



BRIEF 1. **Parenting programmes
to reduce violence against
children and women:
Why it is important.**

Acknowledgements

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Introduction



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Parent and caregiver support programmes are in a unique position to reduce violence in the family — specifically, violence against children and against their mothers and female caregivers. Both types of violence have long-term consequences for children’s health, development, and well-being. While very few parenting programmes explicitly seek to reduce both violence against children and violence against women, emerging evidence demonstrates that parenting programmes can reduce both simultaneously — highlighting opportunities to strengthen existing programmes.

This brief is designed for practitioners implementing parenting programmes to learn more about the rationale for working at the intersections of violence against children and violence against women. It summarises existing research on how these two forms of violence intersect, their consequences, and emerging evidence of effective programmes. It also describes the role of unequal gender norms in perpetuating violence, shaping parenting practices, and influencing children’s opportunities — and why this, too, matters for parenting programmes. The brief is the first in a series designed to support practitioners in integrating the prevention of violence against children and violence against women, as well as the promotion of gender equality, into existing parenting programmes.

Box 1. The Focus of This Series: Parenting Programmes to Reduce Violence against Children and Women

While reducing children’s exposure to violence in the family requires working with individuals and families, communities, services, and systems to change attitudes, behaviours, and norms, this series intentionally highlights parenting programmes. In many communities, parenting programmes are already reaching parents and caregivers. Evidence suggests these programmes can be strengthened to reduce violence against both children and women and to promote gender equality, in addition to improving parenting and child outcomes.

The series focuses on:

- The most common forms of violence against children (VAC) and violence against women (VAW): violent discipline by parents and intimate partner violence (IPV), respectively. These types of violence often co-occur in families and there is evidence to suggest parenting programmes can reduce them.
- Parenting programmes for parents of young children, given the benefits of intervening early, and the greater availability of evidence from these programmes, with regard to reducing VAC and IPV. However, some information is applicable to programmes for parents of older children and adolescents.
- Parents in heterosexual relationships, since gendered, unequal relationship dynamics between men and women are a risk factor for intimate partner violence and men are its primary perpetrators. While violence in non-heterosexual relationships — also driven by power and control dynamics — is outside the scope of this series, all parents and caregivers, regardless of sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation, can benefit from parenting programmes designed to prevent violence and promote nurturing environments for children.

We use the terms parents and caregivers interchangeably throughout the series to refer to individuals with a primary role in providing care to children, whether they are biological, adoptive, or foster parents, grandparents, other relatives, or guardians.

Why does violence prevention matter for parenting programmes?

Children need stable, nurturing relationships with one or more parents or caregivers and safe, supportive home environments to survive and thrive. Yet too many children grow up in homes characterised by violence directed at them and/or their mothers or female caregivers. Violent discipline — which includes physical punishment and psychological aggression by parents and caregivers — and IPV are the most common forms of violence that children and women experience, respectively.^{1,2} Globally, three-quarters of children ages 2 to 4 experience violent discipline from their caregivers regularly,³ and a third of women experience physical or sexual violence from a partner in their lifetime.² Often, these two forms of violence co-occur.⁴ This matters for the design of parenting programmes because:

Violence undermines children’s health, development, and well-being. Violent discipline and IPV are both associated with a range of negative impacts on children’s physical and mental health; their cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioural development; and their educational outcomes.⁵⁻⁷ Exposure to either type of violence at an early age can affect a child’s developing brain and alter their neurodevelopment.⁸ As a result, they may find it difficult to regulate their emotions or interact with others, and they may be aggressive towards peers and others as they grow up. These negative impacts may be compounded when children are exposed to multiple types of violence, with potentially lasting consequences into adolescence and adulthood.⁴

Women experiencing IPV face a multitude of social, economic, and physical and mental health consequences that can undermine their ability to bond with their children and provide them responsive care.⁹⁻¹¹ Poor parent or caregiver mental health also negatively impacts children’s own mental health, psychosocial well-being, and development.¹² Relationship conflict and poor mental health can increase caregiver stress and make it more difficult for parents to regulate their emotions when interacting with their children. Research suggests that women who experience IPV — and the men who perpetrate it — are more likely to violently discipline their children.^{13,14} In some cases, women may use violent discipline to control their children’s behaviour before it triggers more severe violence from fathers or male caregivers.¹⁵

Violence has long-term and intergenerational consequences for children, women, and men. Children in violent homes may learn that violence is a normal way to resolve conflict or to manage unruly behaviour. Exposure to violence can also cause changes in a child’s developing brain that lead to problems, such as poor impulse control, that increase their risk of violence later

in life.⁸ Research suggests that childhood exposure to violence increases the risk of becoming a perpetrator (men) or a victim (women) of violence in adolescence or adulthood, as well as the risk of using violence against one's own children one day.^{4,13,16} Yet these intergenerational cycles are not inevitable. They can be averted through relationships with a supportive, loving adult and by learning skills, such as emotional regulation and conflict resolution.

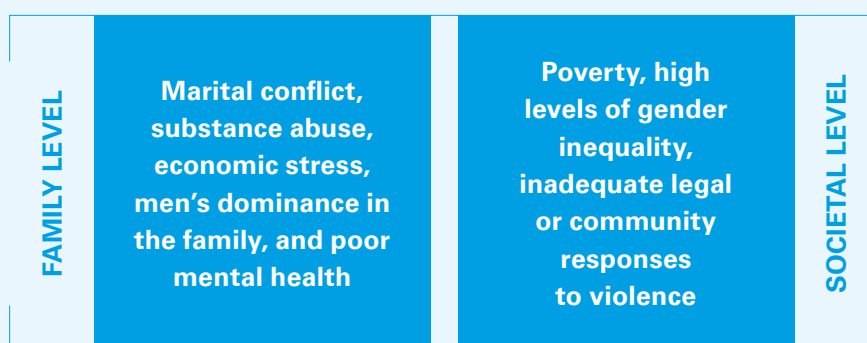
Parenting programmes are in a unique position to strengthen parents' awareness, relationships, and skills in order to reduce violence against both children and their mothers or female caregivers, as well as promote caregivers' own mental health and well-being. Some parenting programmes already seek to prevent the violent discipline of children, but very few intentionally address IPV. Yet both types of violence share common risk factors and norms that allow for common solutions (see Box 2).

Failing to address VAC and VAW is a missed opportunity, and it may even undermine the desired outcomes of parenting programmes. For example, programmes that address violent discipline but not IPV may find that parents are unable to develop healthy parent-child interactions or adopt positive parenting practices. Where programmes are successful at reducing violent discipline, children may still be exposed to IPV and its long-term consequences. Preventing VAC and VAW should be seen as an integral part of parenting programmes.



Box 2. Shared Risk Factors and Norms, Underpinned by Gender Inequality

VAC and VAW share common risk factors at the family and societal levels:^{4,13}



Both types of violence are underpinned by common social norms — the unwritten rules, values, and expectations within a community, which are often socially enforced. Common social norms sustaining VAC and VAW include norms that:^{4,17}

- Support gender inequality and tolerate violence
- Promote harmful masculinities based on violence and control
- Condone violent discipline of children and women
- Legitimise the use of violence to resolve conflicts
- Blame victims and encourage issues to be kept within families, which discourages help-seeking
- Prioritise the reputations of perpetrators

VAC and VAW are rooted in gender inequality and often reinforce it:

- Gender norms — the social expectations that define what is considered 'appropriate' behaviour for individuals based on their sex — are risk factors for violence.¹⁸ Harmful gender norms — that devalue women and girls, reinforce male dominance and aggression, and create hierarchies of power — perpetuate violence and are often used to justify it.
- Support for these norms is linked to violence: men who support gender inequality are more likely to use VAC or VAW,^{4,19} and men and women who think IPV is justified are more likely to violently discipline their children.²⁰
- Such norms create the expectation that violence is often a justified, or even necessary, way to correct children's and women's behaviour, promoting impunity. Patriarchal norms give this right to men over women and parents over children.
- Harmful gender norms also perpetuate unequal opportunities for boys and girls (e.g., limiting access to education or promoting early marriage for girls) — which can increase later risks of violence.

Parenting programmes can reduce violence in the home

A growing number of parenting programmes are seeking to reduce violence against both children and their mothers or female caregivers, and the evidence that they can do so is also increasing. The current evidence suggests that programmes can reduce VAC and VAW simultaneously — even when they are not specifically designed to do so. A recent systematic review identified 19 primary prevention programmes (mostly in the Global South) that reduced both parents' use of VAC *and* IPV — including not only parenting programmes but also community-based and couples' interventions not primarily focused on parenting outcomes.²¹ While many programmes were designed to address only one type of violence, or addressed the other in a limited way, they still demonstrated reductions in both VAC and IPV. Several new programme evaluations have also demonstrated reductions in both types of violence.²²⁻²⁴ Most of these programmes worked with parents of young children, although a few also reached parents of older children and/or adolescents.

While the evidence suggests that parenting programmes can reduce VAC and VAW (particularly if designed with these changes in mind), more research is needed. Many of the programmes that have proven effective have only been evaluated in a single setting and within relatively short time frames. There is much to learn about how effective programmes are when adapted and implemented across diverse settings and over the long term. Programmes also often seek changes in different outcomes or measure them in different ways, limiting understanding and comparability across programmes and settings. Yet more and more programmes are being evaluated, contributing to a larger evidence base.

Recent evaluations of programmes with parents that reduced violent discipline and IPV (most often physical or sexual, but also emotional or economic) also demonstrated impact on a range of other outcomes, including:²²⁻²⁷

- Parents' attitudes about violent discipline
- Positive parenting skills and behaviour
- Responsive care of children
- Parent-child interactions and relationships
- Parental mental health and stress
- Maternal and child nutritional practices
- Child behavioural outcomes
- Couple relationship quality
- Men's participation in childcare
- Men's participation in household tasks

- Women's participation in household decision-making
- Parents' attitudes about gender and VAW

Many of the programmes achieving these outcomes were designed to be gender-transformative, recognising the role of gender inequality in perpetuating violence.

Such programmes understand how gender inequality and power imbalances between men and women, girls and boys, can undermine parents' capacity to provide nurturing care, restrict children's opportunities, and be risk factors for VAC and VAW. The programmes aim to promote caring, equitable relationships and nonviolent interactions for the whole family. See Box 3 to learn more about gender-transformative parenting programmes to reduce VAC and VAW.

Box 3. Gender-Transformative Parenting Programmes to Reduce Violence

Gender-transformative parenting programmes intentionally seek to address the root causes of gender-based inequalities and to challenge or transform harmful gender roles, norms, and power imbalances between women and men, girls and boys.¹⁷ They work with both female and male parents and caregivers to build and sustain healthy, nonviolent relationships with their partners and children.

These programmes aim to transform parents' own gender attitudes and behaviours to improve couple relations and change the way parents raise their children. To do so, they promote critical reflection and discussion of unequal gender attitudes, norms, and power dynamics, as well as support parents in identifying the benefits of more equitable ways of being. They build or strengthen relationship and parenting skills to improve the quality of co-parent and parent-child relationships (e.g., communication, emotional self-regulation, conflict resolution, stress management, and nonviolent discipline).

Alongside improved parenting practices, programmes often seek multiple changes that can benefit children's physical and mental health, development, and well-being, such as:

- Caring, supportive, and nonviolent parent-child and partner relations
- Equitable relationships where partners share responsibility for caregiving and power in making decisions about their relationship, household, and children's lives
- Parent/caregiver capacity to raise children with equal care and opportunities for play, learning, and education, free from gender stereotypes

For a fuller definition of gender-transformative parenting programmes — including their common principles, delivery characteristics, and content of these programmes — see [Brief #2](#) in this series.

Why should parenting programmes promote gender equality?

Unequal gender norms perpetuate VAC and VAW, and they fundamentally shape parenting practices and the environments in which children are raised. In addition to preventing violence, challenging unequal gender norms should matter to parenting programmes because:

Gender norms often discourage men's participation in the care of their children. In most settings, women and girls are expected to be the caregivers and are raised from a young age to care for their siblings and do household chores. At the same time, boys often grow up without examples of men engaged in caregiving or opportunities to learn caregiving skills.²⁸ The expectation of men's limited role in caring for their children is often reinforced by their families, communities, and services (including some parenting programmes). In turn, many children miss out on the full caring potential of their fathers, despite many fathers wanting to be more involved.²⁸ By contrast, boys who grow up with fathers doing household work are more likely to do the same as adults and hold more gender-equitable attitudes.²⁹

Gender norms often contribute to unequal family dynamics. They often prescribe men's role as the household head, with decision-making power in the family. As such, men frequently influence or control women's and children's access to critical resources and services, including health and education. This unequal power dynamic limits women and girls' agency and autonomy, and these gender norms create rigid divisions of labour (i.e., men as decision-makers, women as caregivers), privilege, and responsibility within the home. These divisions often leave both parents overburdened and isolated in their roles, undermining their ability to function as a team in parenting.

Gender norms often influence children's opportunities and behaviour from an early age. Children first learn how to view themselves and the world around them through their interactions with their parents and siblings, shaping their attitudes and behaviour. Parents may consciously or unconsciously transfer harmful gender norms to their children by raising boys and girls differently (see Box 4). Gender norms and stereotypes influence what parents think their children can or should do based on their sex — including how or where they play, their toys, the stories they are told, if they do household chores, whether or for how long they go to school, and at what age they marry.³⁰ This can perpetuate gender inequality and power imbalances that limit children's opportunities (e.g., girls' access to education, boys' opportunities for emotional connection) and also create risks for future violence.

Parenting programmes should be aware of how gender norms influence parents, their relationships with their children and partners, and their parenting practices. At a minimum, parenting programmes should avoid perpetuating or further entrenching harmful gender norms. Yet parenting programmes can also choose to take a gender-transformative approach — working with mothers and fathers to challenge restrictive gender norms and create more equitable relationships — and, in doing so, may even amplify their impact. Parenting programmes designed in such a way can contribute to improving parent-child interactions and family dynamics; reducing violence and its immediate and long-term impacts; and ensuring children are raised with equal opportunities regardless of their sex or gender identity.

Box 4. What Is Gender Socialisation?³¹

Gender socialisation refers to the processes through which individuals learn to behave according to gender norms — it begins at birth, continues throughout childhood, and often intensifies during adolescence. Parents may intentionally or unintentionally socialise their children to unequal gender norms through:

1.

Active teaching, such as telling boys they cannot cry or making girls (but not boys) take on household chores

2.

Speech, actions, behaviours, and practices, such as giving girls dolls and boys guns to play with or praising girls for their looks and boys for their physical strength

3.

Modelling gendered behaviours, such as women and girls doing all of the unpaid care work within the home

4.

Harmful practices, such as IPV or restricting women and girls' mobility²²

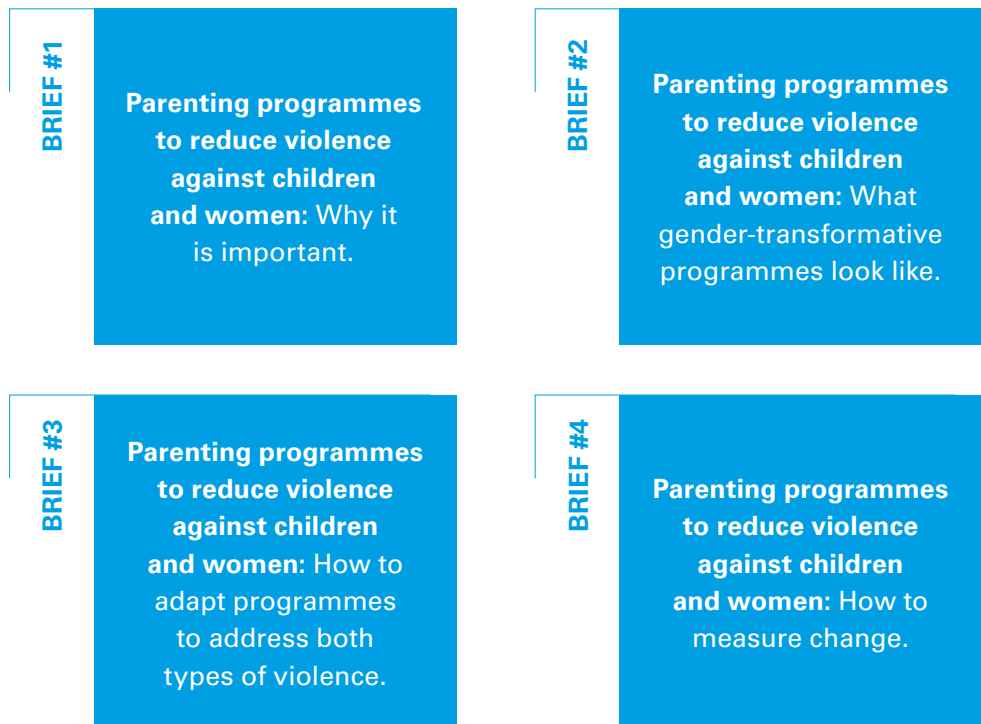
Parenting programmes can promote positive gender socialisation by supporting parents in becoming aware of, questioning, and changing these patterns of behaviour.

Conclusion

Parenting programmes have an opportunity to reduce children’s exposure to violence — against themselves and against their mothers or female caregivers — and this exposure’s immediate and long-term consequences. Existing programmes can be adapted to address both types of violence, based on the evidence. They can adopt a gender-transformative approach, working with mothers and fathers to build relationship and parenting skills, interrogate harmful norms, and improve family dynamics. They can also support parents in raising their children with equal care and opportunities for play, learning, and education, free from gender stereotypes. In the long term, this may help break intergenerational patterns of violence.

The next brief in this series ([Brief #2](#)) explores what these programmes look like in practice. It unpacks the key principles, content, and strategies for working with parents to reduce violence and challenge unequal gender norms and power dynamics. It provides key insights that can support parenting practitioners in adapting their existing programmes to reduce VAC/VAW and promote gender equality.

We invite you to explore all four briefs in our series:



Recommended resources



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[What Works Evidence Review: Intersections of Violence against Women and Violence against Children](#), What Works to Prevent Violence, 2017

[Working at the Intersection of Violence Against Women and Children](#) (online course), Prevention Collaborative

[Gender Dimensions of Violence Against Children and Adolescents](#), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2020

[Parenting and Caregiver Support Programmes to Prevent Violence in the Home: Evidence Brief](#), Prevention Collaborative, 2022

[Breaking the Cycle of Intergenerational Violence: The Promise of Psychosocial Interventions to Address Children's Exposure to Violence](#), Equipundo and Sonke Gender Justice, 2018

[Technical Note: Gender-Responsive Parenting](#), UNICEF, 2019

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The Prevention Collaborative works to reduce violence against women and their children by strengthening capacity of key actors to deliver effective prevention programmes, based on feminist principles and evidence-and practice-based learning. We serve the specific needs of practitioners and implementing partners by curating evidence, mentoring organisations, and ensuring that donor funding is channelled wisely.

Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice has worked internationally and in the US since 2011 to engage men and boys as allies in gender equality, promote healthy manhood, and prevent violence. Equimundo works to achieve gender equality and social justice by transforming intergenerational patterns of harm and promoting patterns of care, empathy, and accountability among boys and men throughout their lives.

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