



BRIEF 2. **Parenting programmes  
to reduce violence against  
children and women:**  
What gender-transformative  
programmes look like.

## 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 physical and mental health, development, and well-being. They also share common risk factors and social norms, rooted in gender inequality, which enables common solutions. Yet very few parenting programmes explicitly seek to reduce both violence against children and violence against women, although emerging evidence demonstrates programmes can reduce both simultaneously. Effective programmes often take a gender-transformative approach, working with women and men to challenge unequal gender norms and power dynamics and to build relationships and parenting skills that support more equitable, caring, and nonviolent family dynamics.<sup>1,2</sup>

This brief explores what gender-transformative parenting programmes to reduce family violence look like in practice based on the evidence. It unpacks the common principles, delivery characteristics, and content of these programmes and how they work with parents to challenge unequal gender norms and power dynamics, reduce violence, and promote nurturing environments for children. It is designed to provide parenting practitioners with evidence-based insights to support the adaptation and strengthening of existing parenting programmes to work at the intersections of violence against children and violence against women. This brief is the second 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.

# What Are Gender-Transformative Parenting Programmes to Reduce Family 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 men and women, boys and girls.<sup>3</sup> Such programmes recognise that these harmful norms and power imbalances can undermine parents' capacity to provide nurturing care, restrict children's opportunities, and be risk factors for VAC and VAW. They work with both female and male parents and caregivers to promote caring, equitable relationships and nonviolent interactions for the whole family.

Gender-transformative parenting programmes seek to transform parents' own gender attitudes and behaviours to improve couple relations and change the way parents raise their children. To do so, these programmes 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

Gender-transformative parenting programmes have demonstrated promising evidence of reducing both VAC and VAW while achieving a range of other outcomes that influence the physical and mental health and well-being of children and their parents.<sup>1</sup> While the evidence is growing, it remains limited to a few programmes implemented in a few settings. However, such programmes provide key lessons for adapting or strengthening existing parenting programmes to address violence and promote gender equality more holistically. Gender-transformative parenting programmes differ in many ways but often share elements, including key principles, delivery characteristics, and core content, which are explored in the remainder of this brief.

# Common Programme Principles

Gender-transformative parenting programmes that have reduced violence differ in their focus and intended objectives, are designed for different social and cultural contexts, and reach parents with children of different ages. Despite these differences, programmes are often guided by shared principles. They:

- **Are grounded in gender equality and women's rights.** Programmes seek to promote gender equality as a goal and as a pathway to prevent violence and/or achieve other positive outcomes — such as improved relationship quality, joint decision-making, or improved maternal and reproductive health. They recognise and strengthen positive norms that support equality and are grounded in respect for women and girls' rights, agency, and autonomy.<sup>4</sup> Programmes promote more equitable relationships and power dynamics between men and women and between parents and children, as well as equal opportunities for boys and girls — and generally seek to measure changes in these outcomes. When seeking to engage men as parents and caregivers, programmes listen to women's preferences and concerns about men's greater participation in their children's lives.<sup>5</sup>
- **Explicitly engage men as equitable parents and caregivers.** Children benefit from having engaged fathers and male caregivers, and men often want to learn how to be better parents.<sup>5-7</sup> Working with men is also critical for preventing violence, as men are the primary perpetrators of IPV and unequal relationship dynamics are risk factors for VAC and VAW.<sup>8-10</sup> Programmes, therefore, design their messaging, content, and recruitment strategies to appeal to both men and women, and they reflect the information and skills both want as parents. They approach men positively, acknowledging that most men are eager to learn how best to care for their children but may feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in existing parenting programmes.<sup>6</sup> However, simply including men in programmes is insufficient to achieve more equitable and respectful relationships. Men must be encouraged to reflect on and challenge their own gender attitudes and practices, and effort also needs to be made to change the world around them to support these shifts.<sup>5,6,11</sup>
- **Engage communities in programme design or adaptation.** Parents and caregivers (women and men), children, and key stakeholders are actively involved in or lead programme design right from the start.<sup>12,13</sup> Programmes consult parents and children through formative research, and test or pilot programmes with them, to ensure the programme resonates and is tailored to their needs, desires, and experiences. Engaging communities early also enables meaningful buy-in and acceptance from the community and avoids a programme being perceived as externally imposed. This can help to prevent backlash, particularly when addressing and challenging topics like violence or harmful gender or social norms. Engaging communities and other key stakeholders, such as local government or policymakers, in programme design or adaptation can also promote sustainability and may support programme scale-up.

- **Apply a strengths-based approach and meet parents where they are.** (Most) parents want the best for their children and are doing their best, often despite challenging circumstances. All parents can benefit from parenting programmes, regardless of whether they use violence, and many parents desire extra support and opportunities to build parenting skills.<sup>13</sup> Programmes do not tell parents they are failing or need to change. Rather, they focus on strengthening parents' skills and recognise the importance of supporting parent and caregiver mental health and well-being.<sup>13</sup> While violence reduction is an explicit outcome, programmes are not advertised as such to participants. Rather, programmes highlight the benefits participation can bring — for children, parents, and families. Successful recruitment messages often emphasise how a programme helps achieve stronger parent-child and couple relationships; achieve happier, more peaceful families; or support children's health and well-being. Positive messages are particularly useful for recruiting men, who may perceive parenting programmes as only for mothers or may feel judged or threatened if a programme appears to focus on violence.
- **Promote women's and children's safety and rights.** Working with parents to reduce violence and challenge entrenched gender norms may carry risks for children and women.<sup>5,13</sup> Programmes assess and then mitigate potential risks by developing adequate safeguarding policies and protocols, carefully monitoring implementation, and referring those in need to support and response services.<sup>8,13</sup> Where laws exist on mandatory reporting of VAC (including exposure to IPV), programmes assess how to do so safely and in the best interests of children and women.<sup>8,13</sup> Programmes also monitor potential unintended consequences of promoting men's greater participation in their children's lives. When not implemented well, programmes may unintentionally reinforce gender stereotypes or power imbalances — for example, increasing men's influence and control over decisions that impact women's and girls' lives.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, programmes often promote women's access to and control over resources and participation in household decision-making and evaluate impacts to women's agency and autonomy.
- **Recognise that violence prevention requires work at all levels of the socio-ecological model,** even if many parenting programmes work only at the individual and family level to change participants' attitudes and behaviour.<sup>8,10</sup> However, some programmes work at multiple levels, including using social and behaviour change campaigns (e.g., radio, theatre, posters, and/or community events) at the community level to change harmful gender and social norms that perpetuate violence. These campaigns often promote caring, nonviolent relationships and more equitable family dynamics, including men's participation in childcare and unpaid care work more broadly. Some programmes work within institutions to train service providers, such as health, social services, or early childhood educators, to engage men and/or support gender-transformative parenting. Some programmes advocate for supportive laws and policies, for example to end corporal punishment, establish national VAW action plans, or provide paid parental leave.<sup>8,10</sup> It's not necessary that every programme works at all of these levels; in fact, few are well-positioned to do so. However, it is important to recognise the need to work at all levels of the ecosystem and to build partnerships and strategies accordingly.

# Common Delivery Features and Characteristics

Gender-transformative parenting programmes most often reach parents through small group meetings and also through mentoring sessions, home visits, or a combination of these.<sup>8,13,14</sup> Regardless of how they reach parents, programmes often share the following delivery features and characteristics. They:

- **Use structured curricula.** Programmes generally include at least 10 sessions — but often more — that are delivered regularly (e.g., weekly, or biweekly).<sup>13,14</sup> They are based on theories of change that view the adoption of new attitudes and behaviours as a process that is best supported when participants have time between sessions to reflect on, internalise, and practise the new behaviours they have learned. Programmes give facilitators clear, well-organised manuals that provide the programme content sequentially (e.g., activities, key messages, group discussion questions, homework assignments) and include tips to help facilitators prepare for sessions or address common challenges.
- **Train peers or community-based service providers as facilitators.** Facilitators may be female or male, parents, community health workers, social service providers, or community-based or nongovernmental organisation staff familiar with the community.<sup>13,14</sup> Male facilitators (alongside female ones) are often included to help appeal to men, who may feel more comfortable or see themselves reflected in a male facilitator.<sup>5</sup> Training is of adequate length (often at least 10 days) and includes opportunities for facilitators to examine their own beliefs about gender roles and norms, helping enable them to lead gender-transformative sessions with parents.<sup>13,14</sup> Facilitators are also trained on referral services and pathways, including mandatory reporting laws where relevant. Refresher training and supportive supervision is often provided through regular meetings, mentoring sessions, and constructive feedback.
- **Are often designed for parents in the general population.** Many programmes with evidence of reducing VAC and VAW do not explicitly screen for or recruit families known to be experiencing violence. However, many are designed for disadvantaged or vulnerable families (e.g., living in poverty, in rural areas) with young children who may be at increased risk and are implemented in settings with a high prevalence of VAC and VAW.<sup>13,14</sup> Different entry points are used to recruit parents depending on the population and age of children, including through referral or recruitment by local leaders, staff from health or social services, or staff from childcare or early childhood development centres. Some programmes are implemented within or in partnership with health, social, or early childhood services.<sup>13</sup>



- **Usually include a combination of single- and mixed-sex sessions.** Men and women may not feel comfortable talking openly in front of each other depending on the context or the topic being discussed.<sup>5</sup> It can also be challenging to reach men and women at the same time, particularly parents. Thus, programmes often include separate sessions for men and women (or create separate spaces within a session to allow private discussion), which are complemented by couples' sessions. The latter seek to foster couple communication, create shared aspirations for parenting, and strengthen relationship skills. They also create space for couples to discuss men's greater participation in childcare and unpaid care work more broadly, as men's partners may otherwise not understand, push back against, or feel threatened by such changes. Programme implementers assess the risks and benefits of single- and mixed-sex sessions depending on a session's theme or topic, the social and cultural context, the feasibility of reaching partners together, and women's and men's comfort level and preferences (usually assessed through formative research with potential programme participants).
- **Use participatory approaches to foster reflection and learning.** Programmes aim to motivate parents to change rather than tell them to do so. They strive to create safe and supportive environments where participants feel comfortable discussing, learning about, internalising, and practising new behaviours. They avoid top-down or hierarchical learning approaches (e.g., teaching by lecturing) and emphasise trust and confidentiality. Facilitators, mentors, and home visitors emphasise equality between themselves and participants, seeing their roles as listening to and supporting parents rather than teaching or chastising them. Participatory and interactive methods — such as group discussion, experience sharing, and activities (e.g., role-play, games, stories) — are used to foster critical reflection, discussion, and skill-building.<sup>9,13,14</sup> Sessions are conducted with small groups (10 to 20 participants) that enable interaction and participation.



## Box 2. Engaging Fathers in Parenting Programmes

Parenting programmes often face challenges in recruiting fathers and male caregivers. Explicitly focusing on fathers and fatherhood is one strategy taken by programmes to recruit and retain fathers. These programmes often recruit via the father or male caregiver and include sessions just for men alongside couples' sessions. Focusing on fathers in this way can be a novel approach for tapping into men's own desires and motivations for change — but it is not the only way to effectively engage men. Other programmes successfully recruit men by emphasising the focus on couples and/or by tapping into men's aspirations for their children's health or well-being.

Regardless of how they recruit men, programmes that successfully engage fathers create welcoming spaces for men to meet and learn from each other and include content specific to fathers in their curricula. They recognise that men rarely have opportunities to talk with other men about their aspirations, joys, fears, and challenges as fathers and are keen to do so. Programmes emphasise men's capacity for care and connection; acknowledge that many men are already involved in positive, caring ways; and support men in building relationship and positive parenting skills. They challenge rigid notions of fatherhood, such as the idea that a father's only role is to provide financially for his children, while acknowledging the pressure and stress many men face in trying to meet these societal expectations.

Programmes approach men with both compassion and accountability. They recognise that while not all men use violence, gender norms, childhood experiences of violence, and impunity all drive some men's use of violence. They encourage men who don't use violence to break the silence and call out men's use of violence.

To learn more about working with fathers, see the 'Recommended Resources' section at the end of the brief.

# Common Programme Content

Gender-transformative parenting programmes to reduce violence differ in their entry points, populations, and specific objectives — and their content reflects this. However, programmes commonly include similar core themes in their curricula, whether in specific sessions or in activities woven throughout a curriculum. While every programme does not include all of the following, programmes commonly include activities designed to:

- **Promote reflection on gender norms and power imbalances.** <sup>8,9,13,14</sup> Participatory activities and group discussion are used to illustrate how gender norms and power imbalances influence daily interactions within the family. Participants identify how norms about men’s and women’s roles influence their behaviour and expectations as parents — for themselves, their partners, and their children. Programmes often encourage participants to understand power — what it is, who has it, and how it is used (or abused) within the family. Participants are supported in reflecting on the disadvantages or costs of adhering to inequitable gender norms, and they are assisted in imagining the benefits of more respectful, caring, and equitable relationships for their children, themselves, and their families. While all gender-transformative parenting programmes do this, they may not publicly refer to themselves as such or use the term *gender*, particularly in settings where there is backlash against gender equality efforts.
- **Raise awareness of violence and its consequences.** Safe spaces are created where participants feel comfortable discussing how violence manifests in their lives and communities, as well as its consequences for children, women, and families. <sup>9,14</sup> Guided reflection exercises, short stories, and group discussion are used, and participants may choose to — but are not required to — disclose personal experiences of violence. Programmes support parents in understanding how social and gender norms justify and perpetuate violence. They also highlight how violence in childhood may lead to violence later in life, build empathy for those experiencing violence, and encourage participants to commit to not using violence or interrupting it when they see it. Some programmes discuss local laws and policies related to violence, children’s rights, or gender equality (e.g., inheritance laws) to increase awareness or clarify misconceptions.
- **Build couple relationship skills.** Practical exercises (e.g., role play, games, stories) are used to build relationship skills, such as communication, active listening, empathy, and resolving conflict. <sup>8,9,13,14</sup> Programmes create safe spaces for participants to practise these new behaviours and reflect on the benefits of adopting them. Couple communication is a critical skill for violence prevention that is promoted within sessions and through homework assignments, including encouraging partners to discuss household decisions and their aspirations for their children and family. For many couples, it may be the first time discussing certain topics or listening to their partner’s experiences or concerns. Couples are also

encouraged to discuss their expectations and concerns as men take on more childcare and unpaid care work to ensure men's partners are aware of and support such changes. Programmes emphasise how these relationship skills — e.g., sharing responsibilities and decisions, listening to and supporting each other — can enable parents to work together to achieve shared goals for their children and family.

- **Strengthen caregiving and positive parenting skills.** Parents learn what children need to thrive and build parenting skills adapted to their child's age. Programmes emphasise the importance of emotional closeness and responsive care, and they support parents in improving parent-child communication and relationships.<sup>8,9,13,14</sup> They help parents to have realistic expectations for their children's behaviour at different stages of their development and to learn positive parenting techniques to manage children's behaviour, including how to communicate with their children and give positive feedback and praise.<sup>8,13</sup> Programmes build supportive couple and peer relationships to assist parents in adopting these new practices. For fathers of young children, some programmes include opportunities for men to learn and practise childcare skills that men are often not taught growing up (e.g., feeding, bathing, and changing a child). Building men's comfort and confidence in these skills can make it easier for men to share childcare with their partners.
- **Build parents' (and children's) skills to manage emotions.** Programmes support parents in understanding and developing skills to manage strong emotions when interacting with their partners and children.<sup>8,9,13,14</sup> Participants are supported in understanding how an inability to manage anger or frustration can increase the risk of using violence against a child or partner. Activities allow participants to learn and practise skills to stay calm, manage their emotions, or diffuse tension — such as doing breathing exercises, taking a pause, or stepping away from a situation. Sometimes, participants are encouraged to identify potential triggers for losing control of their emotions so they can be prepared to put these skills into practice. Programmes also work to reduce parents' stress by strengthening partner communication and relationships, and they may refer those in need to community-based mental health services (where available). Some programmes teach parents how to support their children in learning age-appropriate emotional regulation skills.<sup>8</sup>
- **Promote more equitable family dynamics.** Programmes promote men's equal participation in childcare and household tasks through participatory activities, discussion, and practical exercises.<sup>5,6,8,14</sup> Programmes support participants in reflecting on the disadvantages of rigid, unequal patterns of household labour and decision-making — for children, women, and men. They often promote women's participation in household decisions through activities to foster couple communication about parenting, household tasks, and finances. Participants are supported in identifying the benefits that sharing these responsibilities can bring to their relationship and to the well-being of their children (for example, how sharing tasks can free up time to earn income or be with family, or how shared decision-making can support parenting and financial decisions that benefit children).
- **Encourage reflection on participants' own childhoods.** Programmes often prompt participants to think about how gender norms shaped how their own parents raised them, their relationships with their parents, and the opportunities they were given. Participants are supported in reflecting on how relationship and parenting behaviours are learned from a young age — from parents, teachers, community members, and faith leaders — and thus can be unlearned.<sup>5</sup> Through such reflection, participants are encouraged to think about the positive and negative aspects of their relationships with their parents — and how to maintain the

positive ones in their relationships with their own children while discarding the harmful ones. In this way, programmes aim to help break harmful intergenerational patterns and replace them with care, connection, and equality.

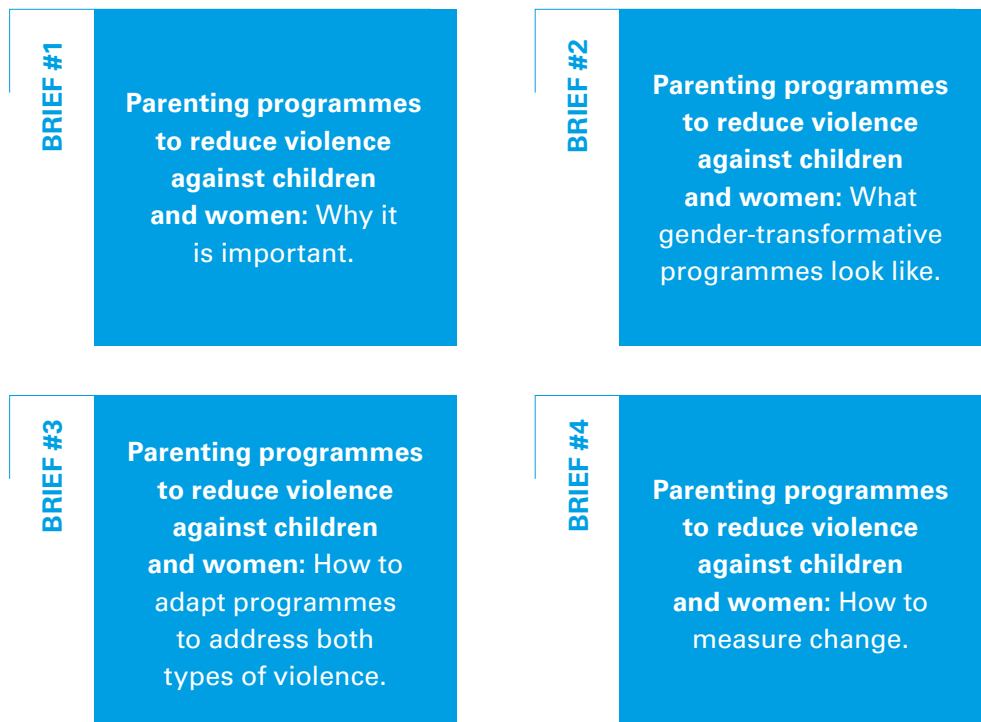
- **Promote positive gender socialisation** to support parents in raising children free from gender stereotypes. Many programmes encourage parents to raise children with equal care and opportunities for play, learning, and education, regardless of their sex or gender identity.<sup>8,13,15</sup> Programmes encourage discussion on how gender norms influence parents' expectations for and interactions with their children, as well as reflection on how this impacts children's opportunities and well-being. Programmes typically encourage parents to consider the toys and games they provide their children, engage sons in doing household chores alongside daughters, and promote both girls' and boys' education. While this brief primarily focuses on programmes reaching parents of young children, programmes for parents of older children and adolescents sometimes include a specific focus on preventing early and child marriage or other relevant outcomes.
- **Promote responsible relationships with alcohol.** Some programmes address men's misuse of alcohol, a known risk factor for violence.<sup>8,10</sup> They help participants see how ideas about masculinity are linked to men's (over)consumption of alcohol.<sup>16</sup> Men identify the consequences of misusing alcohol (or other substances) for themselves and their families — such as negative health outcomes, poor relationships with partners and children, and financial mismanagement. Some programmes directly discuss alcohol consumption as a potential trigger for relationship conflict and violence. Personal reflection and group discussion are often used to encourage participants to take steps to limit their alcohol consumption and/or its negative effects, including by promoting peer support among programme participants.
- **Foster family, peer, and community support to enable and sustain behaviour change.** Family and peer support is particularly helpful to mitigate any pushback parents may face from family, friends, or community members as they take on behaviours that go against prevailing gender and social norms.<sup>5</sup> Programmes support couples in developing shared goals and encouraging each other to sustain positive changes, including fostering women's support for men's greater participation in childcare and unpaid care work. Programmes also build connections among participants to facilitate experience sharing, guidance, and encouragement as they embark on making changes. These connections help participants not to feel alone and can help motivate them between sessions or after a programme ends. At the end of a programme, group, family, or community events are often used to celebrate participants' positive changes, and participants may develop individual, couple, or family action plans for how to sustain these changes after the programme ends.

# Conclusion

Gender-transformative parenting programmes have shown promising evidence of reducing VAC and VAW while contributing to more caring and equitable family dynamics. While programmes differ in their specific objectives, context, and intended populations, they often share the common principles, delivery characteristics, and session content outlined within this brief. These shared elements provide entry points for practitioners who are interested in adapting their existing parenting programmes to work at the intersections of VAC and VAW.

The next brief in this series ([Brief #3](#)) outlines the key steps and considerations for those wanting to adapt an existing programme. It lays out the key stages and activities for adapting a parenting programme based on the evidence and lessons learned from effective gender-transformative parenting programmes.

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



# Recommended resources



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[Supporting Parents and Caregivers: Prevention Strategies Deep Dive](#) (online course), Prevention Collaborative, 2023

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

[Designing Parenting Programmes for Violence Prevention: A Guidance Note](#), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2020

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

[Promoting Men's Engagement in Early Childhood Development: A Programming and Influencing Package](#), Plan International and Equimundo, 2021

[Nurturing Care and Men's Engagement: Thematic Brief](#), UNICEF and World Health Organization, 2022

[Core Elements of Gender-Transformative Fatherhood Programs to Promote Care Equality and Prevent Violence: Results from a Comparative Study of Program P Adaptations in Diverse Settings around the World](#). Equimundo, 2023

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## About us

**UNICEF** works in the world's toughest places to reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents — and to protect the rights of every child, everywhere. Across 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive and fulfill their potential, from early childhood through adolescence. And we never give up.

**UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight** tackles the questions of greatest importance for children, both current and emerging. It drives change through research and foresight on a wide range of child rights issues, sparking global discourse and actively engaging young people in its work.

**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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