SAFE TO LEARN CALL TO ACTION

Ending violence against children in, around, and through schools

Every child deserves to be safe to learn, and to develop the skills and confidence needed to shape their own future and lead healthy prosperous lives. Education can transform children's lives and whole societies.

Yet for too many children and young people, school is a place of violence and fear. An estimated 246 million girls and boys experience violence in and around schools every year.[1] Physical, sexual, and psychological violence in and around schools and online, including gender-based violence, affects children and young people in every country. Marginalized groups and groups subject to discrimination as well as children living in emergencies and protracted crises are often disproportionately affected by school violence and bullying.[2]

When children are not safe, they cannot learn. Violence reduces school attendance, lowers educational attainment, and leads many children to drop out of school. Violence negatively impacts children's brain development and psychological and physical wellbeing,[3] which can result in serious health issues, including death. It also contributes to a destabilizing cycle of violence within societies where child victims are more likely to be perpetrators or victims of violence later in life. An estimated $11 trillion is lost in lifetime earnings globally as a result of violence against children in schools.[4]

Be it sexual exploitation for grades, corporal punishment in the classroom, gender-based violence, or bullying and harassment, all forms of violence in and around schools and online, can and must be prevented. There is an established and growing body of research and evidence around best practices in ending violence in and around schools.[5]

Schools and education systems are central to ending all forms of violence against children in all settings, in all their diversity. Education can help mitigate the impact of instability, conflict, and violence at home, in school, and in communities. Education holds the potential to address discriminatory social and gender norms, behaviors, stereotypes and unequal gender and power dynamics that drive violence.

Urgent political and financial commitments are needed to implement and expand proven approaches to prevent, mitigate and respond to violence against children in, around, and through schools. The Safe to Learn Call to Action outlines 5 key areas where national governments and education actors must act now to ensure that every child is safe to learn.

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[1] UNESCO & UN WOMEN (2016) Global guidance on addressing school-related gender-based violence

[2] Safe to Learn (2023) School-related gender-based violence: achieving systemic, sustainable change – with youth and for youth.

[3] Pereznieto, P., Harper,C., Clench, B., and Coarasa, J. (2010) The Economic Impact of School Violence: A Report for Plan International

[4] Wodon, Quentin ; Fèvre, Chloe; Malé, Chata; Nayihouba, Ada; Nguyen, Hoa. (2021). Ending Violence in Schools : An Investment Case

[5] Examples of successful and promising pioneer interventions from a variety of countries and schools have been documented in: School-based approaches to tackling violence; INSPIRE Seven strategies for Ending Violence Against Children; Action to End Violence against children in Schools

Children's experience of violence

Not all children experience violence in the same way and some children are particularly at risk. Intersecting risks can compound to increase children's risk of experiencing multiple forms of violence across multiple settings.

- Globally, one in three women and girls will experience some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime[6]
- Children with disabilities are more than twice as likely as their peers to be victims of violence[7]
- Children who do not conform to gender norms or stereotypes are particularly at risk of violence and bullying at rate between three and five times higher than their peers[8]
- More than 9,000 students, teachers and academics were harmed, injured, or killed in attacks on education during armed conflict between 2020 and 2021[9]
- Internally displaced children and adolescents living in conflict-affected settings are at a higher risk of mental health problems, increasing risk of dropout[10]

The Safe to Learn Call to Action

We reaffirm our commitment to ensure every child is safe to learn; we commit to create safe, inclusive, equitable, and gender transformative learning environments for all children, in all their diversity, everywhere. We recognise the critical role of the education sector in tackling violence as part of cross-sectoral partnerships and efforts. We acknowledge that our efforts to end violence in, around and through schools have positive multiplying effects and contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

We support the pivotal role of Safe to Learn and recognise the significant momentum that has been gained through the achievements and tools developed by Safe to Learn and its partners to date. This includes, the Safe to Learn Technical Package to support the implementation of the Call to Action at the country level.[11]

Together as governments, international organizations, civil society, youth and survivor-led groups, private sector, donors, and partners from all sectors, we commit to work towards, and hold each other accountable for, the following actions applicable across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus:

1. IMPLEMENT POLICY AND LEGISLATION

National, regional, and local governments develop, implement, and enforce laws and policies that protect all children from all forms of violence in, around, and through schools, including online.

i. National governments prohibit all forms of violence in schools including corporal punishment.

ii. Ministries of Education implement policies to improve systems, capacity, and skills across the education system including positive discipline and classroom management to address violence in schools.

iii. National governments establish multi-sectoral response and referral mechanisms with clear roles and responsibilities of the Ministry of Education to address violence in schools.

iv. National governments facilitate collaboration with children, young people, and survivors of violence in all their diversity, in national education system planning and the development of national policies and legislation.

v. National governments endorse and implement the Safe Schools Declaration[12] and use the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.[13]

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[6] WHO (2021) Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates

[7] UNICEF (2022) UNICEF Fact Sheet: Children with Disabilities

[8] UNESCO (2017) School Violence and Bullying: Global Status Report

[9] Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (2022) Education Under Attack 2022

[10] UNICEF(2022) Learning Brief on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) in Education

[11] Safe to Learn Technical Package

[12] Safe Schools Declaration and Guidelines on Military Use

[13] Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from military use during armed conflict

2. STRENGTHEN PREVENTION, RISK MITIGATION AND RESPONSE IN EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND SCHOOLS

School staff and school management committees provide safe and gender-transformative learning environments for all children that promote positive discipline, child-centered teaching, and protect and improve children's physical and mental wellbeing.

i.   School curricula and learning materials include effective approaches for preventing violence, addressing harmful social and gender norms, and promoting equality, respect, and diversity.

ii. School safeguarding policies and procedures, such as Codes of Conduct, safe recruiting standards, online safety guidance, and violence reporting procedures and referral mechanisms are implemented and monitored in schools.

iii. Teachers and school staff are trained and supported to deliver safe and inclusive education.

iv. Teachers' and students' mental health and psychosocial wellbeing is supported with access to mental health and psycho-social support in all learning environments.

v.   Schools ensure the physical environment in and around schools is safe and designed for the well-being of all students in all their diversity, including in emergency and protracted crises.

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3. SHIFT SOCIAL AND GENDER NORMS AND PROMOTE BEHAVIOR CHANGE

Ministries of Education, schools, community leaders, faith leaders, parents/caregivers, and students/peers work together through a "whole school approach" to promote non-violent behaviors and positive social and gender norms to enable a safe school environment.[14]

i.   Evidence-based interventions are put in place at the school-level to support and enable teachers, parents, and community leaders to promote non-violent behaviors and a safe environment in and around schools.

ii. Schools promote child-rights education and social and emotional learning and life-skills training, ensuring that children and teachers know their rights and respect the rights of others.

iii. Teachers, counselors, and the whole school community are provided with tools to implement gender transformative education that addresses harmful stereotypes and gender gaps.[15]

[14] A whole school approach to prevent school related gender-based violence
[15] UN Transforming Education Summit: Action Track 1 on Inclusive, equitable, safe and healthy schools

4. INVEST RESOURCES EFFECTIVELY

Increased, and evidence-based use of, investments targeted at ending violence in, around and through schools.

i. National governments increase domestic financing for education and increase support for people, programming, and processes to end violence in, around and through schools.

ii. Donors, both public and private, increase financial and technical resources to end violence in, around and through schools.

iii. New and innovative forms of financing are leveraged by governments and their partners to contribute to efforts to end violence in, around and through schools.

iv. Governments and donors provide long-term flexible funding for youth and survivor organizations leading sustainable local advocacy and programme initiatives.

5. GENERATE AND USE EVIDENCE

National governments, schools, international organisations, humanitarian actors, and donors generate and use context-specific evidence and disaggregated data to understand and monitor the drivers of violence in and around schools and what works to address it.

i. Governments, schools, and donors support the disaggregated data collection and monitoring of activities that prevent violence in schools.

ii. National governments, donors, and research partners invest in research, monitoring and evaluation of interventions to address violence in schools, including social and behavioral evidence, formative research, and longitudinal studies.

iii. National education systems integrate indicators on school violence into national data sets and conduct regular disaggregated data collection on the prevalence and forms of violence in schools using methods that adhere to high ethical standards.

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