



Preventing violence against children: Break the intergenerational cycle

18 November 2014

PRETORIA - Over half of South Africa's children frequently experience some form of violence from a very early age. Violence against children has long-term consequences which can be avoided by investing in prevention initiatives.

With South Africa about to embark on the 16 Days of Activism On No Violence Against Women and Children, the *South African Child Gauge 2014* is released today [EDS: 18 November 2014] to contribute to this debate by providing evidence of successful violence prevention initiatives. Published by the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town (UCT), the ninth issue of this annual review of the situation of South Africa's children was produced in partnership with UNICEF, the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD) in The Presidency; World Vision South Africa; the FNB Fund; and UCT's Safety and Violence Initiative.

The extent of the problem

While violence against children is widespread, the *South African Child Gauge 2014* warns that the country lacks systematic research on the extent and range of experiences. However, population-based prevalence studies have shown that over half of children experience physical violence by a caregiver, teacher or relative. Incidents of sexual violence are known to be under-reported – a disturbing reality when considering that 50% of the 45,230 contact crimes against children reported in the 2013/2014 crime statistics were sexual offences (an average of 62 cases per day). Of concern also is that there exist no significant studies on violence against children with disabilities, who are believed to be more at risk.

A two-province study found that one third of participating children experienced emotional abuse. Emotional violence and neglect, and corporal and humiliating punishment of children are common in the home, where abuse and neglect of especially young children can result in death. The use of physical punishment at schools is still pervasive in spite of it being banned for almost 20 years.

Children experience different forms of violence across different life stages: Infanticide or abandonment between birth to one year; with physical and sexual abuse and neglect across the life span, and dating violence and interpersonal violence amongst males peaking in the teenage years. Shanaaz Mathews, director of the Children's Institute and the 2014 lead editor of the publication, says these experiences hamper children's development, learning ability, self-esteem and emotional security and have long-term consequences for employment prospects and life expectancy.

Major barrier to growth and development

“The current epidemic of violence is a serious barrier to sustainable development; it undermines the fabric of society, affects productivity, well-being and prosperity”, explains Hervé Ludovic De Lys, UNICEF’s country representative. “The good news is that all forms of violence against children can be prevented and drastic change can happen by effectively tackling the issue from all angles and at all levels. It is possible to see a dramatic reduction in violence against children in a relatively short time by implementing the right strategies, allocating enough resources and mobilising the highest political will”, says De Lys.

Mathews agrees that violence against children compromises national development: “The impact of violence goes beyond physical scars. Research shows that an intergenerational cycle of violence is created when children are exposed to violence in the early years, as these children are more likely to become perpetrators or victims of violence when they are older because of neurological and psychological damage.”

The solutions

Mathews says prevention programmes need to be designed to work in local settings, and such initiatives should be evaluated and the promising ones scaled up for maximum reach. Families especially have the potential to protect children from harm, and are the most influential socialising environment for children to learn values, norms and expected behaviour: “But many families in South Africa are placed at risk by poverty, intimate partner violence and substance abuse. For these reasons parenting programmes can play a major role in providing essential support to help such families to raising children in supportive and non-violent ways.”

Life-skills programmes for young people can help develop the communication and conflict resolution skills to deal with peer pressure, substance abuse and social norms that promote violence between young men, and between them and their partners. Access to quality education is essential in getting young people into employment and to achieve respect without resorting to violence.

Community-based programmes can mobilise children, caregivers and community leaders to prevent violence, and improve the coordination and delivery of prevention and response services. Structures can be created, and systems put in place “to implement specific interventions that strengthen child protection systems – both informally and formally – at a community level” explains Paula Barnard, the national director of World Vision South Africa. Through the organisation’s Child Protection and Advocacy (CPA) model, which is implemented globally and locally, structures and systems have been put in place to empower communities to protect children. “The CPA model strengthens both children and their protective environment to improve their well-being – and this also fulfils their rights to protection.”

The role of the child protection system

Contributors to the 2014 issue highlight several challenges in the child protection system. A key feature is the ongoing focus on response services instead of also paying attention to prevention and early intervention, which over time can reduce the need for response services. To realise this goal, major investment should be made in the social services workforce to understand and provide prevention and early intervention services, while Social Development budgets need to shift from prioritising reactive protection services, and increase allocations to pro-active prevention services.

Lucy Jamieson of the Children’s Institute however says that non-profit organisations, which deliver the bulk of social services on behalf of government, are not fairly compensated for their services, resulting in a funding crisis which is hampering services to children and families in need.

Evidence-based planning is needed, which means reporting and surveillance systems must be strengthened to plan services based on actual need.

Addressing the complex problem of violence that is embedded at different levels of society requires

intersectoral collaboration on prevention strategies that target the individual, the family, the community, and society broadly. But Dena Lomofsky from the research consultancy Southern Hemisphere says while multiple intersectoral committees have been established to strengthen collaboration between government departments and civil society, research shows that each structure tends to focus on a specific issue, with little collaboration between them to address children's needs holistically.

Explains Mastoera Sadan, the manager of the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development in The Presidency: "Unless the coordination of these committees is streamlined, we will continue to have a fragmented response to a complex problem that requires coordinated efforts and strong leadership from within government."

A common understanding of prevention and early intervention programmes will help a concerted drive and assist in integrating these into services for children and families such as schools, early childhood development programmes, and health care services. Joan van Niekerk from Childline South Africa says the Department of Health especially can play a key role in prevention by helping to identify caregivers and children at risk and referring them to social services. But, she says, "the role of the health sector in strengthening violence in prevention interventions is neglected both in policy and practice".

Sadan points out that violence is a learnt behaviour, which can be undone: "Due to the normalisation of violence in South Africa's past, there is now a widespread tolerance of it. So we need to work very hard to break this cycle. This requires an attitude that preventing violence is everyone's business: government, civil society, religious and traditional leaders, communities, caregivers, children, the media... all have a positive role to play in saying no to violence against children."

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Note to editors, sub-editors and journalists

The South African Child Gauge, published by UCT's Children's Institute, is an annual review that includes the latest research on an annual theme. Therefore, evidence and data cited in the publication and in this press release are not necessarily from studies by the Children's Institute itself, but are from academic partners and other experts. Please consult the publication carefully for references to the origins of facts and figures, and attribute them as the primary sources of specific data that you might want to cite.

The book and an accompanying policy brief, poster and child-friendly summary can be downloaded from www.ci.org.za. The publication this year was produced in partnership with UNICEF, the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD) in the Presidency; World Vision South Africa; the FNB Fund; and UCT's Safety and Violence Initiative.

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