



# WHAT'S WORKING IN VAC PREVENTION?

A review of the evidence for sub-Saharan Africa



## SUMMARY

This reader is based on a review of evidence relevant to the nature, impact and prevention of interpersonal violence against children (VAC) in sub-Saharan Africa. The report, produced by Big Win Philanthropy, explored six areas: prevalence; impact of VAC on children's health; the consequences of childhood violence; the economic impact of VAC; interventions that have been successful in reducing VAC; and, the leadership driving action to reduce VAC. Big Win Philanthropy is an independent foundation that invests in children and young people in developing countries to improve their lives and to maximize demographic dividends for long term economic growth.

**Keywords:** Violence against children, prevention programmes, leadership, government, multilateral

## Introduction

Violence against children (VAC) is an issue high on the social protection agenda in Africa. Its prevention in resource-constrained settings has brought into sharp focus the need to investigate successful programmes to prevent VAC and the impact of these interventions.

## Key findings

The report's main conclusions are that VAC is a major obstacle to human and economic development in Africa, and that it can be prevented by intervention programmes. The main points from each section are covered below.

1. *The extent and nature of VAC in Africa*
  - 2/3 of children in sub-Saharan Africa suffer physical violence
  - 1/4 suffer emotional violence
  - 1/3 suffer sexual violence

2. *The effects of childhood violence on health:*

Neuroscience evidence shows that the trauma and stress of violence in childhood is associated with impaired development in brain areas involved in memory, reasoning, problem-solving, emotional control and empathy.

### Box 1: Attitudes to violence

The report (published in 2018) found that many people in sub-Saharan Africa regard certain kinds of violence as acceptable:

- Approval of physical punishment for children is around 40%.
- Approval of wife-beating in certain circumstances ranges from around 15% to 80% in different countries, with many being at around 50%.
- Around 33% to 50% of children tell someone about their abuse but only around 5% seek help from services and only around 3% receive it.

### Comparing Africa with other parts of the world

Data comparisons show higher levels of social approval of the use of physical violence to punish children in Africa compared to other regions of the world:

*The percentage of adults who believe in use of physical punishment to raise children is almost two and a half times higher in Africa than elsewhere.*

3. *The effects of childhood violence on education and employment*  
Experiencing violence in childhood is associated with lower educational attainment and reduced adult income.
4. *The economic impact of childhood violence*  
Violence costs a substantial percentage of national income. VAC is calculated in middle-income countries to reduce GDP by 3-6%. One study in South Africa concluded that the economic impact of VAC was at least 6% of the country's GDP. The calculations in such studies do not include important areas of cost such as healthcare and education.
5. *Action to prevent VAC*  
There is considerable evidence that VAC can be prevented by intervention programmes that change attitudes and behaviour in four contexts: the capacity of children themselves to affect what happens to them; the home; the school; and the community.
6. *Leadership for multi-sector action*  
To create significant change on VAC in Africa, coordinated efforts led by national governments and multilateral bodies will be required.

### Characteristics of successful VAC programmes

- **Role-playing** techniques, which allow trainers to model desirable behaviour and enable those receiving training to practice new skills in a safe and controlled situation.
- **Positive discipline**, where parents and teachers are trained to apply nonviolent methods of discipline ("positive parenting").
- **Respected front-line workers.** Many of the best programmes recruit front-line workers who are seen as highly credible in the community and who directly interact with the programme beneficiaries.
- **Trained front-line workers.** Good programmes invest a great deal in the training and support of their front-line workers (whether paid or voluntary).
- **Local adaptation.** Adaptation and tuning a programme's curriculum to each local context seems to improve effectiveness.
- **Aspirational messages.** Some successful programmes emphasize the need to avoid messages that appear judgmental or punitive, and instead to frame calls for action in terms of positive aspirations.

### Box 2: Leadership on VAC

Coordinated leadership is key to driving progress around VAC globally in the following forms:

#### Leadership by governments

Governments are the only actors that can undertake large-scale efforts of this kind in a sustainable way (working in partnership with relevant NGOs, multilateral organizations, donors, traditional leaders and religious figures).

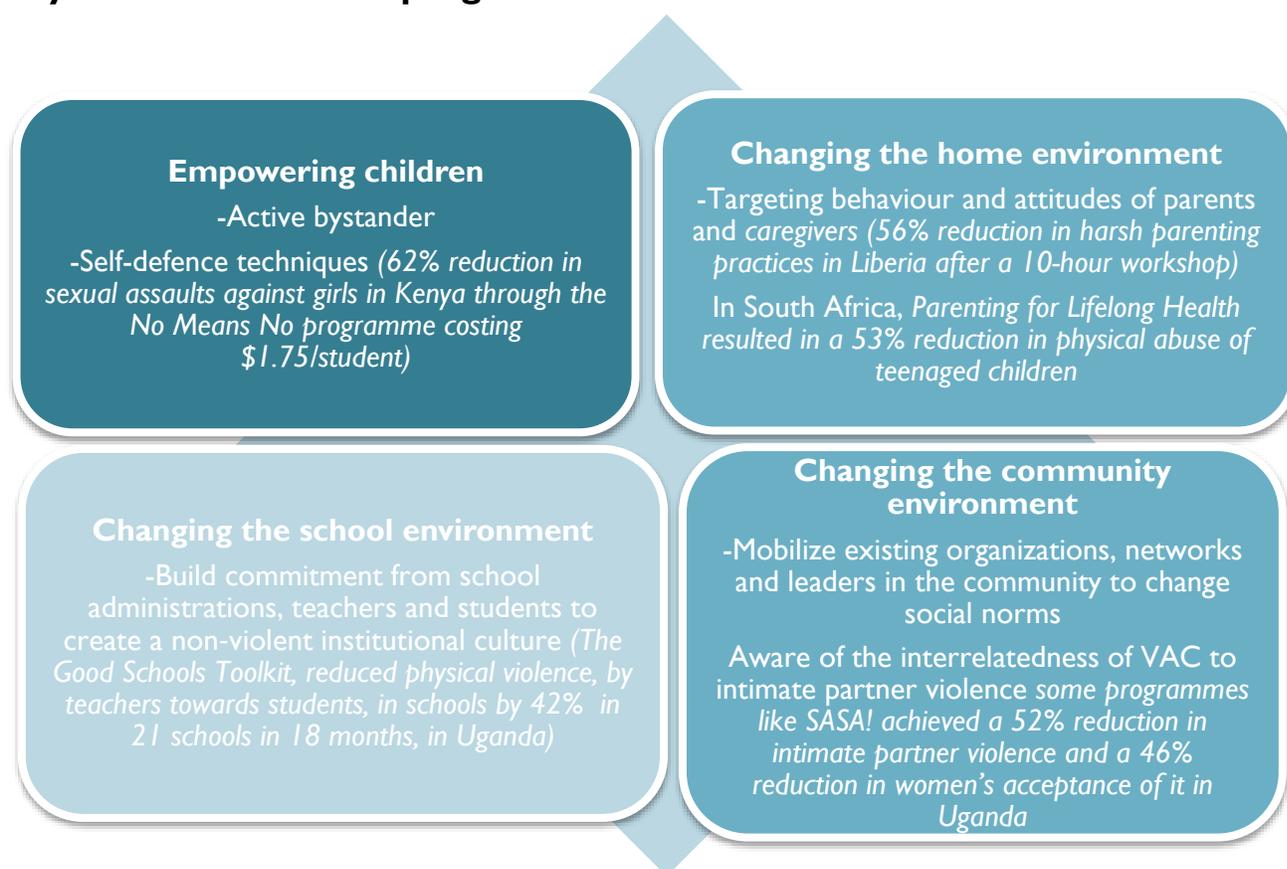
#### Leadership by multilateral bodies and others

Leadership on VAC from regional and global multilateral bodies can raise the political profile, give credibility to solutions and provide powerful partnerships for implementation. These include:

- The African Union (AU), the African Partnership to End Violence against Children,
- The Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children,
- The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence Against Children, UNICEF,
- The World Health Organization (WHO),
- Together for Girls

- **Combining community mobilization with technical assistance.** Action to change attitudes and behaviour on issues of social concern is often successful when it mobilizes resources that exist within a society such as concerned and influential community members.
- **Gender relations.** Because a lot of VAC involves issues of gender, programmes often need to engage participants with issues of how gender affects people and societies, and to encourage them to reflect on how this happens in the context of their own lives.

## Key focus of successful programmes



## Further Reading

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