## How to end violence in childhood

There is something wrong with the state of the world's children. A shockingly large number are not enjoying carefree, happy childhoods but enduring, often brutal, fast-track transitions to adulthood. Three out of four children worldwide suffer from physically or emotionally abusive violence: from corporal punishment to bullying, neglect, rape, even murder.

These are the findings by Know Violence in Childhood, an inter-disciplinary global learning initiative, published in their report titled "Ending Violence In Childhood: Global Report 2017". The report highlights the impact of childhood violence on individuals, families, communities and societies, and recommends evidence-based strategies to prevent and end violence in childhood.

The problem of violence in childhood is far greater than most people realize. Patchy statistics, social acceptance, children's fear and stigma of reporting abuse leads to widespread underreporting. Many vulnerable children pretend abuse isn't happening, blame themselves, or feel unable to seek help in the face of a powerful abuser.

Childhood violence occurs in every country, rich or poor. The impact on individual children and society can be profound, far beyond a child's immediate fear or trauma. Children who experience violence are more likely to suffer depression when they grow up, turn to drugs, endure poor heath or take their own lives. Children who are bullied or beaten at school avoid attending, harming their education and future prospects.

The statistics tumble out of the research in an avalanche of misery: in 2015, 1.7 billion children (three quarters of all children worldwide) experienced inter-personal violence in the previous year. This included 1.3 billion children who endured corporal punishment, 261 million children who were violently abused by their peers, 55 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 who had experienced physical violence since age 15, 18 million girls in the same age group who were sexually assaulted, and 100,000 children who were murdered. All such acts of violence are a violation of human rights and an assault on the dignity of children.

Children experience violence at every stage of growing up, some even before they are born. On average, 4-12% of women are physically abused by an intimate partner during pregnancy, and this can damage the foetus. Toddlers are vulnerable to violence from caregivers: at age 2, 55-60% of girls and boys in 2015 experienced physical violence. Young children were also vulnerable to murder: around one in five child homicide victims were below four years old.

As they grow up, children face new dangers, especially from peers. By the time girls reached their 11th birthday, 25-30% suffered physical abuse from a classmate. In early adolescence, boys and girls become vulnerable to online bullying and sexual grooming; girls between 15-19 years, in particular, are vulnerable to sexual assault.

But within this disturbing picture, hope can be found. Ending childhood violence isn't rocket science, and we know what works. The study finds that childhood violence is lower in countries that are committed to a human development agenda, and that prioritize child health and education, particularly of girls. Moreover, many developing countries tackle the problem well; suggesting poor countries don't have to wait until they are rich to end childhood violence.

The key to success is recognizing that violence is not a private affair: governments have a duty to protect the rights of their citizens, and this includes a child's right to live free from fear.

The opportunities to prevent violence fall into three categories. First, building individual capacities, for example by ensuring children are given life-skills and sex education; and empowering parents and caregivers to create safe, supporting, and stimulating spaces for caregiving.

Second, violence prevention must be embedded in social services. Schools must become violence-free, end corporal punishment and crack down on bullying. Health professionals, in particular first responders, who are likely to witness an injured child, need to know how and when to report suspected abuse. Governments need to find ways to avoid sending children into institutional care, where the chance of them being abused skyrockets.

Third, governments must tackle the root causes of violence, which are bound up in issues of gender inequality and social norms that legitimize violence. Perhaps the most immediate task is to break the silence. Violence needs to be spoken about and made visible. Only then can the scale of the problem be understood, taboos shattered, and the cycle broken. This requires both individual courage, and better national monitoring and reporting systems.

Reducing and eradicating violence in childhood isn't a distant dream. There is nothing inevitable about a suffering child; many childhoods are glorious. We should, however, realize that violence in childhood will not end until nation-states accord greater priority to human rights and human development. And development cannot be sustained unless the world makes a concerted effort to end childhood violence. Leaders of governments and communities need to take this issue more seriously, implement practical policies to prevent violence, and ensure that all children enjoy the happy, peaceful upbringings they deserve.

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