

Raising Voices' Principles for Preventing Violence against Children

Programming
for Prevention
Series,
Brief No. 7

Background

More than a billion children all over the world experience violence in one form or another, often from people close to them such as parents or teachers. Violence against children (VAC) has become normalized in the way people relate with children.

At Raising Voices, we have focused on preventing VAC by designing long-term interventions aimed at addressing abuse of power. Over two decades, we have developed practical methodologies for preventing interpersonal violence, rigorously evaluated them, and integrated practice-based learning into everything that we do.¹ The following are key ideas we have developed to guide our work to prevent VAC.


Who can use this Program Brief?

This brief can be used by organizations doing VAC prevention work. It can guide your organization during program design and implementation or help make improvements to your existing VAC prevention programs. It can also be used by policymakers and donors to inform recommendations they make to their grantees.

Why do we need principles?

Clear and actionable guiding principles bring a measure of discipline and consistency to intervention development, and structurally transfer what has been learned into the design of the program. Without guiding principles, program development can lapse into an ad hoc activity that repeats previous experiments and fails to apply knowledge and experience that has already been generated. Well-intentioned but unprincipled programs may be ineffective over the longer term or may have unintended consequences. For example, programs engaging

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communities to promote children's rights that are not well thought-out might expose children to backlash from their parents, teachers, and/or local communities, while interventions for marginalized children might fail to reach and support the intended group. Good principles help us navigate safely when the unexpected happens. For successful VAC prevention programming, organizations need to be proactive and rigorously define solid principles and values upon which to base their programs.

The VAC prevention principles

The principles presented in this program brief have been honed from our experience in developing and implementing interventions in schools, at community level and in public media in Uganda. They build on, relate to, and reinforce other child protection principles, such as: *child rights based approach, child participation, non-discrimination, best interests of the child, respecting and building on strengths, and do no harm.*²

The World Health Organization defines violence against children (VAC) as “all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting 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.”

(WHO 2002. World Report on Violence and Health: Chapter 3. Child Abuse and Neglect by Parents and Other Caregivers.)

1. Expand conceptions of violence against children.

We need to conceptualize VAC broadly. That includes not only the acts of violence but also the consequences of such acts, such as making children feel worthless, unwanted, scared, intimidated, isolated and belittled. It should also include systematic violence, like withdrawing the child from school or discriminating based on gender, which is harmful to a child's emotional and mental health.

The consequences of all these types of violence travel with children well beyond the time of the act; they continue to traumatize and brutalize children. Promoting a conception of violence that goes beyond the physical act to recognizing the psychological impact, humiliation, and influence on identity development is much more in harmony with children's experience. Acknowledging the multi-layered effects of violence transforms the work of VAC prevention from not only creating the *absence* of certain kinds of violent acts but also generating the *presence* of healthy relationships between adults and children.

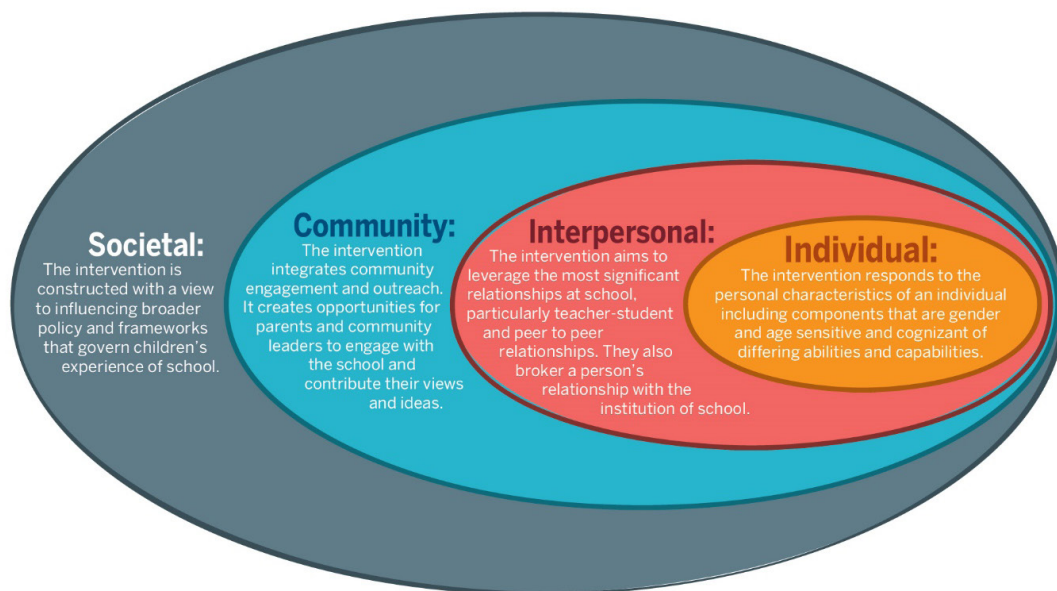
2. Locate interventions in a theory of change – link theory and practice.

Grounding the intervention in a critical understanding of why the form of VAC being addressed is manifesting, why it is tolerated and why it is perpetuated in the community you are working in can strengthen your efforts. It is essential to spell out in as much detail as possible how your proposed intervention will disrupt pathways and create different outcomes from ones that lead to VAC. This will require developing a model that describes the change you want to see, how you will approach the work, resources needed, the actions that need to be taken, who is responsible for those actions and the sequence in which work must flow.

Although each situation will require a unique approach, the process of how individuals change often follows a predictable pattern. A theoretical framework is therefore key to designing your intervention and guiding implementation because it grounds your work in tested ideas, makes your assumptions explicit, and allows you to anticipate outcomes based on the inputs you are investing.

3. Work across the ecological model.

An individual's behavior is influenced by inputs from multiple sources around them. The ecological model³ splits these into four categories: individual, interpersonal, community and societal. Successful interventions begin with the child at the center, but they also try to engage multiple groups of people around the child, intervening at all the various levels of this ecosystem. Therefore, VAC can only be solved when there is diverse commitment and widespread practice that challenges the status quo. The broader the 'buy-in', the greater the likelihood of the idea gaining traction and sustaining over time. When you work across the ecological model, you have a chance to build synergy and a critical mass.



For example, our work with schools is designed in a systemic way. It begins from a student's experience of school and works outwards from a child-centric point of view of what a good quality *school experience* would look like. At school, we work with students, teachers and school administrators to influence the operational culture of their school. Outside school, we engage with community stakeholders of the schools - parents, ordinary community members, community leaders and other stakeholders like the District Education Officers, Inspectors of Schools, Probation Officers and Teacher Training Colleges - persuading them to support the ideas implemented in their schools.

At policy level, we build relationships. We engage line ministries to create a policy environment that promotes children's safety at school.

Such diversity of involvement, however, requires that some people assume responsibility for the process and its outcomes. This builds the ownership necessary to implement changes and foster acceptance of the intervention. We must empower communities and schools to take up the intervention because they want to, not because we are asking them. Our role is to inspire the desire to create change; they are the custodians of the outcome.

Developing synergies between the school, the home, and the wider community means the changes are much more likely to take root. If, by contrast, we had only tried to change the attitudes of teachers, those teachers would still face pressure from parents, school administrators, and officials to go back to the old way of doing things. The change would not have lasted. By working across the ecological model, we give children a much better chance of learning in a violence-free environment.

4. Inspire individual and collective activism.

Our behaviors, particularly the ways in which we relate with children and discipline them, may seem private and personal. However, such behaviors are a result of experiences, attitudes, and knowledge acquired from our surroundings. Thus, they are deeply linked to the prevailing norms and belief systems in the community. The attitudes and actions of parents, caregivers, teachers, neighbors, friends, co-workers, religious leaders, police, health care providers, among others, greatly influence an individual's behavioral choices, and collectively create the operational cultures of schools or communities. They influence how we behave as friends and neighbors, and they eventually influence the values, priorities and even policies of communities and schools.

Successful VAC prevention programs aim to design activities that inspire individuals and groups to act and create positive change in their own lives. Individual activism does not always have to be a large or an organized event. Individuals can effectively influence social change by living and demonstrating their beliefs. This way, they influence their circles of schoolmates, friends, family, colleagues, neighbors, etc. For example, activism can be talking to a neighbor who is caning their child about the effects of violence, a teacher encouraging a colleague to use gentle language, or a student protecting their peers from being bullied.⁴

5. Set long-term objectives.

VAC is an entrenched problem because society has normalized it. Therefore, it helps to begin by breaking the silence and problematizing the 'normal,' followed by creating a space for learning, experimenting with new ideas and ultimately sustaining the new behavior. This calls for a process with multiple steps rather than a single event. It is a common assumption that raising awareness leads to behavior change. However, even when people accept our messages, behavior change requires multiple additional steps that are hard to sustain without longer-term support. Designing projects based on an understanding of how individuals and communities naturally go through a process of change can be more effective than those that thrust haphazard messages into the community.⁵ It is important that organizations build a sustained presence within their community and support sufficient numbers of community members to work through the process of change. Without it, communities will easily fall back into old patterns when projects end.

6. Create a meaningful role for children.

Experience has taught us that children can be powerful agents for their own cause. When designing VAC prevention interventions, we must build meaningful roles for children. In school for example, reserve part of the school-wide outreach for students. Experiment with delegating real power and responsibility to students. Build processes that teach them about broader concepts such as power, justice and equity with encouragement to apply these ideas to prevent VAC. This builds children's confidence that their input and participation matters. It teaches children to exercise agency and leadership on issues that affect them, taking the lead in creating outcomes they wish to see.

7. Use a human rights analysis – find language that resonates with people.

VAC is a violation of children's rights. Employing a child rights-based framework helps in understanding the underlying drivers of the violence and in framing the outcomes desired. A child rights-based approach to preventing VAC aims to empower children and the community they live in to use their power positively. It creates space for children to participate meaningfully in VAC prevention efforts and exercise their agency while recognizing adults' role in nurturing and guiding children as they progressively grow into responsible adults with full decision-making power. A rights-based approach ensures that all children are involved regardless of their sex, religion, disability status, or other factors. It recognizes and addresses inequitable power relationships between girls and boys, children living with disability and those without, and other groups of vulnerable children. It uses the broader framework of human rights and justice to create a legitimate channel for discussing children's needs and priorities and holds the community accountable for treating children as valuable and equal human beings. Without this foundation, programs tend to appeal to the goodwill of others to keep children safe.

However, translating this vision into practical outcomes may require a strategic approach. The language of 'human rights' can be perceived as divisive and adversarial in some contexts if it is used insensitively. Collaborative concepts of 'personal power and justice' may be more fruitful preliminary tools for fostering engagement and building trust. Practitioners must find effective, resonant language to realize rights-based outcomes.

8. Encourage personal and collective critical thinking.

Effective change happens when people are provoked to question their ideas and beliefs. Successful VAC prevention programs speak to people's hearts as well as their minds. They help people reflect on their own behavior and actions, and challenge them with messages that help them to think critically about their actions, without blaming them or simply telling them what to do. When people start to think critically as individuals or as a collective, it opens their minds to think beyond what is familiar. They start imagining alternative ways of living and relating with children. They start to question their own behavior and invest in sustaining their process of change.

9. Balance broad with specific.

Balancing system-level interventions with specific activities leads to disaggregated, specific, visible and measurable outcomes. A broad idea will evaporate after the initial push, but if it is linked to specific and tangible outcomes then it is likely to grow roots and become integrated into the fabric of a community or school. Thus, imploring parents is much more likely to get traction when we provide specific avenues and opportunities for action. Similarly, encouraging teachers to create friendly relationships with students is more likely to lead to sustained change when it comes with specific ideas on how to develop the foundation.

Moving forward

Preventing VAC is possible, as long as the intervention considers and responds to the complexity of the problem: a well thought out framework that shapes and guides the way we work. When we design programs guided by tried and tested principles, we can create schools, homes, and communities free from violence. Preventing VAC takes determination, commitment and focus to consistently follow through on the principles described here. In sum,

- Effective VAC prevention addresses root causes of VAC. It requires addressing social norms and power dynamics between adults and children, as well as among children due to gender, age or other power differentials.
- VAC prevention is a process. Programs need to be systematic and encourage sustained, dynamic efforts for long-term impact.
- VAC prevention requires local leadership. It requires endorsement of local power brokers such as community and religious leaders and implementation by people who live in the community, who are familiar and trusted.
- Preventing VAC takes everyone's participation including children. When we all act, we can effectively influence others who witness us living and demonstrating our belief.



The Programming for Prevention Series is a collection of briefs designed to address critical challenges and questions in violence prevention programming.

Suggested citation: Raising Voices (2019). VAC Prevention Principles, Programming for Prevention Series, Brief No.7, Kampala, Uganda.

Endnotes

- 1 Raising Voices & LSHTM, 2017. Is Violence Against Children Preventable? Findings from the Good Schools Study summarized for general audiences. <http://raisingvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/VAC-Popular-Report-Final-web.pdf>
- 2 Oak Foundation – Child Abuse Programme, 2012. Guiding Principles. Background and a more detailed elaboration of the programmatic implications of the guiding principles. <http://oakfnd.org/assets/oak-foundation-cap-guiding-principles--extended-version.pdf>
- 3 Atkins, M. S., McKay, M. M., Arvanitis, P., London, L., Madison, S., Costigan, C., Haney, M., Hess, L., Zevenbergen, A. & Bennett, D. 1998. An ecological model for school-based mental health services for urban low-income aggressive children. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 25, 64-75.
- 4 Raising Voices, 2009. Guiding principles of community mobilization. <http://raisingvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/downloads/Activism/SBL/GuidingPrinciplesCommunityMobilization.pdf>.
- 5 BehaviourWorks Australia, 2015. Stage Theories and Behaviour Change. http://www.behaviourworksaustralia.org/V2/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/BWA_StageTheories.pdf

