



# Vulnerability to child sexual abuse: NOABS tool

*Vulnerabilidad al abuso sexual infantil: herramienta NOABS*

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## Abstract

**Background:** The prevalence of child sexual abuse shows a result of 19% in females and 8% in males. **Objective:** The main aim of this study, is to identify the level of vulnerability and risk of sexual abuse in children between 6 to 13 years old with the NOABS tool. **Participants and Setting:** 684 children between the ages 6 and 13 from the Simón Araujo school in Sucre, Colombia. **Methodology:** The methodology used in this study has a descriptive approach and data was analyzed with a quantitative strategy. **Results:** After analyzing the data, it shows a 5.3 % high vulnerability (VA), (VA) female (F) 4.3 %, 6.5 % male (M), (VA) family context 16.1 %, social 14.9 %, school 8.2 %. **Conclusions:** Other researches allow to compare these results in order to have a clear idea about the levels of vulnerability and risk of abuse validating the NOABS game.

**Keywords:** Child Sexual Abuse; Prevention

## Resumen

**Antecedentes:** La prevalencia de abuso sexual infantil muestra un resultado de 19% en el sexo femenino y 8% en el masculino. **Objetivo:** El objetivo principal de este estudio, es identificar el nivel de vulnerabilidad y riesgo de abuso sexual en niños de 6 a 13 años con la herramienta NOABS. **Participantes y Ámbito:** 684 niños de 6 a 13 años del colegio Simón Araujo de Sucre, Colombia. **Metodología:** Se realizó un estudio descriptivo y los datos fueron analizados con una estrategia cuantitativa. **Resultados:** Tras el análisis de los datos, se muestra una alta vulnerabilidad (VA) 5,3 %, (VA) femenino (F) 4,3 %, masculino (M) 6,5 %, (VA) en el contexto familiar 16,1 %, social 14,9 % y escolar 8,2 %. **Conclusiones:** Otras investigaciones permiten comparar estos resultados para tener una idea clara sobre los niveles de vulnerabilidad y riesgo de abuso validando el juego NOABS.

**Palabras clave:** Abuso Sexual Infantil; Prevención

## INTRODUCTION

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a phenomenon with a prevalence of more than 19% in women and 8% in men (Losada, 2012). This figure places CSA on the scale of one of the public health problems (Losada, 2009). Children who go through CSA may present developmental disorders due to emotional and/or affective immaturity as well as the seriousness and magnitude of the event itself (Bravo García et al., 2020; Cazabat, 2004). Monica Marzetti (2020) studies show in detail the physical and psychological effects of abuse on children.

Child sexual abuse comes across any sexual conduct carried out between an adult and a minor, with or without physical contact, with clear asymmetry between those involved in the relationship and the presence of both implicit and explicit, including physical, genital, anal or mouth contact or use of the minor as an object of sexual stimulation of the aggressor, exhibitionism, or projection of pornographic material, or use of the child in photos or videos of pornographic content (Losada and Jursza 2019).

Leslie Bravo García and Yira Menendez Monroy (2016) and Analía Verónica Losada (2011) conducted a research based on medical records investigations episodes and real stories of child sexual abuse. This represents a valid tool through which abuse can be narrated in a psychological appointment as a retrospective phenomenon.

In fact, both studies, the ones that analyze prevalence (Losada, 2012), and the researches that report the consequences of abuse (Bravo García et al., 2020; Cazabat, 2004; Losada, 2011; Marzetti, 2020; Pereda Beltrán, 2010) even those that analyze clinical records (Bravo García and Menendez Monroy, 2016; Losada, 2011) study the phenomenon once it has taken place. In other words, they describe consequences and data regarding how often the events happened, as well as valid detection methods.

The reality is that the actions described have not achieved the prevalence of abuse. There is an exception in Germany through a program called the Don't Offend Program (2020, in Losada and Caruso, 2020), which provides a treatment for those who abuse children, under the premise that people are not responsible for what they feel or think, but they are, with the actions they do with that feeling or thinking. That is to say, they treat the phenomenon from a perspective of attention to the effect of the abuse, before the criminal act takes place.

Laura Rodríguez and María de los Angeles de la Cruz (2013) developed the game Coletas and Verdi as a simple and useful instrument for the prevention, detec-

tion and even treatment of Child Sexual Abuse. The developers found out to facilitate the work of early detection of signs and indicators.

It is made up of a board and a set of cards with different topics that collect different proofs that allow the accumulation of points.

Anna Müller et al. (2014) carried out Cool and Safe, presenting the results of the first evaluation. The children have been evaluated before and after participating in Cool and Safe. The results showed that participation in the game contributes to knowledge and offers safe behavioral strategies.

Therefore, actions are required to provide children with training before the contingency of sexual abuse. In this sense, the interactive game NOABS was developed as a methodological tool to diagnose vulnerability and prevention of child sexual abuse. The objective of this work is to present the improvements about the NOABS interactive game for the diagnosis of vulnerability and prevention of CSA.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Type of Research**

Descriptive research was used to complete this study since it aims to describe important characteristic of people, groups, communities, as well as the phenomenon that is being analyzed (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2010; Losada et al. 2022). In this case, will be validated the interactive NOABS game as a methodological tool to diagnose vulnerability and also to prevent child sexual abuse through a systematic process of information. The NOABS project was presented to the Ethics Committee of UFLO University.

### **Research Design**

The research was analyzed under a quantitative approach because it is based on a positivist paradigm. On the other hand, it is important to say that the objective of this approach is to have a sequence and a level of veracity along its whole processes. In addition, some commonalities will be determined from the results obtained in both socioeconomic statuses, which will have a statistical view.

Associated variable	Variable type	Level	Instrument	Grade		
Age	Quantitative	Continue	NOABS software	6-13 years old		
Sex	Qualitative	Nominal	NOABS software	1. Female	2. Male	
Family environment	Quantitative	Reason	NOABS software	Yes	Not	I don't know
Social context	Quantitative	Reason	NOABS software	Yes	Not	I don't know
School context	Quantitative	Reason	NOABS software	Yes	Not	I don't know

**Table 1.** Variables -Operationalization- Categories -Comparison- of study

Monitoring variable	Variable type	Level	Instrument
Vulnerability and risk	Quantitative	Reason	NOABS software

**Table 2.** Monitoring variables

### Population and sample

The population that made part of this study were students from Simón Araujo school, including its headquarters with a population of 3,567 children. 1,668 were between 6 and 13 years old. The sample is taken with a sample for finite populations, obtaining in this way a population sample of 684 with a confidence level of 95% and a range of mistakes of 3%. The group that made up the sample shows homogeneity around socioeconomic resources.

### Instrument

In order to collect the information to carried out this research project, it was necessary, in the first place, to have a tool to identify the level of vulnerability and risk of sexual abuse in children between 6 and 13 years old. This instrument was the software called NOABS, which collects information and gives the results in statistical percentages, discriminating a scale as the level of risk and vulnerability of CSA through the analysis of daily situations in family, social and school contexts. The target group were between 6 and 13 years old. They were tested using some exercises with boys and girls from different ages, providing data related to the level of vulnerability and risk of CSA. At the same time, the oral description through the software and the images allow to the youngest child access in similar conditions to the older child.

To select the context, it was necessary to bear in mind the data obtained from the clinical population in relation to those who carried out the abuse, the places where the abuse took place and the type of phrases the abusers expressed. This is also explicit in the spaces and the selected figures. A pilot test was carried out with images of children outside their school and home.

## **Methods**

Firstly, the approval to carry out the research inside the school was obtained from the directors of the school, then the informed consent is given by parents and finally the NOABS software is applied. The strategy to participate in the game, is that children had to choose, according to his or her sex, which of the two characters he or she wanted to play with. After that, he writes his name, age, grade, and school, identifying several scenes where the child must select the answer that seems to be correct, by making a click on one of the options presented on the software. If the player chooses the right answer, then he will receive a star; but if he chooses the wrong answer, the abuser will receive the star. At the end, a score is obtained as the determined level of vulnerability and risk of CSA.

Secondly, the other part of the game is used to prevent CSA. Here, the player was instructed to make a click on each earned star to move on to another game. As children continued playing NOABS, they acquired a learning process that would allow him or her to protect himself or herself against sexual abuse, as they also acquire other cognitive skills.

## **RESULTS**

The study yielded the following results, that account for the factors inherent to vulnerability to child abuse.

Table 3 shows the relationship between sex and the contexts where child sexual abuse mostly occurs. According to the general results in the sample population, it is possible to see that 53.2 % are at a low level, 41.5 % at a medium level and 5.3 % at a high level. In the same way, in the application of NOABS, according to sex and especially in males, it was determined that 51.6 % present a low degree of vulnerability, 41.9 % medium, and 6.5 % high. The percentage in women was 54.5%, equivalent to a low degree, 41.2% medium and 4.3% high risk.

		Total, n (%)		
		Low	Medium	High
Degree of Vulnerability		364 (53,2)	284 (41,5)	36 (5,3)
Gender Vulnerability				
		Low	Medium	High
Female		204 (54,5)	154 (41,2)	16 (4,3)
Male		160 (51,6)	130 (41,9)	20 (6,5)
Vulnerability by context				
		Low	Medium	High
Family		435 (63,6)	139 (20,3)	110 (16,1)
Social		571 (83,5)	11 (1,6)	102 (14,9)
School		474 (69,3)	154 (22,5)	56 (8,2)
Vulnerability according to context and gender				
		Low	Medium	High
Female	Family	247 (66,0)	75 (20,1)	52 (13,9)
	Social	323 (86,4)	10 (2,7)	41 (11,0)
	School	256 (68,4)	86 (23,0)	32 (8,6)
Male	Family	188 (60,6)	64 (20,6)	58 (18,7)
	Social	248 (80,0)	1 (0,3)	61 (19,7)
	School	218 (70,3)	68 (21,9)	24 (7,7)

**Table 3.** Vulnerability and gender

In the family context, it shows a 63.6% in a low level, 20.3% medium and 16.1% high. In the level of risk in the social context, children scored a low level with 83.5%, medium 1.6 per cent and high with 14.9 per cent. According to the results obtained by children in the level of risk and vulnerability of sexual abuse in the school context, it can be determined that 69.3 % present a low grade, 22.5 % a medium grade and 8.2 % a high grade. The level of risk in the family context according to gender for girls was found to be 66% low, 20.1% medium and 13.9% high, while boys were 60.6% low, 20.6% medium and 18.7% high. According to the social context, girls presented a low level of 86.4%, medium 2.7%, high 11% and boys scored low at 80%, medium 3 %, high 19%. With regard to the table of risk level in the school context, girls showed a low level with 68.4%, medium 23% and high 8.6%, while boys showed scores of 70.3% low, 21.9% medium and 7.7% high.

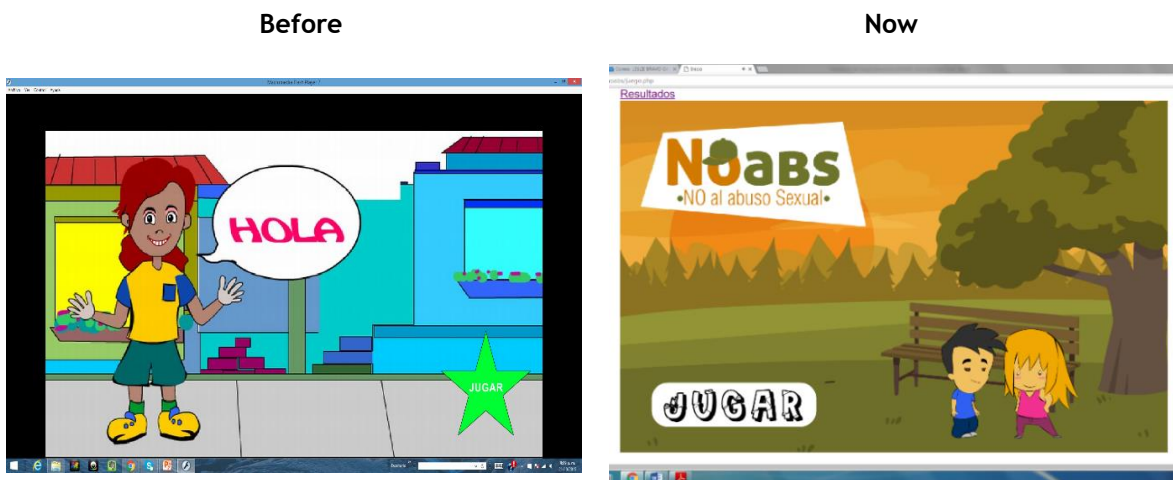
On the other hand, during the application of the strategy, children, professionals in psychology, social workers, educators, and government entities like ICBF

(Colombian Institute of Family Welfare) observed weaknesses and strengths that helped to improve the application, as shown in Table 4.

Weaknesses	Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audio</li> <li>• Voices</li> <li>• Text location</li> <li>• Weak mobility of the characters</li> <li>• Colours</li> <li>• Unattractive characters</li> <li>• Identification of age, sex, schooling and educational institution</li> <li>• Does not generate an automatic diagnosis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Situations according to the problem</li> <li>• Compression of questions</li> <li>• Motivation to play</li> <li>• Identification with the application</li> <li>• Get children's attention</li> <li>• I practice</li> <li>• Acceptance by children in the academic and professional community</li> </ul>

**Table 4.** NOABS Weaknesses and Strengths

According to the results, NOABS tool was redesigned in terms of technological aspects so the application and system can fulfill the objective of diagnosing and preventing sexual abuse in children between 6 and 13 years old, see Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** NOABS Design Before and Now

During the application and socialization of the results in the different academic areas and fields, government entities and ICBF try to join them to NOABS as a means of prevention and intervention of sexual abuse in the Department of Su-

cre. In addition, the Ministry of ICT certified that this application is a suitable business ICT idea.

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTUAL OR POTENTIAL IMPACT OF THE RESULTS**

The validation of the interactive game NOABS as a methodological tool to diagnose vulnerability and risk of child sexual abuse, is really important in terms of prevention since according to the results, it is possible to investigate about the information and treatment that children have when they are in a risk or when their sexuality is being affected.

National and international studies (Bravo García et al., 2020; Cazabat, 2004; Losada, 2012; Marzetti, 2020) report the problem of child sexual abuse in society. CSA from a view after the event itself, NOABS emerges as a useful tool that helps to mitigate the high levels of this phenomenon that affects children before they are abused in a family, social and educational context where the boy or girl operate, acting immediately with the necessary professional human resources considering the diagnosis of NOABS.

The results of the NOABS application will allow the design of prevention programs to reinforce and teach boys and girls about the knowledge and management of their sexuality, what they have to do or how to act in a certain situation. Furthermore, the professional will make a following in those cases where there is a high risk of abuse, since children may be affected. Or for him otherwise, parental protective factors may be weak or exacerbated.

On the other hand, NOABS is a digital initiative recognized on December 31st, 2015, by the Colombian Ministry of ICTs as an application that seeks to improve the quality of life of a fragile population, such as children from all social and environmental spheres. It is also pertinent to mention that the acceptance of the tool in a national and international level by professionals and staff involved in working with children, through presentations, workshops, and conferences, in which they express their satisfaction, support and applause for the application, since it is a great help for intervention and prevention of CSA in children from 6 to 13 years.

### **DISCUSSION**

Child sexual abuse is a problem of gradual growth, which affects children in the early stages of their development. The condition of being a child determines a high degree of vulnerability to this problem and is intensified by the parental inability of María Zulema Barilari parents (2009) and the contexts where it occurs. This study found that there is a level of vulnerability in child sexual abuse



of 5.3%. Where boys in a 6.5% are in high level of risk compared to girls in a 4.3%. Studies show that the highest incidence of sexual abuse is found in girls more than in boys. Analía Verónica Losada (2012) established in an investigation about the prevalence that 19% of women and 8% of men reported episodes of child sexual abuse, which does not coincide with the results obtained, where boys are more vulnerable than girls to be abused which requires a follow-up with a view to reduce the incidence of this problem.

It is also considered that the vulnerability of children may have origin in the deficient or dysfunctional abilities of the parents or primary caregivers. In this sense, we can understand the parental function as vulnerable. The feeling of vulnerability is related to the low assertiveness, low capacity to understand situations and to conceive possible solutions, in addition, the ineffective individual confrontation to the problems, control and prediction of situations (Cortés Arboleda et al., 2011).

On the other hand, in a context level it was found that there is a risk of family vulnerability of 16.1%, in the social context of 14.9% and in the school context of 8.2%, these results are similar to the figures of victims of child sexual abuse described by (Losada, 2012) where it was established that 58% of cases occurred within the family and 38% outside the family and 4% in both. Similarly, Cristian Pinto and Gonzalo Silva (2013) established that 63.1% of abuse occurred within the family and 36.2% outside the family. Kathleen Faller (1998) states that the context of development determines the child's development, but can constitute a risk of abuse, although the presence of these factors does not necessarily lead to abuse.

It is necessary to highlight that the family constitutes a network of protection and emotional link for children, and therefore there is a development of trust and a lack of negative events. If we talk about sexual abuse within the family, we must refer to some characteristics that can be found in them, such as the systems of power, secrecy and beliefs that make the abusive act invisible in many cases. Measuring both personal and contextual vulnerability is a form of prevention, but even so it continues to be an insufficient measure.

In a similar way, the results of vulnerability according to gender, it was found that boys and girls in social contexts with 80% and 86.4% respectively present risks of vulnerability to child sexual abuse and, according to Genny Elizabeth Apraez Villamarin (2015), it becomes a danger factor for children, due to the dynamics that the abuser exercises to attract them and carry out his sexual aggression.

According to the application and results, it is important to note that this NOABS application meets the proposed objectives for a solution to help mitigate child sexual abuse.

The child sometimes presents learning problems, boredom, disinterest, feeling forced to learn things that are not in his interest, defends himself by all means, from the attempts of manipulation by adults. With interactive games, on the other hand, the learner participates in the first person, spontaneously expresses his or her feelings, communicates through verbal and non-verbal codes, plays various roles, moves freely, establishes relationships, faces situations, and makes decisions. They can experience a wide range of actions that effectively influence the life of the group. In this way he becomes the subject of the educational process and not an inert recipient of the wisdom of the educated (Coronado Cabrera et al., 2014). In every learning process the students have an active role, but for personal or didactic reasons of the teacher the process becomes passive where the student only receives information. According to this author, in interactive games the young person is active, interacting with the characters and with the strategies and solutions.

Every interactive game end with a moment of reflection in which what has happened in the development of the game is discussed. This depends on the fact that the interactive game responds to very precise objectives, times, and contents, which causes a display of the child's physical and intellectual energies. While the objectives of an interactive game are well defined, the results it can lead to are open, and this also has great importance. In an interactive game, there are no rights or wrong solutions. Everyone judges, guided by their own feelings and by the feedback they receive from their peers, whether a certain behavior is appropriate to the purpose or not. Interactive games have a competitive component and encourage the spirit of collaboration; when it comes to channeling the young person's actions to achieve the objectives of the game (Vopel, 1998).

## CONCLUSIONS

Educational games manage to expose users, in a situation where they face conditions that can be modified for good or for bad, through the decisions made along the game. In this way, by the experience they get with the game, in case of real situations, they will have the opportunity to have an indirect contact with the situation, and thus get to know the consequences, thanks to the modifications made in the game. This type of software tends to be very beneficial for children because they assume a leadership role in the game and thus learn

and know about external elements, which will allow them to face and relate to the real world in such situations later on.

Moreover, in this type of educational game children have fun and these two aspects are considered a necessity in the stage of childhood and adolescence, however throughout the life of an individual too, but in the early stages of life educational games encourage the individual to develop more sensory, behavioral and cognitive functions that will allow the child to begin to have a mastery over their actions, because they are seen in the need to make decisions in educational games because of the situations posed by the game; This is why this will give the child the possibility of facing the adverse situations that may arise in life.

In the same way, an interactive game for the prevention of child sexual abuse provides the child with the recognition of the type of behavior that he is assuming or adopting to face the different situations presented by the game, and also to recognize not only his own behavior, but also that of his abuser, as well as his motivation during the game and to imagine the motivation that the person who sexually abuses a child may have.

The interactive game NOABS, is a methodological tool that will help to mitigate the problem of child sexual abuse in all the population that requires it, through its intervention and prevention strategies, since these capture the attention of children, while they are playing. In a first moment NOABS interacts with the child to diagnose in which scenarios he is vulnerable, also it will serve as help in the cases of abused children who are afraid to tell the secret, since it could be known or identified if the child is being abused, in which scenarios and which could be his possible abuser, to be able to intervene later adequately.

On the other hand, in a second time, following the instructions of the game, this will work as a preventive strategy, since as the children play they have fun with the hyperlinks that they find as a reward when they get it right, making it clear that when the term “right” is expressed, it refers to the appropriate reactions, behaviors, conduct, etc., that they must execute or perform in situations of abuse, so using this strategy will allow them to internalize this type of behavior, conduct or actions, which occur in situations or scenarios that the game poses.

However, even if the game succeeds in making children learn to defend themselves, it cannot be guaranteed that the same thing will happen to all children, since the motivation when starting the game is fundamental. Furthermore, the fact that the game is a game does not imply that the child is obliged to obtain significant learning, since as it is a game there is no rule for him, because this

is in the essence of the game, whether it is educational or playful without any objective.

Therefore, from this process of internalization that the child makes, a learning will be generated in him, that is to say, when he experiences a type of situation like the ones proposed by the game, he will react with the appropriate behaviors or adapted to the reality that is happening to him, to defend himself from his abuser. Likewise, this study shows that psychology is a science that, based on the use of other disciplines, can make incursions into new forms of intervention that are more innovative and attractive to children and the general population in any part of the world, due to the interest that is centered in this case on ICTs for this population.

The above would lead to psychology having a greater impact and transcendence, due to the evolution of the forms of intervention that would arise when carrying out studies such as this one, which attract and capture the attention of the individual, considering the interests and schemes of individuals who are different from the subject before. Then, as society changes and evolves, psychology must see the need to make proposals to intervene in different problems that are innovative, attractive, effective, and reliable.

It is expected as a future line of research to advance the validity of the NOABS in Peru, Chile, Colombia, and Argentina.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the results obtained in this research, it is recommended:

- To continue working with ICT taking advantage of the interest of the children towards the new technologies.
- Increase prevention programs in child sexual abuse.
- Promote the application of NOABS in the institutional field.
- To increase the awareness campaigns about the NOABS and about the potential abuser in a direct way.
- Strengthen policies of promotion, prevention, and care of child sexual abuse within the department of Sucre, at national and international level.
- To increase the training offer on child sexual abuse for all professionals, with the aim of contributing and providing knowledge that will allow a faster and more effective action in cases of this kind that may arise in the community, as well as its possible feedback in the competent population. This training should include attention to the potential perpetrator.

- Through the creation of extracurricular spaces, psychoeducation should be provided to the educational community and parents, to inform them about the handling of the CSA problem and the respective forms of attention.
- Through the continuation of this research, the administration of the NOABS instrument is being developed in Argentina, Chile, and Peru.

As key points, the following stand out:

What is already known on the subject:

- 1) Child sexual abuse is a highly prevalent phenomenon at the global public level and exposes a scourge that requires intervention from health.
- 2) Studies expose levels of prior vulnerability in children who later experience child sexual abuse.
- 3) Children present higher levels in terms of vulnerability than other age groups.

What is added:

- 1) A novel tool that makes it possible to dynamically account for the risks that a child goes through.
- 2) It allows psychologists to use digital instruments to allow the child to be evaluated dynamically.
- 3) It systematically provides an analysis of current data that allows us to glimpse child sexual abuse as a large-scale phenomenon.

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