

VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD: KEY FEATURES

Violence against children is ubiquitous. In 2015, at least three out of four of the world's children – an estimated 1.7 billion – had experienced some form of inter-personal violence¹ in a previous year.² When the cumulative impact of violence is considered, almost no children – whether they live in rich countries or poor, in the global North or South – experience violence-free childhoods. Any effort to prevent violence must start with an understanding of the scope and character of violence in childhood.³

Defining violence in childhood

Violence in childhood includes violence perpetrated against children by adults, caregivers and other children. Commonly experienced and reported forms of inter-personal violence against children are corporal punishment, bullying, homicide, physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Childhood violence also includes the impact on children of witnessing violence in the home, school or community.

Violence against children is also closely linked with violence against women. Both forms of violence are often rooted in the same patriarchal attitudes, hidden by shame and stigma; and may take place in the privacy of homes and within familial relationships.

The impact of childhood violence

Exposure to violence – whether in the home, in schools, other institutions or in communities – can traumatize children and shape their attitudes towards and acceptance of violence. Children who witness violence are also more likely to experience violence directly, in childhood or later in life.

Witnessing violence against their mother is known to increase boys' risks of committing intimate partner violence as adults. Girls are also at increased risk of inter-personal violence if they have witnessed violence against their mother, or if their partners were abused as children or saw their mothers being abused.

Beyond the immediate trauma and fear it causes, violence can affect a child's health, education, productivity and future life opportunities. The impact of violence can lead to long-term depression and behavioural problems, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and eating disorders, and can make young people more vulnerable to substance abuse and poor reproductive and sexual health.

Not all forms of violence are equally damaging, at least in the immediate term. But all forms of violence have harmful effects on individual children and society. Many studies have found that a child's experience of physical punishment is associated with higher levels of aggression against parents, siblings, peers and spouses. Whether they suffer or witness abuse, children who are raised with violence in the home learn early and powerful lessons about the use of violence to dominate others. Highlighting and preventing these everyday manifestations of childhood violence is essential to preventing other serious forms of violence that often receive more attention.

Poly-victimization

Different forms of violence are often interconnected, and one type of abuse can increase susceptibility to other forms of violence. A child who experiences abuse and violence in the home, for example, may be driven into the street where she or he is exposed to further violence. It is common to find that the same children are mistreated by their parents or caregivers, bullied at school, sexually

¹ This estimate includes child homicide, violent discipline (or corporal punishment) at the hands of caregivers, peer violence (including bullying and physical fights), and sexual and physical violence experienced by adolescent girls.

² See Evidence Highlights 2 in this series. *Violence in Childhood: Key Facts*.

³ This summary draws on chapters 1-4 in the *Ending Violence in Childhood: Global Report 2017*. Know Violence in Childhood 2017. Ending Violence in Childhood. Global Report 2017. Know Violence in Childhood. New Delhi, India.

or physically victimized by adults or peers, and exposed to high levels of crime and violence in their communities. Looking at different forms of violence in isolation tends to underestimate the phenomenon of poly-victimization.

In South Africa's 2012 School Violence Study, significantly more students who had been bullied at school (57 per cent) had also suffered violent threat, assault, robbery or sexual assault, compared to those who had never been bullied. Poly-victims of violence were at particularly high risk of suffering lasting physical, mental and emotional harm.

Age and gender dimensions of violence in childhood

Violence in childhood plays out across a continuum of ages, settings, and experiences (FIGURE 1). The nature of violence a child experiences, and its potential impacts, will differ according to a child's age and level of emotional, cognitive and physical development.

Girls and boys tend to experience different forms of violence and to varying extents in different settings across life stages. For example, boys experience physical violence during middle childhood (5–9 years) at a much higher rate

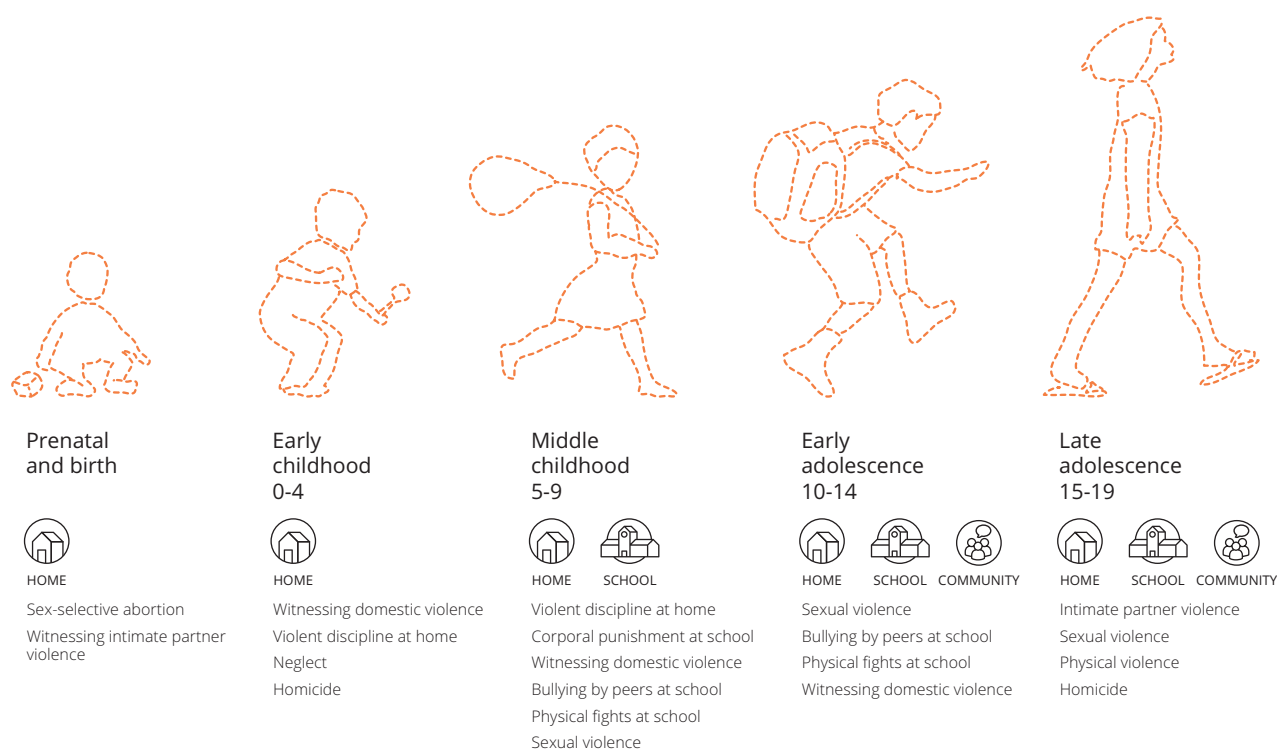
than girls, while girls in late adolescence (15–19 years) experience intimate partner and sexual violence more than boys.

- **Prenatal:** In the prenatal period, children are primarily affected by violence against their mothers. WHO estimates that 4–12 per cent of ever pregnant women across most countries have experienced physical abuse during at least one of their pregnancies. Prevalence rates for intimate partner violence during pregnancy range from 2 per cent in Australia, Cambodia, Denmark and the Philip-pines to 14 per cent in Uganda.

Domestic violence against the mother can present serious health risks for the unborn child. Pregnant women or girls who are the victims of abuse are more likely than non-abused women to have pre-term births, children with lower birth-weight and children with physical and mental disabilities. In India, women who faced domestic violence were more likely to develop complications during pregnancy, resulting in miscarriages, abortions or stillbirths.

- **Early childhood (0–4 years):** Physical violence is common in early childhood. At age 2, 50–60 per cent of girls and boys experienced physical violence from a caregiver or household member.

FIGURE 1: Exposure to violence through stages of childhood.



Source: Know Violence in Childhood 2017.

Data from 58 countries show that the proportion of children aged 2–4 who experienced violent discipline in the surveyed month ranged from 45 per cent in Panama and Mongolia to almost 90 per cent in Algeria, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Morocco, Swaziland, Tunisia and Yemen.

Around one in five homicide victims among children is under age four. Most are killed by their caregivers.

- *Middle childhood (5–9 years):* In middle childhood, children face new threats, including inter-personal violence from peers and punishment at school. Both boys and girls are more vulnerable to emotional violence. During this period, violence also emerges as a reason that children dislike (and often avoid) school. Fighting, teasing and bullying between students, and teachers shouting at or beating students are reported as key problems in schools for 53 per cent of children in Viet Nam, 42 per cent in Ethiopia, 38 per cent in Peru and 26 per cent in India. Children around the world report that they are hit by their teachers with a variety of objects such as rulers, yardsticks, shoes or belts. Other forms of assault include pinching, pulling ears, pulling hair, slapping the face and throwing objects.

Experiencing violence in one setting increases the risk of experiencing violence in another. Corporal punishment at school often leads to further punishment of children by their parents.

- *Early adolescence (10–14 years):* In early adolescence, girls are at greater risk of sexual violence while boys can become embroiled in community or gang violence; both genders are increasingly impacted by bullying. In most countries, the first episode of sexual violence for girls occurs before the age of 15.

Among children 13–15 years, bullying and being bullied in schools are closely related. Students aged 13–15 from 42 high-income countries report that those who get bullied are likely to bully others, and vice-versa. Early adolescence is also the age at which children become vulnerable to online violence, such as cyberbullying and grooming for sexual exploitation.

- *Late adolescence (15–19 years):* During late adolescence, girls suffer intimate partner and sexual violence at higher rates than boys. Harassment in the journey to and from school

leads some girls to discontinue their education. In Ethiopia and India, girls described fear of using toilets because of bullying and harassment from boys. During menstruation, this fear can result in girls' absence from school.

Boys in late adolescence are at higher risk of physical violence from peers, physical punishment by caretakers and teachers and gang violence. During this period, boys experience a dramatic increase in the risk of death by homicide. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the homicide rate for boys aged 15–19 is seven times higher than it is for girls.

Sexual violence in adolescence

The prevalence of sexual violence rises sharply in late adolescence, particularly for girls.

Until recently, much of the evidence on sexual violence of children came from high-income countries. However, emerging data from low- and middle-income countries indicate that the prevalence and characteristics of sexual violence against boys and girls vary widely. A comparative review of the VAC Surveys⁴ in seven countries found that among young people aged 18–24, the experience of any form of sexual violence by girls before the age of 18 ranged from 4 per cent in Cambodia to 38 per cent in Swaziland, with prevalence in most countries greater than 25 per cent. Among boys, the range was from 6 per cent in Cambodia to 21 per cent in Haiti.

Sexual violence against adolescents tends to have different perpetrators depending on whether the victim is male or female. In the VAC Surveys, the main perpetrators of sexual abuse against boys were neighbours, schoolmates and friends, whereas 45–77 per cent of sexual violence against girls was perpetrated by an intimate partner. Although these data are not disaggregated by age it is likely, given global patterns of sexual debut and marriage, that most of the cases of intimate partner violence occur among adolescents, rather than younger children.

Discrimination and childhood violence

Any child can be a victim of violence. However, some factors are linked with increased experience of violence. These include:

- *Disability:* Children with autism spectrum disorders, and learning or intellectual disabilities, are particularly vulnerable to bullying, as well as emotional and sexual violence. Children with disabilities are also at risk of being institutionalized and of facing violence within

⁴ Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS) are nationally representative household surveys of children and young adults aged 13–24 years carried out in a number of countries by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention along with other partners. See available at <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/vacs/>. Accessed 21 May 2017.

Also see Sommarin, C., T. Kilbane, J.A. Mercy, M. Moloney-Kitts and D.P. Ligiero. 2014. "Preventing sexual violence and HIV in children." *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes* 66(Suppl 2): S217–23. doi:10.1097/QAI.0000000000000183.

institutions, where they are frequently physically restrained or abandoned without stimulation or human contact.

- *Appearance*: Difference in appearance, including obesity or wearing spectacles, can increase a child's risk of violence.
- *Sexual orientation*: Up to 85 per cent of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students experience homophobic and transphobic violence in school, as do around one-third of other students who do not appear to conform to gender norms.
- *Ethnic or religious identity*: Racial and religious bullying affects children in all parts of the world.
- *HIV status*: Children and adolescents with HIV/AIDS can experience extreme discrimination and stigma. A case study with orphans affected by the epidemic in Uganda found that they were frequently slapped and caned.

Common settings of childhood violence

Violence in childhood occurs across a spectrum of settings, including the home, schools, online, in institutional settings and in the community. (FIGURE 2) Different forms of violence inter-connect along this spectrum and can also involve the same victims. For example, children placed in alternative care institutions, where rates of violence are high, are often there because of neglect or violence within their homes and families.

The Home

Evidence shows that growing up in a safe family environment leads to positive outcomes in terms of development and well-being for children. A secure home life, in which children are raised in physically safe environments with supportive family members and peers, can serve as a buffer against violence. Children in South Africa, for example, were found to be at less risk of child sexual abuse and maltreatment when they had warm, supportive relationships with parents than children who lacked such relationships.

For many, however, the home environment provides no automatic assurance of safety. Physical and emotional violence against children and intimate partner violence often take place within familial relationships and in the same space— in the home. Violence in the home is often disorganized, emotional, impulsive and associated with the urge to control a spouse or child.

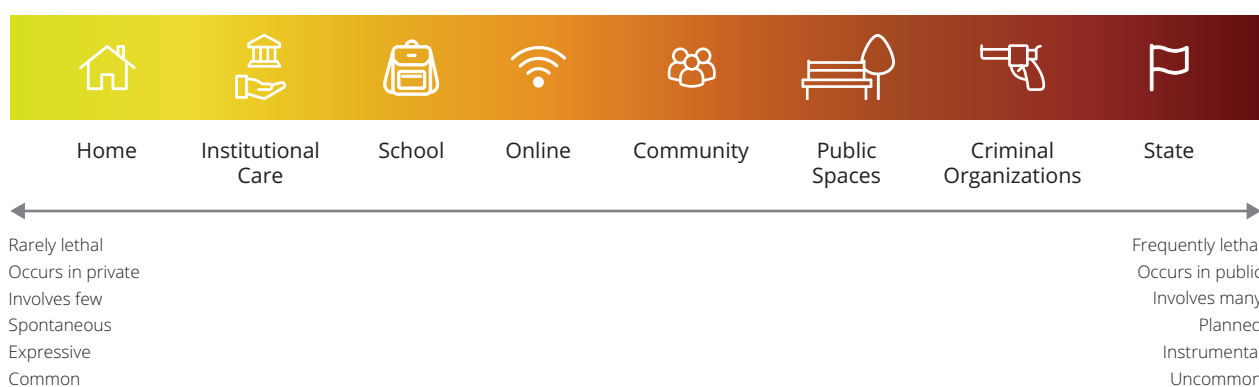
Conversely, the home can be a highly effective setting for efforts to reduce childhood violence. Home-visitation programmes designed to reduce child maltreatment can offer parents, especially first-time mothers, support on child development and child-rearing practices. In several countries, perinatal home visiting programmes and early childhood parenting programmes have been shown to prevent or reduce certain forms of child maltreatment such as physical abuse and neglect.

The School

Schools should be a positive part of a child's development. At the same time, school-sanctioned violence can have a serious impact on children's education. Entering school is associated with an increased risk of emotional and physical violence for many children. In 2015, some 261 million children reported that they were affected by physical fights and bullying in schools. In one study, respondents who had ever attended school had more than four times the odds of experiencing violence than those who had not attended school.

Schoolchildren of all ages are subject to corporal punishment for a variety of infractions, many of them minor. Another common expression of violence during school years is bullying. Social anxiety and peer rejection may put some children at higher risk of bullying than their more confident peers. Certain classroom, teacher and school characteristics may either inhibit or fuel bullying. Some teachers perceive bullying as a normal part of socialization within schools. Verbal aggression,

FIGURE 2: Violence across a spectrum of settings and actors.



Source: Adapted from Abt 2017.

sexual harassment and bullying are often seen as intrinsic to the development of appropriate social identities for girls and boys.

The most fruitful response is a whole-school approach that treats violence as a symptom of a disturbed ecosystem, and integrates into schooling processes and routines a variety of targeted interventions, including student lessons and meetings, to prevent violence. Curricula and teacher training, early childhood education, after-school programmes for children at risk and school-based initiatives to change the social norms that can fuel violence are just some of the ways in which schools can transition from being key locations for violence against children into safe spaces that enable children to realize their full potential.

Residential care Institutions

Children may be placed in institutional care for a variety of reasons, including violence in the family, the death of caregivers, poverty, illness or disability of the child or caregivers, and displacement due to conflict, disaster or epidemics such as HIV and Ebola.

Children who live in residential institutions are at significantly greater risk of physical and sexual abuse than those in foster care or the general population. Children with disabilities are at particular risk.

Safeguarding children in institutional care from violence is an important short-term objective, but the primary aim of violence-prevention advocates is to remove children from institutionalized care by strengthening families and communities and expanding family-based care options. However, creating a favourable environment for the removal of children from institutions into alternative care requires significant reform of policy and systems.

Online and Cyberspace

Internet and new mobile technologies may help mitigate youth violence by providing young people with information and support systems. But digital communications expose children to violence, trauma and aggression through various forms of aggressive or hostile communications, including flaming, bash boards, text wars and many others. The internet can also be used to incite violence and to facilitate the sexual exploitation of children.

The psychosocial impacts of online violence may be similar to those of offline violence. There may also be distinct impacts and harms arising from the unique characteristics of online violence, such as the permanency of the digital footprint, the capacity for the aggressor to remain anonymous

and the sheer scale of an offence that goes viral. As yet, these impacts are insufficiently understood, and the evidence base about online violence remains weak. Technology is evolving faster than the rate at which researchers and policymakers can gather and analyze evidence.

Parents and teachers who are more technologically literate are better equipped to protect and supervise their children than those who know little about digital technology. A number of online systems can also promote children's safety. Among these are *Young Africa Live*, an online forum that gives girls and women an anonymous space to talk freely about sexual issues, and *Harrassmap* (Egypt) and *Township Mamas* (South Africa), tech systems that enable girls and women to map and create alerts about rape assaults. The Internet can be used to make institutions more accountable for protecting children's rights. SMS systems are also being used to track corporal punishment and improve child safety.

Violence in community settings

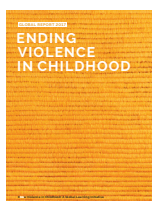
Community-level violence is a feature of both rural and urban societies. Cities, in particular, can present major risks, especially for children. While violence can erupt in any neighbourhood or community, it tends particularly to occur in high-risk, "fragile" contexts. Violence in urban communities is conditioned by a dynamic interplay of factors including high population density, income and social inequality, concentrated poverty, weak social safety nets, poor services and infrastructure, and a high proportion of young under-educated and unemployed youth with easy access to alcohol and drugs. Urban violence tends to cluster in a small number of "hotspots" and is committed by a small number of people, primarily adolescents and youth.

Of the world's 50 most violent cities, all but seven are in Latin America. This region also provides ample evidence of strategies that can reduce violence by strengthening systems of formal justice and community-based mediation. Local authorities can target high-risk hotspots with a range of services and resources, offer young people more productive outlets for their energy, and strengthen community cohesion. Police can work more positively and effectively in partnerships with the community, which helps increase levels of trust and the reporting of crime.

Reshaping the physical environment through better urban planning can also reduce violence. An important principle is to design public spaces according to the safety needs of women and girls. Better public design can reduce community stress through improved public transport and easier access to services and employment opportunities.

Every day millions of boys and girls around the world experience fear and violence – physical, emotional or sexual. This need not happen. Violence in childhood is preventable – through concerted and collective action that addresses the root causes of violence and lays firm foundations for both sustainable development and more peaceful societies.

To achieve the commitments to ending all forms of violence that are enshrined in both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals, states and societies must analyze the causes of childhood violence, and invest in preventing violence against women and children.



Know Violence in Childhood is a learning initiative dedicated to informing and supporting a global movement to end violence in childhood. Established in 2014 for a three-year period, the Initiative analyzed existing data, commissioned new research and synthesized knowledge on the causes and consequences of childhood violence worldwide. Its work highlights the impact of childhood violence on individuals, families, communities and societies, expands the research base on this global crisis and promotes evidence-based strategies to prevent violence.

The full report and related outputs are available at: www.knowviolenceinchildhood.org

