

# Are we truly listening to our children?

**C**hildren are speaking, but are we truly hearing them before they turn to the world for validation?

Child abuse remains one of the most disturbing yet often hidden realities in our communities. It happens behind closed doors, frequently at the hands of individuals children know and trust. Yet beyond the abuse itself lies an equally urgent concern: why are so many children unable or unwilling to speak up? And when they do, are they believed?

For many children, speaking out is not a simple decision. It is a process shaped by fear, confusion, and uncertainty. A child experiencing abuse may question whether they will be believed, whether they will be blamed, or whether speaking up will make their situation worse. These fears are even more pronounced when the abuser is someone within their immediate environment a relative, caregiver, or trusted family friend.

Trust in children is not automatic; it is built over time. Children feel safe to open up when they grow up in environments where their voices are heard, their emotions are validated, and their concerns are taken seriously. However, in many households, communication is one-directional. Children are expected to listen and obey, but not to express themselves freely. Over time, these the silence turns into an urgent cry for help.

Parents and guardians often believe they would easily notice if something was wrong. Yet abuse does not always present itself in obvious ways. It can manifest through subtle behavioural changes such as withdrawal, fear of certain

individuals, mood swings, or declining performance in school. These signs are often overlooked or dismissed as normal phases of growing up.

This raises a difficult but necessary question: have parents and guardians done enough to truly listen?

Listening is more than hearing words. It requires presence, patience, and belief. It means creating a safe space where a child can speak without fear of punishment, dismissal, or judgment. When children find the courage to speak and are met with doubt or disbelief, the consequences can be devastating. It teaches them that their truth is not valued and that silence is safer than speaking.

In recent years, a worrying trend has emerged. Increasingly, children are turning to social media as a refuge platform where they feel heard, validated, and believed. In these digital spaces, they openly share experiences of abuse that they have been unable to voice at home.

This raises a painful question for parents and guardians: must a child's pain first become public before it is taken seriously? Are we pushing children toward strangers on the internet because we failed to listen when they needed us most?

When a child chooses social media over their home to express such deep distress, it often signals a breakdown in trust. It suggests that earlier attempts to communicate may have been ignored, dismissed, or not believed.

At the same time, parents face emotional challenges. Accepting that a close relative, friend, or household member could harm

**W** Equally important is attentiveness. Not all children will speak directly; many communicate through behaviours. Recognizing these signals requires awareness, patience, and emotional presence.

a child is difficult. Denial can become a form of protection against uncomfortable truths. However, protecting children must always take priority over protecting relationships, reputation, or comfort.

The solution begins at home. Parents and guardians must build environments of openness and trust. This means encouraging honest conversations, asking questions, and most importantly, listening without immediate judgment. Children must grow up knowing that their voices matter and that they will be taken seriously.

Equally important is attentiveness. Not all children will speak directly; many communicate through behaviours. Recognizing these signals requires awareness, patience, and emotional presence.

Children, too, must be empowered. They need to understand that their boundaries deserve respect and that it is okay to speak up even when the person involved is someone they know or love.

Ultimately, the responsibility lies with adults. Children should not have to go to the internet or strangers to be believed. They should not have to amplify their pain for it to be taken seriously.

The question is no longer whether children should speak but whether we are ready to listen before the world does.

Because in many homes today, silence is not peace. It is a warning.

*The writer is a Journalist and a Microfinance Practitioner*



**GRACE OBBO**