and depth of this issue has been discussed and acknowledged at macro and governance level, yet the increasing threat it poses on the lives of this young cohort is beyond enumeration. Albeit ascertaining the type of crimes and to some extent the perpetrators, not much explorative investigations have been done on the type of exploitations experienced from the part of the victims. Since each cultural and societal context differs in the risky environments and circumstances that jeopardize these children's lives and future, the researcher proposes to explore such variables through the current study.

This review calls the readers' attention to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment. In this mandate, the Committee entrusts States parties to implement the Convention in relation to the digital environment and to provide guidance on relevant legislative, policy and Optional Protocols and to ensure full compliance with their obligations under the Convention. This has to be carried out in the light of the opportunities, risks and challenges in promoting, respecting, protecting and fulfilling all children's rights in the digital environment (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 2021).

For the purpose of updating the review of the available literature, a scan through the latest reports during the period from August 2021- December 2021 disclosed that the state of Kerala records the highest in cybercrime incidences. The news reports proved that cybercrimes against children, involving them as either perpetrators or victims, are increasing across the country. The exploitation of child victims reported in cyberspace is not limited to one, but it happens in multiple ways. Children are exposed in social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram etc. and are being solicited, groomed and exploited by means of sexting, being induced to watch videos having sexual content, identity theft etc. Apart from the social media platforms, the online classes are also becoming spaces for

cybercrimes. People logging into the online sessions misuse the platforms by sending obscene and unprotected video links to the children that can lead them to risks and exploitation. Cases of identity theft and Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) have been reported which is not anew. There are many incidents of exposing the children through mass media or social media. Often the children in conflict with law and children in need of care and protection are victims of such incidents. This in turn led to labelling / creating stigma that often hamper their opportunity to live in their own community.

Reports depicted the insurgence of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) cases exploiting children and speak about the urgent need to address such issues. Yet another risk domain is the online games and the theft and fraudulent activities associated with it. The children engaged in these online games have been exploited by many adults for money. There are many cases reported which reveal the money loss suffered by children by playing these online games. This is further dangerous when they take their lives. Many cases of children committing suicide when they don't get money to recharge their devices to play and master the desired levels of online games have been reported. Despite the security instruments implemented our children are at high risk of being exploited by opening to them avenues for drug trade, game addiction and threats of the underworld.

For keeping the information up-to-date, a mapping of news articles related to cyber exploitation and safety of children in Kerala was done which reiterated the escalation of the issue and the urgency to act upon. A scan through the current reports disclosed that the state of Kerala records the highest in cybercrime incidences. The news reports proved that cybercrimes against children, involving them as either perpetrators or victims, are increasing across the country. The exploitation of child victims reported in cyberspace is not limited to one, but it happens in multiple ways. Children are exposed in social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram etc. and are being solicited, groomed and exploited by means of sexting, being induced to watch videos having a sexual content, identity theft etc. Apart from the social media platforms, the online classes are also becoming spaces for cybercrimes. People logging into the online sessions misuse the platforms by sending obscene and unprotected video links to the children that can lead them to risks and exploitation. Cases of identity theft and child pornography have been reported which is not anew. There are many incidents of exposing the children through mass media or social media. Often the children in conflict with law and children in need of care and protection are victims

of such incidents. This in turn lead to labelling / creating stigma that often hamper their opportunity to live in their own community.

Reports depicted the insurgence of child pornography cases exploiting children and speak about the urgent need to address such issues. Yet another risk domain is the online games and the theft and fraudulent activities associated with it. The children engaged in these online games have been exploited by many adults for money. There are many cases reported which reveal the money loss suffered by children by playing these online games. This is further dangerous when they take their lives. Many cases of children committing suicide when they don't get money to recharge their devices to play and master the desired levels of online games have been reported. Despite the security instruments implemented our children are at high risk of being exploited by opening to them avenues for drug trade, game addiction and threats of underworld. The news articles and their corresponding links are detailed in the Bibliography.

Chapter – II

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

An extensive review of the existing literature reiterated the significance of this study in the current socio-cultural context of Kerala. The study was conducted with the following specific objectives.

Specific Objectives of the study

1. To find out the type and extent of online use, abuse and exploitation faced by children and adolescents in Kerala.

2. To study the existing internet safety measures and its application for the safety of children, including strategies adopted by stakeholders such as parents and school authorities.

3. To study the perceptions of parents and significant others about online abuse and online safety of children and adolescents in Kerala.

4. To study the subjective experiences of child/adolescent victims of online exploitation and its impact on their life.

5. To come up with recommendations on strategies to prevent cyber abuse and promote cyber safety among children and adolescents.

2.1 Operationalizing the concepts

2.1.1 Online use - Cyber use in this study refers to the engagement of an individual in online platforms for educational and entertainment purposes.

2.1.2 Online abuse - Cyber abuse in this study pertains to prolonged use of the Internet; use of the Internet for non-productive purposes, those activities that hinders the growth and development of the child[1].

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[1] This definition has been formulated by analysing the following literature: (1) Psychometric screening tool of *problematic internet use* developed by Pontes and Griffiths (2016); (2) The Use And Abuse Of Online Platforms: What happens to freedom of expression when the internet is used as a tool to incite violence? by Sewell, 2021.

2.1.3 Addiction - Addiction in this study refers to Internet addiction in which a person has a compulsive need to spend a great deal of time on the Internet, to the point where other areas of life such as relationships, work or health are allowed to suffer; any behaviour that interrupts normal daily functioning of the individual.

2.1.4 Cyber exploitation

Cyber exploitation is defined as any activity conducted or facilitated online that violates the rights of children including,

· **Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)**, i.e. representation of a child engaged in real or simulated sexual activities, circulation of any form of media-video, picture, sound recording- via internet or through a computer, telephone, mobile or tablet, the production, distribution and use of materials depicting child sexual abuse;

· **Online solicitation or 'grooming'** -securing a child's trust in order to draw them into a situation where they may be harmed;

· **Cyber bullying** -exposure to materials that can cause psychological harm, lead to physical harm, harassment and intimidation, online cheating, defacement through social media

· **Cyber stalking** – when an individual is repeatedly or constantly followed, watched or contacted through any electronic means; the movement of the child is tracked, the privacy is invaded or persistent efforts are made to contact someone against their will through text, e-mail, social media or other digital platforms,

· **Identity theft**, **Online financial frauds, Human trafficking for labour, sexual solicitation, gratification and prostitution.**

2.2 Approach and Design of the study

The study utilized a mixed method (both quantitative and qualitative) approach. The study employed a Concurrent Triangulation Design where the data is collected using quantitative and qualitative methods and during the analysis the data results are compared, consolidated and presented in the report. The stakeholders of the study included children (boys and girls)

who belong to the age group 9 – 18 years, teachers who are handling children in the above said age group, parents who have children in the above said age group/family members, school counsellors who work in private schools and also under ORC (Our Responsibility to Children) project of ICPS (Integrated Child Protection Scheme), School authorities (Principals), Police personnel, Cyber experts and Lawyers.

The detailed chart of research design and methodology is given below

Sl. No.	Objectives of the study	Type of research design	Methodology	Method of data collection	Tool of data collection
1.	To find out the type and extent of online use, abuse and exploitation faced by children and adolescents in the state of Kerala	Mixed method research	Quantitative and Qualitative	Systematic review and content analysis of the documents collected from Police department and Cyber cell, measures/ strategies adopted by the stakeholders including parents and school authorities. Survey FGDs	Structured questionnaire for survey; Checklist prepared based on the objectives for content analysis
2.	To study the existing internet safety measures and its application for the safety of children		Qualitative	Semi structured Questionnaire (primary data collected from authorities of police/cyber department) supported by Review of the existing official reports and documents of concerned bodies (secondary data).	Interview guide
3.	To study the perception of parents and significant others about online abuse of children and adolescents in the state of Kerala		Quantitative + Qualitative	Structured Questionnaire Focus group discussions (FGD)	Questionnaire FGD guide
4.	To study the subjective experience of child / adolescent victims of online		Qualitative	Case study method	Structured case Performa

	exploitation and its impact on their life.				
5.	To formulate strategy to promote internet / cyber safety among children and adolescents		Qualitative	Workshops / webinars – expert discussion will be conducted to formulate preventive and protective strategies which can be applicable to different target groups	Discussion framework

2.3 Area of the study and Sample

The universe of the study was the entire state of Kerala. The study is proposed to cover the entire state of Kerala. For the research purpose, the state of Kerala is divided into 3 regions – South, Central and North. Two districts (mentioned in the diagram below) from each region were selected. Against an estimated sample of 200 children from each district, a sample of 203 children from Thiruvandapuram, 205 from Pathanamthitta, 204 from Ernakulam, 213 from Idukki, 206 from Kozhikode and 200 from Wayanad were selected. The researcher had tried to include more or less an equal proportion of both genders. Accordingly, a proportionate number of boys and girls from middle school (6th -8th grade), secondary school (9th & 10th grade), and higher secondary school (11th & 12th grade) and 307 parents who have children in the above classes also were selected. Thus the quantitative sample counted for a total of 1538 samples. (For accurate sample configuration refer page 36).

Qualitative data collection involved Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews (of key informants) and case studies. Focus Group Discussions included participants ranging from 7 - 15. The study conducted 4 FGDs per selected district (2 children FGD + 1 Parent FGD + 1 Teacher FGD), 20 in-depth interviews per district and 4 case studies per region. Thus a total of **24** (4 FGDs*6 districts) FGDs, **120** in-depth interviews (20 *6 districts) and **12** case studies were conducted.

Quantitative survey samples and respondents for FGDs were selected purposely with the help of schools, ICDS adolescent club projects, local forums/ clubs for children and resident associations. Qualitative samples for case studies were identified through school authorities, school counselors, local Police and District Child Protection Units. Key informants for in-depth interviews included (a) anganwadi workers, (b) teachers, (c) principals, (d) school

authorities/school management committee members, (e) school counselors, (f) police, (g) cyber cell officials, (h) those who are engaging with children through different governmental and non-governmental projects, (i) representatives of youth clubs (community/religious) and (j-*a*) children (boys and girls) and (j-*b*) members of Student Police Cadet (SPC), NSS, NCC, BALASABHA*(children's groups in Panchayats)*). The diagrammatic presentation of the sampling procedure and the total sample size for quantitative and qualitative data collection is shown below.
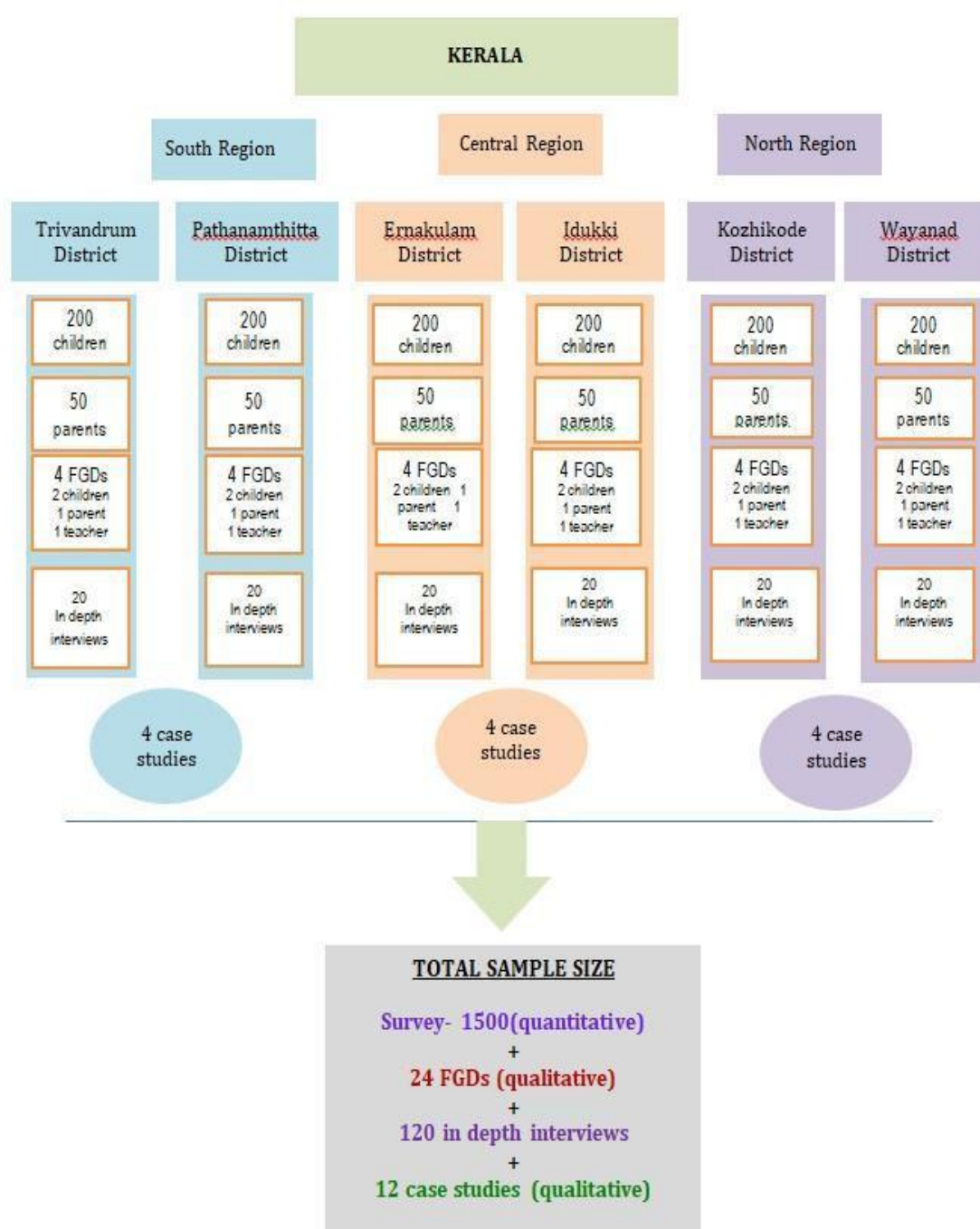
2.4 Ethical considerations for the proposed study

The study takes into consideration the professional and ethical aspects in engaging with the respondents.

1.   Informed consent was taken from the respondents before collecting data.

2.   None of the respondents were forced/coerced to participate in the study.

3.   The investigators were those professionals who are professionally trained in engaging with the children and adolescents and were also availed special orientation and training on data collection.

4.   The study has NOT recorded the identity (name) of any person interviewed in any circumstances

5.   Any query that hurt the emotions/ ego/ of the respondents were avoided.

6.   The privacy of the respondents was ensured in the case of qualitative procedures (case studies and FGDs)

7.   Data collection was facilitated in a conducive and comfortable environment (non-fearful, empathetic, congruent, engaging and positive regard) for the respondents.

8.   The research team ensured the anonymity *(identity of the respondents were not recorded, if at all any references done by the research team used pseudonyms)* of the data and the narratives are discarded (within 1 month of its recording) once it is analyzed and incorporated in the report.

9.   As per the professional ethics, the research team maintained the confidentiality of the information shared by the participants.

2.5 Mitigating risks – The study has taken care and precautions not to hurt any emotions of the respondents. Interviews were done by professionally competent persons who can understand the psycho-social needs of children and can handle them accordingly. The interviews of the specific cases were done with the help of trained professionals of District Child Protection Units (DCPU). Prior consent was taken from other stakeholders when sensitive issues were discussed and ensured the anonymity of the information shared as per the respondents' suggestions and discretions.

2.6 Well-being of the investigators and respondents

The study was conducted conforming to the guidelines of Covid-19 protocol. Masks, sanitizers and social distancing were maintained throughout. FGD group consists of 12 to maximum 15 members. As the principal investigator and co-investigator have been working in the child setting for more than 10 years and have been engaging with different government and non-governmental projects, professional connections in the field helped facilitate the research process; especially in procuring documents for content analysis and also to identify cases.

2.7 Pilot Study and pre-test

A Pilot study was conducted in August 2021 at Karimadom, an urban slum in Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala. Using a preliminary tool drafted for the purpose, a total of 25 samples were collected from the children and parents from the area and key informant interviews with teachers, people working with children in government projects, and Police Officers in Thiruvananthapuram city.

The data was collected from 12 children - four each from 3 categories. The age categories of children selected for data collection are category A – 11 to 13 years, Category B – 14 to 15 year, and category C - 16 to 18 years, and 8 parents who have children in the above said categories. Interviews with teachers and those engaging / directly working with children in various projects, and police officers were also conducted during the pilot phase. All the children, parents, and the key respondents were willing to answer and cooperate with the researcher/ investigators.

2.8 Limitations of the study

The study was conducted during Covid-19 and it was the biggest challenge and limitation the study faced. Data collection was very challenging as many schools restricted permission to meet students and parents for discussions. In children's interviews parents interfered in answering for children which affected authentic responses. Also, there were instances where children showed reluctance to write about their online experiences and marked differently. As a result data discrepancy was seen among the survey forms which affected the credibility of the data.

Chapter – III

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

While the cyber world offers a wide range of opportunities for development and advancement in various areas such as education, banking, trade and commerce, and interpersonal relationships, it also poses a significant threat to the physical, psychological, and social well-being of our children. Children are particularly vulnerable to the dangers of the cyber world, which can negatively impact their lives. Therefore, it is important to focus on the problem of children's safety in the cyber world and take steps to protect them.

The study made an attempt to find out the extent of cyber exploitation and safety of children in Kerala with a proposed quantitative sample of 1200 children and 300 parents. The study interviewed 1231 children, 307 parents, 120 significant others, conducted 24 Focus Group Discussions and 12 in-depth case studies.

This chapter that presents the socio-demographic details of the respondents is divided into three sections. The first section of this chapter gives demographic details of children respondents and the second section gives demographic profile of the parent respondents. The data is presented in tables and graphs. In the second section, along with the profile of the parent respondents additional information on their usage of social media, time spent on social media, type of gadgets used by them, number of parents whose children have their own gadget and their responses on their wards' social media usage also are included. In the last section of this chapter, an overview of the Focus Group Discussions, Key informants and case studies is presented with a detailed profile attached as annexures.

SECTION I

Table 1 - The profile of children from which data has been collected based on the proposed sampling frame

Rural – 614						Urban – 617					
Boys – 302			Girls – 312			Boys - 312			Girls – 305		
Class/Grade			Class/Grade			Class/Grade			Class/Grade		
6th, 7th & 8th	9th & 10th	11th & 12th	6th, 7th & 8th	9th & 10th	11th & 12th	6th, 7th & 8th	9th & 10th	11th & 12th	6th, 7th & 8th	9th & 10th	11th & 12th
108	97	97	95	103	114	99	100	113	95	96	114

Table 2 - District wise presentation of the children respondents based on their gender and place of residence

District	Male	Female	Rural		Urban	
			Male	Female	Male	Female
Thiruvananthapuram	111	92	48	55	63	37
Pathanamthitta	99	106	55	45	44	61
Ernakulam	103	101	52	46	51	55
Idukki	103	110	52	57	51	53
Kozhikode	108	98	55	49	52	49
Wayanad	90	110	40	60	51	50
Total	614	617	302	312	312	305

It is clear from the above table that Thiruvananthapuram district had 111 male children and 92 female child respondents in which 48 male children are from rural areas and 63 male children are from urban areas. When it is the case of female child respondents, 55 are from rural areas and 37 are from urban areas. In Pathanamthitta district, there are 99 male and 106 female child respondents in which 55 males are from rural areas and 44 males are from urban

areas whereas 45 females are from rural areas and 61 are from urban areas. Ernakulam district had a total of 103 male child respondents and 101 female child respondents. In this, there are 52 and 51 male child respondents from rural and urban areas respectively and 46 and 55 female child respondents from rural and urban areas respectively. Idukki District has 103 males and 110 females. Idukki rural has 52 males and 57 females whereas Idukki urban has 51 and 53 males and females respectively. Among the northern districts, Kozhikode had a total of 108 males and 98 female child respondents. In this, 55 male child respondents were from rural areas and 52 from urban areas and an equal number of 49 males and females from rural and urban areas respectively. Wayanad had a total of 90 males in which 40 were from rural areas and 51 were from urban areas while out of a total of 110 females, 60 were from rural areas and 50 were from urban areas. Thus the total number of male child respondents was 614 and total number of female child respondents was 617. Rural boys constituted 302 and urban boys 312 while rural and urban girls were 312 and 305 respectively.

Table 3 – District wise classification of children respondents based on the classification of the grades in which they are studying

District	Class 6,7 & 8		Class 9 & 10		Class Plus 1 & 2	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Thiruvananthapuram	42	25	32	23	37	44
Pathanamthitta	28	37	33	33	36	38
Ernakulam	34	26	35	36	34	39
Idukki	36	36	34	35	33	39
Kozhikode	35	32	35	34	38	32
Wayanad	32	34	26	40	32	36
Total	207	190	195	201	210	228

While looking into the district wise distribution of child respondents in the respective classes from which the sample was drawn, Thiruvananthapuram had 42 male children and 25 female children in the classes 6, 7 and 8, while classes 9 and 10 had 32 males and 23 females. Those male child respondents in plus one and plus two classes of Thiruvananthapuram district total up to 37 and that of female child respondents total up to 44. In case of Pathanamthitta, male

child respondents total up to 28 in classes 6, 7 and 8, 33 in classes 9 and 10 and 36 in classes plus one and plus two and that of female child respondents were 37, 33 and 38 respectively. Ernakulam had 34 male children and 26 female children as respondents in classes 6, 7 and 8, 35 male children and 36 female children in the classes 9 and 10; and 34 and 39 male and female children in the classes plus one and plus two. The males and females in the 6th, 7th and 8th classes in Idukki district total up to an equal number -36 each while that of 9 and 10 come up to 34 and 35 and that of plus one and plus two are 33 and 39 respectively. Kozhikode district had 35 males and 32 female children in the classes 6, 7 and 8; 35 males and 34 female children in the classes 9 and 10 and 38 males and 32 female children in plus one and plus two classes. In Wayanad, the male child respondents of 6, 7 and 8 classes were 32 and female respondents in the same category were 34. Similarly, 9 and 10 classes had 26 male child respondents and 40 female child respondents while plus one and plus two classes had 32 males and 36 female child respondents. From the following figure it is very clear that the sample is more or less equally distributed.
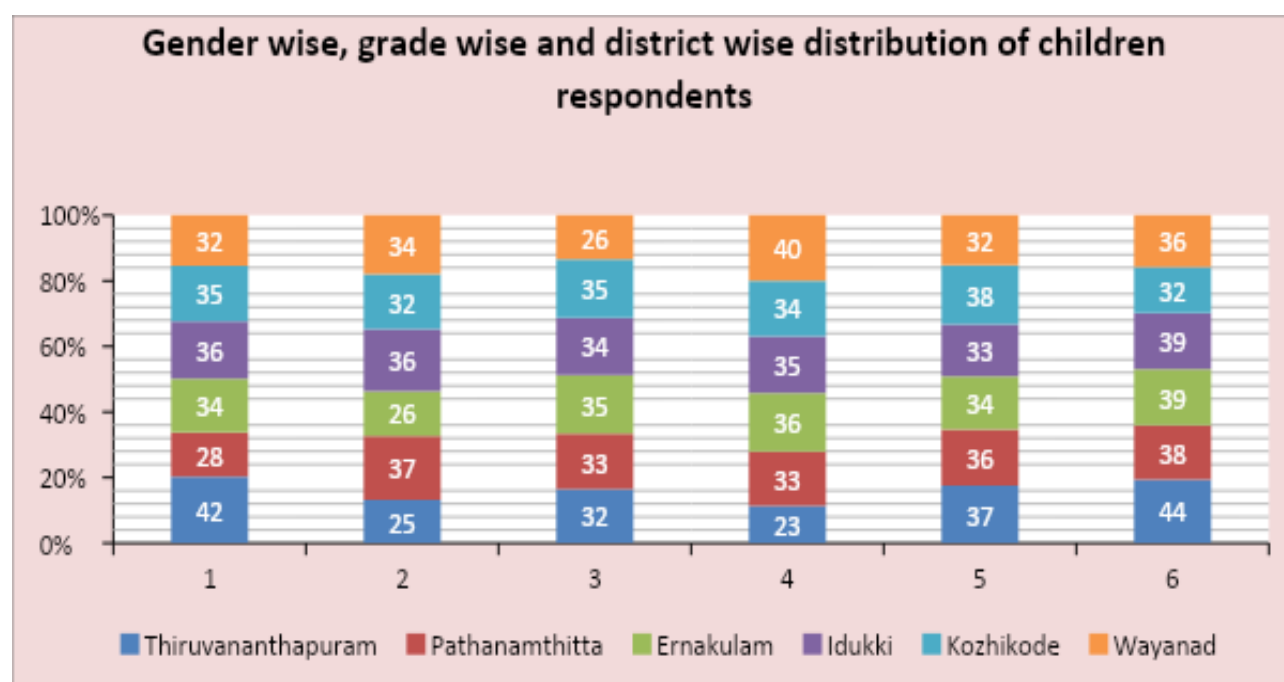
Figure 1- Gender wise, grade wise and district wise distribution of children respondents.

Specifically looking at the age of the children respondents, 58 students are of 11 years of age, 130 students are of 12 years, 186 students are of 13 years, 187 students are of 14 years, 201 students are of 15 years, 209 students are of 16 years, 221 students are of 17 years, and 39 students are of 18 years respectively. Out of these, the majority (1142) are children from the

State run/aided schools and 89 are from CBSE run schools. It is also noted that a sizable number of students in urban schools, hail from the rural setting. The following diagram shows the age of the child respondents.
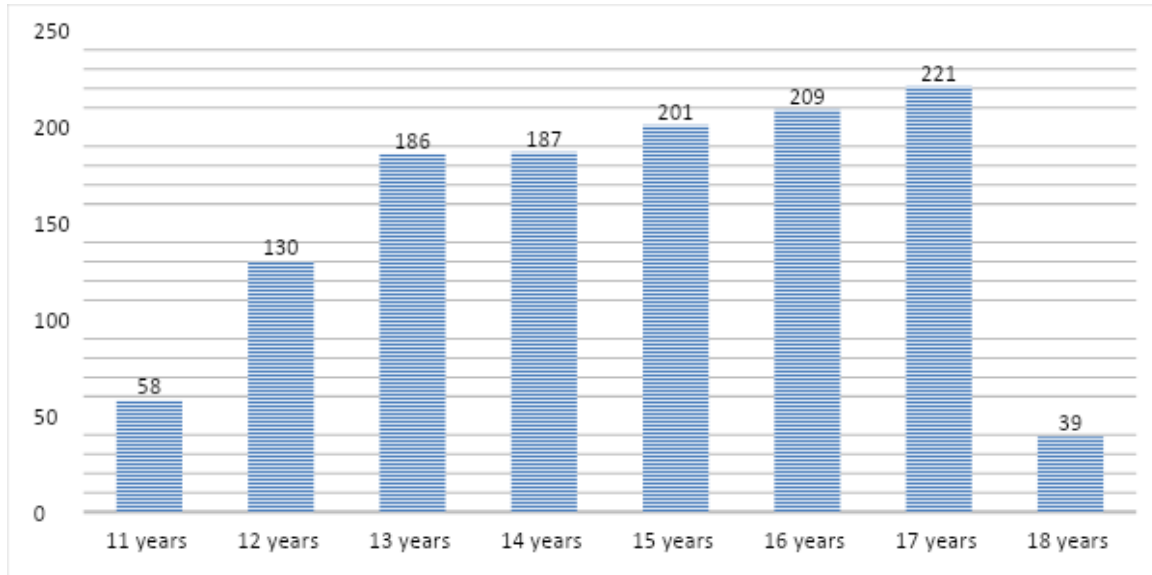
Figure 2- Age of the child respondents

Understanding the occupation of the parents of these child respondents, it is found that parents of 31 children are not occupied, 186 parents own business and 156 parents are self-employed, 247 are casual labourers, 110 are employed in private firms and 142 work in government sector and 14 are employed in IT sector. Looking at the occupational status of the parents of the child respondents, it is understood that the highest number came in the category of casual labourers. The contrast is noticed that those who own their own business ventures (186) are not very less. The heterogeneous nature of the sample helped the researcher to get a vivid picture of the problem and its effect on the society. The pie chart below gives a clear picture about the occupation of the parents of these children respondents.

29
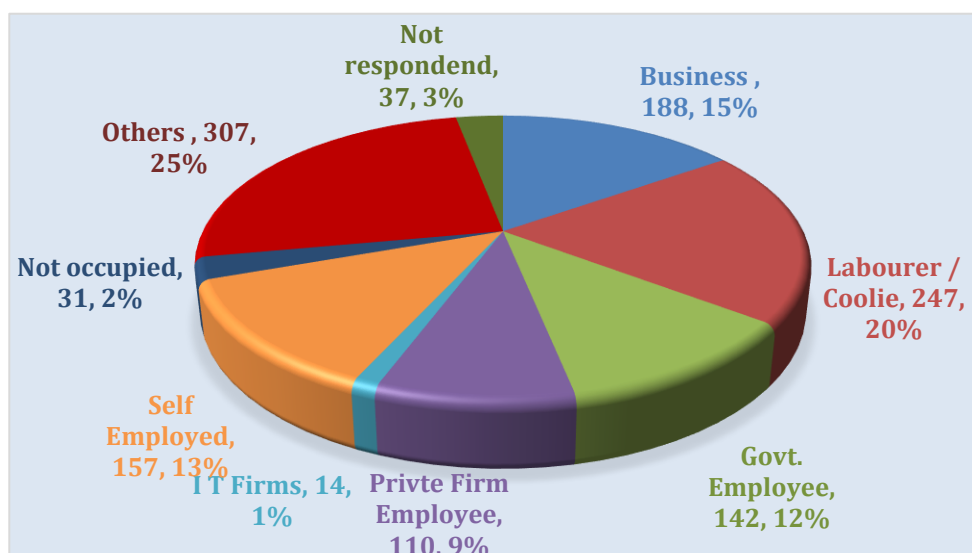
Figure 3 – Pie diagram showing the occupation of the parents of child respondents

SECTION II

PROFILE OF THE PARENTS

For the purpose of the study, data is drawn from a total of 300 parents (50 parents from each district) from 6 districts – Thiruvananthapuram, Pathanamthitta, Ernakulam, Idukki, Kozhikode and Wayanad. Any parent who resides anywhere in the above mentioned districts who have children studying in 6th – 12th grades was the inclusion criteria. A minimum of 50 parents from each district were selected for collecting data and the cumulative sample size of parent respondents is 307. The selection process specifically focused on those parents who have children studying in the classes 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, plus one and plus two. The following table shows the profile of the parent respondents based on their gender and place of residence.

Table 4 - Profile of the parent respondents based on their gender and place of residence

District	Father	Mother	Rural	Urban
Thiruvananthapuram	10	40	34	16
Pathanamthitta	18	32	36	14
Ernakulam	21	31	16	36
Idukki	25	27	38	14
Kozhikkode	19	32	37	14
Wayanad	27	25	48	4
Total	120	187	209	98

From the above table it is clear that Thiruvananthapuram, 10 fathers and 40 mothers participated in the study. Among them 34 were from rural areas and 16 were from urban areas. Pathanamthitta had 18 fathers and 32 mothers in which 36 were residing in rural areas and 14 in urban areas. From Ernakulam, 21 fathers and 31 mothers responded. Among them, 16 were from rural areas and 36 from urban areas. It is clear from the data that those urban districts had less number of rural samples and rural districts had less number of urban

samples. Idukki being a rural district, 38 parents from rural areas and 14 from urban areas participated in the study; among them 25 were fathers and 27 were mothers. Kozhikode had 37 parents from rural areas and 14 from urban areas in which 19 were fathers and 32 were mothers. From Wayanad, 27 fathers responded and 25 mothers responded. This district being a rural district, it is very evident from the sample that among the respondents 48 were from rural areas and only 4 were from urban areas. It is also inferred from the data that though no gender preference was mentioned or insisted while collecting the data of the parents, more number of mothers responded than the fathers except for Wayanad with a negligible difference of 2. In a state like Kerala where gender roles and stereotypes are so strongly imprinted in the family structure and dynamics, until recently, child rearing and caring were solely the sphere of mothers. There were times where fathers considered it shameful to enquire about children's growth and development needs. Today, for the purpose of this study, if a good number of fathers have participated in the study is an indication of attitudinal change, the awareness about equal participation and contribution in the family and is a move towards breaking the stereotypes, implying positive change and advancement.

The parent respondents were more or less distributed in the age group of 30 – 60 years. Nevertheless, there were 4 mothers who were below 30 years and one father above 60 years in the response. From the figure it is clear that, the majority of parents are in the age group 41 – 50 years having 70 mothers and 64 fathers. Those mothers in the age group 31-40 are 68 in number and those fathers in the same age group constituted up to 15. The responses included 9 mothers who were in the age group 51-60 and the number of fathers in the same age group was 33. It is also noticed that 36 mothers did not mention their age and 7 fathers. The reason for this could not be inferred from the interviews. The following figure shows the age wise distribution of parent respondents.
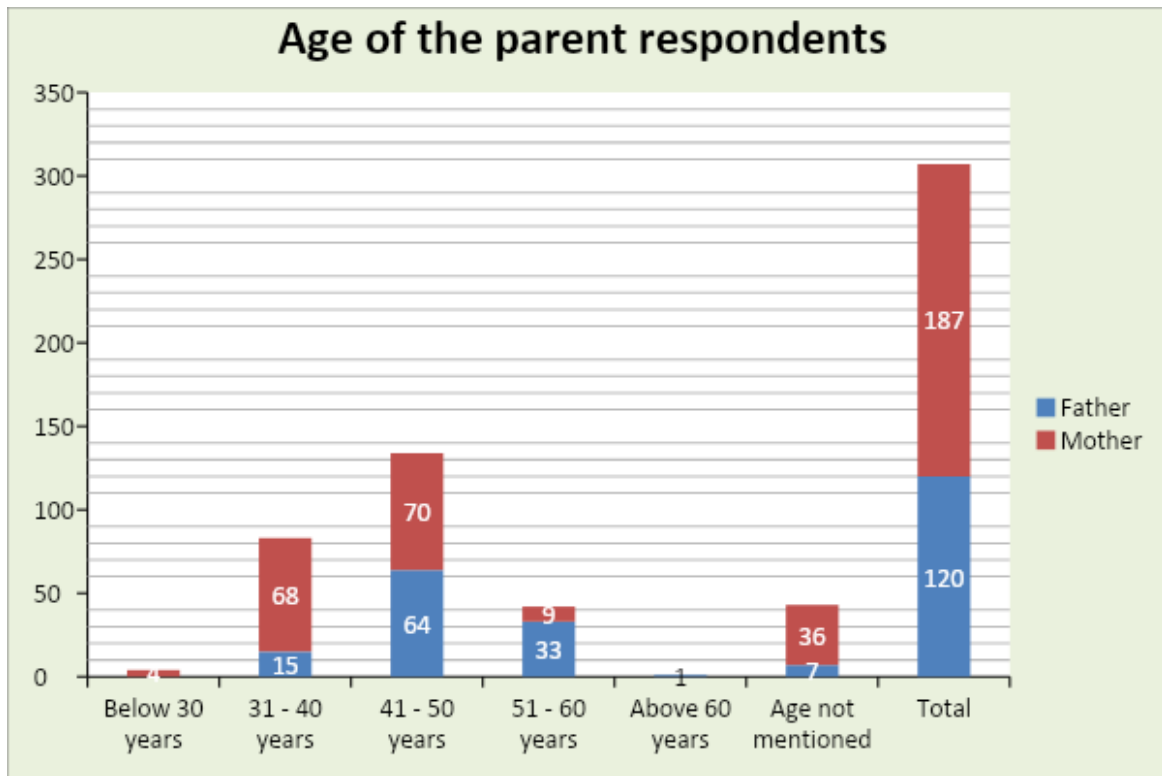
Figure 4 – Age of the parent respondents

While ascertaining the socio-demographic profile of the parent respondents, information on the size of the family was sought and found that among the parents who participated in the study, majority i.e. 46.58 percentage are 3 member family, 22.15 percentage were having 4 members and 23.13 percentage of respondents' families have 5 members. Only a small percentage of parent respondents had 6 members and above in their families. This shows the family size and composition among the population of Kerala. Kerala has moved from a joint/ extended family structure to nuclear families for more than two decades. The size of the families has reduced; dual income families have increased which makes child care a bigger challenge. Leaving children unattended will lead to greater risks and vulnerabilities. In the post pandemic era, those children whose parents are working will be engaging themselves with gadgets because mobile/internet has become a necessity for communication. While interviewing, almost all families were found to have claimed the possession of smartphones. They reported that it is procured for the purpose of online education during the pandemic and once it is used it is very difficult to refrain from them. Also parents reported that sim cards and data availability is so cheap which is a motivating factor to retain the gadgets. The following figure shows the size of the family of the parent respondents.
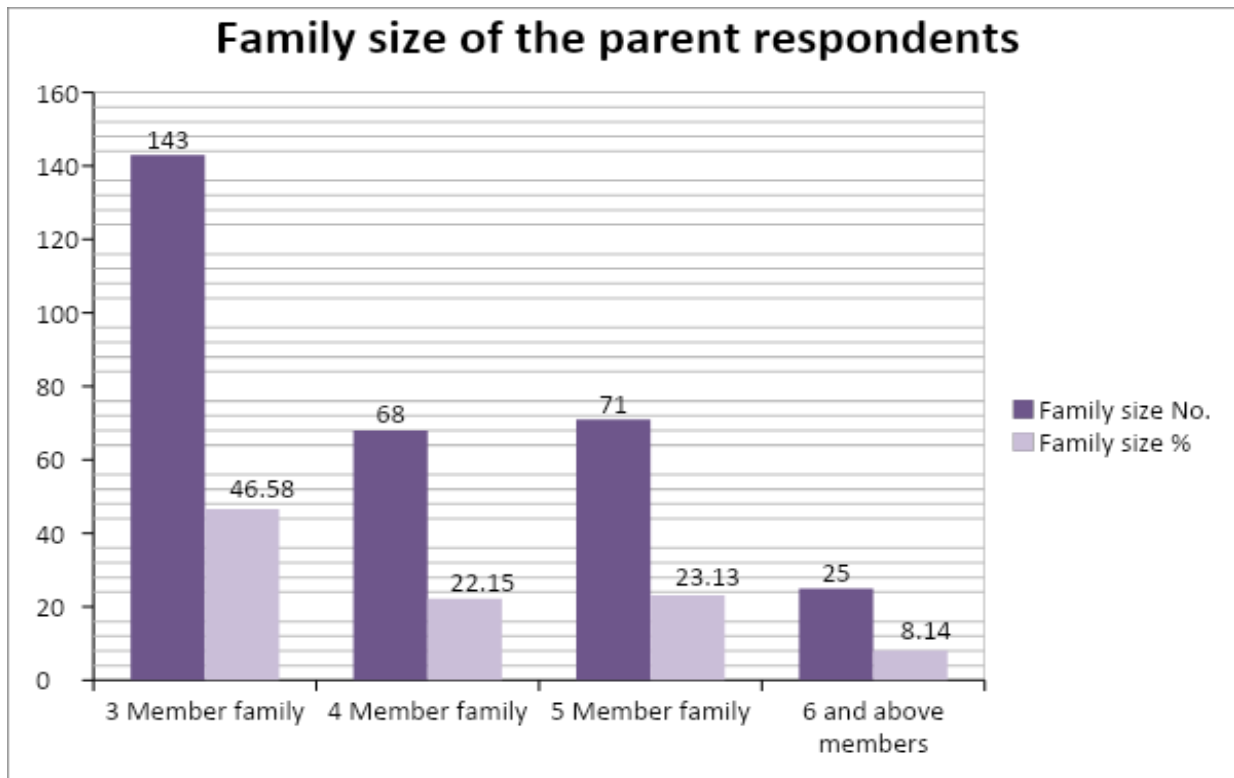
Figure 5 – Family size of the parent respondents

The study also enumerated the number of children these parent respondents have, it is clear from the figure below that the majority of the parents, that is there are 168 parents (55%) having two children, 86 parents (28%) with one child and 48 parents (16%) with three children. There were only 5 parents with 4 children and above in the whole representative sample. This also supports the explanation given to the above figure on the size of the family. While the increasing number of nuclear and dual income families in Kerala implies social and economic advancements, it is also a contributing factor to increase the vulnerability of children to the risks of addiction and exploitation as children have enough space and time unattended by parents. The increasing number of nuclear and dual-income families in Kerala signifies social and economic progress. However, this trend also contributes to the rising vulnerability of children to the dangers of online addiction and exploitation. With both parents working, children often have ample time and space without parental supervision, making them easy targets for cybercriminals who seek to exploit their vulnerability The following figure shows the number of children of the parent respondents.
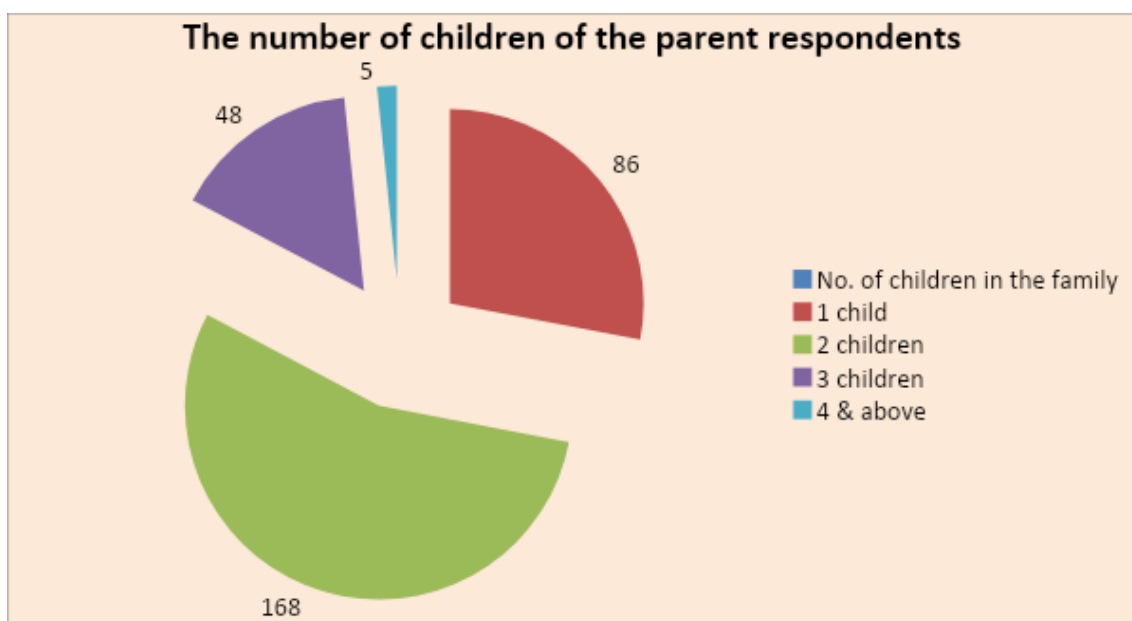
Figure 6 – Number of children of the parent respondents

Education of the parents is one of the significant factors in children's growth and development. There is empirical evidence stating that the formation of perspectives, attitudes and behaviour has strong correlation to parental education. The study intended to find out the level of education of the parent respondents. It is depicted from the data that there are 14 fathers and 9 mothers who have education below 10th grade (SSLC), whereas 26 fathers and 53 mothers have completed 10th grade (SSLC). There are 21 fathers and 34 mothers having education at plus two level and 27 fathers and 29 mothers are degree holders. Those who have completed professional studies are very less in number; only two fathers and two mothers are professionals. There are six ITI/vocational diploma holders; five fathers and one mother and two male and two female parents are primary teachers who have completed Teachers Training Course. It was noticed that fifteen fathers and thirty nine mothers have not responded to this question. This could be linked with the stigma associated with education in the socio-cultural context of Kerala. Kerala is a state having high social indices and education is given great importance among the population. People go for higher education taking loans and mobilising other resources. There are families who mortgage their property for their wards' educational pursuits. In such a society having a low level of education is a humiliation. It could be a reason for such missing responses. The following figure depicts the education of the parent respondents.
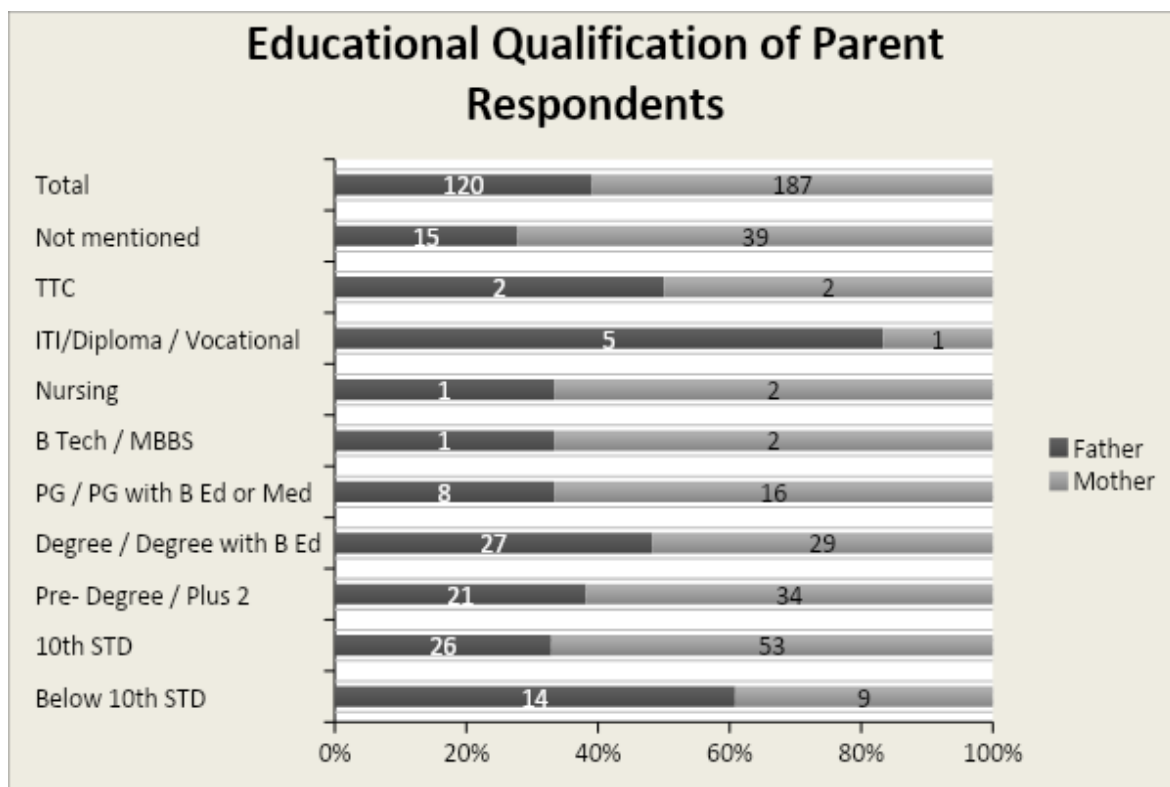
Figure 7 –Educational qualification of the parent respondents

Occupation

Taking into consideration the occupation of the parents of child respondents, it is noticed that we have received information from various categories of people; people from all classes/strata of the society. The following table shows the occupational profile of the parents of the child respondents.

Table 5 – Occupational profile of the parents of child respondents

Categories	Male	Female
Business / Self employed	28	2
Labourer / Coolie	15	8
Govt. Employee	8	19
Private Firm Employee	12	14
IT Firms	0	2
Home maker	0	114
Farmer	21	4
NRI	3	0

Driver	12	1
Others	11	19
Not responded	10	4
Total	120	187

Data from the above table depicts that 28 fathers and 2 mothers run their own business or self-employed; 15 fathers and 8 mothers are casual labourers or daily wage workers; 8 fathers and 19 mothers are government servants, 12 fathers and 14 mothers work in private firms; 2 mothers are IT professionals; 114 mothers are home workers; 21 fathers and 4 mothers are farmers; 3 fathers belong to NRI category and 12 fathers and 1 mother are drivers. Those belong to the category of "others" are 11 fathers and 19 mothers. These "others" include tailors, ex-service men, fishermen, Anganwadi workers, advocates, etc. There were 14 people who did not respond to this query.

Socio-economic status also is a major variable in understanding the various dimensions of the problem stated in the research. Income supports in enhancing the quality of life of every individual; yet the deficit of it is a determining factor that undermines well-being – the physical, psychological and social well-being of human beings. When income supports an individual economically, it is a determinant of social status too. There are studies that portray the vulnerabilities of low income families, accessibility to resources being one among them. In this study, the researchers identified the family income of the parent respondents to understand their financial resource capacity which will influence the life of children.

It is noticed that there are 78 (25.41%) parents who have monthly income up to 10000, 47 parents (15.31%) have monthly income between 10000 and 20000 and 29 (9.45%) have monthly income between 20000 and 30000. Those having monthly income between 30000 and 40000 total up to 26, i.e 8.47% and those having monthly income between 40000 and 50000 total up to 24 (7.82%). Only a small percentage of parents, i.e 2.61% (8) fall in the monthly income bracket of 60000-70000. There are 14 (4.56) of them who belong to the group 70000 and above. It is significantly noted that 65 parents were reluctant to reveal their income. Since it is their personal choice, the investigators left it blank. The diagram below shows the monthly family income of the parent respondents.
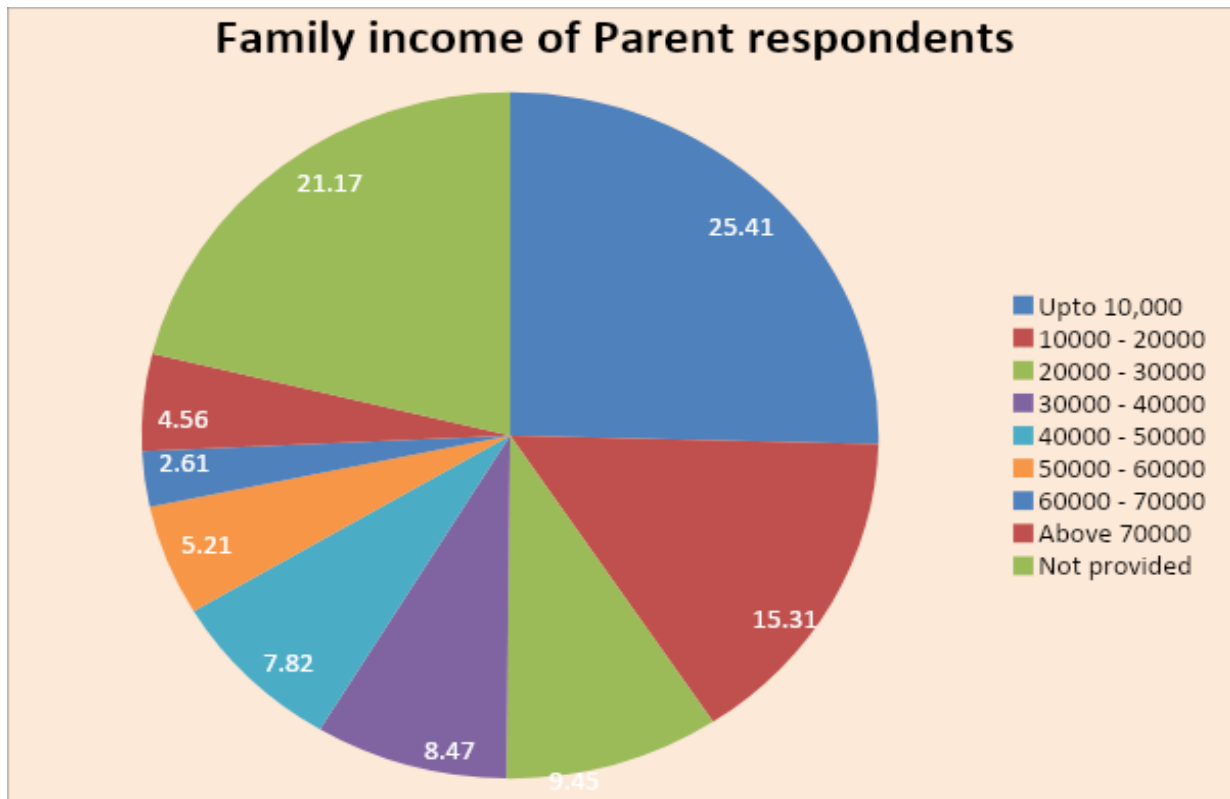
Figure 8 – Monthly family income of the parent respondents

To the question whether as parents they are active in internet/social media, out of 120 fathers 111 said they are active and out of 187 mothers 174 said they are active. Among a sample of 307 respondents 285 are active in social media which is a very high number. Also it is noticed that mothers are more in number than fathers in social media usage.

This data is reflective of the findings of the earlier studies which proved that limited parental supervision (Bleakley et al., 2016) resulted in adolescent internet addiction. Also, there is empirical evidence that states that children of parents who use the Internet excessively tend to be dependent internet users (Liu et al. 2012) and problematic Internet use in parents could interpret problematic Internet use in adolescents (Lam & Wong, 2015). Liu et al   also correlated parental Internet addiction symptoms positively with their adolescent children's Internet addiction symptoms. The following figure gives the responses of parents to their social media usage.
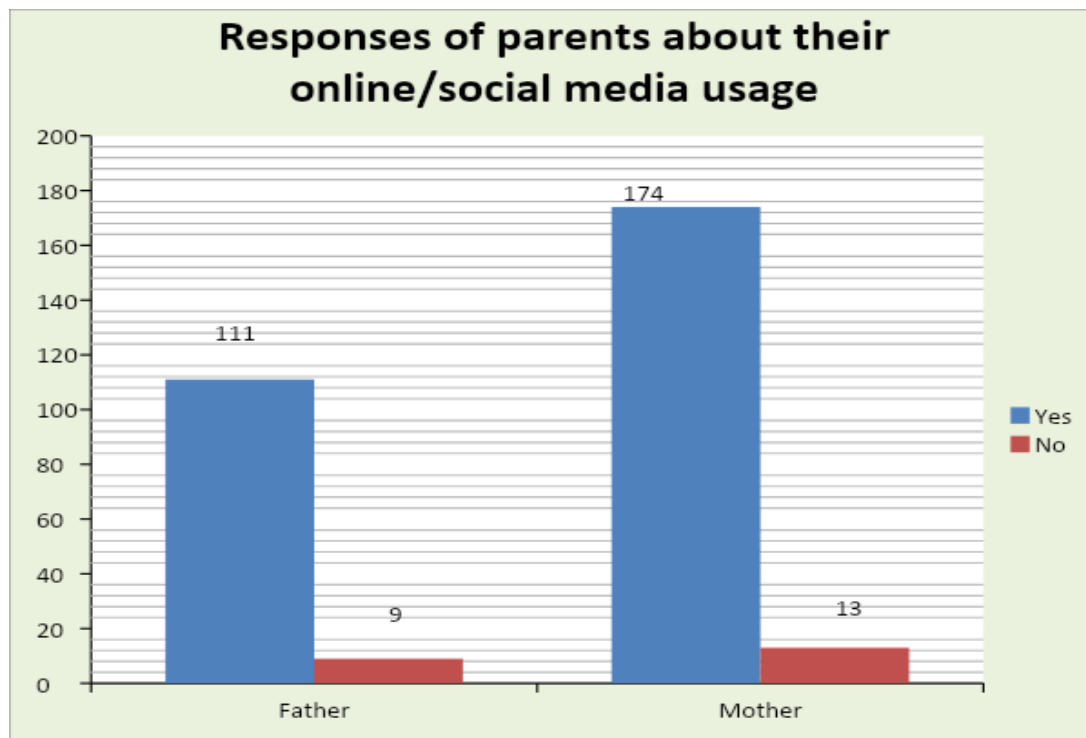
Figure 9 - Responses of parents about their online/social media usage

To the question that on an average how much do parents spend on social media/online, it is ascertained that a total of 89 parents said on an average they spend 2 – 4 hours per day on social media/internet, 91 parents said they spend less than one hour a day, 76 parents said they spend 1-2 hours, 28 parents said they spend above 4 hours and 23 parents said they don't spend time going online rather they don't use gadgets at all. Parents' social media engagements can definitely influence children. Too many engagements will affect spending quality time with the children and is a challenge to discipline their wards. The following figure shows the time spent by parents on social media/internet.
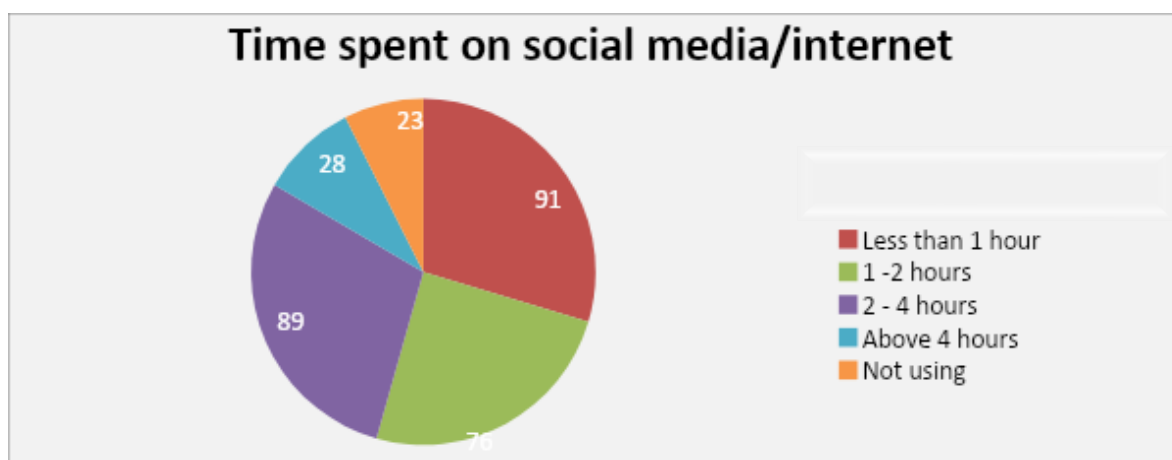
Figure 10 - Parental responses on time spent on social media/internet
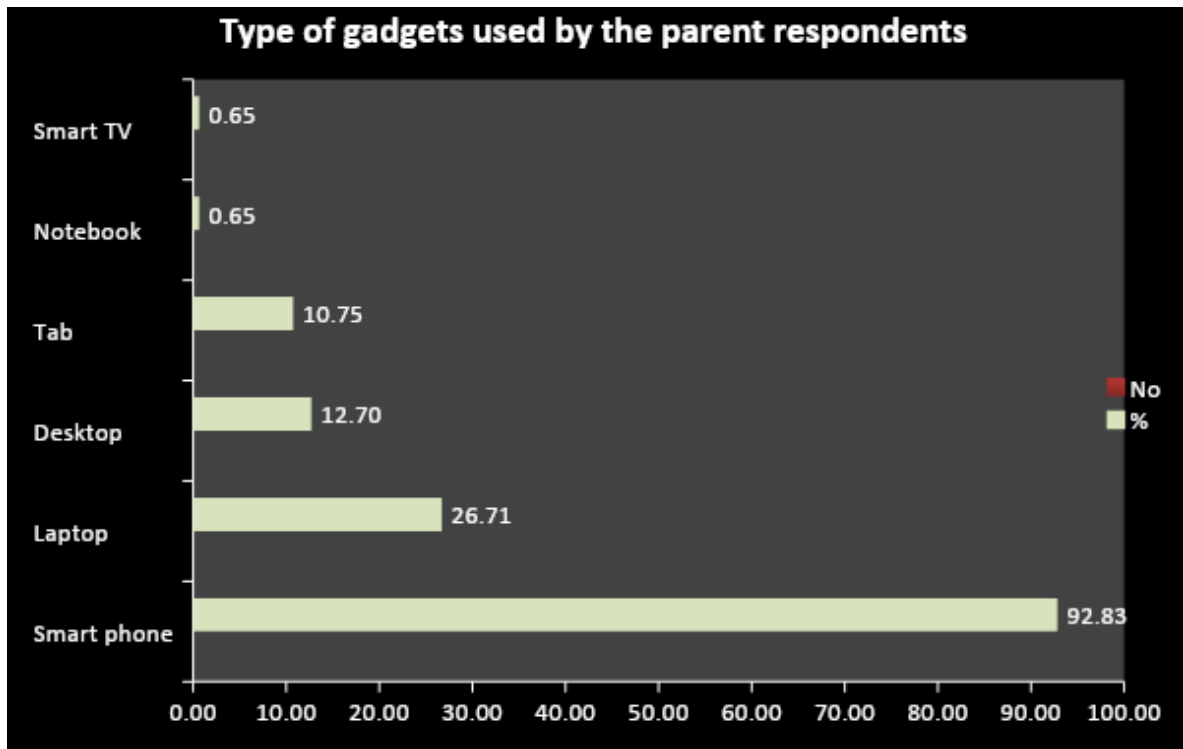
Figure 11 - Type of gadgets used by the parents

The type of gadgets owned by the parents include smartphones which is the highest percentage – 92.83, Laptop owners which comes up to 26.71 and Desktop owners 12.70 percent. Those who own Tablets (Tab) were 10.75 percent while Notebook and Smart TV owners were 0.65 percent each.
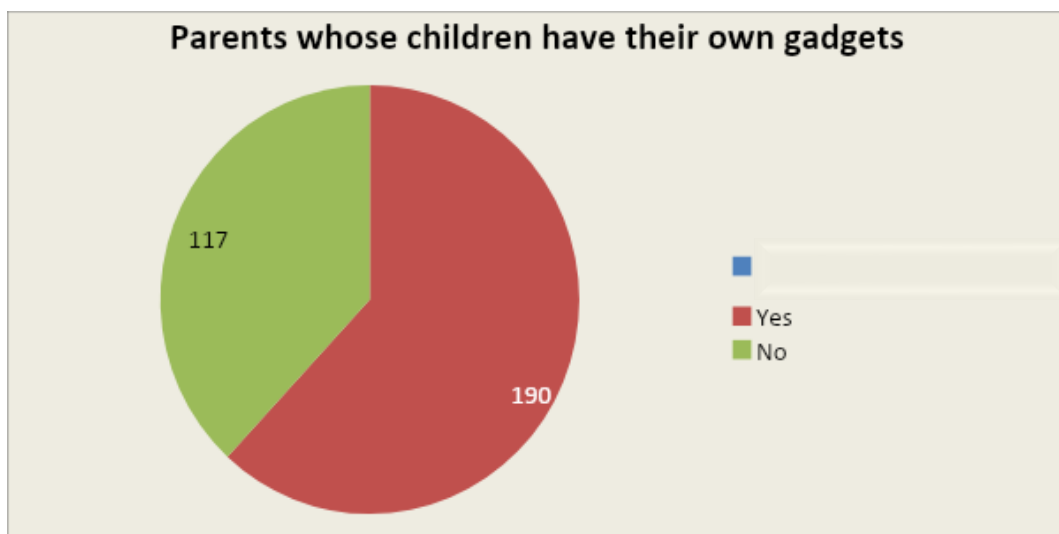
Figure 12- Number of parents whose children have gadgets on their own

From the figure it is clear that out of the 307 parents interviewed, 117 (38.11) said they have not bought gadgets to their wards. The wards are using their parents' gadgets. Rest of the 190 (61.89) parents have reported that their children have their own gadgets. Among a sample of 307, if more than 50% families have children with their own gadgets indicates the socio-economic and cultural development of the society. At the same time, it is more indicative of one of the major risk factors to abuse and online exploitation.

during the survey, the parents were asked about their knowledge and understanding about their children's online/social media usage. The responses were categorized as follows.

Table 6 - Parental responses about their children's online/social media engagements

Duration	Academic	Gaming	Entertainment – Cinema / Videos	Social media
0 - 2 Hours	163 (53.09%)	102 (33.22%)	91 (29.64%)	113 (36.81%)
2 - 4 Hours	123 (40.06%)	45 (14.66%)	46 (14.98%)	74 (24.10%)
4 - 6 Hours	9 (2.93%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (0.33%)	2 (0.65%)
6 - 8 Hours	1 (0.33%)	4 (1.30%)	0 (0.00%)	2 (0.65%)
Don't Know	6 (1.95%)	25 (8.14%)	38 (12.38%)	40 (13.03%)
Not using	3 (0.98%)	59 (19.22%)	79 (25.73%)	39 (12.70%)
Not Responded	2 (0.65%)	72 (23.45%)	52 (16.94%)	37 (12.05%)
Total	307 (100%)	307 (100%	307 (100%)	307 (100%)

The above table depicts the parental responses to their knowledge about their children's online engagement and social media usage. The parents observe that their children use mobile and other gadgets for accessing internet and social media for academic purposes, gaming, entertainment (cinema, videos, songs) and for accessing social media. Academic and accessing social media are the common purposes found among the children who use mobile and internet. For those who use their gadgets for academic purposes 53.09% spent 0-2 hours and 40.06% use 2 – 4 hours per day for the same. The children play online games, 33.22% spent 0-2 hours and 14.66% spent 2-4 hours per day for the same. It is also noted that 19.22% of the children are not using their gadgets for

Chapter IV

TYPE AND EXTENT OF ONLINE USE, ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION FACED BY CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN KERALA

Technology permeates through every aspects of 21st century lives and has impacted invariably every sphere of life, be it education, economy and social life. It accelerated achievements and paved way for the production of multifunctional devices; yet, online offenses are also on increase. The high risk and vulnerable groups are children and adolescents. The elevated number of cybercrimes compared to the previous year shows the intensity to consider the issue in a serious manner. Thus the current study intends to understand and explore the extent of cyber exploitation and safety of children in Kerala. The study collected 1200 quantitative data from children and 300 from parents from the states of Kerala, which was divided into three regions- South (Thiruvananthapuram and Pathanamthitta), Central (Ernakulam and Idukki) and North (Kozhikode and Wayanad). The chapter focuses to find out the type and extent of online use, abuse and exploitation faced by children and adolescents in Kerala.

The study attempted to find out the percentage of children engaged in social media in one way or the other. The following figure depicts the statistical data of the responses of children to the question whether they engage in social media sites.
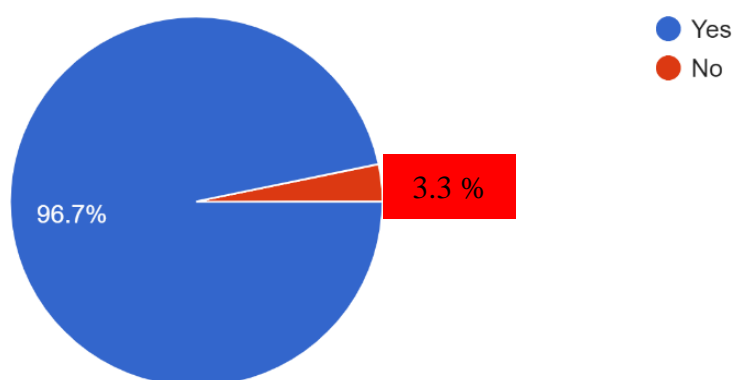
Figure 13- Percentage of children engaging in social media

From a total of 1231 respondents, 1229 children have responded to the question regarding the use of the internet and social media. The large portion of children (1189), which contributes to 96.7% of the respondents, use the internet and social media where only 40 children (3.3%)

are not using any internet or social media. The use of the internet and social media has increased among children in recent years and has become technologically dependent and addicted to it.

To understand the source of children's access to the gadgets, the study examined various responses of child respondents. Out of 1231 respondents, 1222 responses were received. The following figure gives a picture of the sources and means through which these children access gadgets for online engagements.
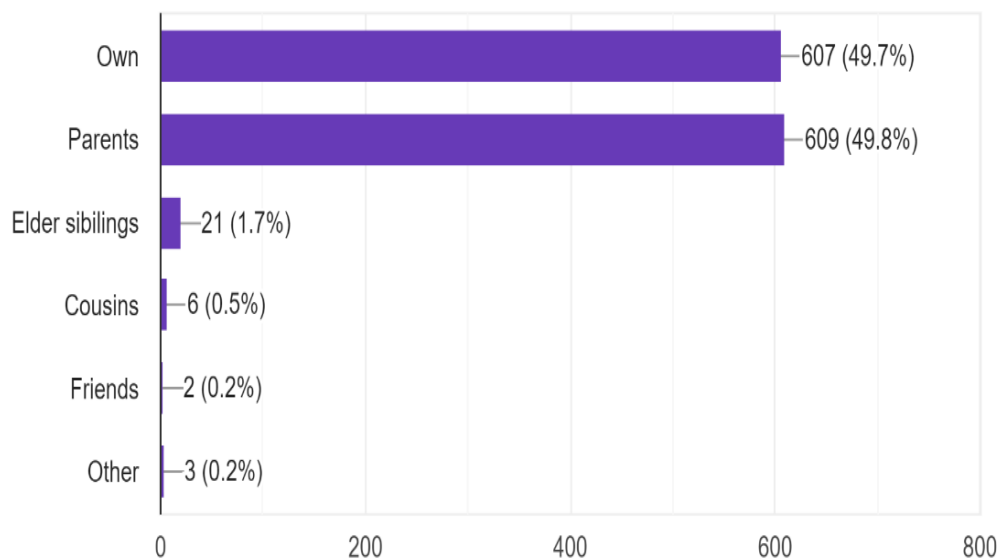
Figure 14 - Access of children to gadgets

Among those 607 children (49.7 %) use their own gadgets and 609 children (49.8%) use the gadgets of their parents, which belongs to the major portion of the respondents. The number of children using the gadgets of their elder siblings, cousins and friends are 21 (1.7%), 6 (0.5%) and 2 (0.2%) respectively. The remaining three children were marked as other categories. From the above data, it is clear that gadgets have become a part of every child's daily life. The transition of classes from offline to online platforms, as well as the pandemic's stringent measures, may have influenced half of the respondents to use their own gadgets.

The study also identified the devices commonly used by the child respondents. The chart below depicts the graphical presentation of most commonly used devices to access internet by the child respondents.
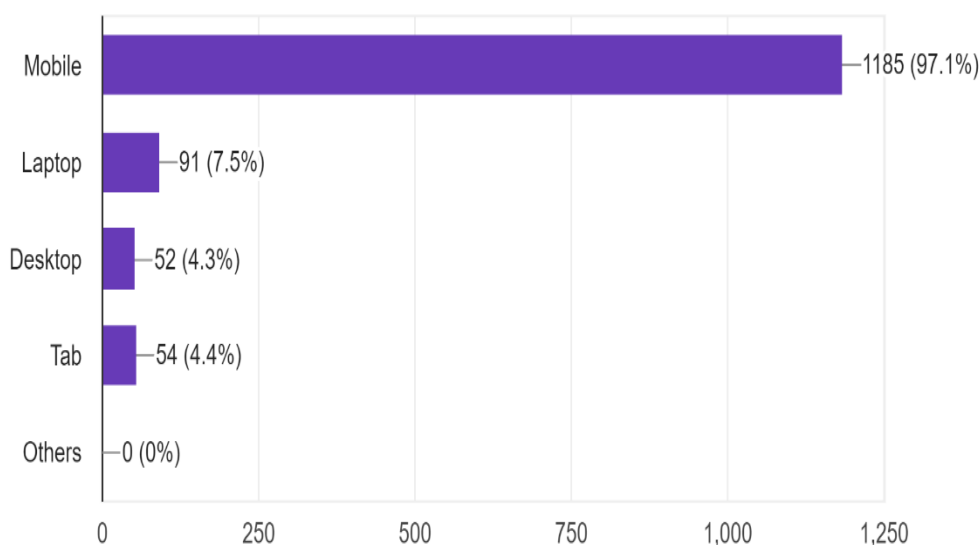
Figure 15 - Devices used by the children to access internet

From the diagram it is clear that the majority of the children that are 1185 (97.1%) use mobile phones to access the internet and social media. The remaining 91 children (7.5%) use laptops, 54 children (4.4%) use tablets and 52 children (4.3%) use desktop for accessibility to the internet and social media. Also, a trend of using multiple gadgets to access the internet and social media is also observed here. The reason for the hike in usage of mobile phones can be attributed to its privacy, and easy portability.

It was surprising to notice from the pilot visits that children hold multiple accounts in social media and they manage it seamlessly. Interviewing the children for research purposes and ensuring the confidentiality of information and anonymity of participants, the respondents revealed they have multiple accounts and they use it for various purposes like storing you tube videos, liked songs and other memes. The following table shows the type and number of social media accounts owned and managed by child respondents.

Stop Table 7 - Type and number of social media accounts owned and managed by child respondents

Social Media Accounts	Number of Accounts		
	1	2	More than 2
Instagram	625	58	29
Facebook	456	18	9

WhatsApp	1067	23	5
Twitter	75	2	1
Snapchat	379	5	2
Telegram	530	12	3
Pinterest	69	6	2
Skype	21	0	0
Tinder	0	0	1
Line	0	0	0
LinkedIn	12	1	1
Viber	0	0	0
Reddit	17	0	0
YouTube	910	34	24
WeChat	21	0	0
Clubhouse	35	0	0

The table shows the active social media accounts of the respondents and its number. Out of 1231 respondents, 1095 respondents use WhatsApp. Out of these, 1067 have a single account, 23 have two or more accounts, and 5 have more than two accounts. 968 children use YouTube and 910, 34 and 24 children have 1, 2, and more than 2 accounts respectively. 712 children use Instagram and out of that, 625 children have a single account, 58 and 29 children have 2 and more than 2 accounts. 545 respondents use telegram and out of that, 15 children have 2 and more than two accounts. Besides these, 386 respondents use snapchat, 78 use Twitter, 77 use Pinterest, 21 respondents each use Skype and WeChat, 14 use LinkedIn and 35 respondents use Clubhouse respectively. Tinder is used by a single respondent and has more than 2 accounts. Viber and Line are not used by any of the respondents. The data elucidates that a major part of the children have any of the social media accounts and the number of children (236 respondents) using 2 or more than 2 accounts is raising a serious concern. A small percentage of students said they have a free fire account, Google meet, or Google classroom, which are not social network accounts. With one account apiece, a small proportion of respondents use Discord, signal, twitch, and IMO. Further, the analysis of the qualitative data collected through KIIs, FGDs and case study analysis shows that the increased usage of social media like Whatsapp, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, Facebook and Snapchat especially the multiple accounts in such online platforms can jeopardize the children into the risk of cyber abuse and exploitation.

The study attempted to find out the amount of time these children spend on screen on an average in a day. It is noticed from the data that these children gave desirable answers to this probe. In the pilot study, the team noticed that parents were interfering in children's responses, insisting them to give neutral or desirable answers. The qualitative information gathered from parents and key informants do not match with the responses given by the children to this query. The diagram below exhibits the responses of child respondents on their average screen time per day.
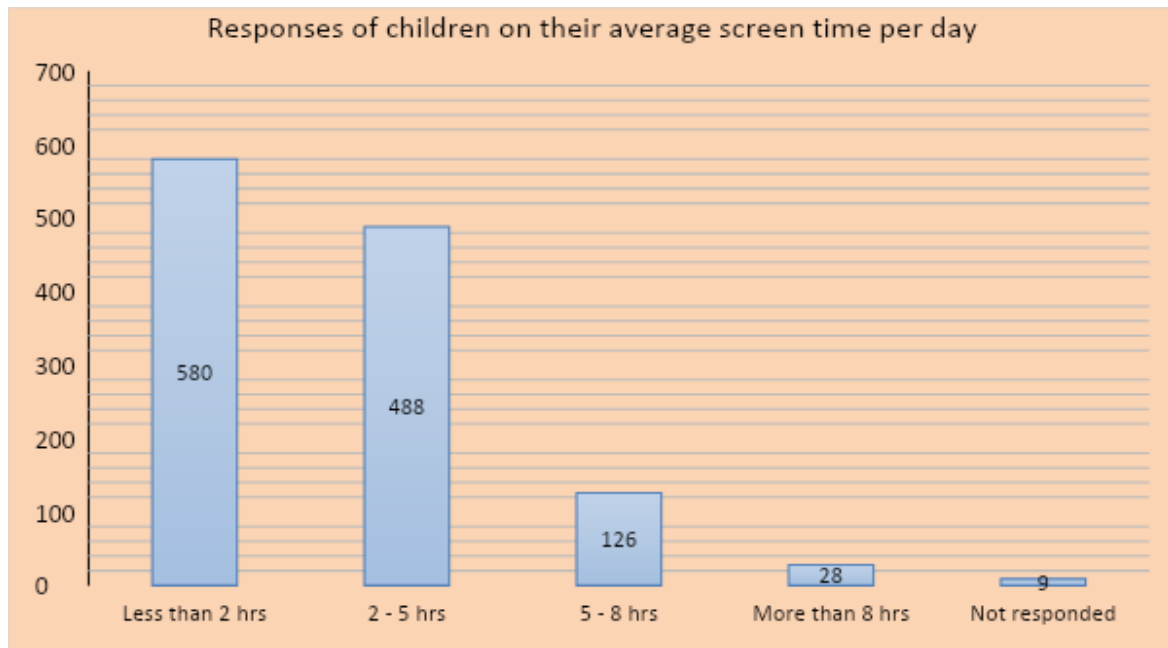
Figure 16 - Average screen time per day of child respondents

A total of 1222 respondents responded to this question. It is noticed from the data that 580 respondents revealed that their average screen time is less than 2 hours, which is the majority part. The remaining 488 respondents indicated 2-5 hour usage, 126 respondents as 5-8 hours and only 28 respondents indicated more than 8 hour usage. Even though the majority of children shared screen time usage less than 5 hours, the current study as well as recent news claim that the usage has shot up very quickly since the outbreak of COVID-19. The contradictory responses reveal that the children are not understanding that they are getting exploited through the phone. Even from the responses given by the parents and teachers, we can understand that children are completely addicted to electronic gadgets and eventually affect the sleeping and eating patterns. When comparing with the recent news related to the usage of electronic gadgets among children, responses given by the students might be aware

about the negative effects of screen time but are already addicted to it. The gadgets have begun to conquer the children's lives.

The contradictory responses during the study reveal that children may not fully understand that they are at risk of exploitation through their devices. It is also evident from the responses of parents and teachers that children are becoming increasingly dependent on electronic gadgets, which negatively affects their sleeping and eating patterns. While students in the study may be aware of the negative effects of excessive screen time, their addiction to gadgets is evident. This suggests that the issue lies not with the devices themselves, but with the need for children to develop better cognitive skills and self-regulation to manage their screen time effectively.

Virtual platform: boon or bane

The children were asked what all purposes they use the internet for and the answers were vivid. As the educational system went online and as access to the internet and online platforms became a necessity, it served as a blessing in disguise. Though data reveals a few categories which are stated below, it can be considered only as the tip of the iceberg. The following table gives an explanation to what all purposes they use the internet for.

Table 8 - Responses of child respondents on various purposes they use internet

Category	No. of respondents	Percentage
Academic	902	73.3
Gaming	498	40.5
Cinema/YouTube/series	853	69.2
Social media	653	53.04
Others	10	0.81

The data implies that the respondents use screens mainly for academic purposes, gaming, watching cinema/ YouTube/ Series, to access social media and others. Among the 1231 respondents, 902 respondents use electronic gadgets for academic purposes, 853 respondents for watching cinema/YouTube/series, 653 respondents for accessing social media, 498 respondents for gaming and 10 for other purposes such as reading books, calling, webtoon,

drawing and to listen to music. The upsurge in screen time usage among children was the result of the shift from offline classes to online classes during COVID-19 pandemic. However, the phone usage for academic purposes later changed to many other purposes such as gaming, watching movies, series, bands, accessing social media etc. Even if the purpose of screen usage started for online classes, the curiosities in children who are new to the cyber world impel them to explore new applications and websites. However, the initial purpose of phone usage for academic purposes has shifted to include other activities such as gaming, watching movies, series, accessing social media, and more. Even though the screen time initially began for online classes, the curiosity of children who are new to the cyber world drives them to explore new applications and websites. To sum up, a total of 853 respondents use screen for cinema/YouTube/Series, 653 respondents use social media and 498 respondents use it for gaming purposes.

It is alarming to notice the data below on how much data these children use on an average in a day. A total of 1177 responses were received and the table below gives a picture of the same.

Table 9 – Data usage of child respondents

Data Usage	Number of respondents
Less than 1 GB	201
1 GB – 2 GB	603
2 GB – 3 GB	176
3 GB and above	119
Don't know	78

The data revealed that 603 respondents use data between 1 GB and 2 GB. It is shocking that 176 respondents use data ranges from 2 GB to 3 GB and 119 respondents use data above 3 GB. 210 respondents answered that less than 1 GB is their data usage per day. 78 respondents shared that they are not aware about the data they use in a day. They also responded that the data is used from either Wi-Fi or mobile data. The excess usage of the internet can be

understood from the above data and it is evident that the major purpose is not restricted to online classes alone, but also to explore other wide areas of the cyber world.

The study tried to find out from where these children managed to get these gadgets. Out of 1231 children interviewed, 1208 responded to this question. The following chart shows the categories of responses from the children.
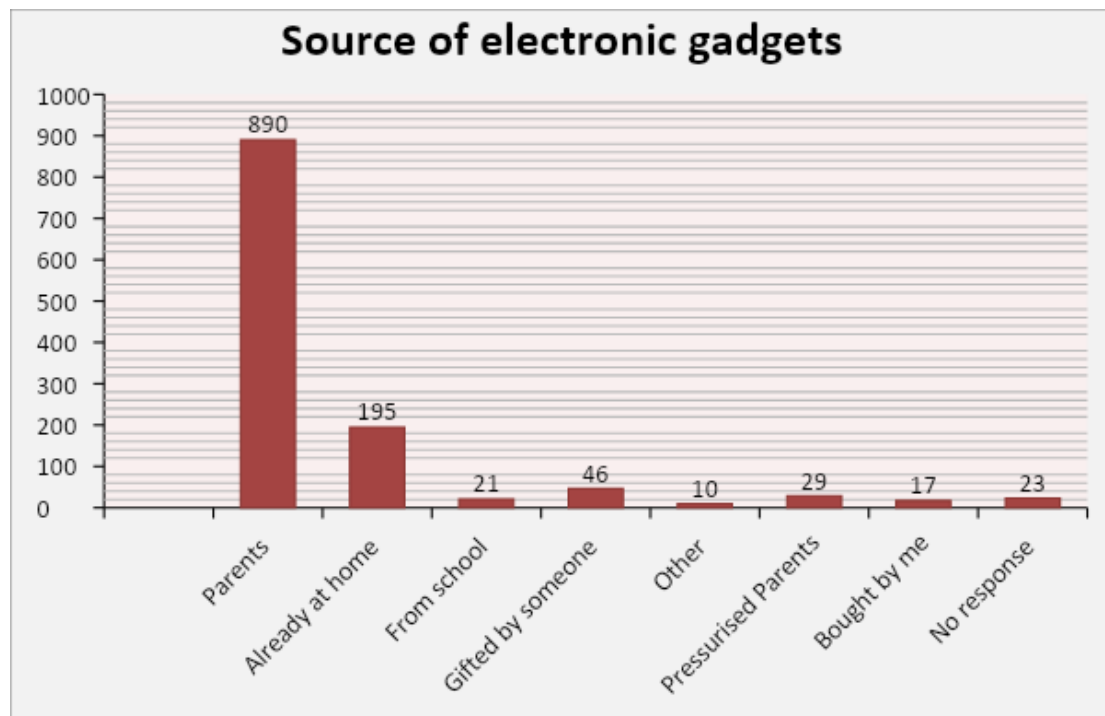
Figure 17 - Source of electronic gadgets

From the data, it is clear that parents are the one who brought the gadgets for the majority of the children (889 respondents). The remaining 196 children use gadgets already at home, 29 respondents pressurized parents to get the gadgets, 21 respondents received it from their school, 46 respondents were gifted with the gadgets from other people, 17 respondents brought the gadgets by their own and 10 respondents received it through other means such as from residence association, Byju's app team and through sponsorship. The COVID-19 pandemic has made electronic gadgets available to all children for study purposes. Also the rigorous social distancing norms made the children to depend more on these devices to overcome from loneliness and other mental stress.

The interview probled into the average cost of the gadgets owned and used by these child respondents. The data is clearly shown in the figure below.
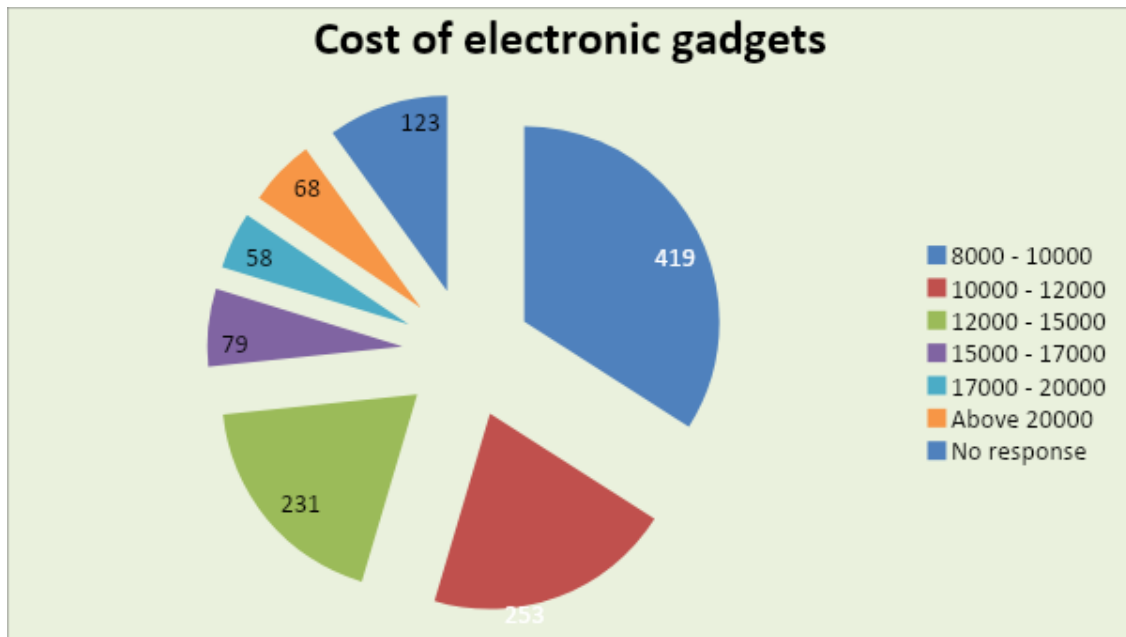
Figure 18- Cost of electronic gadgets

The cost of gadgets used by the children is depicted in the above pie-diagram. Among 1108 responses received, 419 respondents use the gadgets having cost ranges from 8000-1000 which constitute the major portion of respondents. The remaining 253 respondents marked the cost ranges from 10000-12000, and 231 respondents marked the cost from 12000-15000 respectively. The cost of the gadgets for 79 respondents is between 15000 and 17000; for 58 respondents it is above 17000 – 20000 and 68 have gadgets worth 20000 and above. Even if the fundamental purpose is to attend the online classes, the cost of the gadgets is different. A total of 123 respondents did not answer this question. It could be because either they do not know or did not want to reveal the cost. As the cost of the gadgets changes, the facilities available in these gadgets will also change. It is important to consider whether the child who needs to attend online class requires costly gadgets.

The pilot visit observed that children are having multiple accounts and they are using it for various purposes. Tabulating it captured a clear picture of the probe. The following figure shows the number of e-mail accounts child respondents possess and their stated purpose.
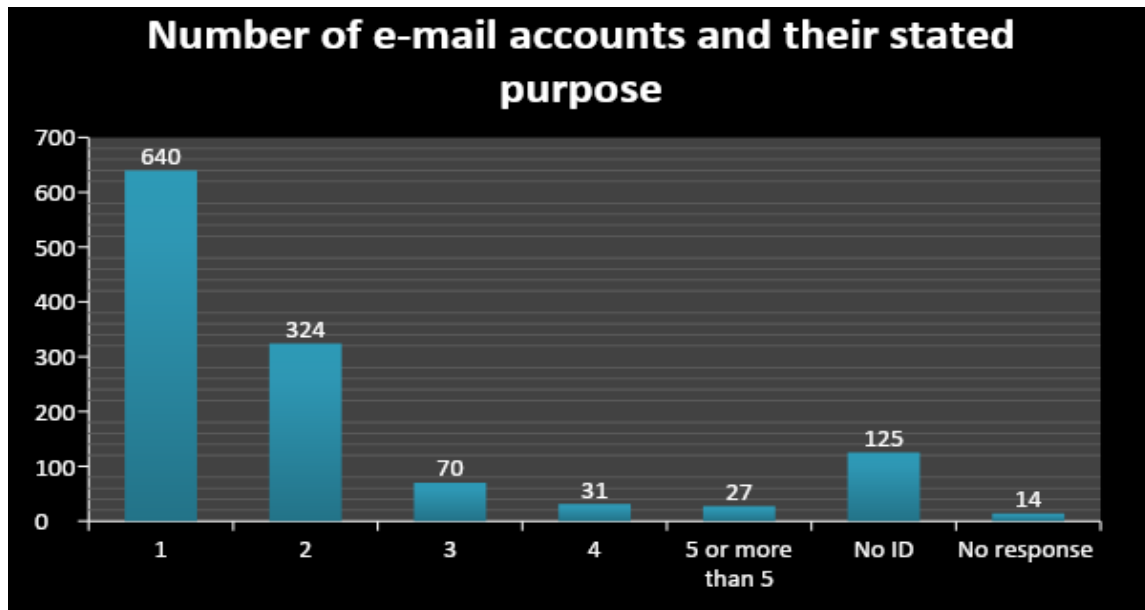
Figure 19 – Number of email accounts child respondents possess and their stated purpose

A total of 1217 children responded to the question regarding the number of Email IDs and its purpose. From the total, 640 children use a single Email ID, 325 children use 2 Email IDs, 69 children use 3 Email IDs, 31 children use 4 and 27 children use 5 Email IDs respectively. Academic, gaming, account backup, account creation in various applications and social media, Google meet, and Google classroom are the purposes of Email ID marked by children. Majority of the children maintain single email IDs for all purposes and a small number of respondents use separate Email IDs for gaming, academics etc.

To understand whether spatial distribution influences their usage, the study attempted to elicit responses on where they mostly sit with their gadgets. The responses were again found desirable in nature. The following pie chart shows the responses these children have given on the place they sit while engaging in cyber platforms.
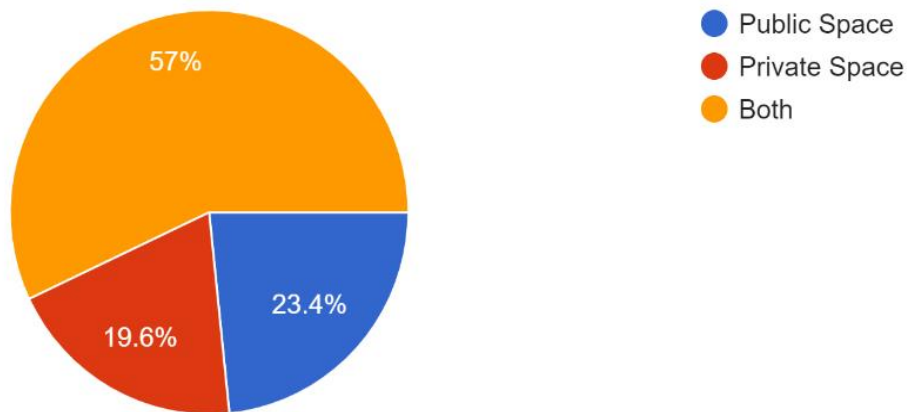
Figure 20 -Diagram showing the type of space used for virtual media accessibility and activity

Majority of the respondents (693 respondents) use both private as well as public space to access the internet. Only 284 respondents specifically marked as public and 238 respondents as private space for the usage of the internet. Because private space provides children with more access to fraudulent sites, dark webs, porn sites, and other sites where children are not permitted, it has become a critical subject in the current environment of rising cyber hazards. When internet connection is provided from a private location, proper monitoring and control are impossible. Thus the hidden activities done in private space by the children will be taken as an advantage by the predators that in turn elevate the abuse and exploitation against children.

To understand the changes in the sleeping pattern among children and how much it caused sleep disturbances in them, information was taken from the child respondents. The data was tabulated to analyse the responses and found that the majority of the respondents (506 respondents) woke up between 5 am and 6 am. The remaining 278 children woke up between 7 am and 8 am, 275 children between 5 am and 6 am, 74 children between 8 am and 9 am, 35 children between 4 am and 5 am, 22 children between 9 am and 10 am and 17 children woke up after 10 am. The bedtime shown by the children varies from before 9 pm to after 3 am. Majority of the respondents (584 respondents) sleep between 10 pm and 11 pm. The remaining 338 children sleep between 11 pm and 12 am, 167 children between 9 pm and 10 pm, 94 children between 12 am and 1 am, 17 children between 1 am and 2 am, 6 children between 2 am and 3 am, and 1 child after 3 am. From the data it is shown that 118 children

who sleep after 12 in the midnight. The change in sleep patterns and increased usage of gadgets during the wee hours is a rising concern from parents and teachers.

The table below depicts the data responses of the wakeup time and bedtime of the child respondents.

Table 10 - Wake up time and bedtime of child respondents

Wake up time	Number of Respondents	Bedtime	Number of Respondents
4am – 5 am	35	Before 9pm	15
5am – 6am	275	9pm - 10pm	167
6am – 7am	506	10pm – 11pm	584
7am – 8am	278	11pm – 12am	338
8am – 9am	74	12am – 1 am	94
9am – 10am	22	1am – 2 am	17
10am and After 10am	17	2am – 3 am	6
		After 3 am	1

The children responded to the query whether they have the habit of waking up in between the sleep in order to engage in gaming or other activity on online platforms. A total of 1119 children responded that they don't use online platforms during the sleep time, while 59 children responded that they have a practice of waking up in between sleep to use virtual media. A small percentage of children stated that there 'may be' a possibility of browsing online media while sleeping. It is noticeable how much the online world has influenced children and the magnitude to which it has affected their behaviour, such as their sleeping patterns. The altered sleeping pattern, on the other hand, has an impact on children's cognitive development as well as other behavioural issues such as anger issues, lack of interest in studies, inactivity, lack of socialisation, and so on.

Online addiction or excessive usage can lead to altered sleeping patterns, which in turn can have a negative impact on children's cognitive development and result in various behavioral

issues such as anger management problems, lack of interest in studies, inactivity, lack of socialization, and more

The deleterious metamorphosis of the life of children
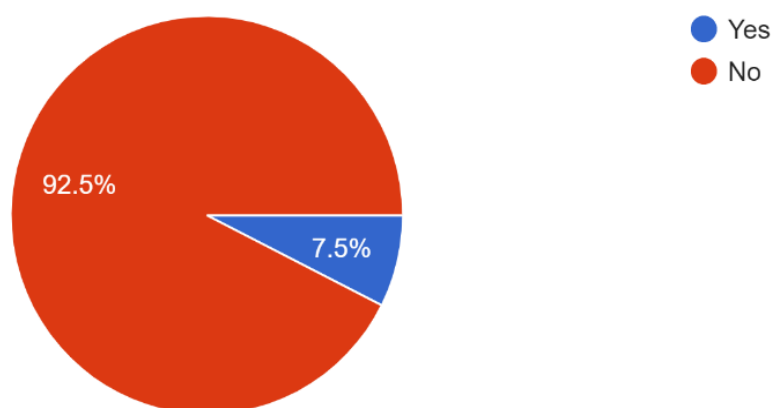
Figure 21- **Responses of children on whether they have encountered any problem in any online platforms**

The above pie-diagram represents the responses of 1207 children whether they have encountered any problems encountered through the access of online media. According to the data, 1117 respondents have not had any problems with online media platforms for themselves or their friends. However, 90 students said they have dealt with issues on their own or of their friends. Even if the children who have experienced problems make up a smaller percentage of the respondents, it is ineluctable since it is such a sensitive topic. The confronted problems shared by the respondents are a compulsion to use screen often and for long, hacking, fake and toxic relationships, relationship issues, lack of interest in studies, cheating, money loss, physical health issues, sleep problems, anonymous call and messages and other similar problems. Due to their limited knowledge about the virtual world, children have become victims of cheating, money loss, hacking, and responding to anonymous phone calls and texts, and other such fraudulent activities. Additionally, their vulnerable age group, the ongoing pandemic, and social isolation have led to increased addiction to virtual media and unhealthy relationships, resulting in abuse and exploitation. Changes in eating and sleeping patterns, a lack of studies, anger issues, and other behavioural abnormalities have become prevalent among children.

The table below represents the changes in the life of children due to the use of the internet and other platforms. From a total of 1210 respondents, a major portion constituting 590

respondents shared that they have no changes in their life. However, 310 respondents identified changes in studies, 198 respondents marked changes in sleep time or patterns, 180 respondents answered changes in food patterns and timings, 175 respondents identified the changes in play, 132 respondents shared changes in communication and interaction pattern, 113 respondents marked changes in health, 96 respondents answered change in behaviour and the remaining 78 and 10 respondents shred the changes in social relationship and others respectively. This reflective question for the children made clear that the majority of the children have changes in their physical, mental, behaviour and the like. Thus the data shows how much the children are getting knowingly or unknowingly abused because of the prolonged online engagement. These changes shown will eventually affect their physical, mental, cognitive and behavioural growth and development of children.

Table 11 - The responses of children regarding the changes they have noticed after excessive online engagements

Category	Number of respondents
Food patterns and timings	180
Communication and interaction	132
Sleep time / patterns	198
Studies	310
Health	113
Behaviour	96
Play	175
Social relationship	78
Nothing	590
Other	10

Table 12 - The types of unfavourable experiences from online engagements

Category	Yourself	Friends / others	No & Not responded
Cyber threat	14	39	980
Money loss	23	56	960
Met with someone know online	173	118	880
Forced to be online	39	35	972
Live stream videos of a sexual nature / online chat	12	10	1011
Hack gadgets / account	32	61	959

The tables above show the number of children who faced unfavourable experiences while using online platforms, as well as the platforms through which they have reported such situations. The direct experiences of children include cyber threat by 14 children, money loss by 23 children, 173 met with someone they knew only through online, 39 children were forced to stay online, 12 experienced live stream videos of sexual nature or online chat and 32 children's accounts and gadgets were hacked. When it comes to their friends or others, they have the same issue. Cyber threat is experienced by 39 people, money loss is experienced by 56 people, meeting someone they only knew online is experienced by 118 people, forced to stay online is experienced by 35 people, live stream videos of sexual nature or online chat is experienced by 10 people, and 61 accounts and gadgets are hacked. In each of the cases, a major portion of the children (345 respondents) have reported it to the family, 238 respondents have reported it to the friends, 2 respondents shared it with their teachers and only 47 have reported it to the cyber cell or police. It may be noted that 9 children have no awareness or idea to whom they can report the issues. Even the majority shared that family is the reliable platform they can report such incidents but the 238 respondents who preferred friends who may or may not know the consequences might lead to more complications by taking inappropriate measures to solve the issue.

The data also disclose the number of children whom they met online only on various platforms such as Instagram (88 respondents), WhatsApp (40 respondents), Gaming (35 respondents), other social media platforms (8 respondents) and others (23 respondents) respectively. The information provided above backs up recent reports on social media toxic relationships, sexual abuse, cheating, fraudulent activities, cyberbullying, and hacking by anonymous cyber perpetuators. These child predators begin their relationships on these sites and then exploit them once they have gained trust. In the meantime, they may have shared their issues, emotions, privacy, money, naked photographs, and other personal information, slipping into a trap. The data also unveil the information regarding whether they have been forced to stay online with many intentions such as chatting (17 respondents), relationships (10 respondents), for taking gaming account (15 respondents), meet up (14 respondents), money (6 respondents) and nameless reasons (21 respondents) accordingly. This small data itself exposes how many children have already fallen prey to cyber predators and how much abuse and exploitation they have already experienced.

To query whether the respondents know anyone personally whose life is affected due to the excessive use of social media or internet. From a total of 1214 respondents, the majority of the respondents (1106 respondents) shared that they are not aware about such incidents or people personally. The remaining 108 children answered they know such people whose life is affected, and the incidents disclosed are compulsion to use screen often, aggressiveness, behaviour issues, changes in food patterns, difficulty in studies, physical health problems, fake relationships, money loss and sleep disturbances.

Measures adopted by children to safeguard themselves in virtual platforms
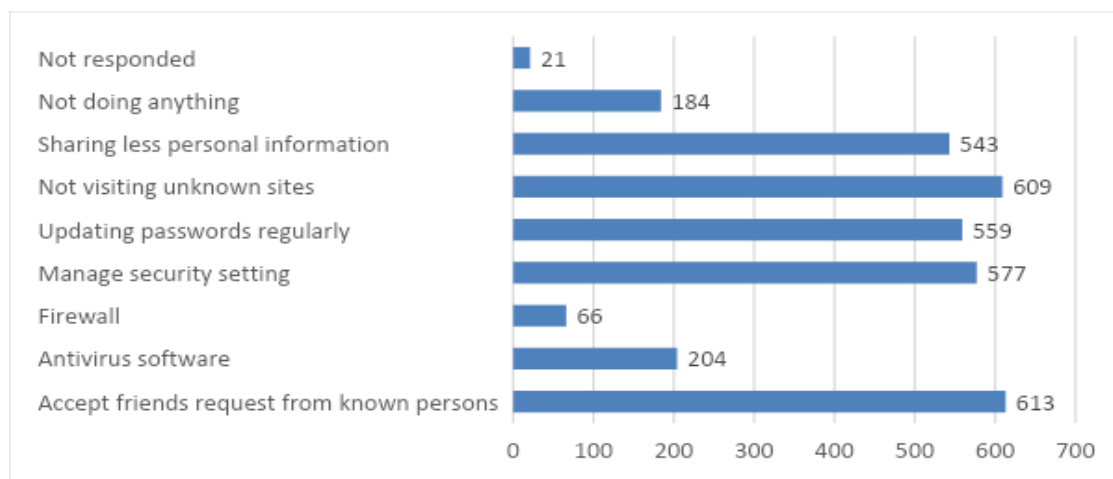
Figure 22 - **Safety measures adopted by children**

The figure depicts the various measures taken by the respondents to overcome the cyber issues. Out of the 1210 respondents, the majority of the respondents (613 respondents) answered that accepting friend requests from the people they know is one of their safety measures. The other strategies include not visiting unknown websites (609 respondents), managing security settings (577 respondents), updating passwords (559 respondents), sharing less personal information (543 respondents), installing antivirus software (204 respondents), using firewall (66 respondents) and others (22 respondents). It is necessary to note that 185 respondents who have not taken any safety measures are prone to cyber crimes while using virtual platforms.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data gathered gave an overview of the type and extent of online use, abuse and exploitation faced by children in Kerala. It is noticed that while engaging the children in personal interviews as well as group sessions, they tend to give desirable answers or their parents interfere motivating them to do so. The research team noticed a stigma fearing response as the respondents shifted their responses to fair ones most of the time. Parents feared that responding transparently will reveal the truth and they will become the topics for gossip. The findings revealed contradictions while comparing children's and parents responses especially regarding the duration these children spend on screen. It is inferred from the responses that either the children do not realise the amount of time they spend online or they do not want to open it up to elders.

The study found that about 97 percent of children interviewed engage in online platforms both for academic and entertainment purposes. Among the children respondents, almost 50 (49.7%) percentage of the children have their own gadgets. This is quite a good number and the privacy they enjoy in having their own devices is one of the determining factors of compulsive behaviour in using Internet often and for long and other unlawful behaviours. It is reported that 97 percent of children access the internet through mobile phones. This gadget gives more space and privacy to children and they perpetuate into this mesmerizing world disconnecting from the world around them. The data revealed that these children hold multiple accounts in different online platforms and applications. They responded that they keep separate accounts for specific purposes namely personal mails, saving the audios, videos

and memes. Regarding the duration of online engagements daily, 47.5 percent of children said they spend 0-2 hours on screen, while 40% said that they spend 2-5 hours and 10 percent told they spend 5 -8 hours online in a day. Personal interviews with the parents and significant others revealed that children spend 5 -8 hours online including their studies.

Identifying the various purposes these children engage in online platforms, it is noticed that youtube/cinema (69.2%) and social media (53.04%) stand high among the usage. Regarding the amount of data they use, 51.2% said they use data up to 2 GB per day, about 10% said they use up to 3 GB per day and 6.3% said they use more than 3 GB per day. This statistics is quite alarming to notice that more than 50 percent of children use up to 2 GB data per day to engage online. The seamless surfing leads them to unhealthy engagements which jeopardize their lives. During the survey 92 percent of children reported that they have not encountered any problems on online platforms. This was different from the subtle responses they shared in small groups. Many children revealed that either they or their friends have encountered problems on online platforms. It is also noticed that they were reluctant to share independent incidents. Children reflected on the changes that have occurred in them after excessive online engagements and listed out as follows – changes in food timings and patterns, communications and interactions, sleeping patterns and sleeping duration, studies, health, play and social relationships. It was paradoxical to notice that while the majority said they have not encountered any problems online, there were children who categorized their unfavourable experiences. They said that they and their friends experienced cyber threat, money loss, developed relationships outside, were forced to stay online, seen live stream videos of sexual nature or online chat and children's accounts and gadgets were hacked. While these children use some measures to be safe online it is imperative to note that 185 respondents who have not taken any safety measures are prone to cyber crimes while using virtual platforms.

It is noted that mobile phones and the internet play a significant role in the lives of children covered under the study. There is a drastic increase in the use of social media and the internet during the course of COVID-19 pandemic. The number of gadgets owned and operated by the children has increased and children engage in multiple platforms using multiple accounts that vary frequently. While analyzing the impact of internet and social media on the lives of children, it is found that many children are spending long hours seamlessly online which affects their physical health, mental health, relationship patterns, food habits and education.

Albeit the measures adopted by the parents and children to safeguard them the study puts forth the need for multifaceted interventions to make the children safe in the cyber world.

Chapter – V

INTERNET SAFETY MEASURES AVAILABLE, ADOPTED, IMPLEMENTED AND ITS APPLICATION FOR THE SAFETY OF CHILDREN

The study made an attempt to identify existing internet safety measures adopted by the stakeholders to protect children and adolescents from the threats and dangers of the cyber world. This chapter is the consolidation of the same. Based on the findings from the primary data responses, it has been noted that the parents, schools, the government and the police have adopted various means to ensure the safety of children in cyberspace. These measures include awareness programmes for children and parents, digital literacy and the use of technology, providing counselling support to the children and the special drives and campaigns by the Force/Police. It is acknowledged and reiterated that various stakeholders such as family, schools, residential associations, Government, Police and health sector have an impending role in the prevention of cyber-crimes against children.

5.1 Police and Cyber Cell

Kerala has developed a modern system for managing the cyber related cases and its prevention. The Cyber Dome spearheads the activities in the State and many of the activities are carried out through cyber cells in respective districts. The Cyber Dome works with National and International Agencies like Interpol. Surveillance and law enforcement, conducting awareness programs for children and parents and building a support system at the schools form major initiatives of the Force.

Cyber dome's research and development wing handles cybercrime in a proactive manner. Kerala is the first State to initiate the Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) model in addressing this issue. The Force collaborates with IT professionals to keep pace with the developments in the technological domain and be up to date with the technical expertise to handle the challenges. Cyber dome is the first ISO Certified organisation in law enforcement.

The following are some of the activities carried out by the Police Department:

5.1.1 Social Media monitoring to monitor the day to day activities and report when it is needed. It also conducts penetration tests in Govt. Websites, Public websites and identifies

threats and addresses on time. This makes sure that any kind of online bullying and exploitation is identified early on and other steps can be taken to avoid further problems.

5.1.2 CCSE (Counter Child Sexual Exploitation) unit functioning to prevent online child exploitation and child pornography**.** The unit reviews the existing safety procedures in place, identifies any gaps in such measures and improves the system by investing in innovative tool solutions.

5.1.3 Drone Forensic Lab- for conducting forensic analysis on any drone or parts of drones recovered from any area and retrieving background information. They function by keeping a watch on all Unmanned Air Vehicles (UAVs) and also by analysing both the threats and benefits of drone facilities.

5.1.4 Hackathons are conducted every year to bring together like-minded people who are passionate about finding technologically advanced solutions to socially pressing issues. The best solutions are picked out and implemented by governments and other authorised institutions for the betterment of society.

5.1.5 Kid Glove is an initiative of Kerala Police along with ISRA (Information Security Research Association) focused on creating awareness and capacity to tackle the threats of cyberspace. It was launched in 2015 as part of c0c0n. Kid Glove provides cyber lessons for students, tool kit for teachers and advice for parents to help children to have a safe online browsing (https://www.kidglove.in/).

Cyber dome conducts raids every 3 months with the purpose to ensure safety and prevent cyber threats. It is found that the magnitude of the issue has blown out of proportion after the virtual learning platforms were introduced due to COVID -19.

5.1.6 Awareness Programmes for Children - The Cyber cell has taken initiative to interact with children by way of conducting awareness classes in educational institutions, understanding the issues of excessive mobile and internet use and abuse. Many of the schools and residents' associations have organized orientation programmes for children on the safety of children while using the internet and social media with the support of the Police. As part of the awareness sessions conducted in schools, they observe cyber awareness week.

5.1.7 Sensitisation Programme for parents - Considering the role of family and parents in ensuring safety of children in cyberspace, the police have networked with schools and people's organisations to conduct sensitisation programmes for parents. They also organize programmes for teachers and residential associations.

5.1.8 Child Friendly Police Stations - Child friendly police stations help the child to seek protection, welfare, education, and other aid and guidelines to inform probation officers and so on. Other activities by the Police include classes by Janamaithri Police Team, Narcotic Cell etc. This will help in generating awareness and to detect the mafia that deploys children for drug peddling. The department also provides counseling services to POCSO victims once the case is charged.

5.1.9 Special drives - P-Hunt is another initiative by Police / Cyber dome to control and prevent Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). The cell does regular surveillance of the cases, collects data of perpetrators and takes legal action against them. In addition to that, Cyber security clubs in each branch were started to facilitate students' cyber security research and practice, especially to prepare students for the cyber security competitions such as collegiate cyber defence competition, MITRE STEM Capture the flag (CAF) and others.

5.2 Special Projects for Children

Police department is implementing various projects / programmes viz. Students Police Cadets (SPC) Project and Our Responsibility to Children (ORC) Project. These programs focus on promoting wellbeing among children and building an external support system for the children when they are in trouble. Both the SPC and ORC projects conduct awareness programs and training on life skills / leadership to enable the children with knowledge and skills to combat these challenges. 'Chiri' is such an initiative under the Children and Police (CAP) Unit to support the children in distress through counselling services. During the pandemic they received 14000 calls and potential cases were referred to psychologists for further intervention.

Taking into consideration the multitude of the children in difficult circumstances, a programme started recently with the support of DCPU that aims to transform SPC Students into '**Child Right Ambassadors**'. Through this 'Children Ambassadors' are selected and trained on child rights and laws relating to child safety to work in their own communities. DCPU has plans to start a '**Buddy system**', a peer support system to identify children in distress and address it as early as possible.

5.3 Initiatives of Department of Women and Child Development

5.3.1 Psycho-Social Counselling Centres is another facility available in government schools of the State which is being implemented with the support of the department of women and child development. Close to 1400 Psycho-Social Counsellors are working in the State now. In addition to addressing the mild and moderate cases of behavioural and psychological issues of the children, they provide support to the severe cases by way of referral services and follow up support. They also work with the ICDS system and provide support to the children in the community as well. They could organize many campaigns at various levels during the covid and post covid phases. The counsellors expressed their concern over the time taken to bring a child back the prolonged online engagement, as it takes more than 6 months or more to help a child recover from the such behaviours.

5.3.2 Special Projects by WCD - Kaval and Kaval Plus Projects are designed to support the children in conflict with law (CCL) and children in need of care and protection (CNCP). The projects are implemented by NGOs and are coordinated under the District Child Protection Unit (DCPU). DCPUs are organizing various programmes for providing awareness sessions to the society regarding cyber law, cyber safety etc. The child protection units also conduct Focus Group Discussions, strengthen school clubs, rehabilitation, suicidal prevention, child right centred approach and support family dignity. The ORC project, a joint initiative of WCD and Police is designed to address the issues of children by focussing on the preventive areas through identifying them at the initial stage and providing psychological services and life skill training.

Projects like KAVAL and KAVAL PLUS are offering social integration initiatives, awareness classes on cyber exploitation and parenting styles along with other activities.

5.4 Other Initiatives

NCC/NSS and Youth Clubs- National Service Scheme (NSS), National Cadets Corps (NCC), Souhrida Clubs etc. are some of the initiatives available in the school setting of Kerala. NCC and NSS camps give an opportunity to interact and to engage in socially related activities helps to improve their skills and behaviour.

The in-depth interviews with teachers, principals and school management representatives mentioned that due to the surge in the screen usage of children and the problems that ensue, they have adopted and resorted to counselling and awareness sessions as the common means to sensitise the student community on cyber use. A teacher from Trivandrum district shared

that as a preventive measure to confront such types of problems, a committee was formed in their school including discipline in charge, principal, staff secretary and representatives of police. In addition to that they have interaction sessions with parents through online meetings every month. The teachers try to build good rapport with the parents so that if they observe changes/problems in their children they can report to the teachers immediately.

5.5 Technology Enabled Apps for the Safety of Children

Making use of technology is one of the strategies that is thought of for monitoring and controlling the use of mobile and internet use. Numerous applications are available on the net that provide assistance for the family and parents. But the study identified that most of the parents are not aware of these; even if they do, they find it difficult to spend time on monitoring amidst the demands of their work deliverables. The following are some of the leading parental control Apps that are available on the net for ensuring safety of children.

5.5.1 Google family link - It's a Family Link parental controls app from Google. The Google family link to set digital ground rules to guide them as they learn, play, and explore online. It is helpful for parents whose children are young or in their teens. It can remotely set digital ground rules from your own device to help guide them as they learn, play and explore online. For children under the age of 13 (or the applicable age of consent in your country), it creates a Google Account for your child that's like your account, with access to most Google services.

5.5.2 Screen Time Parental Control App and Location Tracker

The Screen Time Parental Control App is a free to use parental control app that helps parents to manage and control the amount of time their kids spend on smartphones (Android & iPhone) and tablets (Android and iPad). Additionally, the Screen Time Parental Control app provides robust web filtering, Location Tracking and Social Media monitoring, including YouTube videos watched by your children.

5.5.3 Net Nanny - Net Nanny is one of the most trusted and comprehensive apps on the market. Net Nanny helps to monitor family's digital habits and also protects kids from harmful content. It can establish limits on screen time and prevent kids from accessing inappropriate content then receive detailed information on the searches your kids are conducting. Also get real-time alerts on any pornographic, suicide, weapons, or drug-related content. And also block websites and apps that don't want your child to access or establish specific times of the day they're allowed to be online.

5.5.4 Norton Family - has very strong web filters, even on iOS, monitors Hulu as well as YouTube, and has a new feature called School Time to keep children focused during remote learning class time. Norton Family along with Norton's excellent antivirus protection is a no-brainer, unless your kids happen to use Macs.

5.5.5 OurPact - Ourpact also gets kids involved in managing the daily allowance of screen time that you give them, and it does a good job of scheduling. Its Premium Plus plan gets screenshots from the child's device, even on IOS, and can block messaging and texting apps even if they can't read the messages themselves. Yet its website filtering simply blocks porn, and the time-management interface is a bit clunky. It tells where your child is, and its geofencing will tell when a child arrives or leaves specific locations.

5.5.6 Qustodio - Qustodio supports iOS and Android devices, Amazon Fire tablets, Macs, PCs and Chromebooks. In this set time limits for individual apps and individual devices. This service's location tracking works on both iOS and Android, as do its geofencing and a Family Locator feature that shows where all your kids are at once. It is one of the only apps we've recently tested that can still log a child's texts and calls, view the content of text messages or block phone numbers, at least on Android.

5.5.7 Screen Time -- It is not to be confused with the "Screen Time" feature in iOS; it does an excellent job of managing and scheduling kids' device access. Screen Time lets dole out additional, yup, screen time to kids who perform chores or good deeds.

5.5.8 MMGuardian- MMGuardian has nearly every parental-control feature including the ability to log, block and read text messages, and log and block calls. It's also the only app we know of that can still read texts and messages on iOS, although it can't block them, thanks to Mac and PC software that combs through an iPhone's backups. The iOS and Android smartphone apps offer location tracking and excellent web filtering, and MMGuardian now has an artificial-intelligence component to spot nudity in saved images.

5.5.9 Mobicip - Create schedules to limit screen time and app usage. It helps to monitor social media and prevent risky behavior and also limit and block distracting apps. Then keep track of how children spend their time online. Also monitor and block adult websites and locate your children and set geo-boundaries to ensure their safety, communicate with experts to learn about family online safety and team up with your child to self - regulate device habits

5.5.10 Locategy - Track the children's location at any time. See where they are at any time with a click of a button. Parents can receive, directly on their phone, activity reports that help

understand their children's activities: time usage of any application like social apps or games, etc. Limit individual application usage time to avoid distractions by games or social apps at school or during family activities. Parents can configure the service to receive an automatic alert when their child reaches a defined location (school, home, sports center, etc.). View the current location and recent location history of the last few days. Parents or tutors can monitor their children's devices using their own smartphones.

5.5.11 Circle Home Plus can monitor devices at the router level on the home network or via an app on child's mobile devices. Circle's joint hardware and software solution is simple to set up and a good solution for parents who want control over all of their children's internet activity at home. There are two components to the Circle parental control experience that work in tandem: a physical hardware device (the Circle Home Plus) and a mobile app (the Circle App). The Circle Home Plus is a white, plastic cube (no, it's not round) measuring about three-and-a-quarter inches on each side. Most of its sides are bare, with the exception of the Circle logo on the front. The power button, charging port, and Ethernet jack on the back of the device are protected by a gray rubber ring. Annoyingly, the rubber ring does not detach completely, so if I plug in an Ethernet cord (which the setup recommends), the ring awkwardly folds up halfway on the back of the device.

5.5.12 Qustodio- Block inappropriate apps, games, and websites. Allow kids to visit child-friendly websites and automatically prevent them from viewing potentially harmful ones.Get an easy, real-time view of child's browsing history, Youtube views, social media use, screen time, location, and more. Help children to avoid screen addiction, ensure better sleep routines and preserve family time by setting up consistent time limits and screen-free periods. See who your child is exchanging calls and messages with and read what they're writing. Also, block calls to and from specific contacts. Check family members' locations on the map and see where they've been. Receive alerts when they arrive and leave your saved locations. In addition to the real-time dashboard, receive detailed daily, weekly and monthly reports of your child's online activity by email. Set alerts for certain activities and enable them to send an SOS if they need you.

5.5.13 Canopy- It's not overly restrictive and doesn't invade their privacy and can't read the content of their texts, for example it does continually look out for their safety during virtual interactions. If necessary, the system flags problematic content like "sexted" photos, pornography, and other types of explicit content to the device. It does most of its blocking in real-time rather than with a predetermined set of forbidden content and allows the parent to

decide whether or not a child can receive access to the images or videos. The parental control app also includes removal prevention, so teens can't secretly delete the app.

5.5.14 Bark monitors text messages, email, and over 30 different social networks for potential safety concerns. It looks for activity that could indicate danger like online predators, adult content, sexual content, drug use, cyber bullying, and suicidal thoughts. Bark's location-sharing feature includes alerts when a child arrives at or leaves a specific place. Bark searches through texts, photos, and videos and sends alerts to parents about any concerning interactions. You'll receive automatic alerts via email and text messages when there are potential risks. One of the best features of Bark is that it receives recommendations from child psychologists about how to respond to issues when they arise. also have access to a dashboard that provides a snapshot of a child's internet use. It helps to learn how much time they're spending online, which sites they're using, as well as how many potential threats were detected.

5.5.15 Adopting Kids Versions of Sites - Kiddle is a safe, visual search engine for kids powered by Google. The first three results to each query are kid-safe sites and pages written specifically for children and hand-picked by the editors at Kiddle.

5.6 Measures adopted by the parents in common

Direct interview with the parents examined the various measures adopted by the parents to restrict the usage of gadgets and surfing the internet. The data revealed that parents use various means to curtail the use of mobile and internet. They are:

1. **Time scheduling** - specific time slots given to children /children for surfing during a day. This is usually found in parents having children in 6th, 7th and 8th grades. Parents having children in the older classes opined that though they began practising it, they were unable to control them.

2. **Family rules and norms**
   - ➢ Insisting on handing over the device to the parents after use / during late evenings/bedtime
   - ➢ Insisting on using devices in common areas at home like living and dining and not in bedrooms

3. **Retaining ownership** of the gadgets with the parents

4. **Consistent monitoring**

➢ Periodically checking histories, recycle bins and recently used applications (in one case registered under POCSO, the photo got by the parent from the gadget's recycle bin was the proof).

➢ Monitoring the surfing updates by keeping passwords with the parents

5. **Controlling** the source of internet (wifi) through parental gadgets

6. **Outdoor play** - Engaging children in outdoor activities. Parents reported that they purposely took time to take children out for family outings, outdoor activities and games and outdoor play and entertainment like swimming, football, volleyball and basketball, in order to distract the children from meddling with gadgets.

7. **Parental control apps** - a very small percentage of parents used parental control applications like Family Link and Famisafe. But as education embraced virtual learning platforms, children easily got access to these platforms and it has become beyond the control of parents.

Discussion

The study found out that parents are not aware of most of the parental control applications. Even though 65.5% of the parents reported that they adopt some strategies to monitor the use of mobile and internet, only 7% use some applications for monitoring their wards. The study brings into light the fact that there is a huge gap in the utilization of existing safety measures while analyzing the information collected through the focus group discussions, key informant interviews and from the data collected from parents.

Though efforts are taken to disseminate information on parental control mechanisms and the need to utilize it, the study found that it is happening sporadically. Information about new applications are released through daily news reports or through group sharing of forwarded messages in WhatsApp; but the information is utilized by a small percentage of parents. Parents complained about handling too many WhatsApp groups for academic purposes itself; as a result chances of ignoring or neglecting such forwarded messages are more, even though it is important information. There were suggestions from parents to disseminate this kind of information as statutory warnings in Television and in movies. It is also understood that those schools who were conducting awareness sessions for parents on Cyber Safety of children also could not consolidate on available safety applications to address this issue. Except for a few parents who are technically sound and working in IT related areas, the majority of parents

including the educated ones find it difficult to adapt the technological solutions. Also, parents reported that this threat demands 24/7 monitoring which is not always practical. On the other hand, the children, even the ones who are academically backward, easily master these technical skills of handling the gadgets.

Cyber world is a highly dynamic sector as the technology advances day by day with the advent of new applications having utmost privacy measures. The commercial demand for apps is based on the privacy measures they can ensure. As a result, apps are developed with latest features that ensure secrecy and privacy of the users. Even though various means are available, there is a huge gap between the awareness level and skills of the parents in adapting the technology-based solutions. It is suggested to have consistent, up-to-date and unified programme delivery in terms of available measures to protect our children from the threats of cyber space. Information, Education, Communication strategy should be effectively adopted and implemented to educate the parents, children and the public to beat stigma, seek help and save our young generation from these risks. Multifaceted strategy addressing the children and parents supported by technology is to be adopted to make a change in the scenario.

Chapter – VI

PERCEPTION OF PARENTS AND SIGNIFICANT OTHERS ABOUT ONLINE ABUSE AND ONLINE SAFETY OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN KERALA

The study attempted to find out the perception of parents and significant others about online abuse and online safety - of children and adolescents in Kerala. Qualitative data responses from 420 respondents were grouped, coded, analysed and categorised into themes. Thematic analysis was done to interpret and present the data with a scientific base. This chapter presents the qualitative inputs gathered from the respondents, presented as themes and descriptions supported by excerpts from the field.

Parents responded vividly to the probes to explore their perceptions and perspectives on the online use, abuse and safety of their wards. Parents perceive online abuse and safety more as a problem than a threat and feel helpless to do anything about it. While many parents expressed their pride in acknowledging that their wards are technologically advanced than them, the majority of them are unaware about the threat of abuse and exploitation it may pose. Children are much faster in the cyber world than their parental generation. Most of the cases discussed during data collection revealed how online platforms are being utilised by this young cohort for multiple purposes.

Perception of significant others was inferred from the thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews done. A total of 120 in-depth interviews were conducted in six districts namely- Thiruvananthapuram, Pathanamthitta, Wayanad, Kozhikode, Ernakulam and Idukki. Two respondents participated from each of the ten categories which includes anganwadi workers, teachers, principals, school management/authorities, school counsellors, police, cyber cell officials, people engaging with children through different governmental and non-governmental projects, representatives of youth clubs (community/religious), and members of student police cadet (SPC)/ NSS/ NCC/ Balasabha. The interviews revealed a common understanding among the stakeholders that the use of virtual platforms by children has become common now and so have the increase in cyber-crimes against children. The perception of significant others about the use and abuse of online platforms and the gravity of the problem has been categorized under the following themes which are elucidated below.

6.1 Commonly used devices and platforms

The commonly used platforms for online engagement by the children include WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and online shopping websites. It was reported that children spend long hours on phones and even the compulsion to use even during the late hours at night disturbs their sleep patterns too. The most commonly used devices are mobile phones, tablets, and laptops. Parents are under the impression that the children use the devices exclusively for study purposes such as online classes, notes preparation, gaining information on current affairs and some for craft videos, travel videos and watching Web series. The parents understand it as a hindrance to their academic progress and reported that it has drastically affected their academic performance. While discussing the average screen time of children, a greater section of parents remarked that the children do not have any control on the time they spend on screen.

6.2 Lack of awareness and undue trust

Personal interviews revealed that a large segment of parental population lack the awareness on advanced digital technology, its horizons and scope. Also they pose undue trust on their wards and believe that their wards are 'super heroes' who meddles with latest technology. *"My son uses Google hangouts for his studies"*- a parent said. Upon exploring, the context was, the child has convinced the parent that he is using this application to share notes and the parent thinks that G mail is something which people uses only for official purposes. In this context, the parent has no other option than to trust their ward completely. Some parents are aware of the risks such as hacking and cyber bullying, but they trust their children too much to be concerned about it.

6.3 Perplexities

Parents shared a perplexed and confused disposition in terms of concerns about their children. Many parents expressed fear and ambiguity on facing this situation. A parent described the jeopardous condition of each child around us by describing this incident of online engagement of children and the events ensue. He said, "*a seventeen year old girl, studying in plus two, eloped with a man with whom she was in a relationship for a few months. It all started online and didn't have any direct interaction until this happened*". Another parent shared an incident that happened in her neighbouring village where a 9th grade boy was found in a 10th grade girl's bedroom in the wee hours of morning. On seeing the boy, the girl's father outrageously stabbed him to death. This was a topic of heated discussion in the print and social media accusing the parent having done such an impulsive act. The parent

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who shared this incident was very emotional talking about the helplessness of today's parents while their wards take risks and jeopardize their lives.

6.4 Perceived effects of compulsive online engagement

Personal interviews reported that a compulsion to use phone or other gadgets to engage online is seen among the children. It is also noticed among children, a craving to identify oneself with online groups, specific genre of music bands and certain online games. It is quite overwhelming to read about the suicide of a 11th grade girl who mentioned in her suicidal note that she is addicted to mobile phone and Korean music and warns the parents to restrict her sister's phone usage.They were overwhelmingly concerned about the compulsive behaviours of their wards, as they mentioned emotional and behavioural issues and low academic scores as a result of prolonged online engagements. "*The invasion of digital technology into our lives resulted in social isolation and altered family dynamics'* - a parent stated.

As a result of their prolonged online engagements, various changes have been observed in them physically, psychologically and behaviourally. *"There is a child who is intellectually disabled and he always searches for stories, memes and documents terrorism. He used to say that he wants to make bombs to destroy India. The boy always conveyed false interpretations about the Muslim community. He never comes out of his room. I took a special order from the magistrate and sent the child for treatment to Thrissur. The child was exposed to related contents online and could be a possible reason to develop these thoughts. The child has studied up to 8th grade and comes from a family where parents live separated. The parent used to give phone to the child when they go out. The child was taken for the treatment but proper follow-up is not done".* - Lawyer, Ernakulam.

6.4.1 Effects on physical health - Many respondents noticed the changes in the biological clock of children who excessively engage in online platforms resulting in many health issues including physical ailments, changes in the body postures, back ache, pain in the eyes and headache, and changes in eating and sleeping patterns are also noticed among children/adolescents. '*A 15-year-old child who is addicted to mobile phones has completely changed his daily routine. As he wakes up late in the morning and sleeps late into the night around 2:00 AM, his sleeping and eating patterns have changed. He felt totally disturbed as he was forced to wake up early when his offline classes started. He seemed to be very stressed, tired and anxious.*

Variations were also seen in his BP level. The child was later referred to a hospital and is now taking medications'.-School counsellor, Trivandrum. Also, the changes in eating patterns have resulted in obesity in many. *"A child who was continuously using mobile phone during COVID time, started binge eating and became obese. This has affected his confidence level and has lost interest in going to school."* - School Counsellor, Trivandrum. A parent who is also an Ayurvedic doctor shared the experience that the number of patients with orthopaedic problems (seen more in boys) belonging to the age group of 10-12 years is increasing. He remarked that it is evidently noticed and subjected to the possibility of the body posture while using the gadgets.

6.4.2 – **Effect on psychological health** - The changes in the eating and sleeping habits have affected their psychological health too. Lack of attention, procrastination, lack of respect and discipline, self-centredness, short-temperedness/temper tantrums, rebellious behaviour were some of the characteristics parents and significant others noticed among the children. Aggressive thoughts and negative emotions like fear, anger, resentment, grudge, contempt etc. have been noticed commonly among children and adolescents. Earlier, if it was among children with specific temperament or personality issues, now it is seen among a large section of child population. *"A mother complained that her child is using mobile phone excessively and when she asked for it, the child outrageously threw the mobile. Now it is damaged". -* Principal, Trivandrum*"A child was referred to me convicted of theft. He was referred for stealing his own phone from the school. The story goes like this- the child was too much into online games and as a control measure, the school authorities confiscated his phone and kept in school. He could not resist his craving to play online which finally dragged him to this offense". -* Kaval Project, Coordinator, Trivandrum.

Self- concept and self-esteem – Many pointed out that social media has drastically influenced and lowered the positive self-concept of children and adolescents.

6.4.3 Strange behaviours - Many report that they engage in weird thoughts and behaviours too. *"A boy showed porn video to his younger sister and forced her to perform exactly what was shown in that video. The girl became pregnant and moved to Nirbhaya home. The Children's home has started providing individual sessions, psychiatric support and de-addiction treatment". -* Kaval Coordinator, Kochi

"A boy took a picture of a neighbouring lady while she was bathing. He deleted the picture in the fear of getting caught. But later the phone was identified and the images and videos were recovered. The images and videos in it were shocking". – Cyber cell official from Kozhikode said. This tells more about how thoughts and emotions trigger undesirable behaviours.

6.4.4 Behavioural changes - During interviews many reported that in case if the mobile phones are confiscated, children show very aggressive responses. Lack of skill in maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships and behavioural changes including aggressiveness, lack of concern about things around them and things that matter (e.g. not responding to urgent phone calls of parents), pretending to be listening, forgetfulness, being irritable to parents and immediate family members, comparing the parental attitude to western culture and labelling them as narrow minded, absent mindedness, lack of decision making and critical thinking skills, low self-esteem (e.g. using filtering applications like Snapchat to mask real face), unhealthy timely relationship with friends in social media and gaming groups, fight between children as a result of gaming, etc. are matters of concern for the parents. The transition due to the influence of the cyber world not only affects the life of children but also their families resulting in reduced family interactions and shared goals in families. An ORC project assistant said that a child addicted to online games was reluctant to go to school, had anger issues, was violent towards parents and had a tendency to destroy and commit suicide. He was not ready to attend counselling. But after the prolonged intervention using CBT, relaxation therapy and monthly follow ups, he was helped to overcome the issues.

Social withdrawal is another thing noticed in children. Further, a case worker in the KAVAL project claimed that number of children with personality disorders are increasing that 2 in 10 children have personality disorders. These personality issues make these children vulnerable to such risks. Self-harm, destructive behaviour and suicidal ideations have also become common. *"While analysing in detail about the cases, I observed that children with borderline personality disorder are more vulnerable to relationship issues. They maintain multiple short term relationships and engage in risky behaviour",* claimed a school counsellor from Kochi. *"A student was scolded by his teacher in class and felt insulted among his friends. He took revenge against his teacher by creating a fake ID on Facebook with her mobile phone number.*

She started getting calls and messages from anonymous numbers which defamed her and her identity". – Cyber cell official, Trivandrum.

6.4.5 Attention deficit - Another major change seen in children is attention deficit or lack of concentration. This is not only observed in academics, but in any work they are engaged in. Children cannot pay full attention for a certain amount of time to any activity they are assigned. Interview with child psychiatrists revealed that children developed vitamin deficiencies and hormonal imbalances. Doctors attribute the recent increase in the cases of children having vitamin deficiencies due to lessened outdoor activities. As the children nowadays are mostly confined to their rooms, there is a greater possibility that these children develop vitamin deficiencies.

6.4.6 - Lack of interest in studies – Many teachers and parents reported that children lost interest in their studies after the teaching learning went online. An incident was shared by a school principal in Trivandrum that he noticed during a Hindi class that children were busy chatting in a Whatsapp group created for English. A school counsellor from Idukki shared - *"A boy who was showing homesickness, was deliberately creating problems and was found to be inactive in class. There seemed to be a possibility of him dropping out and thus, was given counselling. It was understood that he was addicted to the phone. He had completely withdrawn from social connections and was fully immersed in the virtual world of gaming like PUBG and Free Fire and in chatting. We can see pictures related to phones even in his books`.*

Focusing on the data from tribal areas, most of the children seemed to drop out of school due to their poor motivation to study and increase usage of substances, alcohol. Invariable everyone seemed to have reported constant social media engagement in various platforms. This was an insight for the researchers that how cyber world has permeated among the humanity irrespective of their structural differences eve in geographically distanced communities too. Lack of responsible use of Internet push the communities to a situation where they face other major social problems such as teenage pregnancies, child marriage, physical and sexual abuse, high rate of suicidal tendencies among children, and poor health and education.

6.5 Gaming: the route to fraudulent activities

A craving and compulsion to engage in online games has become a serious matter of concern to parents and significant others. A lot of parents have lost money from their accounts without their knowledge. In one case the parent lost huge amount from his bank account as the child purchased virtual weapons for playing games. They also lose money in online gambling through rummy play and money chain which is a trap, which, many of them realize only after their wallet goes empty.

"A child in our school was addicted to games and had reached to the extent that he was living in another world and faced great difficulty in accepting reality. He played a game related to survival, in which he was supposed to buy diamond and platinum weapons to survive. Once, his personified character in the game died, the child understood it as if it happened in his real life. He started to speak abnormally and got tremors. His parents brought him to me. Initially, I gave him small assignments to divert his attention from gaming. Then I referred the case to a psychiatrist in our hospital who diagnosed the child's condition and started medication. With the support of his parents, I engaged him in various activities to stabilize his biological clock. As part of the treatment, the parents decided to go for work alternatively to ensure that someone always stayed with the child. Regular follow-ups were done to make the child psychologically stable and now he is recuperating."- Principal, Idukki

Even though online gambling is prohibited, children got into virtual earning through online games. Covid-19 lockdown escalated these kinds of engagements. There are cases where children committed suicide on losing huge amounts through online gaming. Parents tend to ignore when the money lost is a small amount. But children are unknowingly getting into serious crimes and risky activities to achieve the targets. Another important thing to be noticed in online gaming is that they find a lot of new friends from in and outside the country with whom they connect with. These virtual connections flourish and it becomes the means for other dangerous engagement. Vulnerable adolescents get into these relationships to feel accepted. Knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally they end up in cybercrimes and exploitation.

"A lady registered a case for money loss of INR 64,000/. When we collected details, we found that it was lost through online games played by her 14 year old child"- Cyber cell official, Trivandrum

"The games make the children feel emotionally weak that even jeopardize their lives. In order to achieve a game target, a child left his home at night while his family members were asleep. They came to know that their child was missing only in the morning and lodged a complaint. On investigation, the body of the child was recovered from a nearby pond". – Cyber Police officer, Trivandrum

Another issue of prolonged engagement in online games is that it adversely affects children's cognitive abilities and emotional strength. *"I found a child sleepy in the exam hall. I asked him why he was so sleepy. He answered that he stayed awake the whole night. On further chit chat, I understood the child was playing games online and it was some level he has to master. The enthusiasm to master that level (of games) he stood awake the whole night. I also understood that he skips his food while being engaged in these games. He told me that he loses his control and gets angry when he is withdrawn from these games. When I asked him to go for counseling, he told me that he had already gone but it did not work. This incident happened before the lockdown started."*- Principal, Idukki

As the children are new to online platforms, they are unaware about the fraudulent activities behind the cyber world and share the private information of their parents such as card details, and OTP to strangers with or without their knowledge.

There are only a few people without social media accounts, while multiple ID creation and fake accounts have become a common trend now. Individual accounts as well as groups in social media have paved the way for sharing and watching porn videos. Activities such as conducting quiz competitions for school children help the predators to collect their phone numbers easily.

"A 14 year old boy was caught for creating a fake Instagram account. The fake account had a naked girl's picture as its profile picture. While inquiring, he was found to have many hidden apps in his mobile phones and had the habit of watching porn for 2 -3 years".- Cyber police, Kochi.

Adolescence being an age characterized by curiosity and adventure, there are WhatsApp groups where these children and adolescents are a part of that offer hacking methods. Apart from that, Node WhatsApp, and internet WhatsApp paves an easy way for illicit activities like online drug trading and trafficking. It was also noted from some of the sources that certain WhatsApp groups turned into new platform for the increased growth of illicit drug peddling where children are used as carriers by the mafia. Easy money accumulation and

hassle free transactions are one of the reasons that have been attributed to this. Thus, social media has now turned into a vending platform for many children.

6.6 Seasonal relationships and traps

The respondents stressed the jeopardy of falling into unhealthy love relationships through social media. An anganwadi teacher from Idukki stated that they had identified issues like child marriage, pregnancy, and relationship issues in that area. She attributed a major cause of these problems to mobile phones and Internet. A DCPU project assistant shared that social media acted as a platform for love affair cases when both of them were juveniles and their parents were living outside. Children make temporary, unstable relationships with strangers on social media. There have been cases where girls shared their nude pictures with their boyfriends and later found them uploaded in social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook. Since they are not mature enough to understand the consequences at that age, they fall prey to these pranks from which they cannot save their face later.

"In Thodupuzha we had a case filed under IT Act and POCSO, on a boy who shared his ex-girlfriend's nude pictures with his friends on social media. The girl's family filed a case in their police station and JJB referred this case to Kaval. The boy is from a financially stable family and the child was remorseless about his delinquent action. Initially, the boy didn't cooperate with the Kaval team. However, with regular follow-ups and individual sessions the boy is being helped". - Coordinator- Kaval, Idukki

"A boy got engaged in a relationship through Instagram with a girl who is studying in the same class as his brother. The boy was caught by the girl's relatives from her house. It was identified that he tried to engage her in a physical relationship. Simultaneously, he managed to engage another girl on similar lines. Private videos of the latter were shot in his mobile phone a day before this incident. While interviewed, it was found that many girls were calling on his mobile phone. An important point to be noted here is that all these relationships of this 17 year old child are through online platforms like Instagram. None of the girls knew him directly but engaged in a relationship with him through this online platform. A complaint was registered against him under the POCSO act and he was taken to observation home" - Social Case Worker, Trivandrum

"A case was reported of two 12th class students engaging in physical/ sexual intercourse. While counselling, whether they are aware of the risk of pregnancies, the boy replied that they use condoms. There is another case in which the girl was conceived and went for

abortion without informing the parents. When the parents got to know about the incident, the children ran away and were later arrested from a lodge. Going through all these cases, it was found that the relationships were built through WhatsApp chats."- Lawyer, Ernakulam.

It has become difficult for children to differentiate between the real and virtual world. Online grooming is so much influential in building the trust among the children. They develop and maintain undue trust with strangers, which give them courage to do anything impulsive. A principal from Idukki said, *"A child shared that her lover gives more care and freedom whereas her parents restrict her in many things. From a child's perspective, a lover is too good. The reality is that a person who wants to exploit her, takes advantage of her weaknesses. Therefore, healthy relationships should be built by parents and teachers with their children so that they will not fall into the trap of perpetrators."* - Principal, Idukki

"Last year a child committed suicide by burning herself because she was pregnant. She was in a relationship with a married man while she conceived. Mobile phone is something that needs special mention in this case because she was exploited through that platform/gadget. It ended up in pregnancy and the girl burnt herself. She opened up about all this when she was at the hospital, living her last minutes of life."- Anganwadi teacher, Ernakulam.

The WhatsApp groups created as part of online classes made personal phone numbers available to a larger group or community. It became easier to get the personal numbers through the groups where children get into traps. Even though there are relationship issues, identifying and informing the significant people of authority helps in preventing exploitation and also helps in managing the case professionally. Here are a few examples of such cases:

"A 16-year-old girl had a love affair with a boy in another colony, through whatsApp. They were told that it may lead to a POCSO case so that they could step back from that affair." - *Anganwadi teacher from Wayanad*

"A girl in my area met a person from Kozhikode on facebook and decided to get married without seeing each other. One night she went with him and got married. It's been 2 years now. She has been at her home for the last 6 months and has filed papers to get divorced. She was 18 when she got married".- Anganwadi teacher, Idukki

"A minor fell in love with a person from her nearby locality and her parents got them married. A few months later, her husband was found missing leaving this girl pregnant. Upon filed a complaint and an enquiry ensued, it was identified that he had another family in his village. The Anganwadi teacher reported to the ICDS officer and took the child to a special

home for her care during her pregnancy. She delivered the child and gave the child to Ammathottil.- Anganwadi teacher, Ernakulam

6.7 Online grooming followed by sexual exploitation

Social media, dark websites and other virtual platforms became the means of sexual exploitation of children. The making and sharing of Child sexual abuse material (CSAM) are increasing day by day. Even 2-year-olds have become the victims of pornography as people are receiving payment for exposing CSAM in online sites. Children falling prey to paedophiles are also not uncommon. They are groomed with small rewards and gifts online to indulge in obscene activities by the perpetrators. *'In the case of a 13 year old girl; the accused screen recorded the girl during a video call and sent he*r *a morphed nude image. The girl informed her parents and cyber cell and the accused was arrested within three days. Cases related to penetrative sex have also become common now'*- Child Development Project Officer, Pathanamthitta.

6.8 Changes in family dynamics and generation gap

Parents and significant others noticed changes in the interpersonal relationships among them and their wards. They noticed that most of the family time has been devoured by the gadgets. Healthy communication and quality time spent in families have reduced. Children/adolescents have become masters in online media and communication, especially in post pandemic period. Parental generation have been pushed back in terms of digital literacy and advanced digital engagement. They cannot reach up to those 'fast young minds'. Proliferation of cyber sites, online apps and online engagements has altered family dynamics. Families have witnessed less personal interactions and more virtual interactions.

6.9 Family variations and parenting practices

Variations from normal family structure and functioning like faulty parenting patterns, divorce, separation and broken families increase the vulnerability of children to fall into the web of cyber-crimes. *'A child whose parents live separated happened to join one group in Instagram was asked to send his naked photos and finally became a victim of the POCSO case. He was then provided safety and shifted to an organization.* - shared by a DCPU project assistant, Wayanad. An incident was shared by Vice Principal of a school in Idukki. *"This is something occurred as our classes shifted from online to offline. A general instruction was giv*en *to parents to retain all the gadgets back with them which were given to students while*

they were attending classes online. It was reported that one child was behaving aggressively at home and school after this is implemented. When he failed to submit assignments, I called him and asked the reason for which he replied that he didn't get time. Upon further inquiry we came to know that the child is compulsively using mobile phone sparing little time for other activities. While talking about this with the parent in the cabin, the child started shouting and saying "I have something to say that's happening in my family". Both of us were shocked and after some time I asked the teacher to take the student back to the class. In the evening, the teacher called me and shared the problem of the child and the reason for his aggressiveness."

"There is a girl who lived with her father since her parents lived separated from her childhood. She was in a relationship and was addicted to her phone. She was always engrossed in texting and never spoke to her father or siblings. Late night calls was a routine for her. The change in sleep-wake schedule altered her biological clock. After observing the changes in the child, her father called me up. I spoke to her over phone and requested her to meet me. She came and in two days' time she started to open up. She told me that she did not have a space to share her feelings and needs. She feels comfortable with the person she is in a relationship with and he gives her a space to share everything. After counselling her and her parent, she is fine. The intervention was crucial to make her understand the reality and to help her come out from her unhealthy and undesirable behaviour. But her willingness helped the family and teachers to deal with this case." - Principal, Idukki

Parenting plays a significant role in shaping children's behavior as parents have the responsibility to meet their children's needs. When children do not receive adequate responsiveness from their parents, they often seek their own ways to explore the world. It is a natural and universal human need for individuals to feel accepted and approved of. Family is a primary context where individual gains this approval and acceptance. Healthy and non-violent communication fosters this. When individuals in a family's subsystems are rigid and disengaged families cannot maintain a healthy dynamics. This affects parent-child relationship and children fall prey to environmental risks. According to some police officials, all children who commit crimes do not come from broken or dysfunctional families. Nuclear families with workaholic parents have less control over their children increasing the chances to get engaged in online platforms. Nevertheless, children from functional families where parents take good care of them also engage in risky behaviours online.

The compulsive behaviour to use gadgets is developed and reinforced by the parenting patterns. Many parents agreed to the view that they are inconsistent in their parenting patterns. Parents agreed that many times they give in to their wards' need to use the gadgets or use it excessively. *"During a case of a child's online game, I came to know that his father is also playing an online game, Free-fire. When I asked him to stop playing, he said that it is the only way of recreation for him. The father also stays awake at night, playing the game even without eating food. He has no time to spend for his child. Here, the parent has to change in order to help his child to change".* - Kaval project Coordinator.

6.10 Association with various social media groups and the risks involved

Recent cases reported in Cyber Cell depicted a common pattern of association to various social media groups – music groups, racing groups and substance mafia groups. Some specific Korean bands have gained a lot of momentum and popularity among the youngsters. The influence of this has become risky sometimes that an increasing number of local fan clubs were found to be trapping children especially in schools who do not check the credibility or authenticity of similar links that pop up in their gadgets. Fascinated and mesmerised by these, children follow or navigate through these links which are dangerous traps set by the various groups of perpetrators. There are also incidents where children forced their parents to permit them to join various courses and dramas in Korea.

"A girl who was a member of a specific Army group in Instagram changed her identity to the same so as to connect with them. Later she went to Bangalore alone as per the instructions given in the group and went missing". –shared by an ORC Counselor, Kochi.

6.11 COVID -19 Scenario and its effects

With the advent of COVID education embraced online platforms and became a necessity rather than a choice. The COVID-19 lockdown and the subsequent online classes gave most of the children a 'lucky' chance to own a mobile phone or any other electronic gadget as per their interest. It opened the wide horizon of cyber space which was unknown to them. The increase in usage of mobile phones is now being misused by them by creating alternative groups for games, strategies to skip classes by just showing their presence online and so on. Police officials claim that more than 60% of the children are unaware about the cyber security measures. This led to the upsurge of cyber cases among children, especially teenagers during COVID-19 lockdown.

"I dealt with a 17 year old child who was severely addicted to online games for these two years. His daily routine, mainly sleep pattern, was totally changed. He stayed awake during nights slept very late and woke up still late. He had shown no interest in studies and had not written the public exam. His parents are highly educated and occupy higher positions as government employees. They were extremely disappointed about their child's situation as they couldn't do anything to bring him back to normalcy. Before COVID-19, the child had a lot of issues with his peer groups and to withdraw him from the negative peer influence, the parents shifted from one place to another within the same district. Locked inside during COVID-19 lockdown he was dragged into online games. Because of addiction to online games, his daily routine changed, he lost interest in studies, and his total behaviour was changed. He was not taking any household responsibilities, and did not have any love and care towards his parents".- a teacher from Trivandrum said. The teacher also implied that physical exercise and activities which are vital to enhance the mental health of individuals was restricted during the pandemic which in turn hampered individuals' social and psychological functioning*

6.12 Peer influence and peer trust

Peer group influence is very evident in risky behaviors shown by children and adolescents. Children start watching porn even at a very young age of 13 years by the influence of peer groups. The social media sites always give suggestions in order to improve their viewership and this is an opportunity for the viewers to get into similar contents anytime they engage in online platforms. Acceptance and approval are needs of any individual right from early years. During adolescence it is increasingly seen as peers and peer groups are the social group they want to be identified with and associated with. By doing similar things, they think they are accepted. Watching porn is also associated to this craving for acceptance or approval. The incident shared below by an authority is described in the light of how gangs employ online platform to engage in risky behaviors.

"I came across a theft committed by the children of our school who had stolen sweets from a nearby shop. Also, we found out that these children gather at one person's home and cook meat and use beverages in the absence of parents. In this same gang, we found the children establishing relationships with strangers online. They contacted strangers through mobile phones given by one of the members in their gang. All the bad activities the gang was doing

was coordinated through mobile phones, with the help of one of the members in the group."- School Management, Pathanamthitta.

According to Police officials, unlike earlier, children share very limited information about their counter parts or the gang details. They show undue trust and commitment to their gangs. Earlier, children used to share every detail they know upon force and fear. But nowadays children show more conviction towards what they do being unlawful is not their concern. Most of the children who commit crimes are already aware about their rights, consequences, loopholes, and legal formalities; they manage to live with the story they cooked up to escape from the case and also to show commitment to their partners in crimes. According to the Police officials, they behave very kind and soft towards the children on account of the legal implications and hence many a times they felt that this 'goodness' has been taken advantage of.

6.13 Social stigma

Stigma on mental health conditions and help seeking behaviour prevents many from early interventions. Parents and elders want to keep things secret in case of child mental health problems and behavioural issues. Kerala being high in social indices should be showing a broad outlook towards social and behavioural issues of children. This would help address and prevent these kinds of issues to a very great extent. But the existence of social stigma is not uncommon. Mental health conditions, 'abnormality', disability, HIV etc. are highly stigmatized topics in Kerala's social milieu. This leads to social exclusion and catastrophies.

"There was a child who always used to close his room and play online games. He liked to be alone in his room and didn't even like to come out from his room to eat. The parents used to keep the food outside his room so that he could eat when he starves. The parents made the situation worse by not controlling the child. The child became obese. I sent police officers to take him for treatment but he ran away. The police officers traced and caught him and they reported that they were unable to control the child. The case was referred to a psychiatrist but the parents were not ready to send the child for treatment, saying "what will others think". They have never called me back since. In such cases, we have limitations to interfere."- Lawyer, Ernakulam

'A boy was caught for theft. After that, due to humiliation he refused to go out of his house and even from his room. He was completely confined to his room. It was during the emergence of Free-fire game. The online friends he made through the game became his only

source of his contact with the outside world. We were not able to make him understand the negatives of playing these games, since there were a lot of videos supporting such a game'. – KAVAL coordinator, Kochi

"A child was caught watching porn videos by his younger brother and he reported it to their father. Father got angry and scolded the child. Because of the shame and guilt, the child ended up his life being hanged on a tree". - School Management, Pathanamthitta

6.14 Support system

Support systems play a very important role in dealing with people's problems. Developing and maintaining a good support system is inevitable for individual well-being. This serves as a protective factor that saves the individual from risks and problems. Support system includes family, peer groups, school, police, cyber cell, Child Welfare Committee, Government etc. Effective coordination among these units will enhance the service delivery remedially, preventive and developmental.

"A 15-year-old girl in my area fell in love with a 20 year old boy. They starting chatting on Facebook and maintained a regular contact through social media/phone. The girl belonged to a poor family. The boy used to visit the girl's home and used to help them financially and materially. The boy was the girl's brother-in-law's friend. The boy started to stay at their home. Later, the family members fixed their marriage even before they attained the age of 18 and 21. A team to intervene in the case was called for. The team included the CDPO, Ward member, JPHN, ICDS supervisor, Counsellor and me. We made them aware about the legal aspects of child marriage and its consequences. Following this, they decided to get married after the children reach the legal marriageable age. Now the boy has no contact with the girl or her family and is not willing to marry that girl. The timely intervention was fruitful and it saved the life of a girl and her family."- Anganwadi teacher, Idukki

6.15 Adults as role models

Parents and significant others perceive that behaviour is modelled. Children consider their parents and elders as role models. So it is very important that these parents and significant others showcase moral and ethical behaviour so that this young generation also imbibe those values in their lives. *"While travelling in a bus, if a man watches an immoral video, in-front of a student sitting nearby, then it will create curiosity and a chance to watch that or those type of videos on parents' phone when they reach home. So as an adult, it is important to*

control ourselves first and then make a decision to control our children". - Headmaster, Wayanad

6.17 Gap in enforcing laws

According to some of the key informants, it is observed that proper laws are not enforced against the cybercrimes by the officials. It is imperative to make the laws strict so as to reduce the crimes. *"A friend of mine got an abusive comment on Instagram under her post. They filed a complaint to the cyber cell but the response system was much delayed and no action was taken against the perpetrator".* - NSS Member, Ernakulam

ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) has come to play an influential role in the lives of everyone, starting from an early age in children. These virtual platforms have ignited the opportunity to understand and explore the rapid pace of the modern world. But the young generation across the world fails to differentiate the pros and cons of this dynamic world. The exacerbated growth of cyber crimes among children especially during COVID-19 pandemic typifies how appalling the situation is. We are by default the recipients of technological binge in this changing world; but receiving and utilizing it ethically, prudently and responsibly is the need of the hour.

Chapter – VII

ANALYSIS OF THE ONLINE ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION FACED BY CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS AND ITS EFFECT ON THEIR LIVES

The study intended to explore in depth the extent of exploitation faced by children and adolescents in cyberspace by analyzing a few cases in depth. With this purpose, 12 cases were selected from the entire state, 4 each from each region – south, central and north. The cases depicted vivid pictures of the type of exploitation faced by children, the pathway of the problem and the multilevel effect– on the individual, family and ultimately on the larger society.

The researchers prior to the study proposed to explore the subjective experiences of children/adolescents. But, personal interaction with these children/adolescents who engaged themselves in the hazardous virtual engagements and have been reported under children in conflict with law (CCL), revealed that none of them perceived themselves as being victimized or exploited by these engagements and transactions. Even though the cases they are part of, are being reported and trialled under POCSO/civil/criminal cases and the legal system considers them as perpetrators and victims of exploitation, none of them have perceived it as a crime, offense or exploitation. This limitation was an opportunity for the research team to explore the realities through those who have personally engaged with and handled these cases. They were members of the Child District Protection Unit, social workers, school counsellors, team members of Kaval and Kaval Plus projects, Legal cum Probation officers, and Police. Along with these key informants, the team also met the children and parents in person in eliciting information for analysis. The cases were explored in depth from their perspectives and experiences too; the path traversed and effect discussed. An outline of the cases is attached as annexure – 8.

As society changes, perceptions, attitudes, implied meaning to existing morals and values also undergo changes. Identifying and understanding the cases also gave the researchers an insight into the multitude and magnitude of the risk our children are facing, yet not being aware of the same. Some cases are getting reported by chance and not by choice.

The following are the themes emerged while analyzing the emotional and behavioral responses of the adolescents engaged in the cases.

7. 1 Emotional and Behavioral Responses

7.1.1 Undue commitment to the offender/perpetrator - Cases showcased an undue commitment of the victims towards the offenders/partners. This is seen throughout the cases. The victim does not perceive the situations they encounter after the incident as 'dangerous' and even in contexts of police encounters, the victims were not ready to reveal any matter related to the incident or the perpetrator. On the other hand, they showed an attitude of over commitment towards their partners. They are still in a fantasized world, seeing only the romanticized partner and their deeds. According to experts in the field of child mental health, this is the result of "virtual effects". Online platforms romanticize the whole event in such a way that children fail to see the real people and the real world. In one case, the offender was revealed to have been using expensive cosmetics while making reels and video calls. Over commitment to the gang is also noticed among the group who engaged themselves in unlawful activities including gambling and drug transactions. Even physical encounters with agencies of formal social control (law, police etc.) did not stray them away from their commitments. The influence of the virtual world in fascinating young minds is beyond what we understand and acknowledge.

7.1.2 Remorseless attitude - The cases depicted remorseless attitude among the children - victims as well as perpetrators. Among the male offenders who were involved in POCSO cases, two were slightly guiltful about what all had happened. But in general victims as well as perpetrators shared an attitude that things have not gone wrong. They seemed to be not realizing the antisocial behaviour they had engaged and exhibited; rather they don't define it as antisocial behaviour.

7.1.3 Impulsivity - the children engaged in the cases showed highly impulsive behaviour in terms of actions they have been involved in. It ranged from behaviour responses to environmental triggers which resulted in self-harming behaviours, suicidal attempts, decisons to run away from shelters/homes etc. to night visits to partner homes, decisions to elope, abscond, get married, physical/sexual encounters etc. Impulsivity is a fundamental characteristic of adolescence and especially the traits of children having personality issues. Not all cases reported have been diagnosed with personality problems/disorders; but age and age related biological and psychological changes was one among the major variables that results in exhibiting impulsivity in actions and decisions.

7.1.4 Risk taking attitude and behaviour - Invariably all cases showed risk taking attitude and behaviour. Impulsivity is an antecedent to risk taking behaviour. Among the cases, children with personality disorders like Borderline Personality Disorder showed high risk taking behaviours. Inviting partners home during nights, physical relationships, suicide attempts, sharing one's own obscene pictures via social media etc. was noticed among these children.

7.1.5 Disengagement – Emotional distancing towards parents was seen as a common phenomenon among the cases. The children showed emotional distancing by exhibiting angry outbursts, resentful conversations, minimising their positives and looking into the family with a completely negative outlook. Cases stated as children defined their homes as "toxic" and have taken impulsive actions to put their parents in trouble. In one case it was noted that a child filed a POCSO case against her guardian's son which was proved innocent later.

7.1.6 Cognitive distortions - Children seemed to have been diagnosed with cognitive distortions like all or nothing thinking, arbitrary inference, disqualifying the positives, emotional reasoning etc. These cognitive distortions influence their thinking and behaviour in a detrimental manner. Their outlook towards the world around them seems to be very negative and they find deficits in anything and everything they encounter - be it people or events. This negative thinking produces actions that harm themselves and others which results in unhealthy as well as apathetic interpersonal relationships. They get into a flock of people who have similar thinking thus forming gangs and they influence each other with this different outlook.

7.1.7 Low self-worth and self-esteem- children indulged in these cases seemed to have shown low self-worth and self-esteem. Those who have engaged with them professionally in the restorative process stated that they project their fears and insecurities onto others by rationalising their actions and putting the blame on others.

7.1.8 Challenging elders - the value of giving respect to others is defined in a different way by these children. The present generation is highly individualistic in their thoughts and deeds. They challenge elders, especially parents with questions that others find it difficult to answer. Also, these children do not get satisfied with the answers elders say.

7.1.9 "I don't care, come what may" - The cases shared a generalized rebellious nature and attitude among the children.

7.1.10 Friends are the world - Analyzing the cases, it is noticed that those engaged in unlawful activities invariably showed strong affinity towards their peer group. Friends are their world. Peer influence is acknowledged as a risk as well as protective factor in dealing

with adolescent issues. Researchers have evidence established on peer influence as the primary contextual factor contributing to adolescent risky behaviour. Peer presence augment activation of brain regions which are related to reward processing and as a result adolescents perceive risk taking more rewarding than a dangerous affair. Peer relationships showcase positive as well as negative quality relationships. Negative relationships are conflictual and have very low intimacy and peers who encounter such relationships try to indulge in deviant behaviors in order to overcome their negative feelings. Cases analyzed depicted increased peer influence in exhibiting unlawful and antisocial behaviour.

7.1.11 Behaviour symptoms - Children in the case studies commonly exhibited behaviour symptoms such as **helplessness and hopelessness, angry outbursts, irritability, unorganised, inconsistency, procrastination.** Feeling of helplessness and hopelessness led to depression and angry outbursts. They spoke as if they didn't see a normal life ahead. There were statements by children which described their home as a "toxic" place. Most of the cases were reported of having inconsistent behaviour patterns. The social workers and the parents responded that children often do not consistently work on the assignments, be it academics or any household chores; whatever they start, they drop it half way through. It is also noticed the tendency to procrastinate things and not take the commitments very seriously.

7.1.12 Self-harming behaviour, Suicidal ideations and tendencies - children exhibited self-harming behaviours in various contexts as reported by those engaged children in difficult circumstances. Helplessness and hopelessness led to self harming behaviours in some cases. These children seemed to be disorganized and sometimes took actions which are impulsive, dangerous and detrimental. According to those who have interacted with these children, these children get confused on the antecedents or the environmental triggers they encounter often resulting in dangerous actions harming themselves and others.

7.1.13 Depression - Depression is manifested in many forms among the cases studied. Depression was manifested in loud cries, self-harming behaviours, helplessness and hopelessness, not having a focus into the future, thinking that their future is bleak and life is doomed.

7.1.14 Lack of insight - The children who were identified to be in difficult circumstances and those engaged in unlawful activities were understood as having lack of insight and lack of direction in their thought process. They interpret things in their own way, to their own convenience, to justify their own actions. Impeding one's own and others' rights were of less concern to them. They use their insight only to justify their actions.

7.1.15 Less interest in academics and low levels of academic achievement - Academic scores seemed to be very less in these children who came in conflict with law. There were cases in which children have been scoring really good before the incidents and has considerably.

7.2 The Effects

Personal interviews with people who have personally handled the cases have looked into the effects these encounters had on these children and their families. Online engagements have affected the following domains:

7.2.1 Academic performance

Academic performance of children is a major domain that is affected by the over usage of social media. Education is important and it is the fundamental right of every child. Compulsive and prolonged use of gadgets and screen affects academics. Excessive and prolonged use leads to attention deficit. Low level of dopamine induces pleasure seeking behavior. Children lose interest in studies because it doesn't give them any pleasure. The screen which is rapid moving and fascinating devours the time and energy of children which otherwise would have been used for academic purposes. The cases reported that the children had the habit of skipping online classes and later when offline classes were restarted, they refused to attend school. It resulted in absenteeism. For instance, in cases SRC01 and SRC02, children slept only after using the screen till 5 AM in the morning and woke up at 5.30 PM in the evening. Their biological clock changed; they couldn't attend to their studies. The overuse of mobile phones has affected sleeping patterns and food habits. It has resulted in poor academic performance which in turn has led to dropouts from the formal education system and unemployment. Unemployment is one of the reasons to engage in peer groups with antisocial interests and behaviour. Academic performance is also influenced by peer groups. Peer actions are imitated by the children for approval and acceptance. When children spend more time in cyberspace, they enjoy the anonymity and privacy provided in the cyber space which makes them socially isolated.

7.2.2 Socialization/ Social Interaction

Socialization is one of the major issues children face, especially during COVID -19. The only medium of communication during lockdown was social media. The advent of virtual learning opportunities made the accessibility and availability of gadgets easier. Children became more

active on social media and started online engagements that led to cyber abuses or exploitation. On the other hand, their real life social interactions were exceptionally limited, and the time spent outside the home was severely restricted. They spent most of their time indoors and increasingly resorted to video games, video making and online episodes for entertainment. Social isolation and lack of real life social interaction has affected the thoughts, language and behaviour of children. It is noticed that extensive online engagements changed the accent and pattern of verbal interaction; children seemed to be talking like characters of cartoon episodes and you tube documentaries. They seemed to be lacking social skills, interpersonal skills and language skills.

7.2.3 Mental health

Mental health is one of the key aspects of human well-being. The excessive usage of social media and gadgets has affected the mental health of children. Children seemed to be exhibiting symptoms of compulsive and prolonged use of gadgets, aggression, depression, anxiety, increased risk of suicide and substance abuse. This is a vicious cycle as poor mental health leads to these problems and vice versa.

7.2.4 Physical health

Physical health is equally important as mental health. The usage of gadgets affects physical health. In one of the cases (SRC02), while checking the BMI of a child it was found that he was short of 17kgs to get a normal BMI proportionate to his height and has resulted in problems in his physical appearance including bone edging, spinal bend, skin fading etc. Due to lack of consumption of food and irregular food timings, constipation is also observed in children. Above all, obesity is also becoming common in children as they binge eat while being engaged with their phones.

7.2.5 Family Relationship

The extent of online use affects the family relationships. Almost all cases depicted strained family relationship and parent-youth apathy. Faulty parenting patterns and family dynamics became breeding grounds for unhealthy behaviours. The main factor that affects the relationship is the communication gap between parent and child. Both children and parents are so busy in their personal engagements in cyberspace that they don't find enough time for face-to-face communication. If the parent and child relationship is healthy, then the child is

more likely to seek parent's guidance and value their opinion and support. In the current scenario parents are busy; they do not spend quality time with their children. Therefore, children seem to trust the cyber world more than parents. In the cases studied, some parents are afraid to control their wards due to the anger and aggression shown by the children. These children have their own rules in the family. Cyber engagements strains family relationships.

7.2.6 Changes in Biological Clock

The cases studied showed that over usage of gadgets negatively affected the biological clock of children. In the cases SRC01 and SRC02, the children used to sleep from 5 am to 5.30 pm because they sat on the phone surfing the whole night. The change in the biological clock affects cognition and behaviour, attention issues and behaviour problems.

7.2.7 Sexual Harassment

The negative consequences of social media engagement have been seen as sexual harassment and assault of children. In one of the cases (SRC03), a child who was an active member in 'Clubhouse', got into a relationship with a stranger. The stranger insisted on staying nude on a video call. When the girl rejected, he started having conflicts with the girl. He manipulated his friend to threaten this girl by showing her nude pictures. There was another incident where the perpetrator asked the child to burn herself with cigarettes and exhibit the same on a video call. Online platforms have become a common platform for physical/sexual assault and harassment.

7.2.8 Sexual exploitation

Children use online platforms without understanding the reality that the perpetrator may exploit them. In another case (CRC01), a girl used her mother's phone and always kept it with her. She fell in love with a boy who was 20 years old and was the friend of her sister's husband. They maintained regular contact via social media and phone. Initially, the boy visited the girl's home and later on provided things which they require for their daily functioning and builds a good relationship with their family. The boy was a provider for the family and always supported them. He entered into a physical relationship with this girl and exploited her sexually.

In case (SRC04), the boy initiated relationships with girls by attracting them with his talents exhibited on social media and ended up in relationships. He engaged in sexting and sending porn videos. The girls blindly trusted the boy and got trapped in the relationship. After

meeting his needs, he asked for a breakup from the girl and refused to continue the relationship.

7.2.9 Engagement in unlawful activities

With the influence of cyber world, the perpetrators engage in unlawful activities such as substance abuse, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, fraudulent activities. This is noticed throughout the cases. Some of them even form gangs and keep connected using social media (SRC04) and commit crimes outside the online platforms.

7.2 10 Compulsive and prolonged use of screen time and other behavioural issues

The overuse of phones or gadgets has led to prolonged phone/screen usage. Continuous usage of these gadgets for long hours to play games, watch videos, or use other applications has led to addictive behaviours. The extent of phone use has vividly affected the behaviour of the children. A detailed description of emotional and behavioural responses has been delineated in the first part of this chapter (Pg.No – 100).

7.2 11 Loss of money

The parents of a child lost money from their account as their child purchased weapons for his online game. Children may knowingly or unknowingly send the account details to someone, transfer money, or even hack their parents account.

7.2.12 Language

Over time the virtual world is found to influence the language of children. For instance, the children often communicate in cartoon language and accent and act as cartoon characters. Their mannerisms change and they overly identify themselves as superheroes in their favourite cartoons. One instance is shared by one parent where they happened to buy fish from a fish vending woman in their vicinity and after the purchase the child replied to the woman in Dora's (Cartoon character) language and accent. It was a spontaneous response which is indicative of how much children imbibe the mannerisms due to immersive modelling. The over usage of gadgets has also reduced the interest of children to go out and play.

7.3 Precipitating Factors

Though the chapter intended to analyse the subjective experiences of the adolescents involved in offenses and exploitation, during qualitative interviews the respondents stressed a lot on precipitating factors that led to these offenses and exploitation. Since the data is rich and relevant, it is decided to discuss the same in the report too as it implies the types and levels of intervention that is to be administered among this cohort to address as well as prevent this issue. The following are the contributing factors that led to offenses and exploitation of the children under study.

7.3.1 Biological and Personality factors

Certain personality traits make children vulnerable to these risk factors of addiction and exploitation. The structure of the brain and also imbalances of certain chemicals change the cognitive functions of the brain in children and it gets manifested in their behaviour. For example, children having dopamine deficiency are more prone to addiction. Children having clinically diagnosed personality disorders such as Antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder without hyperactivity (ADD), Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) etc. are at higher risk to these exploitation as their behaviour symptoms make them vulnerable. These children usually seem to be very aggressive, impulsive, exhibit extreme mood fluctuations and instability in their interpersonal relationships, and exhibit self-harming behaviour. Although all symptoms are not shown by everyone, cases show a combination of symptoms or one or more symptoms accompanied by depression, anxiety, irritability, parent-child apathy, impulsive decision making, negative perception of self and the whole world, very low level of self-worth and trust issues and undue trust and commitment towards the perpetrator. These personality factors are so much engraved within them that it blocks their insight to realistic and non-risky thoughts and actions. Most of the cases analysed showed these personality traits among the adolescents which made them more vulnerable to these problems.

The bio-psycho-social perspective is very relevant to be considered here. These personality factors and its transactions within them and their social environment get manifested in their physiological domains too. A child who suffered from constipation since his 6th grade started withdrawing from his social environment and it became so chronic over the years that it led to the manifestation of a compulsive engagement in social media. This child refused to visit his cousins and relatives or attend any social gatherings among his immediate family

members and cousins, due to the fear of constipation, ever since he was 10 years of age, and always remained in his private space. He engaged himself in social media platforms and got addicted to it. Thus biological and personality factors were found to be one of the important factors that led to unhealthy engagement of adolescents in the cyber world.

7.3.2 Broken families

A family is characterized by a physical and emotional structure of a father, mother and children which forms various subsystems within the larger family system. This structure gives shape to the roles and functions of each of the family members. If one part of the structure is affected, then the other parts will also be affected. The cases analyzed saw a common trait of broken family structure among them. In all these cases, the adolescents came from single parented families, separated families, no parent families, families of alcoholic and substance abused parents, parents having unhealthy past, parents having multiple or extra marital relationships, abusive parents, parents having personality issues like suicidal ideations and attempts etc. These broken structures led to unfulfilled roles making these adolescents deprived of their psychological needs and consequently vulnerable to these risks. Although these risks existed even without the proliferation of the cyber world due to Covid-19 invasion, the cyber milieu created by Covid-19 augmented these risks to the extent where external factors could not have a control.

7.3.3 Family Dysfunction

Family is the primary social institution and it is the first school for everyone. Healthy family functioning has proved to be a very important protective factor for the psycho-social development of children. Family environment is very crucial for an individual's well-being. In the course of the family life cycle, families face developmental as well as subsystem dysfunctions. Some of the factors such as alcoholic parents, inefficient parenting, substance abuse, faulty communication patterns, distressed or abusive environment, alternate family patterns and personality disorders in parents often lead to family dysfunction. Children in dysfunctional families are at greater risk of victimization in the cyber sphere. The cases analysed also depicted unhealthy family functioning among the victims as well as the offenders.

Differential analysis of the cases in terms of their family dysfunction depicted the level of functionality of families these adolescents came from. While analysing the history of

perpetrators, it was found that their parents also had exhibited anti-social behavior earlier in their lives. For instance, a boy initiated relationships with younger girls through social media platforms like Instagram, tik tok and other chatting platforms, engaged them in sexting; sending, receiving and watching videos with porn content and ended up exploiting them by having physical relationships. The boy is a member of Chenda Melam *(a local art form)* troop and is also a gangster involved in drug transactions. He, a POCSO offender, created a WhatsApp group with other POCSO offenders, who got bail and are out of jail. His father was a substance user/abuser and his family has a history of suicide incidents among the kith and kin. His mother has multiple relationships and stays away from home. The boy shows similar behavioural traits as his father. This is a typical case of a dysfunctional family having its impact on the behaviour of children.

7.3.4 Communication

Communication is the key element to maintain a strong and healthy relationship. Defective communication patterns jeopardize the relationships. While analyzing the cases, a profound communication gap was noticed between the parent and child. Adding to it, quality parenting was missing in all the cases. In most of the cases parents exhibit either permissive or neglected parenting. They seemed to be engaged with their own activities. Creating a friendly environment helps children feel safe and free to share their emotions and feelings. Lack of communication leads to lack of bonding. Most of the cases identified a similar communication gap, polarizing on other spaces for sharing ideas, thoughts, feelings and emotions; the other space being social media platforms. The children were found to be more comfortable in the virtual world having conversations on social media platforms. In fact they found it difficult to communicate in real life situations.

Furthering this 'opportunity', these platforms paved easy pathways into relationships with unknown people, getting trapped and being exploited. Flowery and attractive language was found to be one of the weapons used by the perpetrators to attract and influence the victims. In one of the cases, the perpetrator used these platforms to create reels and rhythm fusions, and exhibited his talents on social media. He also showcased his cultural and religious rituals through social media platforms. Girls got attracted to these personality traits and fell into the loop.

Adolescence is a period where individuals get easily attracted to their peers and especially towards the opposite sex. They are marooned with fantasizing and romanticizing the digital

world. The immense pleasure and excitement generated by social media platforms is an opportunity for them to explore the world. But they never realize that it can be dreadful and deceitful. Lack of communication in the protective sphere and vivid opportunities for virtual communication in the cyber world played a contributing role in the problem presented in the cases.

7.3. 5 Environment

If a child shows antisocial behaviour, the role of the environment and support systems play a vital role. One's behaviour and personality depends on the environment they live in. Children who live in broken or dysfunctional families are more vulnerable to become the perpetrators and/or victims. Also, early childhood experiences develop behaviour patterns; especially undesirable behaviour. A child who has experienced abuse in the early childhood years is likely to develop the traits of an offender in the later stages of develo\pment, if the then environment is manipulative and exploitative. In the case of X, the father is a substance user and indulges in gangster relationships, his mother has multiple relationships, thus, the child grew up exhibiting the traits of a perpetrator, manipulating a number of younger girls at the same time. This is a typical example of an unsupportive environment during the development years. His right or wrong is defined by what he has seen in his immediate environment.

Unsupportive environment is characterized by a neglected and permissive environment too. Family environment is a place where boundaries have to be kept intact, yet flexible and accommodative. The subsystems within the family system – parental, sibling and the couple subsystems – should have clear and marked boundaries of their roles and functions that do not impinge on the rights, roles and functions of others within the system. If this pattern does not work, then problems emerge. Neglected and permissive boundaries place children in the dangers of addiction and exploitation. Flexible and democratic boundaries channelize healthy and open communication and direct the adolescents' energy into constructive and desirable actions. Such family support systems help children develop healthy relationships outside families too.

7.3.6 Peer influence

The need for affiliation to one's social group is very important for an adolescent. Cases depicted the influence of peers in committing the offence. Case Y, from central Kerala was bullied and assaulted by peers outside the virtual world. The video clippings of this physical

assault had been posted in the social media platforms. The offender out of fear committed suicide. Adolescents commit crimes in groups, influenced by peers, craving for acceptance and affiliation. The so-called adventurous, impulsive and curious minds crave for acceptance, approval and affiliation among their peers. They take any risk, to any extent, to gain this acceptance. In the course, they perceive these crimes as adventurous actions which in turn become detrimental to their physical and emotional well-being. Children who have experienced victimization once, became offenders later. Compulsion to use screen and social media also is found to be one among the causative factors of criminal behaviours among children. Cases have shown that cyber platforms have become the means of committing crimes and offenses due to the ease of accessibility, availability, privacy and anonymity provided by it.

7.3.7 Parenting style

Cases showed the impact of parenting styles on the child's behaviour problems. Parenting style is one important factor that influences child development. Authoritarian parenting lacks flexibility, because of the overarching rule and also lacks warmth. In permissive parenting, parents want to be their child's best friend; they support anything without considering the negative side which is also very dangerous. Neglectful parenting is not responsive to the child's needs, while authoritative parenting is democratic and responsive to the child's needs and is so consistently linked with positive outcomes.

In case A, where authoritarian parenting was followed, the child got into a relationship with an unknown person through social media and happened to share her nude videos and photos. It was reported that the offender's friend who is also a young adult started threatening the child using these photos and videos. It became very traumatic for the child. The child's parents came to know about this very late. The parenting style was so rigid that the child couldn't reach out to the parents out of fear.

Case B showcased addictive behaviour of the child towards mobile phones, but parents did not consider it as a serious problem. They felt pride in their child's technical knowledge in a young age. They found happiness in the child's addictive behaviour which was always reinforcing for the child to continue his engagement with the gadgets. Permissive parenting failed to perceive the child's excessive use of mobile phones as a threat or their appreciation as reinforcement of the addictive behaviour.

Another case C revealed the parents' fear in controlling the addictive behaviour due to the aggressive attitude exhibited by the child. Here the child is controlling the parents. The neglected parenting style adopted by the parents previously took things out of control from their hands. Parenting and its impact were found to be a very important factor in determining a child's behaviour responses to the challenges they face.

7.4 Societal impact and implications

Society consists of various segments of population whose roles are distinct in the development process. One such segment - the children and adolescents- has a pivotal role to play in the social, economic and cultural development of the society. This has been widely acknowledged as decades back itself, India showcased its commitment to invest in this young cohort for their holistic growth and development. From ratifying UNCRC in the year 1992 to adhering to the General Comment No. 25 on Children's Rights in relation to the digital environment, India has been vigilant in protecting and promoting children's rights in its march towards UNCRC goals. Yet, the statistics on the increasing number of cases on exploitation of children during and post pandemic is still a question for thought and action.

Qualitative analysis of these cases derived on implications of the increasing number of cyber exploitation experienced by children in a larger society. The stakeholders of the study never denied the alarming state of ever increasing cases and the challenges these incidents pose to individuals, families and communities. Children's problems in families affect family dynamics, interpersonal relationships within the families, family cohesion and bonding. Family dysfunctions become a breeding ground for abuse, exploitation, antisocial elements, criminal tendencies and behaviour outside the families. Thus it becomes a vicious cycle of risky environments and crimes that stem from such contexts. As society is an extension of families, dysfunctional families nurture and foster unhealthy social relations and processes. Growing a generation having a different set of values and morals, norms and rules that impedes their development is an intimidating obstacle to society's progress.

When antisocial elements increase, it demands huge resources - money, institutional mechanisms and manpower - to address and manage these issues. This would be a financial burden to the State in its pursuit to achieve the goals of a Welfare State. When the manpower and material resources utilized to run institutional mechanisms pose a heavy economic burden, these issues will be side lined in order to address the economic crisis. Then the question of accountability will be a fluid phenomenon. Moreover, if this young cohort who

ideally should contribute to nation building is engaged in unlawful activities, it is a threat to the entire nation. This not only hinders nation's development but also results in an ailing economy. Certainly violence and exploitation of the rights of children has serious implications on the growth and development of the society.

Chapter – VIII

MAJOR FINDINGS

This study looked into the type and extent of online use, abuse and exploitation faced by children and adolescents; internet safety measures available, adopted, implemented for the safety of children; perception of parents and significant others about online abuse and online safety; analysis of the cases of online exploitation faced by children and adolescents and its impact on their life; and recommendations on the strategies for the prevention of cyber abuse and for promoting cyber safety among children and adolescents in Kerala.

The study made an attempt ascertain the extent of cyber exploitation and the corresponding safety of children in Kerala by interviewing 1231 children, 307 parents and 120 significant others. 24 Focus Group Discussions and 12 in-depth case studies were also conducted to elicit qualitative information on this topic.

The study covered children and families from different educational, social and economic backgrounds. Understanding the occupation of the parents of these child respondents, it is found that parents of 31 child respondents are not occupied, parents of 186 child respondents own private businesses, parents of 156 child respondents are self-employed, parents of 247 child respondents are casual labourers, parents of 110 child respondents are employed in private firms, parents of 142 child respondents work in government sector and parents of 14 child respondents are employed in IT sector. The above data points to the fact that maximum number of parents of child respondents belong to the category of child labourers.

The following are the major findings of the study:

- The parents observe that their children use mobile and other gadgets for accessing internet and social media for academic purposes, gaming, entertainment (cinema, videos, songs) and for accessing social media. Academic and accessing social media are the most common purposes found among the children who use mobile and internet.

- Out of the total number of child respondents who use their gadgets for academic purposes, 53.09% spend 0-2 hours and 40.06% spend 2 – 4 hours per day for the same.

- Out of the total number of child respondents who play online games, 33.22% spend 0-2 hours and 14.66% spend 2-4 hours per day for the same.

- It is also noted that 19.22% of the total number of child respondents are not using their gadgets for the purpose of gaming. 8.14% of the parents do not know whether their children engage in online games, or the time spent for the same. 23.45% of parents did not reply to the question.

- 96.7% of the children who responded to the study use internet and social media, whereas only 3.3% do not use any internet or social media. 49.7% of the child respondents covered under the study use their own gadgets and 49.8% of them use the gadgets of their parents. The percentages of child respondents using the gadgets of their elder siblings, cousins and friends are 1.7%, 0.5% and 0.2% respectively.

- 97.1% of the total number of child respondents use mobile phones to access the internet and social media. Out of the remaining, 7.5% use laptops, 4.4% use tablets and 4.3% use desktop for accessibility to the internet and social media. The reason for the hike in usage of mobile phones can be attributed to its privacy, and easy portability.

- The data elucidates that a majority of the child respondents have at least one social media account and the number of children using 2 or more than 2 accounts constitute 19.17%. It is observed that vulnerability of children increases with the number of social media accounts they hold. A small percentage of students said that they have a free fire account, Google meet account or Google classroom accounts, which are not considered social network accounts.

- Even though the majority of child respondents shared their screen time usage as less than 5 hours, the current studies as well as recent news reports claim that this usage has shot up very quickly since the outbreak of COVID 19. The rigorous social distancing norms made children increasingly dependent on these devices to overcome their feelings of loneliness and mental stress.

- Mobile phones are major channels of exploitation and most children are oblivious of the fact that they are being exploited in many cases.

- Excessive use of electronic gadgets among children is found to have a negative effect on their sleeping and eating patterns.

- The initial usage of mobile phones for the apparent academic purposes quickly changed to many other purposes such as gaming, watching movies and series,

watching bands, accessing social media etc. Even though the usage of screens started for the purpose of online classes, the curiosities in children who are new to the cyber world impel them to explore new applications and websites.

- Almost 50% of the total number of child respondents use data between 1 GB and 2 GB. It is shocking to not that 14.29% of child respondents use data that ranges from 2 GB to 3 GB and nearly 10% respondents use data above 3 GB on a daily basis. 6.32% of the respondents shared that they are not aware about the data they use in a day, as they use Wi-Fi and mobile data. The excess usage of the internet can be understood from the above data and it is evident that along with online classes, the children explore other wide areas of the cyber world.

- A total of 1217 children responded to the question regarding the number of Email IDs and its purpose. From the total, 640 children use a single Email ID, 325 children use 2 Email IDs, 69 children use 3 Email IDs, 31 children use 4 and 27 children use 5 Email IDs respectively. Academic, gaming, account backup, account creation in various applications and social media, Google meet, and Google classroom are the purposes of Email ID as marked by children.

- Children covered under the study use public places, private places or both for the use of social media and internet access. Public Places were only specifically marked by 284 respondents and only 238 respondents specifically marked Private Places for the usage of the internet. Since private spaces provide children with more access to fraudulent sites, dark webs, porn sites and other sites that are not permitted for children, it has become a critical subject in the current environment of rising cyber hazards. The hidden activities done in private spaces by the children will be taken advantage of by the predators that in turn elevate the abuse and exploitation against children.

- The altered sleeping pattern has an impact on children's cognitive development as well as other behavioural issues such as anger, emotional impulsiveness, lack of interest in studies, inactivity and lack of socialization.

- The fragility of their age group, the present pandemic scenario, and social isolation, they became increasingly addicted to virtual media, as well as get into toxic relationships, which results in abuse and exploitation. Changes in eating and sleeping patterns, a lack of studies, anger issues, and other behavioural abnormalities are seen among children.

- The information provided above backs up recent reports on social media toxic relationships, sexual abuse, cheating, fraudulent activities, cyberbullying, and hacking by anonymous cyber perpetuators. These child predators begin their relationships on these sites and then exploit them once they have gained trust. In the meantime, they may have shared their issues, emotions, privacy, money, naked photographs, and other personal information, slipping into a trap.

- The continuous surfing leads children to unhealthy engagements which in turn put their lives in danger. Majority of the children know about their friends engaging in such activities, but they were reluctant to share independent incidents.

- The parents, schools, the government and the police have adopted various means to ensure the safety of children in cyberspace. Awareness programmes for children and parents, digital literacy programmes, counselling support and special drives and campaigns etc. are the major interventions designed by various departments and institutions for the safety of children.

- Surveillance and law enforcement, conducting awareness programs for children and parents and building a support system at the schools form major initiatives of the Police Force. A system with the Cyber Dome at State level and Cyber cells in the districts spearhead the activities in the areas and investigate the cyber related crimes in the State.

- Social Media monitoring, stop banking services, prevention of online child exploitation and child pornography, Hackathons, Kid Glove, special drives like P-Hunt etc. are some of the major interventions of the Police in addiction to the Child Friendly Police Stations, Student Police Cadets Project, and the Psycho-Social Counselling Centres at district level.

- The technology enabled applications for the safety of children are another set of measures adopted by the parents and schools. However, it is noted that the number of parents who adopt and use such applications are very less.

- Time scheduling, family rules and norms, retaining ownership, consistent monitoring, controlling and limiting use of gadgets and promoting other forms of engagement like outdoor play etc. are the major measures adopted by parents for controlling the cyber use and abuse by children.

Perception of parents and significant others

- Parents responded vividly to the probes to explore their perceptions and perspectives on the online use, abuse and safety of their wards. Parents perceive online abuse and safety more as a problem than a threat and feel too helpless to do anything about it.

- A common understanding among the stakeholders is that the use of virtual platforms by children has become common now and so have the increase in cyber-crimes against children.

- The parents understand it as a hindrance to their academic progress and reported that it has drastically affected their academic performance.

- Physical health, psychological health, behavioural issues, attention deficit disorders, lack of interest in studies etc. are the effects of compulsive online engagements of children, as perceived by the parents and significant others.

- They observe that gaming has become a route to fraudulent activities.

- The parents and significant others stressed on the jeopardy of falling into unhealthy love relationships through social media.

- Online grooming followed by sexual exploitation is another form of exploitation faced by the children. Recent cases reported in Cyber Cell depicted a common pattern of association to social media groups.

- Stigma on mental health conditions and help seeking behaviour prevents many from early interventions. Parents and elders want to keep things confidential in case of child mental health problems and behavioural issues.

- Support systems play a very important role in dealing with people's problems. Developing and maintaining a good support system is inevitable for individual well-being. This serves as a protective factor that saves the individual from risks and problems. Support system includes family, peer groups, school, police, cyber cell, Child Welfare Committee, Government etc.

- It is observed that proper laws are not enforced against the cybercrimes by the officials. It is imperative to make the laws strict so as to reduce the crimes, according to some of the key informants.

The following are the themes emerged while analysing the emotional and behavioural responses of the adolescents engaged in online abuse and exploitation cases:

- Emotional and behavioural responses - Undue commitment to the offender/perpetrator, remorseless attitude, impulsivity, risk taking attitude and

behaviour, apathy towards parents, negative thinking and outlook, very low self-worth and low self-esteem, challenging elders, high peer influence, self-harming behaviour, suicidal ideations and tendencies, depression, lack of insight, lack of interest in academics and low levels of academic achievement are the common emotional and behavioural responses following online abuse and exploitation cases.

- Helplessness and hopelessness, angry outbursts, irritability, unorganized, inconsistency, procrastination etc. are some of the commonly exhibited behaviour symptoms in children.

- The following domains are affected by the online engagements of children – socialization/social interaction, mental health, physical health, family relationships, academic performance, changes in biological clock, sexual harassment and sexual exploitation, engagement in unlawful activities, compulsive and prolonged use of screen time and other behavioural issues. Loss of money is another form of effect. Many children of younger ages started imitating online characters which in turn affect their mannerisms and language use.

- Certain personality traits make children vulnerable to the risk factors of addiction and exploitation. The structure of the brain and also causes imbalances of certain chemicals ultimately changing the cognitive functions of the brain in children, and causing its manifestation in their behaviour. For example, children having dopamine deficiency are more prone to addiction. Children having clinically diagnosed personality disorders such as Anti-Social Personality Disorder (ASPD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder without hyperactivity (ADD), Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) etc. are at higher risk to these exploitation as their behaviour symptoms make them much more vulnerable.

- Broken families and family dysfunction, lack of communication between the parents and children, the environment in which the child lives, peer influence, parenting style, etc. are other areas of concern when it comes to vulnerability of children.

- Qualitative analysis of these cases derived on implications of the increasing number of cyber exploitation experienced by children in a larger society. The stakeholders of the study never denied the alarming state of ever increasing cases and the challenges these incidents pose to individuals, families and communities.

The study reveals the complexity of online use, abuse and exploitation of children in the State and explores the protection strategies used to curb the menace of the same. A multifaceted

intervention involving all the key stakeholders including children, parents, institutions for children, police, community-based organizations and others who are entrusted with the responsibility of child development and protection are needed for making a safer cyber world for children. The suggestions and recommendations towards the same are given in the upcoming chapters.

CHAPTER IX

RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO PREVENT CYBER ABUSE AND PROMOTE CYBER SAFETY AMONG CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

With the objective of formulating strategies to prevent cyber abuse and promote cyber safety among children and adolescents, the study team organized a Consultative Meeting engaging experts from various sectors. The experts from various domains included those working for Child Protection in the State, Police and Cyber Cell, Psychiatry and those who are providing psycho-social support to the children - Children in Conflict with Law (CCL) and Children in Need of Care and Protection (CNCP). The programme was organized jointly by Bharata Mata College, District Child Protection Unit (DCPU), Thiruvananthapuram and The BluePoint Org. The consultative meeting analysed the current situation and explored possible strategies to address cyber exploitation and ensure safety of children in Kerala.

The meeting discussed various cases of online exploitation, the extent and pattern of exploitation and online grooming, the types of threats, the victimization, how the child and people in the immediate environment of the child gets affected, general perception of the stakeholders, institutional mechanisms and gaps in the existing mechanisms.

The following are the strategies for preventing online abuse and promote cyber safety among children and adolescents. Also, an attempt is made to operationalize these strategies in the context of Kerala State.

Recommendation to Department of Town and Country Planning, Local Self Government Department, Govt. of Kerala.

1. **Facilitating outdoor play and infrastructural support for outdoor play** - Children should be given opportunities for physical activities like play, exercise or engage productively by providing grounds in schools. If the existing schools have grounds, it is suggested to keep it open for the public with specified time slots so that children who do not have access to play in their vicinity can utilize that. Establishing small parks in Corporation/City divisions like how it is seen in Metropolitan cities like

Bangalore would help children in the urbanized settings access these facilities. Cities like Kochi are very crowded and schools are not in a capacity to engage children after school during evenings. This arrangement would suffice the play requirements of children.

Recommendations to

(a)District Child Protection Units

(b) Directorate of District Education

(c) Department of Women and Child Development

2. **Awareness programmes -** Children should be made aware about the dos and don'ts in the cyber world. Also they should be oriented about the existing internet safety measures such as two-step verification, strong passwords, and the practice of providing limited personal information.

3. **Parental education** - Parents should be equipped with knowledge on early identification of emotional and behavioural issues. They should be given awareness on parental control apps and its functions and train them with the functional aspects of the same.

4. **Enhancing healthy family functioning** - Parents should spend quality time with children and home should be a place enabled to openly express their feelings, daily life activities, discussions in friend's circle and make them feel that they are loved, cared, supported and trusted by the family members. Teaching positive parenting skills is very important in being responsive to children's needs. Family norms should be flexible, breaking the stereotypes by involving children in household responsibilities like cooking, cleaning, gardening etc. which elicits collective participation in household chores.

5. **Children as peer educators** - Children can be trained as peer educators to enlighten their friends on their rights, contexts that risk them, threats of abuse and exploitation. Awareness programmes should be designed in such a way that elicits participation and interaction of children rather than making them mere spectators. This would help them to take up the roles as peer educators.

6. **Financial and manpower assistance**: Schools should be provided with more resources - finance and manpower (school social workers/ counsellors) for remedial, preventive and proactive actions. Currently there is a high employee turnover in this domain due to the financial constraints and lack of job security.

7. **Widening the support system** - Since the teachers and school counselors are the initial point of contact for any child in distress, the police and cyber cell should be working in association with schools so that seeking help and mobilizing support of the authorities is reachable to the school system. An interdisciplinary team including the representatives from police, cyber cell, psychologists, counsellors, along with school authorities should be formed within the school. Strengthen the club activities, sports, NCC, NSS to ensure productive engagements of children.

8. **Fostering conducive environment in schools** - Schools should function in such a way that it should gain trust and confidence of the students to support them with opportunities to openly share the problems faced by them. This will help the children open up and share their feelings without fear and to seek help. Teachers have to be trained to understand the psycho-social needs of children and equipped with skills to render psychological first aid.

9. **Technological move** - Mechanisms should be there to ensure stoppage on unwanted pop-ups redirecting the children to wrong websites. Biometric identification technique is required to ensure the exact age while taking account in social media.

10. **Remedial support** - Individual and group counselling services should be within the reach of children and families. Information dissemination and accessibility of the same is still a question.

11. **Coordination and networking** - coordination and networking with Local Self Governments, Police, Cybercells, Excise department, Schools and other community based organisations for a collective effort to identify offenders, safeguard victims, risky and vulnerable groups is the need of the hour.

12. **Teacher training and education** - Teachers have to be properly oriented as they are the primary point of contact for any child. They may need to take quick yet prudent decisions, identify the risks and vulnerabilities and reach out to reliable resources in times of need. This group has to be equipped with skills to facilitate these tasks.

9.1 OPERATIONALISING THE STRATEGIES

The inputs from the experts and various stakeholders and also the suggestions from key informant interviews and FGDs, it has been understood that a multifaceted strategy is needed to address cyber exploitation and to ensure safety of children in the State. There is a need for sensitizing and capacitating the children and their parents, strengthening institutions and the social organisations that work with the children and parents, and using the scope of technology itself, to reduce cyber exploitation and ensure safety of children. The security measures incorporated in the social media / internet itself can play a major role.

Creation of a safe cyber space for children with vigilant and skilled users, technology adaptation, surveillance and law enforcement, creation of a support system for providing psycho-social care for the children form the backbone of the strategic framework. Various strategies to be adopted for ensuring cyber safety and to address cyber exploitation are outlined here. The following part is categorised based on the potential flag bearers of each set of programmes.

Flag bearers

    a) **Department of Women and Child Development**
    b) **Directorate of District Education**
    c) **Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) functionaries**
    d) **District Child Protection Units**
    e) **Local Self Government**

9.1.1 Equipping the Child

Equipping the child with necessary knowledge and skills to handle the situation is imperative to the context, as the child will be solely dealing with the situations in the majority of such situations. The child should know the safe zones and support system available in the society. Age appropriate (for below 5 years, 5 – 10 years, 10 – 14 years, 15 – 18 years) information on the cyber world, sex and sexuality, relationships, growth and development and other knowledge / skills in handling the issues to be provided to the child by various means.

The areas to be covered under the sessions are:
    1. Ethical and responsible use of mobile phones / social media / internet
    2. Growth and development - implications and impact
    3. Good touch and bad touch

4. Family dynamics – identifying safe relationships in the family

5. Basic of life skills – self-awareness, self-concept, how to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships, problem solving, coping with emotions.

6. Institutional mechanism for information sharing – family, school, friends and other support systems and its boundaries

7. Child rights and POCSO Act

Currently most of the schools in Kerala organize/conduct awareness classes from middle school onwards. The Department of Women and Child Development, as part of Information Education Communication distributes IEC materials to teachers and students. Limitation on Evidence Based Practice (EBP) in the field is what is to be addressed. There should be scheduled calendar year programmes with the objective of equipping the children with relevant knowledge and skills and there should be institutional mechanisms to execute, monitor, evaluate and make necessary modifications based on the needs of the target groups.

The study emphasizes the role of professional social work in facilitating this. Professional social work competencies can be utilized in micro as well as macro levels. The role of **school social workers** is imperative in this context. School social workers can work with different systems - the school system and the various subsystems involved such as children subsystem, parental subsystem, teacher subsystem, school management subsystem and the community/neighbourhood subsystem in addressing and preventing these issues. The school social workers can act as counsellors providing psycho-social support and counselling, working with children on a one to one basis, educators in training and educating children, parents and teachers, liaison officers connecting children to various resources and support systems, coordinators in organizing these programmes, mediators in managing conflicts and chaos, advocates in ensuring protection of the rights of children, programme developers in formulating need based programmes and researchers in promoting evidence based practice.

9.1.2 Enriching Families and Capacitating Parents:

Family has a pivotal role in the growth and development of children. Being the first socialization agent, its functions in forming personality and behaviour has immense potential. A family goes through various developmental stages and each stage is characterized by various needs, tasks and challenges. Successful completion of tasks helps in successful transition to the next stage. Variations in this due to internal and external factors will lead to family dysfunctions.

One of the common factors associated with crimes against children identified by the study is dysfunctional families. Family dysfunctions are characterized by variations in the Family Life Cycle including death, divorce, separation, parental conflicts, parent-youth apathy, structural differences like single parent, female headed households, disability, family crises and so on. Studies have revealed that these dysfunctions are determinants of antisocial behavioural traits among children/adolescents. Healthy family functioning is a protective factor and a prerequisite for the prevention of crimes against children and adolescents. The love, care and attention that the family offers to a child can save him/her from many risks and vulnerabilities and can help in the healing process as well. The parents should be oriented towards the need for providing additional support to the children so as to protect them from sexual and other forms of exploitation and abuse. Quality parenting augments family cohesion and bonding. Healthy family dynamics provides children with opportunities and space to express their thoughts, emotions and feelings in a healthy manner. Hence parents should be equipped with knowledge, sharpen their parenting skills and help them sustain this relationship throughout. The suggested input domains for the parents are:

1. Family dynamics and Family development
2. Psycho-social development of children - implications
3. Family Life Education
4. Being responsive to children's needs
5. Positive parenting – handling children of different ages
6. Orientation on cyber safety measures and ethical usage of digital platforms
7. Child rights and POCSO Act
8. Managing behavioural issues and addictions (inc. social media, mobile etc.)
9. Promoting resilience among children
10. Academic and remedial support

Individual problems in families require system interventions. Every individual as well as family is a system and if one part of the system is affected the parts also get affected. As such, any attempt to solve the problems in some part of the system requires changes in the other corresponding parts too. The role of a **Family Social Worker** is very relevant in this context. Family Social Workers cater to the needs of the families in communities. A family social worker can become a member of the multidisciplinary team of ICDS functionaries**.** This family social worker assesses the needs of the families, identifies the families at risk and

prevents family disintegration and also provides direct interventions to families in times of crises. As children form one of the main subsystems of the families, children benefit from all these interventions.

Currently adolescent clubs are functioning as part of ICDS project under the leadership of Anganwadi teachers and ICDS supervisors. They are catering to the growth and psycho-social development needs of adolescent girls. Role confusions and clarifications, lack of structured programmes are barriers to meet the expected outcomes. Moreover, male adolescents are not catered to which is again an obstacle to the realisation of human rights. Appointment of Family Social Workers as part of the ICDS team can serve the families in communities in a more systematic and scientific way. Family social workers can be the contact point to reach out to various services when these families are in need. Family social workers can provide individuals in families, individuals in various subsystems in the family system and also the family as a whole with psycho-social first aid and can refer to specialised services in case of such needs.

9.1.3 Psychosocial Care Centres

Providing psycho-social care and support to the children in need would be a major step for reducing the vulnerability of children towards cyber exploitation. The state should have trained manpower and facilities to provide services to the children. An array of Counsellors, Psychotherapists and Psychiatrists who are oriented and skilled in handling the issue and referral centers (including De-addiction centers) within government and private / NGO sector form the support system for children who are already affected or prone to cyber exploitation.

The study recommends initiating a Psycho-social Care Centre in each district headquarters. This psycho-social centre would be the one stop centre for any child to reach out to in times of distress. All the programmes for care, protection, welfare, development and empowerment of children can be executed, monitored and evaluated through these centers. These psycho-social centers can function as part of District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) or under it. It can facilitate need-based and efficient delivery of services, resource allocations, resource mobilization, referral services connecting, coordinating and networking with various institutions working for the development, welfare and empowerment of children.

9.1.4 Strengthening Programmes for Children

There are many programmes for children within the school setting and outside. National Service Scheme (NSS), National Cadet Corps (NCC), Scouts and Guides, Student Police

Cadets Project (SPC), Our responsibility to Children Project (ORC) and various clubs within the school have to be strengthened with yearlong programmes and activities for ensuring productive engagement of children. This will reduce the vulnerability of the children towards cyber exploitation. The children who are not part of the clubs should also be benefited by such activities.

9.1.5 Strengthening civil society organisations

The local community and the society at large have a major role in ensuring the safety of children. The local neighbourhood groups should be able to identify the children in need and extend a helping hand at local level. Local community has to be equipped with knowledge and attitude to understand these issues and its implications and be sensitive to it. At community level collective and coordinated efforts of Kudumbashree, Neighbourhood Groups, Residents' Associations, Local Self Government bodies, Socio – religious Institutions, NGOs, etc. is required in addressing the issue of cyber safety. The roles and responsibilities of various institutions for children are:

1. Orienting the staff to the issue of cyber exploitation and safety of children
2. Roles and responsibilities of staff in creating a supportive environment for the children
3. Engaging children through arts, sports, cultural and social activities etc.
4. Inputs on Child rights, POCSO Act and Juvenile Justice Act
5. Supporting the children in need - through basic psychological first aid and referring them to appropriate centers

9.1.6 Community Centres

Most of the parents send their children to tuition since they are unable to engage children constructively at home after school. In urban settings, both parents would be working and in rural settings these children after school engage in gangs in the vicinity. To avoid this, parents insist and send these children to tuitions which is another breeding ground for unlawful activities and antisocial behaviour. Hence, Community centers can be initiated to engage the students after school with remedial coaching as well as group activities. Every Panchayat can find infrastructure to facilitate this. This can be initiated as a community organisation model eliciting community participation. This model will be sustainable as the community owns this venture. Community animators/social

workers/ICDS team members can be entrusted with the duty to coordinate and facilitate this. In Kerala, some NGOs have initiated community centers in their functional areas but have suffered the sustainability component throughout. Focus should be given to make the project sustainable through a participatory development process.

9.1.7 Stigma eradication programmes

Stigma is a barrier to help seeking behaviour and facilitate immediate interventions. Stigma reduction community programmes will be helpful to sensitise and develop a responsible attitude among the community towards such issues. The study found out that in many cases the family tried to hide the symptoms due to the fear of losing family name and fame. Stigma reduction strategies will help the victims to seek help without the fear of social exclusion. Some of the suggestions in this regard are:

1. The IEC wing has to be strengthened with more innovative programmes.
2. Financial assistance to conduct grass root level programmes - street plays, ritual arts, puppet shows, magic shows, skits in each panchayat. Part of the Plan Fund can be set apart for these activities.
3. Balasabhas in Panchayats should be motivated to showcase at least one programme in a month. Best children's groups can be given prizes.
4. Community centres can be platforms for conscientisation in this regard.
5. Community radios can be initiated in association with nearby higher educational institutions. Conscientisation can be facilitated through radio programmes.
6. Competitions and day observances focusing on the theme of stigma reduction will bring in the right awareness to seek professional help in times of need.
7. Social media can be constructively utilised to build awareness; a team should be dedicated for this purpose.

Flag bearers

(a) **Kerala Police Department**
(b) **District Legal Service Authority**
(c) **Child Welfare Committee**

9.1.8 Adopting and adapting Technology

Using technology to tackle technological threats is the strategy that can be adopted in addressing the issue of cyber exploitation and cyber safety. There is a need to have

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applications and other measures to ensure the safety of children. The parents should have the knowledge and skills in using the same. Both the Government / Police and private players should develop and update the application on a regular basis and the parents should be equipped to use the same for the safety of their children. Key strategies in this regard are:

1. Ensure availability of Cyber Safety Apps that suit the requirement of different target groups
2. Orientation and knowledge updation of parents.
3. Regular updation and support system for users

Currently, in the state of Kerala, CyberDome is functioning in collaboration with a team of IT professionals in facilitating technological invasions in surveillance, monitoring and identifying the offenders. It is functioning as a separate entity on account of data safety and security measures. Decisions at bureaucratic level should be made to widen their horizon of activities and network with the apex body of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to fight the villain malwares, unauthorised sites, links, hackers and trappers.

9.1.9 Surveillance and Law Enforcement

Police and Cyber Dome's regular surveillance and law enforcement measures to be continued so as to identify and deal with the offenders through means of formal social control. The following activities which are currently in the list have to be continued and evaluated.

1. Regular monitoring and surveillance
2. Campaigns for creating awareness and skill building
3. Special drives to identify the perpetrators
4. Support system for the victims and their parents who seek assistance for registering cases

   Flag bearers
   (a) Kerala State Commission for Protection of Child Rights
   (b) Central Social Welfare Board
   (c) Social Justice Department

9.1.10 Research and Development

Evidence based practice (EBP) is an essential element of every practice domain including professional social work. EBP is a process in which the practitioner combines well-researched

interventions with clinical/field experience, ethics, client preferences, and culture to guide and inform the delivery of treatments and services (NASW, 2007). Every practice domain of professional social work acknowledges and reiterates the relevance of EBP in delivering scientific and uptodate interventions, enhancing the credibility and authenticity of services. Research informed practice is fundamental to this. Empirical studies will help provide need based interventions, help modify methods and techniques according to the respective cultural contexts, evaluate the utility of interventions in response to client needs and problems, develop new practice frameworks, formulate new methods and techniques and finally add to the knowledge base of the discipline.

The study proposes to initiate a research and development wing under the Department of Women and Child Development exclusively for initiatives catering to women, adolescents (both boys and girls) and children. This will help develop and execute culture appropriate scientific and need based interventions catering to these target groups. Scientific recording and documentation are the strength of any agency/ organisation. These records serve as resources to practitioners, academicians and students in keeping up to date with the field realities. The proposed Research and Development (R and D) wing can act as a State Resource Centre that facilitates documentation of various practice techniques, methods and models which can be solely applied to Indian context. These documents can be made available to other States which can be adapted and applied to their socio-cultural contexts.

India needs to be very vigilant to the threat posed by the cyber world to our young generation. Victims turn out to be offenders. Rights and exploitation are perceived wrongly by the young generation. Meaning of morality and the value system undergo drastic changes. Threats are being perceived as opportunities. There is no hesitation in impinging on someone else's rights. When the world is at the fingertips so too its dangers. The vandalising effect of the cyber world, what we have known and experienced is only the tip of the iceberg. Our interventions are many; yet it needs to be coordinated under one umbrella. Consistent surveillance, updated technology to combat these technical invasions and professional interventions are required to prevent this menace.

9.2 IMPLICATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities

are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing." "IFSW (https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/)"

Social work profession has passed through the contours of various disciplines of psychology, sociology, economics, political science and law integrating divergent models and approaches in meeting human needs. Starting from its remedial and restorative approach, the focus has shifted to a preventive, proactive and strength-based models. The profession has its uniqueness in the teaching-research-practice nexus which makes it regularly updated with the societal currents and appropriate interventions. Professional social workers are equipped with competencies which makes them unique in the areas of professional practice. The wide range of practice settings leaves the discipline with the scope of sharing this expertise in almost all domains related to human life - case work and counselling, schools, correctional institutions, family courts, geriatric care, child care institutions, disability, health care system, adoption, foster care, community development, social policy, governance and welfare administration. This prospect and development of social work discipline owes to the scientific and up-to-date curriculum and pedagogy.

Professional social work engages itself in addressing human problems through remedial, preventive, developmental approaches deployed through major segments – Social Work Education, Social Work Practice, Social Welfare Administration, Policy Formulation and Social Work Research. The current study identified the key domains where professional social work competencies can be employed in addressing and preventing this issue of online use/abuse and exploitation among children and adolescents.

9.2.1 Social work education:

Professional social work education acknowledges working with children as one of the key areas of practice and hence developing a comprehensive understanding of rights of children, psycho social needs of children, their development, personality and behaviour, the influence and impact of environment on the growth and development of children is of prime importance in the curriculum. The curriculum is designed in such a way to develop specific competencies to work with children. Hence professional social workers are trained to professionally engage children in remedial, curative and developmental capacities. The study

reiterates the relevance of social work trainees engaging in discussions and discourses with practitioners in the field to understand the field realities and scale up their knowledge and skills in engaging this cohort.

9.2.2 Social work practice:

Interventions are framed by employing professional social work methods through remedial, restorative, preventive and development approaches. Techniques of counselling, psychotherapy, psycho-social support, case management, life skill training, parent skill training, organisational and institutional enhancement, system linkages and system development, programme development, monitoring and evaluation come under the umbrella of comprehensive programmes for children and adolescents. Mental health interventions such as Behavioural interventions, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, Group therapy and Group counselling can be given to those children who are in need of such services. Group interventions not only help children identify the risks and get away with that but also it catalyses self-healing and curing in victims of abuse and trauma. Competent manpower has to be mobilised and materialised for this purpose.

9.2.3 Policy formulation and social welfare administration:

Professional social work practice includes policy analysis, policy formulation and policy interventions. It calls for the expertise in reviewing existing policies by ascertaining practice knowledge and evidence, make amendments, formulate new policies and ensure programme implementation based on the policy framework. The current services for children can be coordinated under a single umbrella and can ensure continuous monitoring, evaluation, follow up and documentation. The strategic measures suggested by the research are not one time interventions but it is to be regularly and periodically administered to keep up the stakeholders in the safety loop.

9.2.4 Social Work research:

The study identified further areas to explore under this domain of cyber exploitation and safety.

1. Influence and impact of early induction to internet and social media – a study among children aged 3 – 5 years and 5 – 10 years
2. The presence of social media networking and vulnerability towards sexual abuse – a study among the victims child sexual abuse.

3. Cyber engagements among Children in Conflict with Law – exploring the offenders.

4. Role of parents in ensuring safety of children in cyber world – intervention study

5. The strategies adopted for ensuring safety of children in cyber world and its impact on children

CONCLUSION

Kerala, as a state high in social indices, has polarised development initiatives in the service sector mainly in education and health. Technological advancements have conquered the sectors leaving the older generation handicapped. Nevertheless, the youngsters aced the context as it opened an array of opportunities for them to learn, earn and grow. The fascinating cyber world has conquered us in every little way it could. Children are the most vibrant yet vulnerable group who fall prey to this mesmerising trap. Realising the risk and the threat, the State has adopted measures to protect its young generation but people are being bombarded with latest knowledge which overrode the protective measures in use. The State witnessed a tremendous increase in the number of crimes and antisocial activities on online platforms against children and adolescents in the last three years. The Covid-19 pandemic has added fuel to the fire as engaging in virtual platforms became a necessity rather than a choice.

In this backdrop, to understand more about this problem, to ascertain the facts, to analyse the individual experience of the stakeholders, to deliberate and formulate action plans including policy interventions, a study on Cyber Exploitation and Safety of Children in Kerala has been done fully sponsored by National Human Rights Commission. This research journey was enriching and insightful in terms of understanding the length and breadth of the issue, revelation on cases being not reported, the attitude of the offenders, victims, the grooming pattern, the awareness and attitude of the children, parents and people in the immediate environment of children and what is the way forward in dealing this issue. It was surprising to notice how victims perceive these threats, to what extent things have become normalised in our society that further leads to jeopardy.

Covid-19 restrictions and protocols were really a challenge in conducting the study. But what the research team noticed is, all the stakeholders seemed to be supportive in terms of sharing their experiences and rendering information. We noticed a unanimous attitude among the respondents by being cooperative as they reiterated the importance of this issue to be

addressed in a rightful and scientific way. The most perplexed group of respondents were those in the schools as they encounter vivid cases of this sort in their official realm.

Cases depicted diverse patterns of online exploitation, cyber space being the majorly used platform for grooming and engaging. The dangers unnoticed and ignored are still major concerns among the participants of the research. A multilevel and multifaceted approach is required to address and prevent this menace which is delineated in the suggestions of the report. These interventions have to be done at individual level, institutional level, programme level and policy level. Technological innovations to combat this evil have to be invited and encouraged. Our young brains have to be motivated and groomed to fight for their rights.

The present study was an attempt to understand the extent of cyber exploitation and safety of children in Kerala. The study identified the need for differential and need based interventions to the risk groups which will prevent bigger mental health damage and social problems. Going through this process was challenging yet enlightening for the researcher as it revealed subtle realities and unravelled the enormity of the problem. The support and cooperation rendered by the stakeholders through their inputs were insightful to understand the relevance given to the issue. The study has brought forth evidence-based information which has policy implications at national level.

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A youth was attacked for allegedly chatting with a girl through **WhatsApp***. According to the complaint lodged by the relatives of the youth, police registered a case against the girl's brother and some others who attacked him.* *https://english.mathrubhumi.com/news/crime-beat/youth-attacked-for-allegedly-chatting-with-girl-in-tirur-minor-boys-attacked-1.5933447* *Date: 29/08/2021; Newspaper: Mathrubhumi*

82. 16-year-old boy loses Rs 36 lakh playing online mobile games. (2022, June 4). *The Tribune.* https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/16-year-old-boy-loses-rs-36-lakh-playing-online-mobile-games-400962

83. **13-year-old spends Rs 40000, on online game, hangs self after mother scolds him.** *In Madhya Pradesh, a 13 year old boy had killed himself after he realized that he lost a huge amount of money by falling into the fraudulent traps hidden besides the online games.* *https://www.indiatoday.in/cities/story/13-year-old-suicide-spent-rs-40000-on-online-game-1835056-2021-07-31* *Date: 31/07/2021l; Newspaper: India Today*

84. **51 cases filed in 2021-22 so far for misusing online study platforms: Kerala CM.** *Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan said that of the 51 complaints that police received, eight were lodged after verification of information and probe into them is underway.* *https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/others/51-cases-filed-in-2021-22-so-far-for-misusing-online-study-platforms-kerala-cm-101627991213945.html* *Date: 03/08/2021; Newspaper: Hindustan Times*

85. **കൗൺസലിങ്' ശരീരഭാഗങ്ങളെപ്പറ്റി; വാട്സാപ് മറ്റൊരു ഫോണിൽ, ഞെട്ടിച്ച് ഇ–ക്ലാസ്മുറികൾ...**
ഓൺലൈൻ ക്ലാസ് നടക്കുന്നതിനിടെ അധ്യാപികയുടെ വാട്സാപ് അക്കൗണ്ട് സ്വന്തം ഫോണിലേക്കു മാറ്റിയ വിദ്യാർഥി,ഓൺലൈൻ ക്ലാസിൽ നുഴഞ്ഞുകയറി നഗ്നതാ പ്രദർശനം നടത്തിയ അജ്ഞാതൻ,അധ്യാപിക ക്ലാസെടുക്കുന്ന ദൃശ്യങ്ങൾ ഉപയോഗിച്ചു മോശം ട്രോളുണ്ടാക്കിയവർ, ഓൺലൈൻ ക്ലാസിനായി ഉണ്ടാക്കിയ വാട്സാപ് ഗ്രൂപ്പിലേക്ക് അശ്ലീല സന്ദേശം അയച്ച അധ്യാപകൻ, ഓൺലൈൻ ക്ലാസിൽ നുഴഞ്ഞുകയറി വിദ്യാർഥിനിയുടെ വ്യക്തിഗത വിവരങ്ങൾ ശേഖരിച്ച് ഫോണിൽ കൗൺസലിങ് നടത്താൻ വിളിച്ച അപരിചിതൻ.പരാതികൾ വർധിച്ചതോടെ ഓൺലൈൻ ക്ലാസുകൾക്കായി പൊലീസ് പ്രത്യേക പ്രത്യേക മാർഗരേഖയും പുറത്തിറക്കി...*https://www.manoramaonline.com/news/latest-news/2021/08/14/kerala-online-classes-turning-into-a-hub-of-cyber-crimes.html* *Date: 14/08/2021; Newspaper: Malayala Manorama*

86. *ഓൺലൈൻ ഗെയിമിന് കുട്ടികളെ അടിമകളാക്കി പണം ഊറ്റുന്നു; 'മരണക്കളി' തുടരണോ?..*

The parents who brought their son with the mobile phone for attending the online classes was finally forced to silently witness their child's dead body. Addiction to the online games had finally resulted in committing suicide. *https://www.manoramanews.com/news/breaking-news/2021/07/06/teen-ends-life-after-father-chides-him-for-playing-online-games-06.html* *Date: 06/07/2021; Newspaper: Manorama News*

ANNEXURES

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Study on Extent of Cyber Exploitation and Safety of Children in Kerala

INFORMED CONSENT

The **National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)** in association with Bharata Mata College, Thrikkakara is conducting a study on **'The Extent of Cyber Exploitation and Safety of Children in Kerala'**.

As a part of the research study, the data is collected from 6 districts of Kerala state - Thiruvananthapuram, Pathanamthitta, Ernakulam, Idukki, Kozhikode and Wayanad. The respondents are children in the classes 6th to 12th, parents having children in the above said classes and others who closely associate with children in their professional front as key informants.

In this regard, your participation in the study is highly valued and appreciated by giving your valuable knowledge inputs. Nevertheless it is not mandatory. You are free to opt out from the call any time. We assure that the data collected will be kept strictly confidential and will be used only for the purpose of this research.

Thanking you,

Sincerely,

Dr. Elsa Mary Jacob
Principal Investigator

Annexure – 2

Study on Extent of Cyber Exploitation and Safety of Children in Kerala
Interview Schedule for Children

Sl. No.   District   Rural / Urban

Age	Gender	Class	Syllabus

1. Occupation of parent

   Not occupied   Business   Casual labourer

   Pvt. Firms   IT employee   Govt. employee

   Self-employed   Others ………………………..

2. Do you use the internet / social media?   Yes   No

3. How do you access your internet / social media accounts?

   Mobile   Laptop Desktop   Tab   Others…............

4. Which are the social media in which you are currently active and number of a/cs for each (in Brackets):

   Instagram   Facebook   WhatsApp   Twitter

   Snapchat   Telegram   Pinterest   Skype

   Tinder   Line   LinkedIn   Viber

   Reddit   YouTube   WeChat   Clubhouse

   Others   (None)

5. Average screen time per day?

   (a) Less than 2 hrs (b) 2-5 hrs (c) 5-8 hrs (d) More than 8 hours ……………………..

6. For which activity do you spend most of your time on the Internet?

   (a) Academic ..……   (b) Gaming …….. (c) Cinema/ Youtube/ Series ……..……

   (d) Social media…………. (e) Others (Specify)……

7. How did you get the gadgets and its cost?

   Bought by parents   Gifted by someone   Bought by me

   Already at home   Pressurise Parents

   Others (Specify)……………..   Cost…………………….

8. How many email IDs do you have? ……………

      Purpose of the same………………..

9. Do you have a Mail ID with another Name?   Yes   No

10. What is your Profile picture?..

11. Mode of using the gadgets / Internet

      (a) Public space (b) Private space (c) Both public and private space

12. Do you face any issues related to Social Media/Internet usage (Yes/No)

13. If yes, what are they?

      ……………………………………………………………………

14. Timing

- Wakeup time ………….
- Bed time ……………..

15. Do you have a habit of waking up in between your sleep to use online platforms? (Yes/No)

16. Have you noticed any changes in your life due to the use of the Internet and other online platforms?

Food patterns and timings	Communication and interaction	Sleep time/ Patterns
Studies	Health	Behaviour
Play	Social relationship	Others………….

17. Average data usage per day?

- Mobile data………………… MB/GB
- Wi Fi……………….…… MB/ GB

Have you / your friends, family members or any others that you know ever experienced any of these situations?

	Yourself	Friends
18. Have you ever experienced a Cyber threat		
19. have you lost money?		

20. Have you ever met with someone you only knew online? Platform…………..……………………….…		
21. Has anyone forced you to be online? Intention………………………………….…		
22. Does anyone send you messages, images or any other with sexual content?		
23. Has anyone asked / forced you to share images or other sexual content?		
24. Does anyone ask for live stream videos of a sexual nature / online chat? Platform…………………………….…		
25. Does anyone hack gadgets / accounts? Intention………………………………….…		
26. Have you tried to hack the gadgets / accounts of others? Intention…………………………….…		

27. Do you know anyone personally whose life is affected due to the excessive use of social media / internet? (Yes / No)

28. What was the incident and what all are the ways by which it affected the life of the person?

29. Did your parents adopt any measures to ensure your online safety? If yes, explain

30. What measures have you taken to keep yourself safe online?
   - Sharing less personal information
   - Manage security settings
   - Updating passwords
   - Not visiting unknown websites

- Accept friend request from people I know
- Antivirus software
- Firewall

Investigator's remarks:

Date: Name of Investigator: Signature

Study on Extent of Cyber Exploitation and Safety of Children in Kerala
Interview Schedule for Parents

Rural / Urban

1. Respondent: Father [   ]   Mother [   ]

   (Tick the boxes whichever suitable)

2. No. of children:

3. Place of residence:

4. Family Composition

	Gender	Relationship	Age	Occupation	Education	School/ Board
Head of the Family		--------------				
Spouse						
1st child						
2nd child						
3rd child						
4th child						
5th child						
Others in the family						
Average Family Income						

5. Do you use internet or social media (Yes/No)

6. How much time do you spend on mobile on a day? ………………………………….

7. How useful is the internet for you?..

8. How many gadgets are available at your home to access internet / social media

   Smart Phone ………   Laptop ……   Desktop ………… Tab ……. Others ……..

9. Do your children own their own gadgets (Yes/No)

10. How much money do you spend monthly for your children to use the internet/social media?

☐ Less than 500 ☐ 500 – 1000 ☐ 1000 – 1500 ☐ Above 1500

11. For what all purposes do your child/ren use gadgets and the internet?
    (a) Academic (b) Gaming (c) Cinema/film (d) Social media (e) Others (Specify)………………………………………….(f) Don't know ………………

12. How much time each day does your child spend on the phone/internet?.............................
    (a) Academic ..…… (b) Gaming ………... (c) Cinema/film ……. (d) Social media (e) Others (Specify)…………………………(f) Don't know ………………

13. Do you think children are safe on internet / social media? (Yes/No)

14. What are the risk factors associated with the use of social media / internet?

…………………………………………………………………………………………………….

15. Does your child have a social media account? (Yes / No)

Instagram	Facebook	WhatsApp	Twitter
Snapchat	Telegram	Pinterest	Skype
Tinder	Line	LinkedIn	Viber
Reddit	YouTube	WeChat	Clubhouse
Others………………………………		(None)	

16. Do you oversee or monitor your child while they use the internet/social media? (Yes / No)

17. Do you feel that your child is using mobile phones and the internet excessively? (Yes / No)

18. Do you have to recharge your internet pack due to excessive use of internet / social media on your child's demand? (Yes / No)

19. If yes, have you tried to control it? How?

Do you take any actions to control and keep your child safe while using internet and online platforms?

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Yes ☐   No ☐   Not Aware ☐

- € Parental control Applications / Softwares
- € Limiting screen time
- € Changing the security settings on gadgets, browsers etc.
- € Not providing the gadgets
- € Being friends and followed in social media
- € History check
- € Speaking about the risk factors associated with internet and social media
- € Speaking about your concerns about internet safety
- € Prohibition of using internet and gadgets in Private Space (bedrooms)
- € Nothing
- € Other………………………………………….

20. Do you have any rules in home for child/ren on the internet usage and its timings?

21. Are you aware of any parental control apps for ensuring safety of your child online? If yes, what are they?

22. If yes, do you use any such apps?

23. Do you use any software that limits strangers to be in touch with your child?

24. Do you take any steps for the betterment of your child's internet experience?

25. Does your child/ren follow and understand your concerns about internet safety?

26. Do you check the history of sites visited by your child/ren?

27. Have you ever talked to your child about the internet facilities and its safety? If yes, how often do you talk about it?

28. Have you observed any changes in your child/ren after they started using internet / online platforms? Share .... :

29. Do you notice any change in your child/ren after they started using the internet / social media? If yes, specify….describe….

- € Sleep time
- € Food patterns and timings
- € Health
- € Communication and interaction
- € Behaviour
- € Play
- € Others………….

€   Nothing

30. Has your child shared about any unpleasant experiences that they or their friends have undergone while using the internet/online platforms?

31. Have you ever come across any experiences shared with personally known children/families regarding online exploitation?

32. If yes, can you share that?

33. Have you done anything to help such children/families to solve such issues?

34. Does your child/ren know about unauthorised sites and what to do if something disturbs them? If yes, how did they get to know about it?

Has your child or children of your friends, family members or any others have undergone:

Cyber Exploitation	Your Child	Friends	Family	Others
(Specify the platforms of each) Cyber threat Cyber Stalking Hacking Cyber bulling Sexual exploitation Financial exploitation Others (Specify)				
Incident				
Measures you have taken to solve such issues, if any.				

35. As a parent, can you help your child/ren if any unforeseen online encounters happen? If yes, how?

36. Does your child know about the dos and don'ts of online behaviour? (Yes / No)

37. Have you noticed them taking enough measures to be safe online?

€   Anti-virus software

€   De-activate / Deleted social media account

€   Keeping private accounts

€   Managing security settings

€   Updation of Passwords

      €   Accept friend requests only from people I know

      €   Other………………………….

      €   Nothing

      €   Don't Know

38. Any other specific descriptions of the respondent

39. Any other observations done by the investigator

40. Investigator's remarks:

Date: Name of Investigator: Signature

Study on Extent of Cyber Exploitation and Safety of Children in Kerala
Interview Guide for Key informants

1. Name

2. Position/Designation

3. Contact Number

4. Organization/institution

5. Place/locality of your work

6. In what way are you associated with children?

7. How long have you been working with children?

8. What type of cases could you generally observe among children?

9. In what way have you come across children in social media and internet usage?

10. Can you share specific contexts or incidents?

11. How have you helped the child in such situations?

12. Could you follow it up and what was the result?

13. What do you think or see as contributing factors for such incidences?

14. What are the preventive measures that can be taken at different levels? (*Other domains - Children, parents, schools, police, govt. etc.*)

15. General suggestions to address the use, abuse and exploitation of children in social media.

16. What could be the perceived roles of your organisations to address this issue?

Date: Name of Investigator: Signature

Study on Extent of Cyber Exploitation and Safety of Children in Kerala

FGD Guide

1. Introduction of the research team and the purpose of the study.
2. Self-introduction of the participants.
3. Introduction to the topic.
4. For what purposes do we use internet/virtual platforms?
5. For what purposes do the children use internet/virtual platforms?
6. On an average, how much time do they (children) spend on the internet/online platforms?
7. Which gadgets do they use and are familiar with for accessing the internet?
8. What are the threats we foresee in these engagements?
9. What are the steps we take to control the use of these gadgets and online engagements?
10. Have you heard of cyber threats?
11. Have you come across incidences where children have been exploited in any way in online engagements?
12. How have you managed such cases?
13. What are the changes you have noticed among children after they are exposed to online engagements?
14. What are your suggestions to prevent this?
    - Parents role
    - Children
    - Institutions and systems of formal social control including Police and Legal systems
15. Any other remarks

Consolidated list of Key Informants

Thiruvananthapuram	Pathanamthitta	Ernakulam	Idukki	Kozhikode	Wayanad
Anganwadi Teacher – Karimadom	Anganwadi Teacher Omallor	Anganwadi Teacher – Division 60, Thevara	Anganwadi Teacher – Madathumkadavu, Mariyapuram Panchayat	Youth Club Member Koduvally	Anganwadi Teacher Sulthan Batheri
Anganwadi Teacher – Attukulangara	Anganwadi Teacher Thottakonam	Youth Club Member, Samathwa, St. Theresas, Ernakulam	Anganwadi Teacher - Anganwadi – 42, Udhaya City	Youth Club Member Vadakara	Anganwadi Teacher
Youth club member Trivandrum City	Youth Club Member CPIM-Kulanada	Youth Club Member, Jesus Youth, Thevara, Kochi	Youth Club -Legal Advocate	Cyber Police Officer	NCC Member Don Bosco School Sulthan Batheri
Youth club member Fireflies Club. Trivandrum	Youth Club Member Omallor Women Cell	NSS Volunteer SCMS School of Engineering and Technology	Youth Club - NGO staff – with children	Sub Inspector, Cyber Police	NCC Member Don Bosco School Sulthan Batheri
NSS leader St. Mary's High School, Pattom,	NSS Member Gov. Higher Secondary School Omallor	NSS Volunteer SCMS School of Engineering and Technology, Kalamassery, Kochi	NSS Volunteer St. Joseph college, Moolamattom, Idukki	ORC District Coordinator	Youth Representative Manathavadi
NSS leader St. Mary's Pattom	NSS Member Gov. Higher Secondary School Omallor	ICDS Supervisor, Aroor	NSS Volunteer St. Joseph college, Moolamattom	Kaval Coordinator, Manusha School of Social Research and HRD, Vadakara	Youth Representative Lakkidi

School Counsellor GKSGV & HSS Vellanad	SI Cyber Cell	Lawyer, High Court, Ernakulam	Coordinator Kaval Project, Dheenadhaya Seva Trust	Counsellor ORC	Sub Inspector, Cyber Cell
School Counsellor GHS, Chalai	DYSP Cyber Cell	School Counsellor, GGHS Udayamperoor	Counsellor – GHS Vazhathoppu	Principal PBS School Kozhikode	Cyber Cell Wayanad
ADGP, Director of Vigilance and Anto Corruption Beaureau, Trivandrum	Psycho-Socio Counselor Thykkavu Govt HSS Pathanamthitta	Anganwadi Teacher, Nr. Cardinal School, Judgemukku, Kochi	Counsellor – Ekalavya MRS, Painavu	Principal St.Joseph HSS Kozhikode	School Counsellor Sarvodaya School, Kalpetta
KAVAL Coordinator – Trivandrun City	DCPO Pathanamthitta	Station House Officer, Thevara Police Station	Principal, Sacred Heart English Medium High School, Moolamattom	Teacher PBS HSS Kozhikode	School Counselor SKMJ, Kalpetta
Principal - Sree Sharadhadevi Sisuvihar UP School, Maruthankuzhy	ORC Project Assistant, Pathanamthitta	Sub Inspector, Perumbavur	Vice Principal, De Paul Public School, Thodupuzha	Teacher Pbs Hss Kozhikode	LCPO, DCPU Wayanad
Special Juvenile Police Officer	School Management Authority - District Project coordinator – Samagra Shiksha Kerala	School Counselor, Kalamassery Govt, Higher School	Teacher, APJ Abdul Kalam School, Thodupuzha, Idukki	Junior Red Cross Society District Coordinator	Kaval Coordinator, Wayanad rural
Teacher - Cotton Hill Girls higher secondary School, Vazhuthacaud	PTA President Omalloor	Principal, Mary Matha Higher Secondary School, Thrikkakara	Teacher, APJ Abdul Kalam School, Thodupuzha, Idukki	NCC Nodal Coordinator PBS HSS Kozhikod	Principal SKMJ Kalpetta

Teacher – St. Mary's HSS Pattom	Principal VHSC Kaipattoor	Teacher, Rajagiri Public School, Kalamassery	Anganwadi Teacher, Rajakkad	Anganwadi Teacher Kunnamangalm	Principal Sarvodhaya School Arinchermala
Teacher – GKSVG & HSS, Vellanad	Teacher GHSS Omalloor	Asst. Director, Rajagiri Higher Secondary School, Kalamassery	Care taker, Child Care Institution, Thodupuzha	Anganwadi Teacher Arambram	School Manager Sarvodhaya School Arinchermala
SPC member, Cotton Hill School, Trivandrum	Teacher GHSS Thykkavu	NSS Volunteer, Bharata Mata College, Kochi	Caseworker, KAVAL, Rural	NCC Member St.Joseph HSS Kozhikode	School PTA President & Psychologist SKMJ Wayanad
ADGP, Police Head Quarters, Trivandrum	VHSC Principal Omallor	Youth Worker, Moozhikulam	District Child Protection Officer, Thodupuzha, Idukki	NCC Member St.Joseph HSS Kozhikode	Teacher SKMJ Wayanad
Principal Psychiatrist, Govt. Medical College, Trivandrum	Anganwadi Teacher Panthalam	Student Police Cadet volunteer, Aluva	Case worker, KAVAL project, Thodupuzha	School Counselor St. Joseph HSS Kozhikode	Teacher SKMJ Wayanad
IT Head, KIMS Hospital, Trivandrum	Anganwadi Teacher Arthilmukk	Vigilance Officer, Muvattupuzha	Special Juvenile Police Officer	Special Juvenile Police Officer Kozhikode, City Circle	Anganwadi Teacher Cheegodu
Coordinator, DCPU, Trivandrum	Special Juvenile Police Officer Pathanamthitta Rural	Tribal Hostel Warden, Kuttampuzha	SPC member, Govt. High School, Thodupuzha	Special Juvenile Police Officer Kozhikode Rural	DCPO, Wayanad

Consolidated list of FGDs

District	Category of participants & Number	Venue
Thiruvananthapuram	Teachers (9)	Govt. Vocational and HSS Vellanadu, Thiruvananthapuram
	Parents (8)	Madathuvilakom Residents Association Peroorkada, Thiruvananthapuram
	Students (11)	St. Mary's Higher Secondary School Pattom, Thiruvananthapuram
	Students (10)	Govt. HSS, Pulluvila
Pathanamthitta	Teachers (8)	Govt. HSS, Thycode Pathanamthitta
	Parents (9)	Govt. HSS, Thottakonam
	Students (15)	Govt. HSS, Omalloor
	Students (15)	Govt. HSS, Thottakonam
Ernakulam	Teachers (8)	Govt. Vocational and HSS Kalamassery
	Teachers (15)	Mary Mata HSS, Thrikkakara
	Parents (11)	Bharata Mata College Ernakulam
	Students (12)	Thevara Residential Area, Division 60, Ernakulam
	Students (15)	St. Thomas Higher Secondary School, Perumanoor
Idukki	Teachers (8)	Sacred Heart Eng. Medium School Moolamattom
	Parents (7)	Parents from Munnar, Marayoor and Adimali, Online FGD
	Students (11)	Ayalkoottam, Karimannoor
	Students (9)	Jospuram Sunday School, Rajakkad
Kozhikode	Teachers (8)	PBS School, Kozhikode
	Parents (9)	PBS School, Kozhikode
	Students (15)	PBS HSS, Kozhikode
	Students (15)	Tuition Centre, Koduvalli
Wayanad	Teachers (9)	Sarvodaya HSS
	Parents (8)	Parents from Tribal Setting, Kattikulam Mananthawadi, Wayanad
	Students (12)	Sarvodaya HS, Wayanad
	Students (15)	SMJ, Kalpetta

CASES

SOUTHERN REGION

SRC01

The client is a 17-year-old boy, studying in 12th grade of one of the leading aided schools in Trivandrum. His father is a government servant and mother is a homemaker. He has a younger brother. The family is residing in the urban area of Trivandrum District. The client looks physically fit and healthy. The case is referred by his teacher to the school counselor. This case was reported for absenteeism from school and is reported for having very low academic scores. He has been found absent from 11th grade final exams and was not consistent in studies in his 12th grade, because of which he failed in two subjects in 12th grade. He was previously an above average student but now his motivation has gone down considerably. The client is the elder child of a middle-class family. He performed well academically until the pandemic forced the shift to online education. He had good interpersonal relationships and a smooth life at school and home. However, the shift to online education gave him more opportunities to engage in online platforms, leading to excessive screen time. He used to sit in front of the screen throughout the night until 5 in the morning and then wake up only at 5.30 in the evening, which became his regular pattern. He ate only once a day and suffered from severe constipation. Due to his fear of constipation, he had a very low food intake. Upon detailed investigation, it was found that he had been suffering from severe constipation for the last seven years, which may have contributed to his current behavior. He maintained constant online connections with his schoolmates and seniors, which made him more isolated from his family. He avoided family interactions, family functions, and visiting relatives. His excessive screen time led to aggressive behavior, making it difficult for anyone to control him. If someone disturbed his sleep, he responded with physical violence. There were instances where he even hurt his own mother for waking him up from sleep. He shouted and raised his voice in response to his parents' calls and requests. He picked quarrels with his parents for restricting his online engagements, used bad language, and behaved rudely with them. The parents were afraid to communicate with their son, and he seemed to make his own rules in the family. They found it hard to control or manage him, and as a result, they had to shift him to his mother's sister's house. The parents were unable to accept the changes in their child's behavior, which led to increased anxiety in

the family and hampered family functioning. The excessive use of the phone affected his biological clock, studies, and food habits. Consequently, the child started skipping classes and exams, and his sleeping pattern changed, affecting his health and behavior. He lost several kilograms, and his health was affected. The parents were afraid to confront their son, as he easily got annoyed and showed aggressive and abusive behavior. The family environment became stressful and the parents experienced emotional distress due to the situation. A tendency of excessive screen use was also observed in the younger brother. The initial step taken to address the issue was to provide medication to alleviate the constipation problem and offer psycho-social support to both the child and parents. A team of professionals with different specializations was involved in the intervention process. The child and the family received counseling and psycho-social support to manage the issue. To provide a conducive environment for studying, the child was moved to his aunt's house, where he could concentrate better. The child was guided through counseling and behavior modification techniques, such as activity scheduling and insight-building. He reappeared for his Plus One examinations and successfully cleared them, as well as his 12th-grade exams. To regulate the behavior of the younger child, the parents were given education and training. Communication was identified as a gap between the parent and child, so tasks were assigned to improve their communication patterns and relationships. The child and parents were helped to develop appropriate insight to work towards resolving the issue. The intervention involved the participation of the child's teacher, counselor, social worker, and extended family members such as his mother's sister and father's brother.

KEY FINDINGS

The case presented highlights the harmful effects of excessive screen time on a 17-year-old boy's academic performance, behavior, and family functioning. The shift to online education due to the pandemic provided him with more opportunities to engage in online platforms, leading to an increase in screen time, sleep deprivation, and poor eating habits. This excessive use of technology led to isolation from family, aggressive behavior, and a tendency to make his own rules. The child's parents were afraid to confront their son due to his aggressive behavior, which further worsened the situation.

The case also highlights the need for psycho-social support and intervention to manage the issue. A team of professionals with different specializations was involved in the intervention process, providing counseling and behavior modification techniques to the child and family. The child was moved to his aunt's house to provide a conducive environment for studying,

and his parents were given education and training to regulate the behavior of the younger child. Communication was identified as a gap between the parent and child, and tasks were assigned to improve their communication patterns and relationships. Overall, the case highlights the need for parents and schools to be aware of the harmful effects of excessive screen time on children's academic performance, behavior, and mental health. Cyber exploitation and safety of children should be a priority, and parents and schools should take measures to regulate children's screen time and promote healthy online behavior.

SRC02

The client is a 17-year-old boy studying in 12th grade, residing in Kollam district. His father is an advocate, and his mother is a government servant. He has a younger brother studying in 3rd standard. The parents brought the problem to the notice of the social worker. The boy was spending excessive amounts of time on social media and was found to be confined within the four walls of his room. He hardly came out of his room, and when he did, he behaved aggressively and impulsively with the people around him, including family members. He showed no interest in anything other than social media platforms and seemed to be living in a virtual world. His parents found it challenging to communicate with him and deal with his behavior. The client is a 17-year-old boy from an affluent family, residing in Kollam district. Though the family was very much concerned about his well-being, they were motivated to seek help. The boy had a compulsive use of video games that progressively interfered with his interpersonal relationships and motivation to study. He started playing video games at the age of 15 during the pandemic, which changed his lifestyle and affected his sleep pattern. He lost interest in his studies, developed an erratic sleep pattern, and had irregular eating habits. His BMI was checked, and it was found that he was 17 kg less than the ideal weight required for his height, resulting in several physical problems. As a result of these circumstances, his social interactions with peers were exceptionally limited, and the time he spent outside his own home or room was close to zero. He spent most of his time indoors and increasingly resorted to video games, video making, and watching animated episodes for entertainment, spending around 10 to 12 hours on screen. He used to get irritated whenever his parents asked him to stop playing games. Due to his screen addiction, family dynamics also changed, leading to interpersonal problems between parents. He did not attend online or offline classes, resulting in him failing all exams. His overuse of phones affected his biological clock and food habits, reducing his concentration level and interest in studies. There was a

communication gap between the parent and child, with the child's communication or interaction being only through social media. His younger brother also started showing addictive behavior, part of modeling behavior, though parents did not seem overly concerned. Parents also had some health issues, leading to emotional stress. His aggressive nature was to that extent that it became necessary to resort to police intervention to control him. The parents consulted a reputed organization and sought help to address their emotional problems and the child's problems as well. The treatment plan was to reduce the dysfunction caused by excessive gaming, including sleep disturbances and irregular eating habits, and to work on academic grades. The treatment included motivational therapy, behavior modification techniques, a formulated daily timetable, restriction in screen use, and a healthy diet plan. Family meetings were organized to alleviate their concerns about screen use and to teach them techniques to improve their interactions with the child. They also rewarded the child for non-technology-related tasks. Family group meetings were arranged that were insisted to be attended by the entire family, including home visits. The social worker involved in the case provided psycho-social support that enhanced the social functioning of the client and family members. The child started following a healthy diet, interacted more with his family members, and started concentrating on academics, changing the situation for the better. Currently, the child is in the follow-up stage. Grandparents have been a constant source of support that was mobilized during the problem-solving process.

KEY FINDINGS

This case study demonstrates the severe consequences of cyber exploitation on children in Kerala. The excessive use of social media and video games has led to physical, psychological, and social problems for the child involved, including sleep disturbances, irregular eating habits, and reduced academic performance. The child's behavior became aggressive and communication gaps developed with his parents. The case emphasizes the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to address the issue of cyber exploitation. The treatment plan included motivational therapy, behavior modification techniques, a formulated daily timetable, restriction in screen use, and a healthy diet plan. Family meetings were organized to alleviate concerns about screen use and to teach techniques to improve interactions with the child. Psycho-social support was provided to enhance the social functioning of the client and family members. Overall, the case illustrates the need for greater awareness and action to ensure the safety of children in Kerala. Parents, educators, mental

health professionals, and policymakers must work together to prevent and address the negative impact of cyber exploitation on children's mental and physical health.

SRC03

The client is a 15-year-old girl studying in 10th standard. Her father is a businessman and mother is a housewife, residing in Trivandrum. The child entered into an unhealthy love relationship with a boy that she met online through social media. The child is an average and well-behaved student. During the pandemic, the girl was exposed to Clubhouse, which was one of the prominent social media platforms at that time. She was an active member of Clubhouse and joined a music group. She listened to a person's song and enjoyed it. She then sent a request to him through Instagram and connected with him. He is a middle-aged man from a different district. The child fell into a relationship with the stranger, who repeatedly asked the girl to do a nude video call. There was a disagreement since she declined the request, but she eventually showed her nude body during the video call. A girl messaged her on the same phone two or three days later and claimed to be his girlfriend. The child then started to feel depressed, and his friend threatened her by showing her naked pictures. Negligible parenting is one of the factors. The parents are least bothered and never took care of their child. They had no knowledge of what was happening with their child. Hence, this home environment was conducive to growing this kind of relationship. The incident affected the child. She lost interest in studies as she was fully committed to the stranger. The concentration level of the child was also reduced. She faced depression, and this impacted her social interaction. The stranger's threat frightened the child. She lost interest in interacting with others. A social worker was involved in the case, and only one session was completed. A multidisciplinary team was involved in the helping process. It was decided to give counseling and psychological support to the child and the family to deal with the issue. The child was given mentoring and educational support. The perpetrator knew how to attract and influence the victim. Classes on cyber exploitation and relationship building were planned to create awareness for the child. The parents were also advised to be more careful about the child and build a good family relationship.

KEY FINDINGS

The case highlights the extent of cyber exploitation and its impact on children's safety in Kerala. The case involves a 15-year-old girl who entered into an unhealthy relationship with

a middle-aged man she met online through social media. This led to her being threatened with the release of nude images, causing severe psychological distress. Negligible parenting was identified as a contributing factor in the case, as the parents were unaware of what was happening with their child. This emphasizes the need for parents to be more aware of their children's online activities and to build stronger family relationships to prevent cyber exploitation. The case also demonstrates the detrimental effects of cyber exploitation on children's mental and physical health, academic performance, and social interactions. The girl lost interest in studies, faced depression, and withdrew from social interactions, leading to reduced concentration levels. The multidisciplinary approach taken in the case involved counseling and psychological support for both the child and the family. Classes on cyber exploitation and relationship building were also planned to raise awareness and prevent future incidents. Overall, the case highlights the urgent need for greater awareness and action to address the issue of cyber exploitation and ensure the safety of children in Kerala. This requires a comprehensive approach involving parents, educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers.

SRC04

The client is a 17-year-old boy from Trivandrum, residing with his grandparents and younger brother. His parents are separated, and he discontinued his studies in class 12 to pursue Chenda Melam. He has a history of maintaining fake social media accounts and was charged under POCSO for penetrating sex with his girlfriend at the age of 18. He has also been diagnosed with PTSD due to a past sexual abuse experience when he was in 4th standard.

The boy initiates love relationships with girls by showcasing his talents on social media and engages in sexting and watching pornographic content. He uses aggressive and abusive sexual comments towards family members and others. The girls trust him blindly and get trapped in the relationship, only for him to ask for a breakup after fulfilling his needs. The family dysfunction, peer group influence, and community are considered as causal factors for the boy's behavior. The child had a challenging childhood as he did not receive love, care or physical proximity from his parents due to their separation and other personal issues. The biological father failed to provide proper care and protection. Unfortunately, he committed suicide due to domestic issues, which further impacted the child's mental state. As a result, the child had to stay with his grandparents and move from one place to another. The child

belongs to a vulnerable community where alcohol consumption is common, especially among men. The child has stable earnings from Chenda Melam programs, but he uses his earnings for alcohol consumption and his needs. The grandparent has complained that the child does not support the family. The child's peers also engage in Melam and other activities on social media, creating reels, fusions and exhibiting their talents. These vulnerabilities increase the chances of recidivism. The child's behavior influences his peers and even his younger brother, who starts to repudiate school and studies. The child has been charged under POCSO, and the case has caused isolation from society. The child is undergoing psychosocial intervention, and the supporting team includes social workers, caseworkers, legal service authorities and rehabilitation centers. Mental health assessments have identified that the child has Conduct Disorder and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Medications and treatments have been provided, and the child's condition seems to be improving. During the intervention, the child has developed his vocation, family interactions and rituals. However, there is a risk due to the discontinuation of follow-up and medication. The child knows how to influence others, and the people associated with him are also at risk. Hence, the intervention needs to be extended to the entire peer group, as the environment plays a crucial role in every individual's life and early intervention provides better chances for transformation.

KEY FINDINGS

The case of the 17-year-old boy from Trivandrum highlights the extent of cyber exploitation and the lack of safety for children in Kerala. The boy engaged in sexting, maintaining fake social media accounts, watching pornographic content, and initiating love relationships with girls to fulfill his sexual needs. He used aggressive and abusive sexual comments towards family members and others. The case also showed the impact of family dysfunction, peer group influence, and community factors on the boy's behavior. Additionally, the boy had a history of sexual abuse and was charged under POCSO for penetrating sex with his girlfriend at the age of 18. The case demonstrates the need for measures to protect children from cyber exploitation, such as providing education on safe online behavior and monitoring children's internet activities. It also highlights the importance of early intervention in cases of child sexual abuse and trauma, as the boy was diagnosed with Conduct Disorder and PTSD. The involvement of social workers, caseworkers, legal service authorities, and rehabilitation centers in the child's intervention underscores the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to addressing the complex issues related to child safety and welfare.

CRC01

The client is a 15-year-old girl residing in Idukki with her mother. She is studying in the 10th standard, does not have any siblings, and is a single-parent child. Her father passed away, and she belongs to a poor family. Her mother is the breadwinner of the family. The child was the victim of POCSO. The girl is addicted to social media and the internet. She continuously uses her mother's phone and keeps it with her always. The girl fell in love with a boy who is 20 years old and a friend of the girl's sister's husband. They used to chat on Facebook and maintained regular contact using social media and phone. The boy started visiting the girl's home and later started providing things required for their daily functioning to build a good relationship with their family. The boy was a support for the family and always helped them in need. The boy started staying at their home after the mother provided space for him. The girl and the boy were in a relationship. In later days, changes were identified in the physique, behavior, and attitude of the girl. Considering this, the family members fixed their marriage before the girl and boy reached the ages of 18 and 21, respectively. According to psychology, a girl child is more connected to her father (electra complex). In this case, the girl's mother played the role of father in her childhood, and she did not receive any such love and care from her father. In this situation, the sister's husband's friend is the one person who takes care of her, and she is attracted to him, but she doesn't know the reality. The boy exploits the girl with false promises. After identifying changes in the girl, the case was taken by the CDPO through an ICDS officer. Individual counseling, family counseling, medical checkups, educational support, and other family interventions were done as a part of psychosocial support to the child. Social workers, CDPO, ICDS Officer, and educational institutions were the people involved in the case. The team gave them awareness of the legal aspects of child marriage and the consequences. They have decided to get both the boy and girl married after they reach the age of 18 and 21. She needs psychosocial support and training in building and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships.

KEY FINDINGS

The case highlights the dangers of cyber exploitation and the need for ensuring the safety of children in Kerala. The victim, a 15-year-old girl, was addicted to social media and fell in

love with a boy she met online. The boy exploited her vulnerability and promised her a better life. He even started staying at their home and building a good relationship with the girl's family. However, in later days, changes were identified in the girl's behavior and attitude, indicating that she was being exploited. The case also highlights the issue of child marriage in Kerala. The girl's family members fixed her marriage with the boy before they reached the legal age of marriage. This is a violation of the law and poses a threat to the girl's physical and mental health. The case underscores the importance of psychosocial support for children who are victims of cyber exploitation. The victim in this case received individual and family counseling, medical checkups, and educational support as part of her psychosocial support.

CRC02

The client is an 18-year-old boy studying in grade 12 who resides in Palakkad with his father, who works in the IT sector, and mother, who is a housewife. He has one sister. The child struggles with a severe dependence on video games. He exclusively plays games on hybrid devices and becomes violent and aggressive if his parents do not provide them. On one occasion, he destroyed his family members' phone and other electronic items and even threatened his mother with a knife. The child's current desire is to have a bike. He is highly hyperactive and not well-socialized, and he tends to be materialistic and controlling in his relationships. The influence of his peer group is a major concern, as he only associates with his gang of friends. Additionally, his relationship with his parents is strained, with his father struggling to manage his aggressive behavior. The child demands to be in charge and threatens his parents, insisting that all his needs be met. His violent behavior has caused his sister to fail and lose two academic years. The parents require support, safety, and care. However, no intervention is possible as the child would question family members and retaliate if they contacted a social worker for help. There have been no changes in the child's behavior, and the case is sensitive. At times, he tries to gain status among his peers, which drives his materialistic desires. According to Maslow's hierarchy theory, human needs are limitless, and the child is a prime example. His needs are not limited, and he is fixated on achieving status. Given the child's behavior, it is unlikely that any intervention would be effective, and attempting one may exacerbate the situation. In this case, no clear path forward is evident for addressing the issue.

KEY FINDINGS

The case of the 18-year-old boy highlights the issue of excessive dependence on video games and the potential for violent behavior when access is restricted. The child's desire for material possessions, such as a bike, and his need for status among his peer group contribute to his hyperactivity and controlling behavior. The child's relationship with his parents is strained, and he displays aggression and violence towards them. The case is sensitive, and the child is unlikely to respond positively to intervention. The situation highlights the importance of promoting safety and responsible use of technology among children and adolescents, as well as the need for support and care for families dealing with such issues.

CRC03

The client is a 16 year old girl studying in 10th standard and is a complainant and victim of the POCSO case. The accused is a 19 year old boy from a middle class family residing in a rural setting. The girl is the second child among three children of parents from an upper middle class family. Parents are educated and live in an urban setting. The child is involved in an unhealthy relationship and is seen to have social media addiction. The child is showing aggressive behaviour and is very hostile towards parents and siblings. There were instances of suicidal attempts and self-harming behaviour. The child was noticed of having been isolated at home and was showing apathy towards parents and siblings for the last three years. The child shows extreme mood swings and is highly irritable and aggressive to any conversation her immediate family members make. She was a happy child during her school hours and not very interactive at home. She did not own any gadgets and seemed to be addicted to social media especially Instagram, Spotify and Snapchat. When Covid-19 pandemic initiated online learning and all children started using gadgets for academic purposes, the amount of time they get to engage in online platforms increased and so did the addiction towards the same. The engagements went on to games which they played with unknown people across the globe and then developed into personal relationships which are unhealthy and toxic. The child is completely disengaged emotionally from the family members. One day the perpetrator visited the girl's home at night and took obscene pictures of the girl and recorded them on the boy's phone. This has been shared to the girl via Instagram. The child, who is already emotionally detached from the family members, started showing extreme mood swings and violent outbursts of cry and helplessness and was often found to have been engaging in self-harming behaviour. She was highly inconsistent in

anything she did. She was found to be totally disoriented and her academic scores dropped down drastically. The child was showing emotionally unstable behaviour in the home environment. The obscene pictures were found in the gadget the child was using for academic purposes and the case was registered. The child was also found to have stolen a gadget from one of the family members. The child was referred to a therapist and was diagnosed to have Borderline Personality Disorder. Genetic factors, social and family environment were found to be the causal factors of the presented problem. The child's family consisted of parents, grandparents, one older sister and one younger brother. Grandparents joined five years back, before that it was just the parents and these three children. The psycho social development of the child seemed to be normal. The child had been sent to daycare when she was two and a half years old and she stated experiencing a humiliating incident of keeping her alone in a class because she urinated in the class. Her mother is a cancer survivor and that was one of the major incidents in her development years where the whole family faced a lot of limitations in terms of meeting people and having social connections. The child remembers that she was devoid of opportunities to play outside and never had company of children during her younger years. She never found her older sister comfortable to play with. The conflicts between the parents had also contributed to the parent-child apathy. Father and mother both are dominant personalities who often fight for control and power and so the subsystem is said to be a conflictual marital subsystem. This might have contributed to the apathetic parent-child relationship and dynamics. The family functioning is flexible and separated as emotional investment in each family member is less noticed. This problem has shattered the whole family, especially the parents emotionally. The parents found it extremely difficult to handle the child, her emotional outbursts and self-harming behaviour. Individually the child's mental health is affected and subsequently her physical health too. Her sleeping and eating patterns are disturbed. Her biological clock is upended. The child used to skip meals as she was addicted to social media and this has affected her health. Her vitamin levels have decreased, particularly her levels of Vitamin D and B12, which has led to constant fatigue and changes in behavior. Fluctuating and low vitamin levels have worsened irritability and mood swings. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case, as there is an increasing number of adolescents and young adults with poor mental health in our society, which poses a threat to our nation. These individuals are often targeted for antisocial activities, such as drug abuse and criminal behavior, which can harm the country's development. The child has been referred to a therapist and is receiving counseling and therapy sessions. The parents are also involved in the therapy, and the child is taking

medication for mood changes and irritability. Counseling and therapy are not quick fixes, but rather a long-term process, and the parents are supportive in this regard. The therapeutic team, including the parents and the child, are involved in the process, and the school is also providing support for the treatment. The treatment involves a combination of direct and indirect methods. The child has started to gain insight into the problem, and with continued therapy in a systematic manner, positive change is anticipated.

KEY FINDINGS

➢ The child in the case is a victim of cyber exploitation, where obscene pictures of her were taken and shared through Instagram.

➢ The child had an unhealthy relationship and was addicted to social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Spotify. This addiction increased during the pandemic and led to engagement in online games and toxic relationships.

➢ The child was emotionally detached from family members, had extreme mood swings, and engaged in self-harming behavior. Her academic performance dropped drastically, and her sleeping and eating patterns were disturbed.

➢ The case highlights the increasing number of adolescents and young adults with poor mental health in society, posing a threat to the country's development. Such individuals are often targeted for antisocial activities such as drug abuse and criminal behavior.

➢ The child's case is an example of the need for better safety measures for children in the digital world. The family's lack of awareness of the child's online activities and addiction contributed to the situation.

➢ The child's case emphasizes the importance of therapy and counseling as a long-term process in treating mental health problems. The parents' involvement and support are also crucial in the therapy process.

➢ The case also highlights the importance of schools providing support for the treatment of mental health problems among students.

Overall, the case highlights the need for increased awareness and safety measures for children in the digital world, as well as the importance of early intervention and support for mental health problems.

The individual is an 18-year-old boy who is currently studying in grade 12. He lives in the outskirts of Ernakulam city with his father, who is a real estate businessman, and his mother, who is a housewife. He has a younger sister who is in 7th grade. The individual is struggling with game addiction and anger issues. He displays aggressive behavior towards his father, while his mother is not currently living with him. In his childhood, he experienced a traumatic event related to family conflict. His father used to drink and cause trouble for his mother for no apparent reason. His addiction is mainly focused on games such as PUBG, and when he was forcefully stopped from playing that game, he switched to playing FREE FIRE. His behavior has become destructive, as he destroyed doors in the house out of rage. He stays up all night playing games and sleeps during the day, causing a disruption in his biological clock. This addiction has negatively impacted his health and hygiene, leading to poor nutritional intake. Although his sister uses social media, she is not addicted to it. The individual has shown very little interest in his studies and even skipped an exam due to family conflicts. He has mood swings and displays bipolar tendencies. The main cause of his problems is family conflict, and his parents are separated. He has a stronger bond with his mother than his father, and he loves his sister despite conflicts between them. His peer group, which consists of substance users, has negatively influenced him. He has no social connections outside of his game group, which has further impacted his behavior. His addiction to phones and games has disrupted his biological clock and eating habits. He has a high physical stature compared to his age. Counseling sessions were conducted, which provided opportunities for family interactions. To improve their socialization, they needed to modify their environment. As a result, he has been admitted to a college in Bangalore, and there has been a slight change in his behavior. He is now openly communicating about his interests and needs, and his socialization and communication skills have improved. His parents are now able to talk to him without fear, and he is not reacting with aggression as frequently as before.

KEY FINDINGS

➢ The individual is excessively dependent on online games and has disrupted his biological clock and eating habits.

- His over-relience on phones and games has negatively impacted his health and hygiene, leading to poor nutritional intake.
- He has no social connections outside of his game group, which has further impacted his behavior.
- His peer group, which consists of substance users, has negatively influenced him.
- The individual's compulsive use of online games and phone has made him prone to cyber exploitation.
- The individual's childhood trauma related to family conflict has resulted in aggressive behavior towards his father.
- Counseling sessions and admission to a college have led to a slight improvement in the individual's behavior.
- The individual's parents are now able to talk to him without fear, and he is not reacting with aggression as frequently as before.

The case highlights the importance of parental monitoring and guidance in preventing cyber exploitation and ensuring the safety of children in Kerala.

NORTHERN REGION

NRC01

The client is a 15-year-old girl who studies in 10th standard at a Girl's Higher Secondary School in Kozhikode. She belongs to a middle-class family and lives with her parents and grandmother in an urban area. She is the only child of her parents. The research team collected information from her father, aunt, school counselor, and a well-wisher, as the girl was not allowed to be interviewed. The case was referred by the school counselor after the girl was found missing from school for three consecutive days. Upon investigation, it was discovered that she left for school in the morning but did not attend classes during the intermediate hours. The girl was an above-average student in terms of academics, but she was found in possession of five mobile phones and had multiple relationships while studying in 8th, 9th, and 10th grades. The parents were unaware of these phones, which were gifted to her by her boyfriends during dating. As the parents found it difficult to manage the child during her high school years, the aunt took the initiative to mold her and took the girl to her home for the rest of her studies. However, the girl exhibited rebellious and self-harming behavior in response to disciplinary measures. When the girl was reported

missing from school for three days, the aunt beat her. In resentment and to avoid being accused of missing school, the girl falsely accused the aunt's son of abusing her. As a result of this complaint, the girl was shifted to a Shelter Home and then later to a Children's Home. During her investigation from the Children's Home, she escaped police custody and ran away. Later, she was produced in court before a special magistrate and found guilty of making false accusations against her aunt's son. It was found that peer support was strong in this case, as her friends and classmates helped her foster these unhealthy relationships with different people for the previous three years. One of her friends even helped her by arranging a sim card. The girl exhibited a highly revengeful, remorseless, and rebellious personality and behavior throughout. Unrestricted parenting was also observed in this case, as the girl had access to phones and social media platforms from her middle school years.

The individual involved in this case is a child who has encountered the law, and the nature of the case has necessitated numerous interactions with formal social control agencies such as the police and legal systems. These encounters have had a negative impact on the child's education, leading to her having to switch schools. Adapting to a new environment, making new friends, and adjusting to these challenges have been difficult for her. Involvement in these unhealthy social media relationships and grooming has caused a significant decline in her academic performance. The family turmoil has also had a detrimental effect on her parents, grandmother, and aunt, straining their relationships with one another. False accusations have endangered the aunt's son's career, but thankfully, he was found to be innocent. Thanks to mature intervention from the police, the case was managed without further complications. Social workers provided the child with psycho-social support, and steps were taken to ensure that she received educational support as well. In addressing this complex issue, collateral contacts and resources were mobilized, including the aunt, children's home, police officers, social worker, and CWC. The case was finally referred to a psychiatrist for further assessment and treatment.

KEY FINDINGS

➢ The child had access to multiple phones and social media platforms from a young age without proper parental monitoring, leading to unhealthy relationships and cyber exploitation.

➢ Peer support was strong in this case, as the child's friends and classmates helped her foster these unhealthy relationships for several years.

- The child exhibited rebellious, self-harming, and revengeful behavior as a result of family turmoil and disciplinary measures.
- Unrestricted parenting and lack of parental guidance led to the child's involvement in unhealthy relationships, which negatively impacted her academic performance.
- False accusations and involvement in the legal system had a negative impact on the child's education and forced her to switch schools.
- Social workers provided the child with psycho-social support, and steps were taken to ensure that she received educational support as well.
- The case highlights the importance of parental monitoring and guidance in preventing cyber exploitation and ensuring the safety of children in Kerala.

NRC 02

The client is a 16-year-old girl who is currently enrolled in 12th grade. She resides in a suburban area in Kannur with her parents, younger brother, and grandmother. Both her mother and father are employed, with her mother being a government school teacher. The family is financially well-off, and the girl is their eldest child. She is an exceptional student, but her life took a turn for the worse when her uncle caught her using a phone while on her way to school. Despite not owning a phone of her own, the girl lied to her uncle, claiming that it was her friend's phone. When her uncle asked her to contact her friend, she eventually admitted that her boyfriend had given her the phone. When she refused to unlock the phone, her uncle threatened to inform her parents, leading her to eventually give in to his demands. Unfortunately, her uncle found explicit images sent by her boyfriend, leading him to inform the girl's parents of the incident. The girl's boyfriend resided in the same area as her, and they frequently met up. Negligent parenting can be considered a factor that contributed to the girl's behavior. The girl and her younger brother both have rooms on the first floor of their home, while their parents' room is on the ground floor. There is a separate corridor that leads to the first floor, which allowed the girl to sneak out of the house at night without her parents' knowledge. The parents never paid much attention to their child's matters, which enabled her to maintain her relationship with her boyfriend. Her commitment to the relationship gave her the courage to act in such a manner. Additionally, the curiosity that arises during adolescence is another factor that contributed to her behavior. Her priorities shifted, and she became more focused on her boyfriend rather than her studies. Social media played a significant role in the girl's life and contributed to her issues. She became afraid of

facing her parents and started isolating herself from others. Her parents were concerned about their child, and the situation caused the family to distance themselves from their extended relatives. The girl's loss of interest in her studies and her prioritization of her boyfriend over everything else highlights the need for parental supervision and guidance during this critical period of adolescence. The case requires intervention from various authorities, such as social workers and a psychiatrist, to provide the necessary support to the girl and her family.

KEY FINDINGS

➢ The use of mobile phones and social media can expose children to potential risks, including cyber exploitation.

➢ Negligent parenting can contribute to children's unsafe behavior, as in the case of the 16-year-old girl who was able to sneak out of the house without her parents' knowledge.

➢ Adolescents' curiosity and peer pressure can lead them to engage in risky behavior, such as sending explicit images and prioritizing relationships over studies.

➢ Lack of parental supervision and guidance during adolescence can lead to children prioritizing relationships over other aspects of their lives.

➢ The case highlights the need for intervention from various authorities, including social workers and psychiatrists, to provide necessary support to the child and the family.

➢ The case highlights the need for parents to be vigilant about their children's use of technology, including mobile phones and social media, and provide necessary guidance to keep them safe from potential cyber exploitation.

➢ The incident also highlights the importance of educating children about the risks of engaging in unsafe behavior online and the potential consequences of such actions.

NRC 03

The client is a 14 year old girl studying in grade 9 at a Government Higher Secondary aided school in Kozhikode. The teachers suspected her of having an unhealthy relationship and caught her in the act of being involved with a boy studying in grade 12 in the same school. This led to her attempting suicide by running away to the third floor. The teachers were unsure whether she did this to scare them or if it was a genuine suicide attempt. Her cousin supported her in this plan and the girl used her cousin's phone. She had multiple Instagram accounts that she accessed through other people's phones and uninstalled the application

soon after use, so as not to raise suspicion. The girl and her boyfriend met through a popular social club in school, and he used to visit her frequently. The school authorities informed the parents, and upon returning home, the boy was manhandled by the relatives and family members. The school was the point of referral for this case. The girl did not admit to her mistake and exhibited a remorseless attitude. She was found to be moody after the incident. The counselor recommended that the girl be clinically assessed and diagnosed for personality disorders. She was referred to a psychiatrist and is currently undergoing treatment. The family became more responsible and responsive, and the parents were supported in handling the case. The teachers were supportive and helped the girl to continue her education at the same school.

KEY FINDINGS

- The case highlights the prevalence of unhealthy relationships among adolescents in Kerala, facilitated by social media platforms like Instagram.
- The girl's attempt at suicide and her remorseless attitude towards her actions highlight the need for better mental health support and awareness among children and parents.
- The girl's access to multiple Instagram accounts through other people's phones and her habit of uninstalling the app after use highlight the need for greater awareness about online safety and the dangers of cyber exploitation among parents and teachers.
- The involvement of the girl's cousin in the suicide attempt underscores the need for better supervision and monitoring of children's behavior, especially in the digital space.
- The case also highlights the importance of school authorities in identifying and addressing instances of cyber exploitation and promoting a safe and healthy learning environment for children.
- The referral of the case to a psychiatrist underscores the importance of mental health support and intervention in cases of cyber exploitation and unhealthy relationships among adolescents in Kerala.

NRC 04

The client is an 11-year-old boy studying in grade 6 of a government school in Kozhikode. His parents are working, and he is the older child among two sons in the family, with his younger brother in kindergarten classes. The family resides in an apartment complex that is government quarters in an urban setting. The case was reported by the boy's parents against

older boys in the same residential complex for having exposed their child to pornographic videos. The child routinely uses his parents' phone, especially his father's, and used to play with other boys from the same complex but of different age groups. One day, the child was found with older boys from 10th grade who were watching porn videos. It was also reported by his parents that he himself has navigated through porn sites. A POCSO case was charged against the older, 10th-grade boy for showing and sharing pornographic videos with the child. Here, the accused and the victim are minors. Parents were unaware of their children's online engagements, and negligent parental attitudes were found to be one of the reasons for these hazardous internet engagements. Social diagnosis noticed a lack of responsiveness to the child's needs. His socialization with older boys gave him an early exposure to sexual content, which can have a detrimental effect on his mental health. The exposure to sexual content before the body and mind are ready could generate confusion, shock, fear, curiosity, misunderstanding, and many other intense and impulsive emotions. Therefore, there is a greater possibility that it affects the child's emotions and alters his thought process. It reduces the extent of control he has on his own thoughts, emotions, and actions and affects his well-being. The incident affected the studies of the accused, an older boy who is a 10th grader. The incident triggered neighborhood riots in the residential complex, and families never let their children play or socialize thereafter. This, again, will hamper the children's growth and development as they will resort to other entertainment and follow a vicious cycle of risky engagements. As part of interventions, the victim was given counseling and psychosocial support to deal with the issue. Parents were oriented and given inputs on positive parenting and asked to be more watchful about the child and his environment.

KEY FINDINGS

➢ The client, an 11-year-old boy, was exposed to pornographic videos through online engagement with older boys from the same residential complex.

➢ Negligent parental attitudes and a lack of responsiveness to the child's needs were identified as the reasons for hazardous online engagement.

➢ The early exposure to sexual content affected the child's emotional and mental well-being, which can have a detrimental effect on his development.

➢ The incident triggered neighborhood riots in the residential complex, leading to a decrease in socialization and hampering children's growth and development.

- The victim was given counseling and psychosocial support to deal with the issue, and parents were oriented on positive parenting and asked to be more watchful about their children's online activities.
- The case highlights the need for more significant efforts to promote cyber safety and prevent cyber exploitation of children in Kerala.