

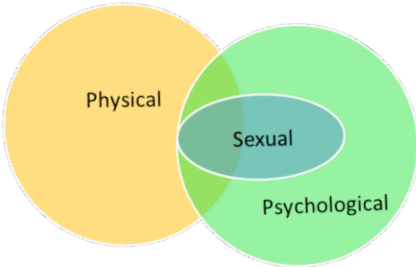
Summary of Key Policy Issues: Safe Learning Environments

Context

1. Despite notable efforts, **children continue to experience a wide range of violence in and around schools**, including physical, psychological and sexual violence. Fifty percent of all children experience violence in and around school.¹ Globally, half of all students aged 13–15, about 150 million children, report experiencing peer-to-peer violence in and around school.² And, 720 million children live in countries where corporal punishment in schools is not fully prohibited.³ As communities around the world seek to “build back better” following the COVID-19 crisis, holistic education that promotes safe, inclusive and equitable learning environments is more important than ever.⁴

ChildFund Alliance Working Group on Safe Learning Environments: Working Definition of Safe Learning Environments. Efforts to create ‘safe learning environments’ focus on ending all violence that happens while at school (formal and informal), on and around school grounds, while getting to and from school, and in online activity linked to a student’s school life. In addition, it involves using school as an entry point to reduce violence in other areas of children’s lives.⁵

What types of violence do children face?

2. Children experience **physical violence**, including attacks and physical fights. They experience **psychological violence** such as verbal and emotional abuse, social exclusion, discrimination and bullying. They suffer **sexual violence** by peers, teachers or other adults in and around schools. In some countries, particularly where organized crime or conflict are high, children may be exposed to gun violence at school or face recruitment.
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- The diagram consists of three overlapping circles. A yellow circle on the left is labeled 'Physical'. A green circle on the right is labeled 'Psychological'. A smaller blue circle is positioned in the center, overlapping the intersection of the yellow and green circles, and is labeled 'Sexual'.
3. **Girls and boys experience violence differently.** Research indicates that girls are more likely to experience psychological bullying, sexual violence and harassment while boys are more likely to experience corporal punishment and physical violence.⁶
 4. Recent evidence suggests that nearly one in three students between 11 and 17 years of age (32%) has been bullied by their peers at school at least once in the last month.⁷ The proportion of students reporting that they have been bullied is highest in sub-Saharan Africa (48.2%), North Africa (42.7%) and the Middle East (41.1%).⁸ Bullying can be psychological, physical or sexual. While some researchers suggest physical violence and bullying appear are trending down, **cyberbullying is increasing.**⁹ At the same time, **in-person bullying and cyberbullying feed into each other**, forming a continuum of damaging behavior online and offline and often in connection to schools.

What are the consequences for children?

5. Violence against children in and around schools **has a deep and lasting impact on their physical, emotional, and social well-being as well as their intellectual and economic prospects.** Children who experience multiple forms of violence are more likely to suffer life adversities and manifest symptoms of psychological distress.¹⁰ Children who are exposed to violence may have worse educational outcomes than others. Violence prevents many children, especially girls and children living in

marginalized situations, from attending or finishing school, or accessing educational opportunities. It can also affect the overall attainment of the student population of a school.^{11, 12}

6. Children who are bullied are around **twice as likely to feel lonely, to be unable to sleep at night and to have contemplated suicide** as those who are not bullied. Self-reported quality of health and life satisfaction is lower among children who are bullies and victims of bullying than among those who are not involved in bullying. Bullying is also associated with higher rates of smoking, alcohol, earlier sexual experience and lower academic performance.¹³ Cyberbullying can cause profound damage as it can quickly reach a wide audience and lead to long term reputational harm or suicide in extreme cases.¹⁴

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violence in and around schools

7. Many children will have experienced increased violence and emotional stress linked to social distancing, school closures and economic hardship at the household and community level as a result of the pandemic. Some experts **anticipate substantial increases in children’s exposure to physical, sexual and/or psychological violence** alongside significant disruptions to programs and services designed to support them.¹⁵ They expect this to be particularly true for girls and children living in marginalized and low-resource settings.
8. Experts also warn of a **possible increase in absenteeism or dropouts**, making it harder for schools to be an entry point for violence prevention. Some families may no longer have the means to cover school fees or related expenses. Students may have anxiety about returning to school, particularly those who were previously subjected to bullying and discrimination or face stigma as a result of their family’s experience with COVID-19. The [digital divide](#)—the gap between those able to benefit from the digital age and those who are not—may make it difficult for some students to return to the same academic level as their peers. Child protection issues exacerbated during the pandemic, such as forced marriage, may prevent some from returning at all. Experts warn that as many as 10 million secondary school-aged girls may be out of school after the COVID crisis.¹⁶

Why are children vulnerable to violence in and around school?

9. The [social-ecological model of violence prevention](#) (individual, community, societal) provides a useful structure for understanding the underlying risks and gaps leading to children’s vulnerability.

Individual Level

10. **Children who face discrimination and exclusion in school due to religion, ethnicity, migration status, socio-economic class, disability, sex, gender orientation or other perceived differences may be more vulnerable** to violence and abuse.

Community

11. Children face increased risk of violence when **teachers and parents have less knowledge and awareness about child rights**. Equally, teachers and other adults at school who have been **victims of violence** and who use violence against people other than students may be more likely to use violence against students.¹⁷ **Social norms and community perceptions** related to gender conformity, disabilities or other perceived or actual differences among children may also elevate violence in schools.¹⁸
12. In **fragile or conflict-affected contexts**, students and staff face targeted and indiscriminate attacks from the military or other groups and other forms of violence.¹⁹ This is particularly true in settings

where criminal justice mechanisms are weak, gun violence is high and/or **organized criminal groups and armed groups** are present. In areas prone to natural disasters or climatic events, where the continuity of education is challenged and educational facilities are commandeered for emergency response, child protection actors and educators face additional hurdles in supporting the most vulnerable.

Societal / policy level

13. **Inadequate resources and overstretched systems** can make it difficult to develop and deliver high-quality teacher training and school-based curricula to address violence.²⁰ Weak referral systems and limited response services for survivors of violence lead to underreporting and unaddressed incidents.²¹ In addition, **enforcement and accountability mechanisms** to drive implementation of legislation are inadequate, under-resourced and poorly coordinated.^{22, 23}

What is needed to make learning environments safe?*

14. Schools are uniquely positioned to both address and prevent violence against children. “Building back better” after the pandemic **hinges on the ability of education and child protection systems to come together to meet the needs of all learners and deliberately address gaps** that have existed before but have increased due to the crisis.²⁴ **This requires action from a wide range of actors**, including donors, private sector actors, national policymakers and legislators, relevant line ministries, child protection actors, educators and school staff, parents, and children themselves.
15. These actions should **collectively deliver the critical results and outcomes outlined below (paragraphs 15 – 24) to make learning environments as safe as possible**. Progress against some outcomes is well underway while others need additional resourcing and attention. Emerging options for ChildFund Alliance are addressed later in the document (paragraphs 25 – 26).

Individual level

16. **Children understand their rights and respect the rights of others, including children living in marginalized situations**. This means children challenge social, cultural and gender norms that justify violence; can identify safe online and offline practices that can protect them from abuse; and know how to report incidents of violence and seek support for themselves and their peers.

Community Level

17. **Teachers use child-centered approaches to make schools safer**. This requires training teachers and school staff in non-violent methods of discipline, classroom management, and how to prevent and respond to bullying / cyberbullying, paying particular attention to children in the most vulnerable situations. It also involves helping teachers to understand their rights and supporting them to transform their own harmful beliefs, challenge other harmful norms and respect the rights of others.
18. **School curricula include effective approaches to create positive, safe school environments that promote equality and respect**. This includes promoting child-rights education, digital citizenship and online safety in school curricula. Curricula should promote peacebuilding and end violence in schools and communities and schools should serve as venues for teaching and modeling violence prevention.

* Drawn in large part from the [INSPIRE strategies](#) and the [Safe to Learn initiative](#).

19. **Effective safeguarding policies and child protection systems are established and adequately resourced.** This includes implementing and monitoring safeguarding policies and procedures, such as codes of conduct, digital safety guidance, and violence reporting procedures. Safe and child-friendly methods for reporting violence in and around schools (including in on-line learning environments) should be established and regularly assessed.²⁵ In addition, multi-sectoral, child-friendly response and referral mechanisms should be established and well-funded to support survivors of violence in and around schools, particularly as schools reopen and anticipate increased child protection issues.²⁶
20. **Schools adopt community-wide approaches that engage parents and communities in promoting non-violent behavior and promoting safe environments.** This requires communities to take action to promote positive social norms and gender equality to ensure online and offline learning environments are safe spaces for students. Community members must empower one another to speak up and take positive action against violence that they or their peers have experienced. Similarly, parents and caregivers should receive support to grow as good digital citizens and learn to protect children online.
21. **Research and evidence help improve the impact of violence prevention interventions.** To this end, schools and governments ethically and safely collect disaggregated data on incidents of violence in and around schools to support targeted and better-quality interventions. Additionally, school-related violence prevention initiatives and their impact are regularly evaluated and redesigned, as necessary. Donors and research partners increase investment in research and evaluation about interventions to prevent violence in and around schools (in particular longitudinal studies).

Societal / policy level

22. **Political leadership is mobilized at the global level** and more governments endorse the [Safe to Learn Call to Action](#) and the [Safe Schools Declaration](#).
23. **National governments develop and enforce robust laws and policy frameworks that keep students safe in and around school.** This means national governments fully prohibit corporal punishment and Ministries of Education implement policies that improve systems, strengthen capacity, and build skills to prevent and respond to violence across the education system. National governments enforce laws and policies that promote positive discipline and protect children from all forms of violence in and around schools, including online violence, corporal punishment and all forms of bullying.
24. **Sufficient resources are mobilized from a range of sources to end violence in and around schools.** This requires national governments to increase domestic resources and donors increase investments at the country and global levels to end violence in schools. At the same time, private sector actors provide relevant financial, technical and in-kind resources.
25. **The education system and school infrastructure is more resilient to natural and climatic hazards.** National governments and relevant authorities establish disaster management plans to maintain safe learning environments and plan for educational continuity. The physical environment in and around schools maximizes safety and is designed with the well-being of all students in mind.

Emerging options for ChildFund Alliance

26. The following **7 emerging options represent potential ways in which ChildFund Alliance members could work together to make learning environments safer.** These options pair grassroots action with global and/or national-level policymaking to improve enforcement and accountability. Additionally,

they all deliver against the SDGs and the INSPIRE strategies for ending violence against children and can be designed to elevate children’s voices and promote children’s participation. Based on an early steer from the Working Group, we have not included an option related to safe facilities and infrastructure.

- a. **“Build back better” and strengthen local child protection systems** to address violence in schools, particularly in advance of post-pandemic schools reopening and in anticipation of increased child protection issues. This would include pushing for formal endorsement of the [Safe to Learn Call to Action](#) and supporting grassroots mechanisms to drive accountability.
 - b. Make **online learning environments safer for children** by pushing for endorsement of global commitments, like the [Child Online Safety Universal Declaration](#), promoting national legislation to protect children online, including cyberbullying legislation, and enabling school-based training on digital citizenship, including digital literacy for children and teachers.
 - c. End all forms of **bullying in schools, including cyberbullying**, by advocating for national legislation to explicitly prohibit all forms of bullying against children and complementing that with school-based violence prevention strategies and survivor support, particularly for marginalized children. Encourage national governments to support the [International Day against Violence and Bullying at School including Cyberbullying](#) through concrete action and commitment to build effective national responses to bullying. Some [momentum](#) is building towards a possible push for international commitments on this issue, which could also provide an advocacy opportunity.
 - d. Seek the **universal abolition of corporal punishment** in schools by pushing (where necessary) for national legislation that prohibits corporal punishment and strengthening parent, teacher and student associations—or other accountability mechanisms powered by young people’s participation—to promote policy uptake and enforcement at school-level. Combine these efforts with local-level, violence prevention strategies, such as the [Good School Toolkit](#).
 - e. Eliminate all forms of **sexual and gender-based violence** (GBV) in schools by pushing for national legislation that prohibits all forms of GBV both offline and online, including online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) and at the same time supporting the delivery of curricula that promote positive social norms and gender equality.
 - f. **Future-proof education** by ensuring curricula and schools are disaster-ready and resilient to natural hazards and climatic events, in-line with guidance from the [Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience in the Education Sector \(GADRRRES\)](#).
 - g. **Protect schools from attack, and reduce gun violence** by pushing for the endorsement of the [Safe Schools Declaration](#) and strengthen school-based accountability mechanisms and child protection systems to prevent violence against children and respond to incidents when they happen.
27. Some **elements of options 25b and 25c are also included in the summary of policy issues related to children’s online safety**, namely: improving the digital literacy of teachers and students; promoting safe online learning environments; and addressing cyberbullying.

Annex 1. Key terms

Bullying	Bullying is unwanted aggressive behavior by another child or group of children who are neither siblings nor in a romantic relationship with the victim. It involves repeated physical, psychological or social harm, and often takes place in schools and other settings where children gather. [Source: WHO]
Corporal punishment	Any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause pain or discomfort, however light. Most corporal punishment involves hitting ('smacking', 'slapping', 'spanking') children with the hand or with an implement – whip, stick, belt, shoe, and so on. But it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, burning or scalding them or forcing them to swallow food or liquid. [Source: WHO]
Cyberbullying	The use of information and communication technologies to harm a victim or victims in deliberate, repeated, and hostile ways. [Source: UNODC]
Digital citizens	Originally coined in 2007, digital citizens are those who use the internet regularly (daily) and effectively. ²⁷ This definition has since been expanded to include competent and positive engagement with digital technology (access and skills), active and responsible participation (empowerment and etiquette), and lifelong learning in formal, non-formal and informal contexts (including risk management and resilience). [Source: OECD]
Digital literacy for children	The knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow children to be both safe and empowered in an increasingly digital world. This encompasses their play, participation, socializing, searching and learning through digital technologies. What constitutes digital literacy will vary according to children's age, local culture and context. [Source: UNICEF]

Annex 2. Methodology

This summary note was informed by a review of open-source research and other material available online published, with one exception, in or after 2015. Research for this note was not exhaustive. The aim was to identify relevant learning and recommendations from academic studies, grey literature papers and other relevant work related to safe learning environments.

Annex 3. Endnotes

¹ <https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/paragraphs/download/STL%2015.pdf>, accessed 14 February 2021.

² UNICEF, An Everyday Lesson, New York, 2018. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/everyday-lesson>.

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- ³ Safe to Learn, Ending Violence in and Through Schools, 2015. <https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/paragraphs/download/STL%2015.pdf>.
- ⁴ WHO, School-based violence prevention: a practical handbook, Geneva, 2019. <https://www.unicef.org/media/58081/file/UNICEF-WHO-UNESCO-handbook-school-based-violence.pdf>
- ⁵ Safe to Learn (GPEVAC)
- ⁶ Safe to Learn, Ending Violence in and Through Schools, 2015.
- ⁷ UNESCO, Behind the Numbers: Ending School Violence and Bullying, Paris, 2019. https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/paragraphs/download/UNESCO_Bullying.pdf.
- ⁸ UNESCO, Behind the Numbers, 2019.
- ⁹ UNESCO, Behind the Numbers, 2019.
- ¹⁰ Finkelhor, David and others, "Polyvictimization: Children's Exposure to Multiple Types of Violence, Crime, and Abuse." National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence, U.S. Department of Justice, October 2011. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/235504.pdf>
- ¹¹ UNESCO, Behind the Numbers, 2019.
- ¹² Jones, Hayley and Kirrily Pells, "Undermining learning: multi-country longitudinal evidence on corporal punishment in schools." UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, June 2016. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08954e5274a27b2000027/YL-IRB-2016-01_pb-corporal-punishment-in-schools.pdf
- ¹³ UNESCO, Behind the Numbers, 2019.
- ¹⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/safer-internet-day-unicef-calls-concerted-action-prevent-bullying-and-harassment>, accessed 14 February 2021.
- ¹⁵ Safe to Learn, Reopening Schools Safely: Recommendations for building back better to end violence against children in and through schools, 2020. <https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/paragraphs/download/REOPENING%20SCHOOLS.pdf>, accessed 14 February 2021.
- ¹⁶ Safe to Learn, Reopening Schools Safely, 2020.
- ¹⁷ Merrill, Katherine G. and others, "School staff perpetration of physical violence against students in Uganda: a multilevel analysis of risk factors." *BMJ open* 7, no. 8, 2017. <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/bmjopen/7/8/e015567.full.pdf>
- ¹⁸ Safe to Learn, Ending Violence in and Through Schools, 2015.
- ¹⁹ Safe to Learn, Ending Violence in and Through Schools, 2015.
- ²⁰ UNICEF, An Everyday Lesson, 2018.
- ²¹ UNICEF, An Everyday Lesson, 2018.
- ²² WHO, Global status report on preventing violence against children, Geneva, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/media/70731/file/Global-status-report-on-preventing-violence-against-children-2020.pdf>.
- ²³ Jones, Hayley and Kirrily Pells, "Undermining learning: multi-country longitudinal evidence on corporal punishment in schools." UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, June 2016. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08954e5274a27b2000027/YL-IRB-2016-01_pb-corporal-punishment-in-schools.pdf
- ²⁴ Safe to Learn, Reopening Schools Safely, 2020.
- ²⁵ Safe to Learn, Reopening Schools Safely, 2020.
- ²⁶ Safe to Learn, Reopening Schools Safely, 2020.
- ²⁷ Mossberger, Karen and others. Digital citizenship: The Internet, society, and participation. MIT Press, 2007. <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/digital-citizenship>