

# Stories of Change in violence against children prevention:

Communicating to Prevent Violence  
Against Children: Ideas and Process for  
Facilitating Change





# Overview

Violence against children (VAC) is a global issue that affects diverse regions, and substantial effort has gone into communications work to prevent VAC in both the Global North and Global South. This brief aims to highlight innovations from long-term VAC prevention communications efforts born in the Global South. By synthesizing what we've learned over more than 15 years, we at Raising Voices hope to inspire similar organizations in their efforts to bring about social transformation and to share their own stories of change to collectively strengthen this global dialogue.

Overall, our strategy includes regular communication campaigns, the development of compelling materials, local activism, and strategic conversations with policymakers, local leaders, and cultural figures. The work is situated in the understanding that social norm change is a gradual process, requiring a critical mass of individuals to accept new positive norms and behaviors. Our communications journey has involved three key components towards this end:

- 1) **Raising awareness about VAC through stories shared by children themselves**
- 2) **Reaching people across diverse multimedia platforms to reinforce key messages**
- 3) **Building an opinion infrastructure by working with all stakeholders invested in schools.**

What we are learning: **First**, sustained engagement and consistent messaging from diverse sources are vital to effect behavioral change on social norms. **Second**, incorporating humor fosters a shared bond and trust, facilitating the adoption and sharing of messages. **Third**, establishing a feedback loop for monitoring progress and documenting insights is crucial. **Forth**, cultivating strong relationships with media outlets and journalists enhances their ownership of VAC prevention, ensuring a sustained dialogue.



Our communications work has evolved alongside our whole school approach to VAC prevention. The **Good School Toolkit** puts teachers, students, and parents in the drivers seat of their own process of change. It describes a process, suggests activities, and provides tools for ordinary teachers and students to create a more transparent and accountable school operational culture. This six-step process creates opportunities for everyone (including students) to participate, show leadership, and determine how everyone experiences the learning environment. It has been evaluated through a rigorous randomized controlled trial which showed a 42% reduction in the risk of physical punishment in schools.



# Introduction

Violence against children (VAC) is a deep-rooted problem in Ugandan society, with long-term consequences for children's physical and psychological well-being and life course. Prevention requires shifting norms, attitudes, and behaviors, and research has found that long-term strategies with a multi-component approach are most effective across Global South contexts.<sup>1</sup> Our approach recognizes schools as a unique entry point for VAC prevention. Schools provide an exceptional opportunity to influence a vast number of children and childhoods. They are somewhere that children spend much of their time and where the state and civil society have a mandate to ensure children's safety and well-being.<sup>2</sup>

Raising Voices has developed the Good School Toolkit with ideas and approaches tested for preventing VAC in schools but believes that the success of VAC prevention work in schools depends on gaining wider acceptance of these ideas among the diverse stakeholders who engage with schools on a day-to-day basis. Raising Voices has thus maintained a national dialogue in Uganda for over 15 years around the issue of preventing VAC in Uganda.

The World Health Organization defines **child maltreatment** (which we call “violence against children” in this paper) as “all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.”<sup>3</sup>



We have augmented school-based implementation of the Good School Toolkit with multimedia communication campaigns, local activism, and establishing national structures for dialogue by nurturing relationships with key stakeholders. This work has mobilized schools, parents, community members, local leaders, policymakers, and others in an ongoing conversation on VAC, one that aims to inspire healthy, violence-free relationships between adults and children (including teachers and students) and to encourage adults to use their power positively to nurture and guide children without the use of violence, a process we call **building an opinion infrastructure**.

1 Mathews, S., Achyut, P., October, L., & Makola, L. (2021). *Evidence review: Prevention of violence against children through schools in the Global South*. Raising Voices & University of Cape Town.

2 Naker, D. (2019). Preventing violence against children at schools in resource-poor environments: Operational culture as an overarching entry point. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 47, 268–273. [https://coalitionforgoodschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Naker\\_Preventing-VAC-at-School\\_2017.pdf](https://coalitionforgoodschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Naker_Preventing-VAC-at-School_2017.pdf)

3 World Health Organization. (2022, September 19). *Child maltreatment*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/child-maltreatment>



**Our national dialogue strategy includes:**

- o Regular communications campaigns through multimedia platforms, including print, television, radio, and social media
- o Developing compelling communication materials (such as stickers, calendars, posters, and booklets)
- o Hosting local dialogues and activism through in-person, community-level engagement
- o Influencing strategic conversations on VAC prevention with policymakers, local leaders, and the religious, cultural, and broader opinion leadership in Uganda.





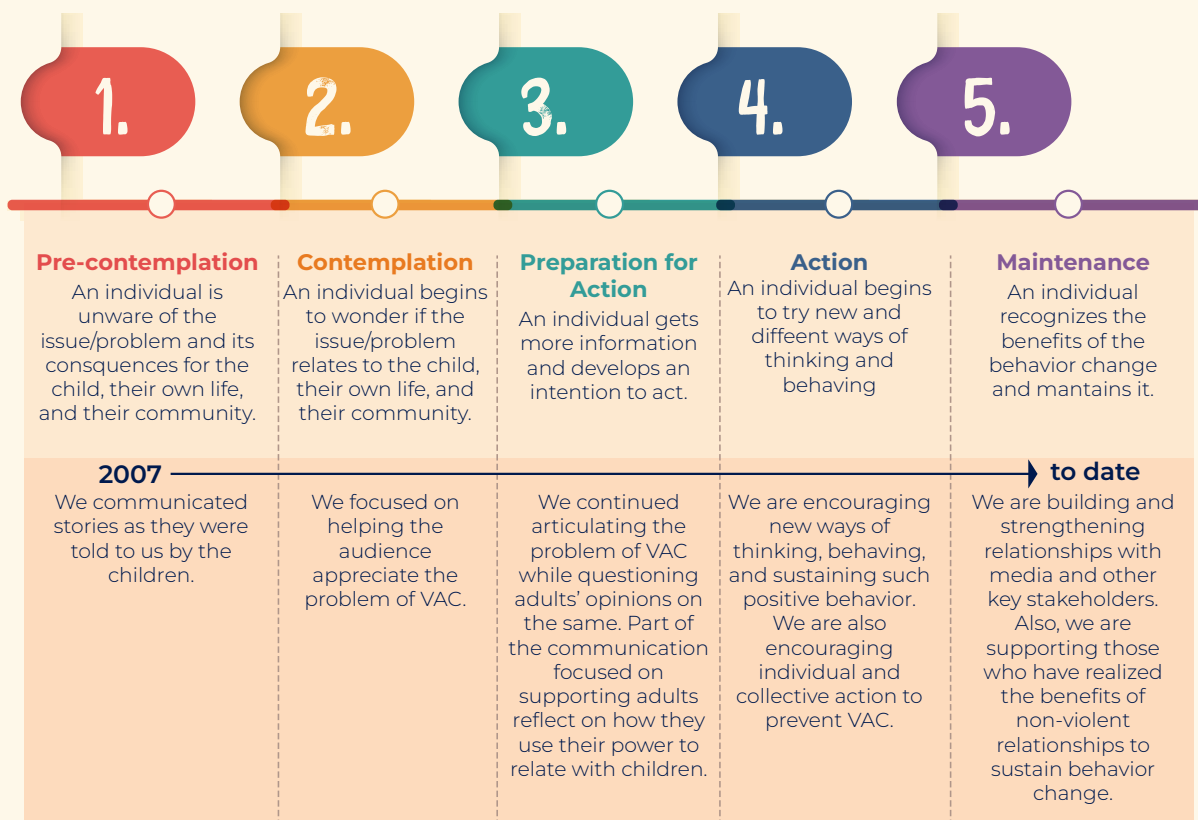
# Our Theory of Change

Social norm change is a long-term process. Some forms of violence have been normalized in African contexts as a way of life. When we started working to address VAC, most people thought of alternatives to violence as “foreign” ideas. The biblical proverb “Spare the rod, spoil the child” and **descriptive norms** condoning violence (such as “African children’s ears are on their buttocks”) needed to be challenged. We began by using positive **injunctive norms** (such as, that it is unacceptable to use violence against another person to make them do something), recognizing it is not enough to change attitudes—behaviors must change as well.

We knew that we needed a sufficient number of people—a critical mass to change either attitudes or behaviors and that new positive norms would have to be accepted before we would see a change in behaviors. Our communications work has been designed to help people to navigate this change, first by helping them question their behavior, then by providing information and ideas on how behavior can be changed, and finally by supporting positive behaviors in being sustained.

According to the theoretical background behind our VAC prevention work, for people to change, they must be affected by multiple spheres of influence and navigate different stages of change. While there are many theories on how people change, we have found the **stages of change theory** to be intuitive, simple, and generally cross-cultural. This is the basis of our interventions, and all our communications content has been designed to help individuals progress from one stage to another, with the goal of helping people sustain positive change (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. The process of change**







# Our Communications Journey

We started this work in the early 2000s, a time when most of the Ugandan audience did not recognize VAC as a problem with consequences for children, for their own lives, and for their communities. From the start, our communications work on VAC prevention was heavily informed by **our national study with Save the Children** involving 1,406 children and 1,093 adults from five diverse districts of Uganda. In that study, more than 98% of children reported experiencing physical or emotional violence, 76% reported experiencing sexual violence, and 74% reported experiencing economic violence. However, although most adults (90%) agreed that children were deliberately beaten, shouted at, and denied food or basic needs in their communities, they hesitated to label these acts as “violence.” Many also disapproved of holding adults accountable for their actions against children, believing that this accountability cultivated uncontrollable behavior in children.

## Starting the Conversation

In 2007, we set out to address these attitudes by designing communications campaigns on VAC prevention using print, radio, television, and local activism. Using stories shared by children as a foundation, our initial dialogue involved crafting a series of consistent and thought-provoking messages to raise awareness on VAC and challenge adults’ perspectives on the issue. We articulated the problem of VAC, including where it happens, why it happens, and who commits it.

With proper consent procedures and anonymity in place, we have ethically communicated and followed the principle of “do no harm” to children to tell their stories using traditional styles (sitting around a fireplace, as in our **storytelling series**). We also expanded the stories into larger campaigns by developing **short films, pre-recorded magazine shows, radio dramas, cartoon strips, quarter-page newspaper messages, and small cartoon booklets and posters**, all demonstrating alternatives of how peers, teachers, family, and other community members can act to prevent different forms of violence—physical, sexual, economic, and emotional.

We started to register increased cases of VAC reported to our office, an indication that our audiences were starting to appreciate the problem of VAC and the need to report. This informed our next phase, supporting audiences with relevant information to facilitate more progressive attitudes and actions. In 2011, we designed a series of thematic, consistent—and, where appropriate, humorous—messages for print under diverse themes including ‘*The power is in your hands to prevent VAC*’, ‘*The time for action is now!*’, and ‘*What is your promise to the children of Uganda?*’ (see examples of content here: **handprints and cartoon strips, radio, and television**). We also continued to discuss different forms of VAC and shared stories of individual community members, teachers, and parents demonstrating progressive attitudes, such as teachers using nonviolent methods to discipline learners and community members identifying cases of VAC in their communities and acting to support such children.



## Sustaining the Conversation

In 2012, we began conducting formal research and rapid assessments to learn from how this work was shifting the national dialogue on VAC. Our results highlighted how our communication was sparking a conversation, causing reflection, and helping people to rethink their violent relationships with children. This pushed us to think of creative ways to sustain our conversation with nuanced information that supports people in maintaining positive behaviors.

Recognizing that different audiences are at different stages of change, our communications began building on previous ideas, with a stronger focus on encouraging new ways of thinking, behaving, and sustaining such positive behavior. This phase of communication has encouraged individual and collective action to prevent VAC. We initiated social media conversations on current issues related to VAC (e.g., children's safety online, mental health, and COVID-19).

We invested in building and strengthening relationships with media to interest more journalists in furthering the VAC prevention discussion. We conducted workshops for journalists and talk show moderators; collaborated with journalists to publish and/or respond to VAC cases, held informal meetings with senior journalists, editors, and others; from journalist engagements, we are seeing several journalists reaching out for comments, interviews, and talk-shows on VAC-related issues. In addition, we have documented our local activism experience in our **Community Activism Toolkit** for organizations and individual activists interested in mobilizing communities for VAC prevention.

## Raising Voices Communications Principles

In all our violence prevention work, the way we communicate is important. The following principles have set our intentions for, and guided, all of our communication efforts:

- Portray the positive.
- Maintain the dignity of women, men, and children, representing them as thoughtful individuals who can make positive decisions.
- Help audiences engage.
- Avoid using labels and stereotypes.
- Avoid shaming and blaming.
- Encourage critical thinking and dialogue.

For more information on our communications principles, follow the **Link**.



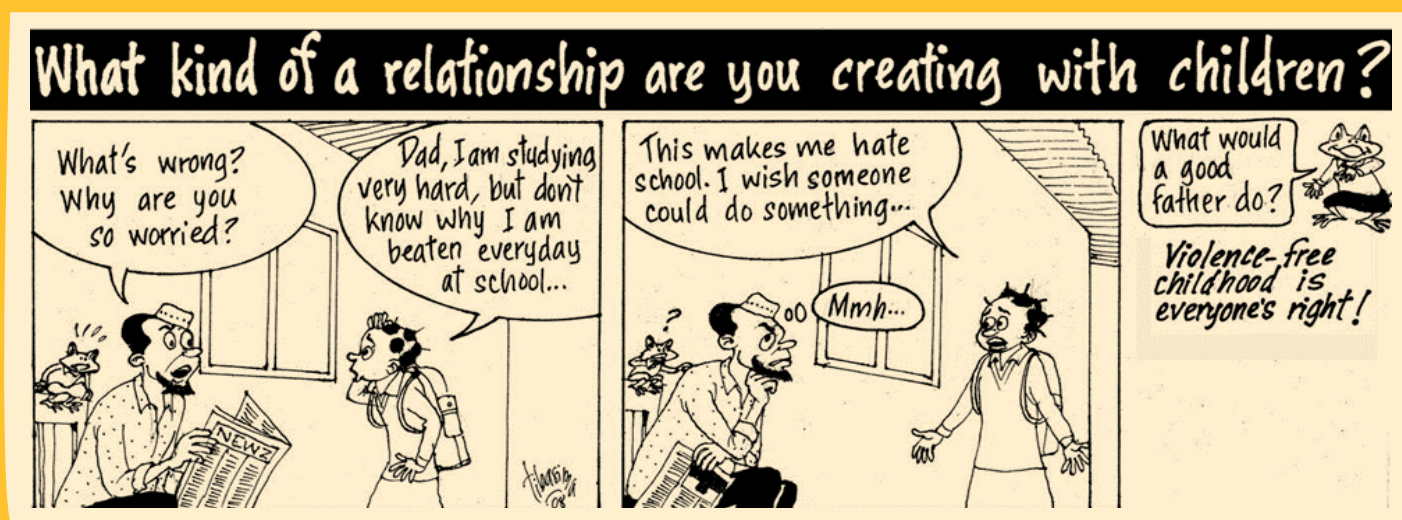
# Our Communication Campaigns

Our multimedia campaigns have revolved around three core components: **asking key reflective questions, telling stories, and holding informative discussions.** These three components have guided our content development, and each year, we build on the previous year's work and learning to harmonize print, TV, radio, and local activism. We learned that if audiences hear a message from a variety of sources (e.g., print, TV, radio, and social media), they are more likely to absorb the message. Repetition and consistency in messaging have boosted our campaigns for sustained exposure.

By using a multimedia approach, we have aimed to reach a diverse audience and triangulate messages to facilitate a national dialogue on VAC prevention. We have used a series of diverse, but linked, activities to meet our overall objective of preventing VAC:

1. **Print media** has a loyal audience in Uganda with multiple national and regional newspapers read consistently by much of the population. Since we were initiating a conversation on a social norm problem that Ugandan society has largely accepted, we initially had to provide people with information and time to deeply engage with alternatives. Since we began this work, we have run campaigns in seven newspapers (three English and four regional). We used multiple communications strategies within this media, building awareness on VAC through a series of cartoon strips and quarter-page announcements under themes like **'I have a question...';** 'Presenting Children's Voices'; 'What is a Good School', and 'What kind of relationship are you creating with children?' to help adults reflect on their relationships with children and emphasize key Good School Toolkit ideas to the general public.

**Figure 3. Cartoon Strip 8—2008 Newspaper Campaign**





**2. Radio** is widely accessed in Uganda and remains a trusted and inclusive medium, engaging diverse categories of people across regions. In Uganda, all regions have local radio stations that broadcast in local languages used in diverse communities and it is affordable compared to TV and print. Using the same concept, our radio campaigns have aired a series of conversation starters featuring children's voices, radio dramas, magazine shows and live talk-shows on over 30 stations, with annual radio campaigns featured on anywhere from 16 to 34 radio stations and airing for at least three to six months each.

**3. Television** provides both audio and visuals, which helps the audience to easily understand the message and better engage with it. TV is mostly watched at home with family members, which makes collective reflection and discussion easier, but is also consumed in public settings allowing for the possibility of wider community engagement. Our TV content has involved short films, public service announcements, "pop-ups" scrolling across the screen, children's stories, and magazine shows. Nine television networks have aired our campaigns, which have run three to six months each in selected years. This has been augmented by film shows in community video halls commonly called bibanda where for example, 14 films were screened in 40 community video halls in Kampala in 2013.

**4. Communications materials** are expansive in their scope and potential, and being tangible and tactile helps them cater to different learning styles. Materials have involved **annual wall calendars** carrying monthly messages, **posters, booklets, info sheets, stickers, frequently asked questions**, and reflector jackets. Our audiences have consistently appreciated these materials, which are good at creating wide awareness of an issue because they can be displayed in various places where many people can interact with the message. For example, we collaborated with 1,600 public shared taxis in 2013 to carry our "footprint" sticker on the rear window glass, offering substantial coverage through routes in and beyond Kampala. We also developed one-way vision bus stickers, collaborating with 150 buses to carry three stickers each in places that passengers could easily see them.

**Figure 2 Footprint sticker.**



**5. Social media** became part of our communications strategy as it spread rapidly across Uganda. We have used social media to amplify our campaigns in print, TV, and radio, highlight and question stories on VAC in mainstream media, and run campaigns to commemorate and articulate themes on special children's days such as the Global Action Week for Education, the International Day to End Corporal Punishment, the International Day of the African Child, and the International Day of the Girl Child.

**6. Our local activism** efforts have involved collaborating with many groups, including artist groups, local theater groups, and community-based organizations (VAC Prevention Centers, or VACPCs) such as Kaana Foundation for Outreach Programs, Joy for Children Uganda, Foundation for Integrated Rural Development, Children's Chance International, Community Development and Child Welfare Initiatives, and Childhealth Advocacy International Uganda. Together have implemented activities in the communities surrounding the schools implementing our Good School Toolkit methodology: facilitating community-wide dialogues on VAC prevention; open theater on VAC; school-based discussions; film shows in open spaces, poster and booklet discussions; community focus group discussions; community leaders' workshops; and "towns speak" (engaging towns/communities with a common VAC issue and working with community leaders to identify solutions and commit to solving the problem). To date, an estimated 80,000 community members have participated in the local activism dialogues across Uganda.





# Learning from our Approach

We have learned about our communications work through rapid assessments, research, and tight feedback loops between participants and primary audiences. In 2012, Raising Voices **commissioned Synovate Uganda to assess the impact of our multi-media campaigns**. The assessment was conducted in six districts (Kampala, Wakiso, Mukono, Mpigi, Mbale, and Soroti, with 600 total interviews (adults) at the household level, two focus group discussions with parents and guardians of children, as well as 85 key informant interviews with two religious leaders per district, one representative from each radio station, one local chairperson per parish, one district welfare official per district, and two Raising Voices staff members.

The results showed that community members were least likely to receive our messages through newspapers (28% of parents and 49% of key informants) compared to radio (82% and 86%, respectively) and television (65% and 73%, respectively). We learned that while print media has a loyal and narrow audience, it is critical for reaching and influencing primarily urban, affluent, opinion leaders and policy makers. We decided, therefore, to use print media sparingly for public campaigns and use more precise means for advocacy work, such as **writing opinion articles**, collaborating with journalists to publish feature stories, writing letters to news editors, reacting to VAC-related stories, providing comments for stories being written, and collaborating with journalists to cover VAC-related events.

In 2019 & 2020 we wanted to follow these learnings up and conducted another **study with the Busara Center for Behavioral Economics** that provided a more in-depth understanding of the effectiveness of our VAC prevention media campaigns on radio and TV. From this study, we learned that:

- **81%** of adults had listened to the campaigns on the radio, while **20%** had watched it on TV. Radio was popular with adults and teachers, with **70%** of adults and **63%** of teachers saying it was their main source of information. By comparison, **44%** of teenagers said TV was their main source of information and **43%** said radio.
- Faith-based radio stations command a loyal audience, one likely to engage with most of the messages we had been communicating—which could facilitate ongoing progress through the different stages of change.
- **95%** of adults, **99%** of teachers, and **90%** of teenagers remembered our “A good school equals a better life” campaign: **67%** of the adult participants who had interacted with the campaign through multiple media could recall the tagline “A good school equals a better life” compared to **26%** of the adults who interacted with the campaign through just one form of media.

- Using techniques such as emotional appeals, local languages, humor, and context-appropriate examples were effective in capturing audience attention and increasing their engagement with campaigns.

In 2022 following two years of school closures resulting from COVID-19, when our media messaging felt more critical than ever before, we conducted our own carefully developed survey with talk show participants, held a series of region-based focus group discussions, and administered a community-based survey with over 420 community members in 11 sampled districts. We found strong exposure to campaign ideas, and that 56% of community members exposed to the media campaign believed that beating children in schools could never be justified compared to 39% of unexposed community members.



## Public transport to facilitate dialogue

In September 2015, we initiated a **reflector jacket campaign** involving 10,000 *boda boda* (motorcycle taxi) drivers across five Ugandan districts. Each driver received a reflector jacket branded with a heart-shaped sticker carrying the message “*What are you doing to prevent violence against children?*” The idea behind the campaign was to provide that useful safety gear—and a hook for *boda boda* riders and passengers to engage in conversations about VAC prevention.<sup>4</sup>

To assess the campaign’s impact, we conducted an initial survey in September with 600 respondents (300 male and 300 female) in Kampala District. Additionally, we conducted a follow-up cross-sectional post-test survey in the same area after nine months of campaigning (June 2016).

We learned that passengers exposed to the campaign were more likely to have discussed children’s issues (82% vs. 61% of passengers not exposed) and spoken to a *boda boda* driver about children’s rights (52% vs. 18%). More than one in three passengers exposed to the campaign reported they had spoken to someone else about the message, suggesting it sparked immediate conversation.

<sup>4</sup> Read media reports on our reflector jacket campaign in the **Observer** and on [chimpreports.com](http://chimpreports.com).





# Key Challenges

Our communications work has helped people develop progressive attitudes, but many still hold on to negative beliefs—appreciating that corporal punishment is a harmful practice, for example, but still willing to use it as a last resort. Through formal and practice-based learning alike, we acknowledge the many challenges of this work and have gained many insights throughout our journey:

- **Change is a gradual process – addressing social norms requires long-term engagement.** Our learning shows that while the majority of the people engaging with our messages have shown signs of more progressive attitudes toward VAC, some still resort to or accept corporal punishment as the default, highlighting for us the ongoing need for sustained communication as crucial for change. Raising awareness is only the first step in promoting behavior change. It is important to begin by breaking the silence and problematizing the “normal” before creating a space for learning, experimenting with new ideas, and ultimately sustaining new behaviors. As individuals adopt positive behaviors, the ideas start to diffuse into communities for greater societal change, but this process takes time.
- **Communicating a social problem is challenging and requires patience.** We started our communication at a time when children’s rights were perceived to be a “Western idea,” creating strong potential for resistance to our VAC prevention dialogue. We had to be mindful of the language we used—for example, using “violence against children” instead of “children’s rights” in our messaging. Political and regressive movements in Uganda have made use of this language more difficult in recent years. VAC is deep-rooted, complex, and systemic, so we have had to approach it systemically and develop content that challenges power structures that allow it to continue. This has involved telling children’s stories in a manner that helps our audiences to reflect and rethink their actions, but also encouraging all different stakeholders to share stories from their own perspectives.
- **Without tight feedback loops it is difficult to track progress and learn from communications.** Monitoring communications campaigns can be expensive and requires creativity, from developing accurate monitoring tools for communications campaigns to finding research methods unique to communications from research institutions. Often, we have incurred additional costs to conduct follow-up studies to triangulate information because affordable research institutions lacked effective impact measurements. Tracking programs like pre-recorded dramas and films across diverse media platforms in different regions can be challenging as well. Developing a tight programmatic feedback loop including talk-show feedback tracking tools to track comments from the audience, focus group discussions with talk-show hosts and participants, and rapid assessments can help clarify what we were learning from formal studies even when overall reach of a campaign is costly to assess.



# Lessons Learned & the Way Forward

- **It is critical to engage a broad audience.** To facilitate and sustain a national dialogue, we need to engage multiple levels of the social ecosystem and have key stakeholders join the conversation through large-scale advocacy. We've found it beneficial to engage many actors in dialogue, such as ministries, local leaders, teachers, children, media, religious and cultural leaders, and ordinary community members. For example, this has included inviting them to participate in live talk shows, offer their opinion in pre-recorded magazines, and take part in school and community activities, among other actions. This helps to foster a spirit of collective responsibility, ownership, and sustainability. In a multilingual country like Uganda, working with partners in different regions helps confirm or edit translations to match diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. This process takes time and should be planned for well in advance of a campaign.
- **To sustain a national dialogue, media is a key ally.** Public media both mirrors and influences the public that it serves. It is important to work with media groups to encourage their ownership of VAC prevention, so they do not have to always be persuaded to hold these conversations with their audience. When media outlets themselves reach out for stories, statistics, and comments on VAC related issues, this is a strong indicator that the issue is more firmly entering the public discourse. We have found that collaborating with media professionals creates opportunities for publication, commentary, interviews, invites to programs, and relationships that keep the discussion going.
- **Messages should embrace humor.** Integrating positive messaging—and, ideally, *humor*—when communicating on VAC and developing messages in a humorous way without diluting or making light of the core concept of the communication creates a shared bond and trust that is a prerequisite for people hearing a message on complicated issues, such as why beating is wrong (see [these examples](#)). We have had strong success with use of our Froggie character, who appears in media messaging in a way that brings lightness and positive framing to our aspirational content. This helps bypass suspicion and resistance and makes audiences feel more connected to the message, and goes a long way in helping people embrace the message, memorize it, and share it with others.

- **The most powerful examples come from children themselves.** Documenting children's stories and communicating them is an important way that children have participated in our national dialogue. It is important to draw from children's real-life experiences of violence and ethically communicate them. This promotes children's voices and helps the audience better relate to the ideas, and ensures that children themselves are sitting at the forefront of the journey towards change. This should always be done in a safe and anonymized way that does not put the child in danger of further harm.
- **Campaigns can reach audiences in multiple ways!** It is important to understand how audiences communicate and engage with multiple media platforms. We have learned that when people get the same message from multiple sources—from school and community settings to radio and TV—they are more likely to consider these messages, believe them, and act on them. We've found TV and print to be very expensive and perhaps not worthwhile for many activist organizations working on smaller budgets. Regardless of the specific mediums, the repetition and triangulation of messaging is powerful in its potential to drive key messages home.

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You can also view past content on our previous VAC Prevention focused Twitter  
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# Acknowledgement

This Stories of Change Brief was written by: Tabitha Suubi, Devin Faris, and Hope Wambi.

Special thanks for those who reviewed this piece: Dipak Naker, Desire Ruth, Prossy Jonker Nakanjako. Thanks also go to Jill Merriman who edited and Samson Mwaka who designed the piece.

**Suggested Citation:** Raising Voices. (2024). *Communicating to Prevent Violence Against Children: Ideas and Process for Facilitating Change*. Kampala: Raising Voices.

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