

# Building Safe Havens: Strategies for Inclusive and Protective Environments for Children

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## Abstract

*This conceptual research examines strategies to create safe and inclusive environments for children in India, focusing on schools, homes, and public spaces. By analysing secondary data from academic journals, reports, and news sources, the study investigates existing protective frameworks and challenges in their implementation. It highlights successful case studies where inclusive policies and child-friendly spaces have been established. The research emphasizes the importance of collaboration between governments, NGOs, and local communities to ensure the physical and emotional safety of all children, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.*

**Keywords:** Safe Environments, Child Protection, Inclusion, Community Collaboration, Marginalized Children, India, Child-Friendly Policies

## Introduction

Creating safe, stable, and nurturing environments for children is vital for their overall development, including their physical, emotional, and cognitive growth. Such environments form the foundation for children to thrive, allowing them to build healthy relationships, develop resilience, and realize their potential. A secure setting ensures that children are shielded from harm while fostering their growth and well-being. To achieve this, families, communities, and institutions must actively engage in creating these spaces, maintaining a vigilant and adaptive approach to safeguarding children.

Children are among the most vulnerable members of society, particularly in places where risks like violence, exploitation, neglect, and discrimination are prevalent. These threats can manifest in various settings, such as homes, schools, or communities, and their impact on a child's development can be profound and long-lasting. Establishing "safe havens" for children is therefore crucial, as these environments provide not just physical protection, but also emotional and psychological security. Feeling secure and having a sense of

belonging are essential to a child's healthy development. In this context, fostering inclusive and protective environments is a pressing necessity, requiring collective efforts from governments, institutions, and society at large.

The family plays a pivotal role in shaping a child's early experiences, providing emotional stability, security, and support. A nurturing family environment, aligned with the principles outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ensures that children grow up in a loving and supportive atmosphere. The responsibility of creating child-friendly environments extends beyond families. Schools and communities must also contribute by providing supportive spaces that foster a child's growth, well-being, and development. Communities have a shared obligation to ensure that children are safe and protected. This includes creating safe spaces for learning, play, and social interaction, as well as ensuring access to services that address the needs of children.

Despite these efforts, numerous obstacles continue to hinder the creation of safe environments for children. In many parts of the world, including India, traditional practices, resource limitations, and inadequate legal frameworks contribute to the risks children face. Challenges such as child labour, gender discrimination, and limited access to education and healthcare further complicate the situation. These factors, compounded by weak enforcement of child protection laws and insufficient community engagement, often leave children vulnerable to harm. To address these challenges, it is essential to adopt a comprehensive approach to child protection that involves not only legislation and policies but also active participation from all sectors of society.

As urbanization increases, ensuring the safety of children in cities has become a growing concern. Urban areas, with their rapid growth, often result in overcrowded, unsafe, and inaccessible spaces for children. Recognizing this, UNICEF and UN-Habitat launched the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI), which aims to transform urban environments by prioritizing the rights and needs of children. The initiative seeks to create cities that are not only safe but also inclusive and responsive to children's well-being. This global movement has already led to the development of thousands of child-friendly cities across the world, demonstrating the effectiveness of child-centered urban planning. These cities focus on creating safe, accessible, and inclusive public spaces, ensuring that children can thrive in urban environments.

In India, the legal framework supporting child protection is robust, with the Constitution offering special protections for children. Various laws, such as the Juvenile Justice Act and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, safeguard the rights and welfare of children. The National Policy for Children further emphasizes the importance of children's rights in national policy-making. Despite these legal frameworks, the implementation of child protection laws and policies remains a challenge, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. Issues such as poverty, lack of awareness, and deeply ingrained traditional practices often undermine efforts to protect children from harm.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in supplementing government efforts to protect children. These organizations operate at the grassroots level, implementing child protection programs, raising awareness, and advocating for stronger policies. NGOs-like CRY (Child Rights and You) bridges the gap between policy and practice by addressing the specific challenges faced by vulnerable children and their families. Their work is essential in tailoring solutions to local needs and providing on-the-ground support.

Marginalized communities often face additional barriers to creating safe environments for children. Children in these communities are more likely to be deprived of access to essential resources and services, making them vulnerable to exploitation, neglect, and abuse. Marginalization not only affects their immediate well-being but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and exclusion, limiting their future opportunities. Addressing the issue of marginalization is therefore critical to creating inclusive environments where all children can thrive and participate fully in society.

This paper will delve into the strategies and policies that contribute to building inclusive and protective environments for children, with a focus on India's efforts. Drawing on successful case studies, policy frameworks, and conceptual models, the study will examine the intersection of child protection, community involvement, and infrastructural development. By exploring these elements, the research provides a roadmap for creating environments that not only protect children from harm but also nurture their overall well-being, development, and potential.

### **Review of Literature**

The literature on creating safe and inclusive environments for children is vast, reflecting the multifaceted nature of this issue. Various studies have explored different aspects, from policy frameworks to community interventions and the role of education in safeguarding children's rights. Reviewing these works helps in understanding the key strategies already in place and the challenges faced in their implementation, particularly in the Indian context. This section will analyse major studies that contribute to the discourse on child protection, examining their findings and how they relate to the present study's focus on inclusive and protective environments for children in schools, homes, and public spaces.

A study by Banerjee et al. (2016), titled "Child-Friendly Cities: A Critical Analysis of Urban Spaces in India," examined the implementation of the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) in India. The authors highlighted the lack of consistency in adopting this framework across different urban areas, noting that while some cities had made significant progress, others lagged due to resource constraints and limited community involvement. The study emphasizes the need for stronger policy enforcement and local government collaboration, which aligns with the current research's focus on the importance of cross-sector partnerships in creating safe environments. The study primarily focused on urban settings, leaving a gap in understanding rural areas' unique challenges.

Salma Daiban and Efthymia Efthymiou's (2023) study titled "Building Resilience in the Education System: Safeguarding Children in Inclusive Settings Through Teacher Empowerment and School Preparedness" emphasizes the critical role of resilience in ensuring children's protection within inclusive educational environments. The authors address key challenges such as the lack of awareness and understanding of child protection policies among teachers, highlighting the necessity for proactive communication and collaboration among stakeholders. This study emphasizes resilience as a central factor in overcoming these challenges and creating a safe, protective environment for children.

The authors explore resilience from multiple angles, including self-care, coping strategies, and the role of social support, suggesting that teacher empowerment and school preparedness are crucial in safeguarding children. They argue for comprehensive teacher training and supportive systems within schools to cultivate resilience, thus promoting a culture of accountability and openness. These insights are especially relevant to our study, as they underscore the importance of building capacities at the institutional level to ensure children's safety, particularly in schools.

Singh and Chatterjee (2018), in their paper "Challenges in Protecting Children from Violence and Exploitation in India," explored the systemic failures in addressing violence against children, particularly in rural communities. They found that despite the existence of strong legal frameworks, such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, enforcement remains weak in many parts of the country due to inadequate resources and societal stigma. This connects to the current study by highlighting the importance of not just having protective policies but also ensuring their effective implementation through better training and support for local law enforcement. The research further stresses the need for community-driven approaches to supplement formal mechanisms, which is a key theme in this conceptual research.

The Role of Education in Promoting Safe Environments for Children in India by Reddy and Kumar (2020) examined how inclusive educational policies contribute to creating safer environments for children, particularly in schools. Their study found that schools that implemented child-friendly infrastructure, anti-bullying policies, and mental health support systems saw a significant improvement in student well-being and academic performance. This directly correlates with the current research's focus on protective frameworks in schools. The study also pointed out the disparity between private and public schools in adopting such measures, which is a critical issue that this research aims to explore further, particularly regarding marginalized children.

In their 2021 paper, "Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms in Rural India," Desai and Gupta analyzed the effectiveness of local community-driven programs aimed at child protection. The authors found that when communities are actively involved in creating safe spaces for children, such as through village councils or child protection committees, the results are often more sustainable and culturally relevant. This study reinforces the current research's emphasis on community involvement as a crucial component in creating inclusive environments. It also pointed out challenges in scaling these initiatives, particularly in areas where communities are not well-organized or lack the necessary resources to implement protective measures effectively.

Verma and Srivastava (2019), in their study "Digital Dangers: Navigating Online Risks for Children in India," explored the growing issue of children's exposure to online risks, including cyberbullying, exploitation, and harmful content. The research highlighted the urgent need for digital literacy programs for both children and parents, as well as stricter enforcement of online safety regulations. While this study focused on digital environments, its findings are relevant to the broader context of creating safe spaces for children in both physical and online environments. The current research integrates these insights into the discussion of leveraging technology to enhance child protection.

The reviewed literature offers valuable insights into the various dimensions of child protection, from policy implementation to community involvement and the role of education. There are noticeable gaps in the literature, particularly in the understanding of how protective frameworks can be effectively scaled in rural areas and among marginalized communities. While several studies have addressed specific aspects of child protection, such as online safety or urban child-friendly spaces, there is a lack of comprehensive research that integrates these different elements into a cohesive strategy for creating inclusive environments. This research aims to fill those gaps by offering a more holistic approach to building safe havens for children in India, focusing on collaborative efforts between governments, NGOs, and communities to ensure the protection and well-being of all children.

### **Research Methodology**

This conceptual research examines strategies to create safe and inclusive environments for children in India, focusing on schools, homes, and public spaces. The study draws on secondary data from academic journals and reports to explore existing protective frameworks and the challenges involved in implementing them. By analyzing relevant case studies, the research identifies key factors contributing to the success of inclusive policies and child-friendly spaces. It underscores the need for collaborative efforts between governments, NGOs, and local communities to secure both the physical and emotional well-being of children, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.

The study's significance lies in its focus on identifying and enhancing protective measures for children in various environments. It is critical to explore the interconnected roles of legal frameworks, social policies, and community initiatives in building child-friendly spaces, especially

in a rapidly urbanizing context. This research aims to offer practical insights into the challenges and potential of such strategies in India, shedding light on areas where improvements are necessary.

The study's objectives are:

1. To evaluate existing child protection frameworks in schools, homes, and public spaces
2. To analyze the effectiveness of collaborative efforts between governments, NGOs, and communities in creating safe environments for children
3. To examine the specific challenges faced by marginalized children in accessing these protective measures.

The research employs a descriptive approach, relying exclusively on secondary data to provide a comprehensive review of existing literature, reports, and studies related to child protection. The study delves into policy documents, academic papers, NGO publications, and government reports to understand the current landscape of child safety initiatives. While the absence of primary data is a limitation, the secondary sources offer a rich repository of information to assess the successes and shortcomings of protective strategies for children.

Data is sourced from a broad range of published material, including reports from UNICEF, governmental child protection schemes, and research articles on inclusive education and community-based interventions. This allows for a nuanced understanding of how safe havens for children have been established across different settings and the roles various stakeholders have played in their creation. The study also identifies specific challenges in scaling these interventions and ensuring their inclusivity, particularly in under-resourced areas.

One limitation of this study is its reliance on published material, which may not capture the most recent or evolving dynamics of child protection efforts in rural or marginalized areas. The focus is predominantly on urban environments, with limited exploration of rural contexts where unique challenges may arise. The research offers substantial contributions to the discourse on child protection, providing actionable recommendations for policymakers and organizations working in the field.

By identifying the gaps in existing frameworks, this study aims to contribute to building safer and more inclusive environments for children across India. It provides a foundation for understanding how policies, legal protections, and community initiatives can be better aligned to secure the well-being of all children, particularly the most vulnerable.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This study focuses on identifying strategies for creating safe and inclusive environments for children in India by examining existing frameworks and challenges in schools, homes, and public spaces. Using secondary data analysis, the findings reflect key trends, best practices, and gaps in the current system of child protection, offering insights into areas for improvement. The study emphasizes the roles of government, NGOs, and communities in addressing these issues, particularly for children from marginalized backgrounds.

### **Disparity in Child Protection Policy Implementation**

One of the primary findings is the uneven implementation of child protection policies across different settings. Schools, for instance, have been the focus of multiple initiatives aimed at creating child-friendly spaces. Programs such as anti-bullying policies, mental health support systems, and inclusive learning environments have been effectively implemented in some private schools and urban areas. Public schools, especially in rural regions, often lack the necessary resources to adopt these measures. This disparity highlights the urgent need for equitable distribution of resources and consistent enforcement of policies across educational institutions.

Bridging this gap will require stronger governmental oversight and a more coordinated effort between schools and communities. Community-driven initiatives that tailor interventions to local needs can support this process, ensuring that all children have access to safe and inclusive educational environments.

### **Role of Community in Child Protection**

Another significant finding is the crucial role communities play in protecting children, particularly in rural areas where formal child protection systems may be weak or inaccessible. Community-based child protection committees and village councils have been successful in providing culturally relevant and sustainable support systems for children. The scalability of these initiatives remains a challenge. Many community efforts lack the financial and human resources needed to expand and reach a larger population.

The findings suggest that integrating community-led initiatives with formal government child protection systems can help create a more robust safety net for children. Government collaboration with local bodies can increase the efficiency and reach of child protection strategies, particularly in areas where governmental services are limited.

### **Safety in the Home Environment**

The study found that children's safety at home is often compromised by factors such as domestic violence, neglect, and cultural practices that normalize harmful behaviours. While legal frameworks such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act are in place, enforcement remains inconsistent. The findings highlight the need for increased parental awareness and education on children's rights and safety.

More proactive intervention from social services and community organizations is also needed to address these issues. Families, particularly those from marginalized communities, should receive support from both NGOs and government bodies to create emotionally and physically safe home environments for children.

### **Children's Safety in Public Spaces**

With increasing urbanization, children are exposed to new risks in public spaces, including trafficking, exploitation, and accidents. Public areas such as parks, transportation systems, and recreational spaces often lack the necessary safety measures for children. Initiatives like the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative have made some progress in addressing these issues, but more comprehensive planning and resource allocation are needed to make public spaces safer for children.

The findings show that public spaces should be designed with input from children, parents, and local stakeholders. Proper planning, consistent maintenance, and child-focused designs can help ensure that these areas are safe and inclusive for all children.

### **Collaboration Between Stakeholders**

A key insight from the study is the importance of collaboration between various stakeholders in ensuring child protection. Government bodies, NGOs, schools, and communities must work together to develop integrated approaches that address the diverse needs of children across different settings.

The findings suggest that top-down policies from the government are insufficient. Grassroots involvement, driven by community-based organizations and NGOs, is essential in tailoring child protection measures to local realities. Civil society organizations play a critical role in bridging the

gap between policy and practice, offering expertise and resources that complement government efforts.

### **Technology and Child Protection**

The study also found that technology plays a dual role in child protection. On one hand, children are increasingly vulnerable to online risks such as cyberbullying, exploitation, and harmful content. On the other hand, technology can be a powerful tool for enhancing child safety. Digital literacy programs, child-monitoring apps, and online abuse reporting systems can empower children and their caregivers to better navigate online dangers.

The findings emphasize the need for a balanced approach that both protects children from online risks and leverages technology to improve their safety and well-being in physical spaces.

The findings of this research reveal a complex landscape of child protection in India, marked by both significant progress and critical gaps. While successful examples of creating safe and inclusive environments for children exist, these efforts remain unevenly distributed across sectors and regions. Collaboration between governments, NGOs, communities, and families is essential for developing comprehensive and sustainable solutions. By addressing challenges in policy implementation, resource allocation, and community engagement, a more effective system of child protection can be developed, ensuring the well-being of all children in India.

### **Social Work Interventions and Suggestions**

#### **Suggestions**

#### **To the Government**

##### **Strengthen Policy Implementation**

The government should ensure uniform implementation of child protection laws and policies across both rural and urban areas. This can be achieved by increasing funding for child welfare programs and enhancing monitoring mechanisms to track the enforcement of laws such as the POCSO Act and the Juvenile Justice Act.

#### **Resource Allocation**

Adequate resources should be provided to schools and community-based organizations to implement child protection measures effectively. This includes funding for training teachers, counselors, and social workers, as well as ensuring that public spaces are child-friendly and safe.

#### **Technology Integration**

The government should invest in technology-driven solutions for child protection, such as digital literacy programs, online abuse reporting systems, and mobile apps that promote child safety. Such tools can be powerful in both preventing and addressing risks children face online and in physical spaces.

#### **To Parents**

##### **Promote Awareness of Child Rights**

Parents must be educated on child rights and the importance of creating a safe and nurturing environment for their children. This can be done through awareness campaigns and workshops organized by social workers, community groups, and government bodies.

##### **Improve Communication**

Parents should foster open lines of communication with their children, encouraging them to speak up about any abuse or discomfort they experience. Active engagement in children's emotional and mental well-being is crucial for early detection of any issues.

## **Parental Guidance on Technology**

As children are increasingly exposed to the digital world, parents should be trained to guide their children in navigating online spaces safely. This includes monitoring internet usage, teaching digital literacy, and discussing the dangers of cyberbullying or online exploitation.

## **To Educational Institutions**

### **Create Safe Learning Environments**

Schools must implement strict anti-bullying policies and establish mental health support systems, including counselling services. Educational institutions should create an environment where every child feels safe and included, irrespective of their background.

### **Train Educators on Child Protection**

Teachers and staff should be trained to recognize signs of abuse or neglect, both at home and in school. Continuous professional development programs can equip educators with the skills to address child protection issues more effectively.

### **Engage with Communities**

Schools should actively collaborate with parents and local communities to ensure the holistic well-being of children. Community involvement in school activities, safety measures, and inclusive education practices can foster stronger protective frameworks for children.

## **To NGOs**

### **Enhance Community Outreach**

NGOs should expand their community outreach programs to educate families about child protection and digital safety. This can include organizing workshops, seminars, and community meetings that focus on practical strategies for safeguarding children.

### **Develop Targeted Programs**

NGOs should create and implement targeted programs that address the specific needs of vulnerable groups, including marginalized communities and those at higher risk of exploitation. Tailored interventions can address unique challenges faced by these populations.

### **Foster Partnerships**

NGOs should collaborate with government agencies, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to create a network of support for child protection. Such partnerships can enhance resource mobilization, share best practices, and create comprehensive strategies for addressing child safety concerns.

### **Advocate for Policy Changes**

NGOs can play a crucial role in advocating for stronger child protection policies and better implementation of existing laws. By conducting research, raising awareness, and engaging in policy dialogues, NGOs can influence legislative changes and improve protective measures for children.

### **Provide Support Services**

NGOs should offer direct support services such as counseling, legal aid, and emergency assistance to children and families in crisis. These services are essential for addressing immediate needs and ensuring the safety and well-being of children affected by abuse or neglect.



## **Social Work Intervention**

### **Child-Centered Community Programs**

Social workers can play a pivotal role in developing and implementing child-centered community programs. These initiatives should focus on educating families and communities about child protection, fostering safe and inclusive environments, and addressing the unique challenges faced by marginalized children. Social workers can serve as liaisons between government bodies and communities, ensuring that policies and resources reach those who need them the most.

### **School-Based Interventions**

In schools, social workers can facilitate interventions that address the psychosocial needs of children. This includes conducting workshops on mental health, organizing support groups, and providing one-on-one counseling for children who may be experiencing abuse or neglect. Social workers can also assist in implementing inclusive education policies that protect vulnerable children, such as those with disabilities or from marginalized communities.

### **Crisis Intervention and Counselling**

In cases where children experience violence, abuse, or neglect, social workers should be equipped to provide immediate crisis intervention. This involves working with families, schools, and legal authorities to ensure the child's safety and well-being. Counselling services, both for the affected children and their families, are critical to addressing trauma and fostering healing.

### **Parental Education and Support Programs**

Social workers should design and implement parental education programs that teach parents about child development, rights, and protection. These programs can include topics like positive parenting techniques, the importance of emotional bonding, and strategies for maintaining a safe and supportive home environment. By empowering parents with knowledge and resources, social workers can contribute to creating safer spaces for children at home.

### **Collaborative Advocacy for Policy Change**

Social workers must collaborate with NGOs, community organizations, and legal bodies to advocate for policy changes that strengthen child protection. This includes lobbying for increased funding for child welfare programs, more stringent enforcement of child protection laws, and ensuring that marginalized children receive the attention they need. Social workers, through their advocacy, can serve as powerful voices for vulnerable children, helping to influence decisions at the policy level.

### **Technology-Based Interventions**

Given the growing role of technology in both child protection and the risks children face, social workers should engage in tech-based interventions. These could involve developing child safety mobile apps, creating online platforms for reporting abuse, or using social media to spread awareness about child rights and protection issues. Social workers can collaborate with tech companies and educational institutions to ensure that technology serves as a tool for child safety rather than a threat.

## **Conclusion**

This study, which explores strategies for creating safe and inclusive environments for children in India, underscores the vital importance of fostering protective frameworks across various

domains, including homes, schools, and public spaces. The research reveals that while significant strides have been made in developing policies and interventions aimed at safeguarding children, considerable challenges remain in their effective implementation and outreach.

The findings highlight that building safe havens for children requires a multifaceted approach. This involves not only strengthening existing policies and frameworks but also ensuring that these measures are adaptable and responsive to the evolving needs of children. The successful case studies examined demonstrate that inclusive policies, when combined with community engagement and collaborative efforts, can significantly enhance child protection and well-being.

One of the key conclusions is the necessity for robust government involvement in ensuring that child protection laws are uniformly enforced and adequately resourced. The study emphasizes the need for enhanced policy implementation, improved resource allocation, and greater integration of technology to address both physical and online safety concerns. By investing in these areas, the government can play a pivotal role in creating and maintaining safe environments for children.

For parents, the study underscores the importance of being proactive in promoting child safety and rights within the family setting. Educating parents about child rights, fostering open communication with their children, and guiding them in safe digital practices are crucial steps in ensuring a nurturing and secure home environment.

Educational institutions also have a significant role to play in child protection. The study advocates for the creation of safe learning environments, comprehensive training for educators, and active collaboration with parents and communities. Schools should be equipped to address the diverse needs of their students and provide support systems that promote mental and emotional well-being.

Social work interventions emerge as a central component in bridging the gap between policy and practice. The study highlights several areas where social workers can make impactful contributions, including community programs, school-based interventions, crisis counselling, parental education, and advocacy for policy changes. By addressing these areas, social workers can help ensure that child protection measures are effectively implemented and tailored to meet the needs of marginalized and vulnerable children.

Creating a safer world for children is a collective responsibility that requires the active participation of government bodies, parents, educational institutions, and social workers. The study demonstrates that while challenges exist, collaborative efforts and targeted interventions can lead to significant improvements in child protection and well-being. Ensuring that children grow up in safe, inclusive, and supportive environments is not only a moral imperative but also essential for fostering their overall development and contributing to a more just and equitable society.

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