

2.21 BILLION REASONS: Creating Safe Environments for Children

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»NO VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IS JUSTIFIABLE;
ALL VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IS PREVENTABLE.«¹

Violence touches everyone; it either hides behind the closed doors of homes and institutions, or it permeates every aspect of life through war and conflict. It is a daily reality for millions of people around the world, affecting all ages and both genders within every social context and nationality. Violence is a complex problem related to patterns of individual thought and behaviour that are shaped by a multitude of forces within relationships, families, communities and societies. It is a health, social, justice, legal, economic, spiritual, development, risk management, and human rights issue.

Although violence impacts members in every community and society, children and youth are the most vulnerable. In every part of their lives – their homes and families, schools, institutions, workplaces and communities – children are beaten, sexually assaulted, tortured, neglected, maimed, bought and sold, and killed. Far too often the adults in their lives are the perpetrators of their pain or the »observers« and take little or no responsibility to protect them and create safe environments. The consequences are enormous – at the individual, family, community, and societal levels.

Violence: Definition and Types

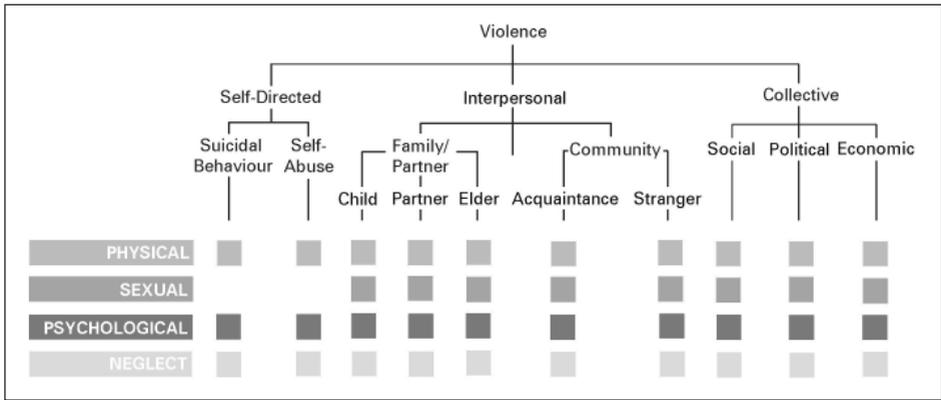
In the WHO 2002 *World Report on Violence and Health*², violence is defined as »the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.«

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The misuse of power is the basis of all violence; one person or group of people has more power than others and misuses it to physically or emotionally hurt or kill those who are more vulnerable or themselves.

Within the WHO typology, violence is addressed under three sub-types: self-directed violence, interpersonal violence and collective violence. Each one is unique but also shares many similar qualities with the other types. Although states put most of their resources on collective violence, it only counts for 11% of the violence in the world while interpersonal violence makes up 35% and self-directed violence, 54%.³

World Health Organization's Typology of Violence⁴



Self-directed violence

Self-directed violence includes suicide, substance abuse, and self-abuse. In much of the world, suicide is stigmatized; the result is often a secretive act surrounded by taboos, negative myths, denial and misclassification. Approximately 1 million lives are lost annually to suicide⁵; this represents more lives lost than in all wars and homicides globally every year, or three times the catastrophic loss of human lives in the 2004 tsunami.⁶

The misuse of substances, both legal and illegal, is one of the world's major challenges. While over 2 billion people worldwide consume alcohol, 76.3 million drinkers are diagnosed with alcohol use disorders. Research has linked alcohol with more than 60 types of disease and injury; alcohol causes 1.8 million deaths per year and 58.3 million disabilities.⁷

There are approximately 180 million people worldwide abusing illicit drugs; 13.1 million people from 130 countries are injecting drugs.⁸ The WHO⁹ reports that globally 200,000 deaths (0.4% of total deaths) are directly attributed to overall illicit drug use.

Interpersonal violence

The range of interpersonal violence includes but is not limited to: child abuse and neglect; violence between peers (including bullying and harassment), intimate partners or family members; elder violence; violence between community members; gang violence; workplace violence; cyber violence; and trafficking. Violence impacts members in every community and society either directly as victims or perpetrators, or as witnesses and observers. Although interpersonal violence often receives less attention and resources than collective violence, its toll on human life, health, dignity and interpersonal relationships is staggering.

Collective violence

Collective violence is committed by a group of people against another group of people in order to meet political, economic or social objectives. Collective violence is linked to self-directed and interpersonal violence but operates on the larger scale of conflict and war, genocide, terrorism, and organized crime.

There is growing recognition, that each type of violence is linked to other forms of violence; where there is a significant prevalence of one type of violence, the risk of the others escalating is increased.¹⁰ For example, the high rates of suicide – one person every 40 seconds¹¹ – are often fuelled by interpersonal violence.

I was sexually abused when I was 10 years old by my cousin. He was 13 and it was awful and I felt hurt and thought it was my fault. I told my teacher and all that happened was I talked to the police and nothing happened and now I'm suicidal. Grade 8 Female Student.¹²

Emerging areas of violence

Violence within disasters

Interpersonal violence can be insidious and parasitic in how it grows during emergencies. Reports from the Americas and Asia during disasters show that the levels of child abuse and domestic violence dramatically spike upwards in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and continue into the reconstruction and development phases.^{13,14}

Violence online

Individuals, especially children and youth, can be at risk of online violence in several ways. They may access or be sent unsolicited material that is inappropri-

ate; people who want to hurt them may lure them through online discussions; or children can be abused and exploited and then these images of violence are posted and distributed online, for people anywhere in the world to see.

Emerging trends within violence online¹⁵ include:

- increasing prevalence of »home-grown« pornographic images that are produced by predators themselves and include live streaming video images of children being abused
- growing use of sophisticated security measures and of peer-to-peer networking where information can be shared without downloading from websites
- increasingly violent and graphic nature of images involving violence against younger children
- unprecedented online bullying between young peers.
- messaging on camera phones and instant messaging: the invasion and manipulation of images is immediate.

Violence by humanitarian aid workers

Abuse and exploitation of beneficiaries by humanitarian aid workers and peacekeepers have been reported in each region of the world.^{16,17,18,19,20} Disturbing reports of the ultimate betrayal of humanitarian workers occur each year and involve a variety of aid agencies including local NGOs, international NGOs and the United Nations (peacekeeping operations and development bodies). Save the Children reports that from 2004-2006, 856 allegations of sexual misconduct towards adults and children were made against the United Nations.²¹ Although the UN allegations are alarming, the UN shows a high level of transparency; vulnerable people, especially children, continue to be exploited and abused by those whom they should be able to trust.

Urban violence

As of 2007, for the first time in history more than 50% of the world population is living in urban areas, and the numbers are growing. The cities of the developing world are expected to account for 95% of urban growth over the next two decades.²²

Urban violence is a unique form of violence, as it encompasses both interpersonal and collective violence. Its very definition is based on a setting – urban environments – where all types of violence occur. Violence in the private spaces of homes, schools, workplaces, and institutions has a direct influence on violence in public areas. The violence that occurs behind closed doors impacts the violence that occurs in the streets and public spaces of a city: they are intertwined.

Violence is a concern in urban centres around the world, particularly in areas often termed as »slums« and those with few economic and social support systems and networks. Violence in urban areas can take various forms including organized crime, gang warfare, open armed conflict, interpersonal violence, drug use, and sporadic acts of crime and assault.

Violence against children around the world

Children, defined by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* as those less than 18 years of age, are at highest risk to violence. In every space in their lives – public and private – children are beaten, sexually assaulted, tortured, neglected, maimed, bought and sold, and killed. Children are vulnerable because they are the smallest, weakest and most dependent citizens in any country, community or city. Some young people are more vulnerable than others: disabled children; orphaned or unaccompanied children; indigenous children; ethnic minority children; street children; those in institutions and detention; refugee and displaced children; and those living in communities where inequality, unemployment and poverty are highly concentrated. Within every minute of every day children are either being killed or hurt physically or psychologically.

The World Report on Violence Against Children²³ reports:

- 150 million girls (14% of the world's child population) and 73 million boys (7% of the world's child population) have experienced sexual abuse
- 15-17 year old males are most likely to be killed followed by infants
- the highest rates of homicide in children under five, are found in sub Saharan Africa and North America
- 133-275 million children witness violence between their parents/carers on a frequent basis
- In some countries 97% of students reported that they had been physically punished at school
- Boys, 15 to 17 years of age, have the highest rate of homicide in the world with 9.1 per 100,000 population; the next largest are males infants under 1 year at 4.5 followed by female infants under 1 year at 4.3 per 100,000 population
- 8 million boys and girls live in institutions; physical and sexual abuse is rife: six times higher than violence in foster care
- only 2.4% of children in the world are protected from physical violence in all settings

Other research shows:

- 25-50% of children report severe and frequent physical abuse²⁴
- More than 20,000 images of sexual torture of children are posted on the internet each week²⁵
- At any one time, an estimated 1.8 million children are being sexually exploited for profit across the world²⁶
- Every year, 1.2 million children are trafficked, and this number is increasing²⁷

- In Peru, a study found 73% of children on the street left home due to family violence²⁸
- In India, 66.8% of children report having been physically abused; 50% sexually abused – both males and females²⁹
- 1 billion children live in poverty (1 in 2 children in the world): 640 million live without adequate shelter; 400 million have no access to safe water; 270 million have no access to health services; 10.6 million died in 2003 before they reached the age of 5 – or roughly 29,000 children per day³⁰

Roots of violence

It is in childhood that people form their view of the world and how to act within it. If children are socially and economically marginalized, know only poverty and hardship, discrimination and abuse, that experience will shape them as adults.³¹

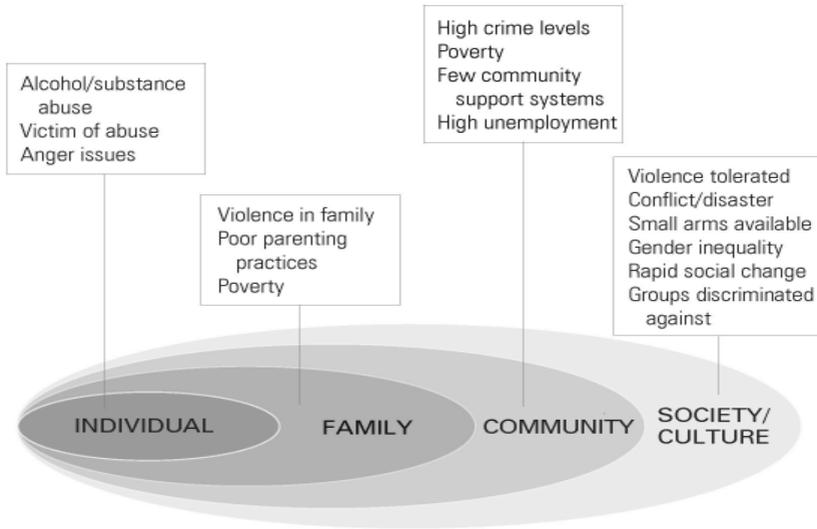
To see children's vulnerability in its full context, it is critical to recognize that violence against children is a result of a complex interplay of variables between individual children, their families, communities and societies. Each of the variables is tied together and cumulatively increases the vulnerability of children to violence.

A useful model to highlight the complex linkages between these different levels is the ecological model^{32,33,34} which combines the many theories of violence and examines the relationship between macro and microsystems. Understanding and addressing these inter-linkages is an important element of any prevention activities and calls for a holistic approach instead of action that is focused only on single parts or only on addressing symptoms of a larger, deeper issue.

We need to move from identifying the immediate risk factors for involvement in serious violence to analyzing the conditions in which they arise. And once we identify these conditions – the roots – strategies to address them can be put in place.³⁵

Individual level

There is mounting and compelling evidence³⁶ that shows that the experience of children between the ages of 0-6 years can significantly shape their health and success across the lifespan. Research is revealing that when children are victims of violence at an early age there can be dramatic consequences that in turn may sharply increase the risk of a child to act out in harmful ways or become vulnerable to harm. For instance, violence against young children



Adapted from World Health Organization. (2002).
World Report on Violence and Health. Geneva: WHO.

has shown to leave a »genetic imprint« which reduces the ability of the child as they grow into adulthood to cope with stress in the same effective way a child who has not been abused.³⁷ Similarly, children affected by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) – a variety of physical and cognitive birth impairments – caused by alcohol consumption by pregnant women – can have a corrosive effect across a child’s entire life: difficulties managing emotions and anger, low empathy or remorse, limited understanding of consequences, and use of violence against themselves or others.³⁸

Not only is alcohol associated with prenatal injury to a child, its effects can be multiple and profound in increasing the risk to be hurt by violence or become a perpetrator of violence at any age. Children of parents who have a drug and alcohol addiction are almost three times more likely to be physically and sexually assaulted and four times more likely to be neglected than children of parents who are not substance abusers.³⁹ Young victims of violence have shown to be 103% more likely to become alcoholics and 192% more likely to become addicted to drugs.⁴⁰ In turn, while alcohol and substance abuse are not themselves the cause of violence, their damaging influence on decision-making, self-control and their ability to confuse perceptions and communication can more readily lead to interpersonal violence.⁴¹

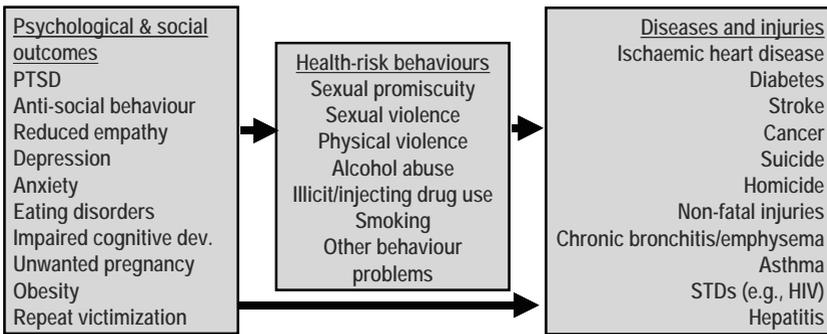
I live with my mom and grandmother. When I was young I was abused by my dad. He hated me and would hit me occasionally. My sister

would always be there to protect me if I was locked out. My dad is an alcoholic. I haven't seen him in 9 years. I don't understand why he doesn't want to see me. I don't know him at all...and it hurts. It's hard to locate him and I want to see him when he's sober.

Grade 9 Female Student.⁴²

For children, the impact of physical, sexual, psychological violence and neglect is on many levels: psychological, social, physical injuries, health-risk behaviour, and diseases. For many, their reaction to the low self esteem, anger, helplessness and powerlessness they feel, makes them vulnerable to gang recruitment and life on the street. Children who are physically or sexually abused in homes are more likely to run away from home⁴³ or join gangs⁴⁴; the exact number of street children is impossible to quantify, but the figure runs into tens of millions across the world.⁴⁵

The Consequences of Child Maltreatment⁴⁶



Relationship/family level

Violence between two people does not exist in a vacuum; rather it occurs within a family or relationship context. When a child experiences violence everyone in the family is impacted, and conversely, the relationships and roles within the family impact the occurrence of violence. Those who are not directly involved in the maltreatment are involved through witnessing or condoning abusive acts or keeping the secret.

Family risk factors for abuse are: poverty or limited income; unemployment; verbal and physical conflict; marital difficulties; intimate partner violence; poor communication skills; value placed on the use of force; decreased or lack of cohesion; isolation or lack of social supports; perceived losses; single or youthful parenthood; family instability; disorganization; child/parent stressors; and larger families.

Socioeconomic status of a family is associated with potential violence. Poverty and low family income have been found to have a high correlation with child maltreatment⁴⁷ and in some studies the greatest risk factor for violence against children.⁴⁸ Overall, low income has been associated with greater caregiver mood problems, greater use of physical punishment, higher risk of intimate partner violence⁴⁹ and experiencing higher health risks, such as stressful life-events and poorer housing, which adds pressure and stress to the family.⁵⁰

There is a considerable amount of evidence demonstrating that most emotional and physical abuse originates as physical punishment.⁵¹ Punitive violence can become abuse when parents are especially angry or stressed, with approximately two thirds of all cases beginning as physical punishment and escalating into physical abuse.⁵² It is in the home that children learn through exposure and experience that violence is acceptable; they learn there are few, if any consequences for violence and it is okay to harm someone who is small, weak and dependent – those who are vulnerable.

Harsh physical punishment or abuse in the home is linked to bullying, violent behaviour and engagement in youth gangs.⁵³ Studies have found behaviour problems to be overwhelmingly the most common effect, and developmental delay is the most common disability resulting from physical abuse.⁵⁴ A study of youth offenders aged 9 to 24, showed they had higher average levels of past exposure to violence in the community, both witnessing and victimization, than other youth.⁵⁵

It has been found that when partner violence was present, the likelihood of child maltreatment increased⁵⁶, with between 40% and 70% of males who abuse their partners and 44% to 57% of abused women also having perpetrated physical child abuse.⁵⁷ Research has also found that the children of young parents and those with poor academic achievements are at greater risk of maltreatment with three- to five-fold increases in risk, respectively.⁵⁸

I was physically abused almost every day until I was about 14 or 15. When I look back now I see how bad my mother's actions were, I feel that my emotions are now affected because of the abuse.

Grade 10 Male Student⁵⁹

Community level

Parenthood is not an individual act but a social or community act ... our capacity to be a parent evolved in a community context, in which there was a lot of sharing responsibility for children and a lot of group focusing on how well parents were doing. The idea of raising a child by yourself in isolation is really unnatural, even to us humans.⁶⁰

The influence of communities on violence against children involves the socio-economic status of the neighbourhood, the cultural attitudes and beliefs held by the community, the level of community violence, and the level of neighbourhood social supports or social isolation. Associated with these influences, are poverty, high levels of unemployment, crime, concentrations of socially and economically disadvantaged residents, high levels of population turn over, poor health and educational attainment, and a run-down physical environment; they all increase the risk of child abuse.⁶¹

When looking at indicators of economic status or resources in a neighbourhood, the ones most greatly associated with child maltreatment include income level, median residential housing/property value, vacant housing, unemployment rate, poverty rate, female labour force participation, residential instability, overcrowding, and low economic status.⁶² Approximately 50 percent of the world's children – one billion – are living in poverty.⁶³ A study in Colombia showed that low-income youths are influenced by a culture of violence in their own community and society in general.⁶⁴

In general, research is showing that boys living in urban areas are more likely to be involved in violent behaviour than those living in rural areas.^{65,66,67} Within urban settings, those children living in pockets with high levels of crime are more likely to be impacted by violence than those living in other neighbourhoods^{68,69}; children born into and living in zones of poverty and violence are more likely to be victimized and to commit violence.

The family social context and supports have a great influence on the parent-child relationship. When families lack social supports or experience negative neighbourhood social conditions, the risk of stress and conflict within the family increases, as well as the potential for child abuse.⁷⁰ Research has found that rates of child abuse are higher in neighbourhoods with fewer social resources.⁷¹

Societal/cultural level

Only 2.4% of the world's child population is protected from violence in all settings – homes, schools, institutions, workplaces and communities.⁷²

The final factors in shaping the risk of violence against children are social and cultural variables such as inequality, patriarchy, poverty, devaluing of children, tolerance for physical punishment, denial of child abuse, honouring of violence, stereotypes, gender roles, inadequate child/family laws, inadequate social welfare and justice systems, individualism, and legitimized violence. These provide a framework that allows violence against children to exist and thrive.

Research shows that the most significant influences on child development and parenting capacity stem from the structural inequalities.⁷³ An entrenchment of beliefs in male superiority and male entitlement to sex greatly affect the likelihood of sexual violence taking place, as will the general tolerance in the community of sexual assault and the strength of sanctions, if any, against perpetrators.⁷⁴

When the individual, relationship, community and societal factors co-exist the vulnerability of children to violence is heightened. In the private spaces of their lives, from the people whom they are suppose to trust, children learn about alienation, low self-esteem, anger, unfairness, disrespect, powerlessness, helplessness, aloneness, hopelessness, and violence.

We are displaced children

We are children who have been used by armed groups

We are orphans

We are street children

We are girls who sell our bodies to survive

We are children who have to work

We are children who can't go to school

We are children with disabilities

We are detained children

We are girls who have been raped

We are children taking care of our brothers and sisters

We are children without a childhood

We live in violence

(Young people, age 15-19).⁷⁵

Comprehensive prevention

What mean ye, fellow citizens, that ye turn every stone to scrape wealth together and take so little care of your children to whom ye must one day relinquish all?

Socrates

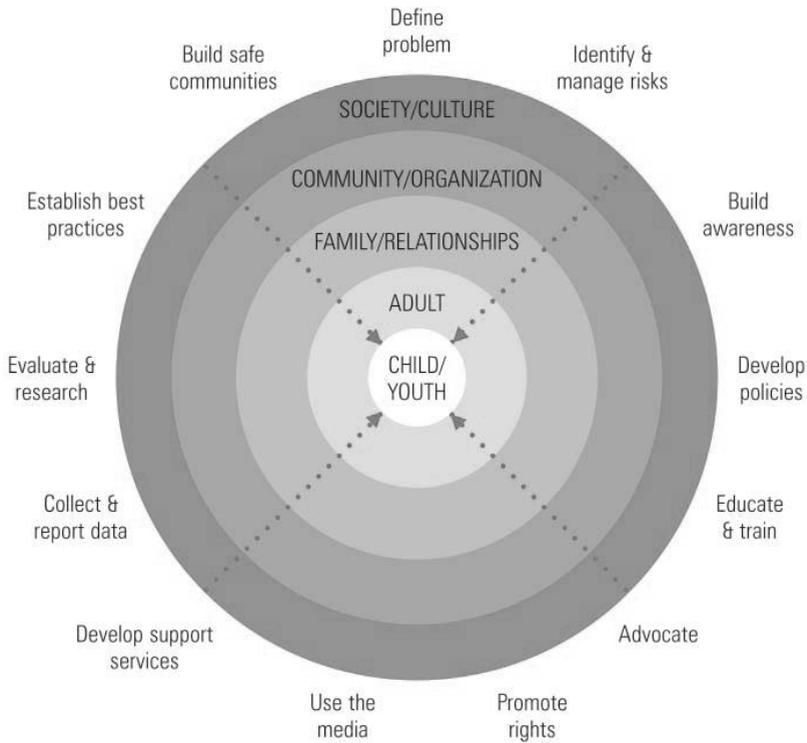
Although violence and abuse against children is a complex, devastating problem, it is preventable. Each year brings new knowledge, understanding and challenges. It is increasingly recognized that effective prevention needs to address the root causes, the contributing factors, and the different ways abuse is expressed; it must reach both the populations affected by violence and the general population.

Prevention efforts must be as multi-faceted as the problem itself – a mosaic of actions that strives to anticipate, avert, interrupt and thwart violence. Prevention is a variety of activities that enhance and maintain protective

factors and decrease the presence and effect of risk factors for children, youth, families and communities.⁷⁶ In a Canadian national study, youth clearly defined their realities and what is needed to support them and prevent violence:

*We're not being heard or believed
Adults don't know how to help us
Nobody asks us if we have experienced violence
Control is taken away from us
We need at least one person we can trust
We need safe environments⁷⁷*

An effective prevention response includes listening to these voices and addressing violence at all levels of vulnerability through comprehensive approaches that target all ages, actors and agencies.⁷⁸



Foundational to any approach on preventing violence against children are local/national child protection laws and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC).⁷⁹ Since 1989 it »has been ratified

by more countries than any other human rights treaty in history.«⁸⁰ The UNCRC is the only international convention dedicated in its entirety to the specific needs of children and includes articles (19, 27, 34, 36, 39) on the prevention of and protection from violence. Fundamental to the UNCRC is the concept of meeting a child's best interests: »It provides that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.«⁸¹ It accounts for children as whole beings and encompasses children's »civil, social, economic, political and cultural rights«⁸² in all settings regardless if they are considered private or public.

Building on this Convention, individuals, cities, governments, networks and agencies are working to address violence against children. While the approaches vary, increasingly there is recognition that comprehensive models that focus on prevention and are multi-pronged addressing individuals, families, communities and society are necessary. The World Health Organization⁸³ outlines ten »best buys« for the preventing violence that encompass all settings.

- Increase safe, stable and nurturing relationships between children and their parents
- Reduce availability and misuse of alcohol
- Reduce access to lethal means
- Improve life skills and enhance opportunities for children and youth
- Promote gender equality and empowerment of women
- Change cultural norms that support violence
- Improve criminal justice systems
- Improve social welfare systems
- Reduce social distance between conflicting groups
- Reduce economic inequality and concentrated poverty.

In 2008⁸⁴, Unicef identified a Protective Framework that outlines their prioritization of child protection in all parts of the world, both in situations of crisis and stability. The eight major actions of their framework are:

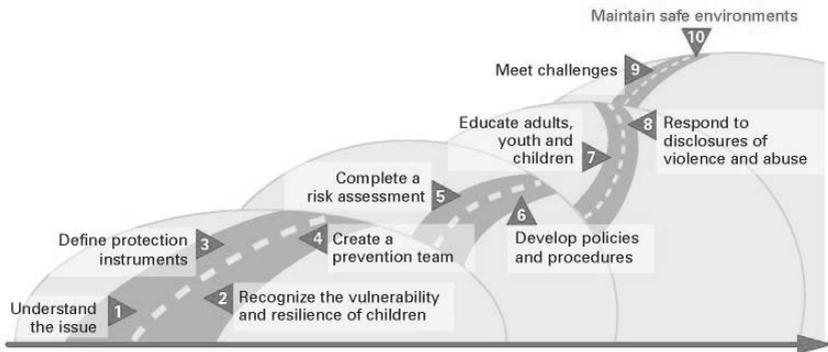
- Government commitment to fulfilling protection rights: this includes policies, budgets, public acknowledgement, ratification of international instruments
- Legislation and enforcement: adequate legislative framework, implementation and accountability
- Attitude, traditions, customs, behaviours and practices: condemnation of injurious practices and support of protective ones
- Open discussion including with media and civil society: remove the silence and secrecy
- Children's life skills, knowledge and participation: both boys and girls are actors in their own protection
- Capacity of those in contact with children: knowledge, motivation, skills, support needed by families and community members

- Basic and targeted services: social services, health and education and specific services targeted at violence and exploitation
- Monitoring and oversight: data collection, trends, responses

Surrounding these actions are a commitment to strengthen national protection systems, support of social change, promotion of child protection within conflict and natural disasters, evidence building and knowledge management, and being catalysts for change. Unicef has clearly stated that child protection is their highest priority.

As both WHO and Unicef have outlined, successful child protection begins with prevention ... prevention that is owned by each individual, organization and government. Building on this premise the Canadian Red Cross has been working on violence prevention through its RespectED program, since 1984. Through partnerships with individuals, organizations and communities, policies, education and systems are implemented to prevent violence and protect children. The Canadian Red Cross' *Ten steps to creating safe environments for children and youth: A risk management road map to prevent violence and abuse*⁸⁵ clearly outlines the step by step process that organizations and governments can take to protect children in their care.

10 STEPS TO SAFER ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH



In understanding the issues and the vulnerability and resiliency of children, individuals within organizations and communities are empowered to use the protection instruments – international, national, human rights, child protection acts, organizational policies – to conduct risk assessments and develop the policies and education practices that will create the safety needed to protect children. Critical to the success of safe environments are the principles of participation and protection. Children have the right to participate in their safety needs, and adults have the responsibility to honour the protection

rights: equality and non-discrimination; »best interests« of the child; rights to survival, protection, development and information.

Conclusion

The benefits of protecting children are enormous: children, families and communities are safer; economic and human costs are dramatically reduced; risk management for organizations is achieved; and moral, ethical, and legal duty of care is met. There are no down-sides to taking on this responsibility: the challenges come when it is shirked, denied, minimized, rationalized or refuted. Adults are to protect and nurture their young, not maim, exploit, and destroy their bodies and spirits. At some point we have to say:

*Enough of gnawing hunger
Enough of rejection
Enough of lost children
Enough of child soldiers
Enough of sexual violence
Enough of children stolen and sold
Enough of broken spirits
Enough of lives denied
Enough! Enough! Enough!*

The quality of a child's life depends on decisions made every day in households, communities and in the halls of government. We must make those choices wisely, and with children's best interests in mind. If we fail to secure childhood, we will fail to reach our larger goals for human rights and economic development. As children go, so go nations. It's that simple. Carol Bellamy⁸⁶

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