

# VIOLENCE AND HARM AGAINST CHILDREN:

## Children's reflections on their experiences, feelings, and mental health effects



### What is the purpose?

Violence against children is a violation of children's rights and a threat to their health and development. South African children are at risk of experiencing multiple forms of violence during childhood which may occur across multiple contexts of home, school, and their community.<sup>1-3</sup> However, most research studies do not ask children, especially young children, about violence in their lives, which limits our understanding of the issue.<sup>4-5</sup>



### How did we do it?

To understand the violence that children experience, how they think and feel about it, and how it impacts their mental health, we interviewed young children (ages 6–12) and adolescents (ages 13–17) from rural and peri-urban communities in Mpumalanga. Children answered child-friendly survey and open-response interview questions about their lives, the violence they witnessed and experienced, opinions, families, friends, and health.

### Key findings:

Sample characteristics: 280 children

**55%**  
Girls



**67.5%**  
Age 6-9

### Violence reported



Physical  
**55.4%**



Emotional  
**56.4%**



Between adults  
in household  
**39.3%**



Sexual  
**5.7%**

### Of children reporting physical violence



**83.2%**

Hit with an object (belt, stick, pipe, shoe, etc.)



**19.4%**

Injuries or marks from the abuse.

The average child showed moderate acceptance or endorsement of violence, it was deeply entrenched that some children recognized violence as the only form of acceptable violence.

*“No, it [reprimanding children] doesn't help. Hitting the child helps.”*

(Boy, 9 years old)



## Policy/Program implications:

1. Efforts to address violence in childhood need to **consider the multiple contexts and perpetrators** through which children experience violence, as their mental health is harmed by violence across their homes, schools, and communities.
2. Policy and programming need to be expanded to **address use of corporal punishment by caregivers and by school staff**, as current policy outlawing corporal punishment is not deterring its widespread use against young children and adolescents and children are internalizing violence as an acceptable way to solve problems.
3. There is a need to introduce interventions that **encourage positive parenting and teaching practices**, with healthier ways of communication that do not involve violence. These programs should provide parents and teachers with **alternative discipline strategies that foster mutual respect and understanding**. Such interventions have been proven to be effective in other similar South African communities.<sup>6-7</sup>
4. Interventions should engage children, teachers and parents to **challenge the belief that violence is the only appropriate method of discipline**. By promoting healthy communication skills from an early age, these efforts can help establish a culture where non-violent discipline becomes the norm.
5. As well as addressing the violence and mental health burdens experienced by children, **attending to parent's mental health issues is key**. Efforts to improve parenting and create safer, non-violent homes for children should be accompanied by work to address the mental health concerns for parents and their children—and to build positive coping practices—to facilitate meeting these needs in tandem and strengthening the bond between parents and children.

## Key findings: (cont.)



### Poor mental health symptoms

Poor mental health symptoms (post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, self-harm/suicidality) were linked to violence experiences of peer bullying, community violence, and violence between adults in household, as well as having unsafe spaces in their home or community, and endorsing violence norms.



### Physical and emotional abuse

Physical and emotional abuse via hitting and shouting were the only recognized methods of correcting children when they had done something wrong at home or at school, sometimes for developmentally appropriate behaviors that do not warrant harsh punishment methods. These forms of abuse were rarely followed by conversations to teach children to avoid doing the same thing or to teach them the expected form of conduct. The occurrence of violence was particularly difficult for children as it created fear and took away their sense of safety or happiness.

*“She [mother] once beat me for writing on the base of the bed. She beat me with a belt. Then, my little sister told my neighbours about this. Then, my mom beat her for telling our neighbours what goes on in the house.”*

(Girl, 9 years old)

*“I feel sad when she hits me...I feel this sad (with tears coming out)”*

(Boy, 7 years old)

### Children are often helpless

Children are often helpless as there is power in place when violence takes place, the inflictors are often adults who care for the children, and children cannot act against this occurrence without sanctions on them.

*“It hurts because the other person is older than the young one, the young one cannot fight with the older person.”*

(Girl, 12 years old)

## Key findings: (cont.)

### Power is sometimes interlinked

Power is sometimes interlinked with the feelings of love that children have towards the inflictor, Children expressed feelings of love and fear towards their caregivers. Because of the power imbalance between parent and child, this can be confusing for the children as they believe this person cares for them but at the same time the person is responsible for hurting them

### Children used violence when in conflict with peers

Children used violence when in conflict with peers, mostly to show dissatisfaction or disapproval, which mirrored how adults would treat them when they had done something wrong.

*“He threw me in the mud. After I punched him, he got a black eye”*  
(Boy - 7 years old)

1. Franchino-Olsen H, Spreckelsen T, Orkin M, Meinck F. Contextually Sensitive Polyvictimization Profiles and Physical and Mental Health Outcomes among South African Adolescents from Low-Resource Communities: An Extended Latent Class Analysis. *Child Indic Res.* 2024;17(5):2069-2097. doi:10.1007/s12187-024-10155-0
2. Kaminer D, du Plessis B, Hardy A, Benjamin A. Exposure to violence across multiple sites among young South African adolescents. *Peace Confl J Peace Psychol.* 2013;19(2):112-124. doi:10.1037/a0032487
3. Leoschut L, Kafaar Z. The frequency and predictors of poly-victimisation of South African children and the role of schools in its prevention. *Psychol Health Med.* 2017;22(sup1):81-93. doi:10.1080/13548506.2016.1273533
4. Noble-Carr D, Mearthur M, Moore T. Children's Experiences of Domestic and Family Violence: Findings from a Meta-Synthesis Institute of Child Protection Studies Australian Catholic University. Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University; 2017. www.acu.edu.au/icps
5. Woollett N, Christofides N, Franchino-Olsen H, Silima M, Fouche A, Meinck F. "Children Are Like Vuvuzelas Always Ready to Blow": Exploring How to Engage Young Children in Violence Research. *J Interpers Violence.* Published online 2024. doi:10.1177/08862605241230088
6. Cluver LD, Meinck F, Steinert JI, et al. Parenting for Lifelong Health: a pragmatic cluster randomised controlled trial of a non-commercialised parenting programme for adolescents and their families in South Africa. *BMJ Glob Health.* 2018;3(1):e000539. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2017-000539
7. Devries KM, Knight L, Child JC, et al. The Good School Toolkit for reducing physical violence from school staff to primary school students: a cluster-randomised controlled trial in Uganda. *Lancet Glob Health.* 2015;3(7):e378-e386. doi:10.1016/S2214-109X(15)00060-1

Maluleke, P, Franchino-Olsen, H, Meinck, F, Silima, M, Christofides, NJ, Asghar, K & Woollett, N. Children's narratives of violence and the effect on their cognitive and emotional well-being: Qualitative findings from a violence study with young children in South Africa

Franchino-Olsen, H, Maluleke, P, Meinck, F, Christofides, N, Asghar, K & Woollett, N. Children's experiences of, feelings on, and mental health associations with violence: A quantitative study from a sample of young children and adolescents in South Africa