



OPPORTUNITY

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Building communities free of violence: Lessons learnt about engaging parents to prevent violence against children

Violence against children has long-term effects that impact not just the development of our children, but the development of our nation. A costing study commissioned by Save the Children South Africa estimated that early exposure to violence during childhood resulted in the loss of R238-billion in human capital – the equivalent to 6% of the GDP¹. In this brief, PATCH Helderberg Child Abuse Centre and Clowns Without Borders South Africa share their experience – and lessons learnt – implementing a community-level programme to address the drivers of violence against children in the Helderberg Basin in the Western Cape.

Violence against children remains widespread in South Africa. According to the Optimus Study on Child Abuse, Violence and Neglect in South Africa², one in five South African children (both boys and girls) had experienced sexual abuse in their lifetimes, and one in three respondents reported having experienced physical abuse – they had either been hit, beaten or kicked by an adult caregiver – in their lifetime³.

The consequences of this violence are significant – to both the children themselves and to national development. Children who experience these forms of violence are “more likely to engage in risky sexual activity and substance misuse, and to develop mental and physical health problems. These, in turn, undermine their capacity to succeed at school, to work, and to maintain healthy relationships. These problems cost the country enormously, both in terms of the costs of treating these problems, and in lost

economic productivity.”⁵ A costing study by Save the Children South Africa estimated that South Africans who were physically abused as children earned on average 11.7% less a month than people who were not physically abused, and 9.2% less if they were emotionally abused as children⁶. Furthermore, and one of the most “troubling challenges” of violence against children, is that those who experience violence in childhood are more likely to perpetrate violence later in life⁷.

Over the past two decades, civil society – in partnership with government and funding organisations – has sought to reduce the prevalence of violence against children in South Africa. We now have a significant understanding of, and growing body of research that identifies the drivers of violence against children, as well as preventative measures that can be implemented across the entire life course of an



“In order to improve human capital and earnings in South Africa, the root causes of violence need to be addressed early.”⁴

Institute for Security Studies

¹ Gould C, Hsiao C. 2017. Building an inclusive economy: why preventing violence and supporting families is essential. Joint Submission to the National Treasury by the Institute for Security Studies and Save the Children South Africa.

² This study provides the first-ever representative data in South Africa on both incidence and prevalence of different forms of violence and maltreatment (including sexual, physical and emotional abuse, and neglect) against children.

³ Optimus Study. 2015. Research Bulletin: The Optimus Study on Child Abuse, Violence and Neglect in South Africa. Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention & The University of Cape Town.

⁴ Gould C, Mufamadi D, Hsiao C and Amisi M. 2017. Reducing Violence in South Africa: From Policing to Prevention. Institute for Security Studies Policy Brief, October 2017.

⁵ Optimus Study. 2015. Research Bulletin: The Optimus Study on Child Abuse, Violence and Neglect in South Africa. Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention & The University of Cape Town, p.3.

⁶ Gould C, Hsiao C. 2017. Building an inclusive economy: why preventing violence and supporting families is essential. Joint Submission to the National Treasury by the Institute for Security Studies and Save the Children South Africa.

⁷ Willman AM, Puerto Gomez M, Gould C and Newham G. 2019. Crime Violence and Exclusion in South African Society: Background Note for the South Africa Systematic Country Diagnostic (English). Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.



individual⁸. Engaging caregivers and families is one such strategic entry point shown to be effective in preventing and responding to violence against children⁹.

In 2016, PATCH Helderberg Child Abuse Centre partnered with Clowns Without Borders South Africa (CWBSA) to demonstrate whether engaging caregivers through an evidence-based¹⁰ parenting programme could support efforts to prevent child abuse in the Helderberg Basin. This learning brief outlines the steps taken to implement the Sinovuyo Kids-Brief Programme, as well as five key lessons learnt along the way to help build the case for implementing parenting programmes as a strategy to prevent violence against children.



“Reducing violence against South African children is both a moral imperative (to protect our children) and an imperative for national development. It can and must be achieved.”

The Optimus Study on Child Abuse, Violence and Neglect in South Africa

DESIGNING A PROGRAMME FOR PARENTS - AND FOR SCALE

The **PATCH Helderberg Child Abuse Centre** provides response, care and support services to victims of child sexual abuse. It is the only organisation in the Helderberg Basin to exclusively provide assessment and therapy, court preparation and crisis services to victims of child abuse. In 2016, PATCH sought to expand the scope of its services by introducing a community-level parenting intervention intended to build community mechanisms to prevent and monitor child abuse. To this end, they teamed up with **Clowns Without Borders South Africa (CWBSA)**, which is dedicated to improving the lives of children and families by providing technical capacity and support to non-profit organisations seeking to implement and scale up parenting programmes. Together they decided to implement the **Sinovuyo¹¹ Kids Programme** that was developed by the Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) initiative¹².

Targeted to caregivers of children between two and nine years old, the Sinovuyo Kids Programme is a 12-week programme designed to prevent violence against children by supporting caregivers to improve their relationship with their children; introducing positive parenting techniques to reduce harsh parenting; and helping caregivers to improve their mental health.

Unfortunately, parenting programmes are often expensive to implement and therefore challenging to scale-up in low- and middle-income countries¹³. Building on emerging evidence that brief interventions may be effective in resource-scarce communities, CWBSA and PATCH decided to test whether a shorter version of the programme could still be effectively implemented and brought to scale in South Africa. They therefore condensed the original programme to an eight-week programme consisting of six group sessions and two supplemental home visits.

In order to participate, caregivers had to be older than 18 years old and be considered the primary caregiver of a child between the

ages of two and nine who lives in the same household as them at least four nights a week. Just over 70 participants from Macassar and Sir Lowry's Pass Village were recruited to participate, as well as seven facilitators, who were either community members or employed by PATCH as social workers or social auxiliary workers. A five-day training helped facilitators to understand the content of the programme and taught them how to facilitate sessions and conduct structured home visits.

Lasting about three hours per session, parent sessions were facilitated in English, Afrikaans, and isiXhosa using methods like group discussions, illustrated stories to help caregivers identify effective parenting skills, and role-plays to practice these skills during the session. Sessions explored topics such as one-on-one time with your child, emotional awareness, child-led play, using praise and rewards, instruction-giving, non-violent discipline, consequences for aggressive behaviour and problem-solving, and were followed up by home visits to reinforce the group session learning.

Researchers from the Universities of Oxford and Cape Town conducted a feasibility pilot study during implementation of the programme. Mixed methods like focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were used to examine the quality of delivery, programme adherence and the effect of the programme on parents, children, parenting behaviours and the relationship between the caregiver and child.

The study results showed that children were less likely to experience maltreatment, emotional abuse and physical abuse after their parents participated in the programme¹⁴. Caregivers reported that the groups in which they participated had become a network of support even after the programme had

⁸ Mathews S, Gould C. 2017. Preventing violence: From evidence to implementation. In: Jamieson L, Berry L & Lake L (eds) South African Child Gauge 2017. Cape Town, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.

⁹ Gould C. 2018. Glimmers of Light: Opportunities for Preventing Violence in South Africa. The Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding. Wilson Centre Africa Programme, Research Paper No.21.

¹⁰ In 2014, the Sinovuyo Kids Programme was initially tested in a feasibility study with 68 participants in Khayelitsha. This was followed by a larger randomised controlled trial (RCT) with 296 families in Khayelitsha and Nyanga between 2014 and 2016.

¹¹ Meaning 'we have joy' in isiXhosa.

¹² Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH) is a suite of affordable parenting programmes to prevent violence in low-resource settings. These programmes have been developed and rigorously tested through a collaboration between WHO, Stellenbosch University in South Africa, the University of Cape Town in South Africa, Bangor University in Wales, the University of Oxford in England, and UNICEF. Training in the PLH programmes is led by Clowns Without Borders South Africa (South Africa), the Mkhulu Child Development Trust (South Africa), the Prevention Research for Community, Family and Child Health at Stellenbosch University (South Africa) and the Children's Early Intervention Trust (Wales).

¹³ Knerr W, Gardner F and Cluver L. 2013. Improving Positive Parenting Skills and Reducing Harsh and Abusive Parenting in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review. *Prevention Science*, 14(4): pp.352-363.

¹⁴ Clowns Without Borders South Africa. 2018. Sinovuyo Caring Families Programme for Young Children: Sinovuyo Kids - Brief Version. Final Report, December 2018, p.29 [unpublished].

ended, and that the programme tools and activities enabled them to better respond to anger and stressful situations¹⁵. However, despite the results of the programme, the study concluded that the condensed programme did not yield optimal results for either caregivers or facilitators, compared to the full 12-week version. This was due to challenges linked to the condensed nature of the programme that placed a heavy workload on facilitators and not enough time to enable caregivers to connect with the content and practise the core parenting skills covered in the programme.

In 2018, PATCH built on their parenting implementation experience to develop a programme design and strategy that aligned with their expertise in sexual abuse and trauma, in order to help parents identify signs and symptoms of abuse and enable them to respond effectively when their children confide such experiences to them. The programme was also delivered over eight weeks, fusing sexual abuse safety with positive parenting techniques to reduce harsh parenting.



“By focusing on the trauma of the parents and allowing them to release the emotions linked to their trauma in a professional and supervised manner, the parents were more open to understanding how their negative parenting techniques may affect their relationship(s) with their child/children. Once the emotional blockage had been removed, each parent was more motivated to adopt new and effective parenting skills to build relationships with their children and to lessen the frustration and anger parents often feel in addition to the many other struggles they experience daily.”¹⁶

This round of implementation revealed that many of the caregiver participants had been adversely affected by trauma themselves, and that this situation needed to be addressed with the support of a professional. This was done by threading therapeutic components throughout the programme, and by providing counselling for parents, as needed, after each session. Because of the focus on caregivers’ trauma, most of the facilitators were social workers specialising in trauma. The programme allowed caregivers to address their own experiences of trauma, whilst gaining the positive parenting skills needed to transform their own parent-child relationships.

15 Ibid, p.5

16 PATCH/Helderberg Centre for Abuse. 2018. Implementation Dashboard for the Parenting and Prevention Program. Additional Report to DGMT, December 2018. [unpublished].

17 Conger RD, Ge X, Elder GH, Lorenz FO, Simons RL. 1994. Economic Stress, Coercive Family Process, and Developmental Problems of Adolescents. *Child Development* 65(2): p.541-561.

LESSONS LEARNT

1 | Place caregivers at the centre of programme design

Families are often called the foundation of society, yet limited support is provided to caregivers when it comes to navigating the terrain of parenthood and/or guardianship. It is important for caregivers to be seen and invested in, but initiatives often only engage caregivers as a means to an end, without taking into account the stressors they face. In order to truly empower and support caregivers, we need to recognise their dreams, aspirations, needs, potential and trauma first. Including these factors through a human-centred approach to programme design in communities enables interventions to adequately support caregivers and mobilise them for violence prevention and children’s educational and health outcomes.

2 | If you want to change behaviour, invest in relationship building

The experiences of caregivers in the pilot, as well as in the results of the study, indicate that change is possible at a behavioural and relational level. The kinds of shifts influenced by positive parenting and family support programmes are said to have the potential to “buffer the effects of poverty on children”¹⁷ and equalise outcomes for vulnerable children¹⁸. One-on-one time between caregivers and their children was identified as a critical component of the programme that facilitated the improvement of the relationship between the caregiver and child. This is best demonstrated by the following statement recorded during the qualitative process of the study:



“Before the one-on-one sessions my child was like a closed book. You had to open the book to see what was going on and with this course I have learnt how to do that. So, I understand her better and our relationship is not like one where I am the mother and she is the child; no, we are like sisters or like friends and she can speak openly to me about things.”¹⁹

18 Martin M, Hall K and Lake L. 2018. Supporting families in South Africa: A policy map. *Child Gauge* 2018. Children’s Institute: University of Cape Town.

19 Clowns Without Borders South Africa, p.33.



3 | When designing condensed interventions for scale, methods to incentivise attendance are critical

Whilst there is an understanding that longer-term interventions increase impact in underserved communities²⁰, brief interventions increase the likelihood of a programme being scaled. Due to the condensed nature of this intervention, the impact of missing a session was more detrimental than would be the case with the full version because each session covered two key topics. Incentivising attendance could be one way to ensure that caregivers do not miss critical sessions during the implementation of a brief version of an intervention.

4 | Integrated approaches that encourage collaborative design have the potential to be more cost-effective and impactful

Integrated approaches that tackle risk factors for a range of experiences of violence are instrumental, especially in contexts with resource constraints. Such approaches increase the likelihood of programmes being scaled for meaningful impact and reduce the likelihood of the intergenerational transmission of violence. It is important to invest in both primary and secondary forms of prevention. The former (primary prevention) designs programmes that intervene before the perpetration of violence takes place and seeks to reduce the factors that lead to violence. The latter (secondary prevention) provides response, care and support services should an individual be exposed to violence, so as to prevent the reoccurrence of violence.

5 | Champion an agenda for family support programmes

From the feasibility study, the programme teams realised that certain vulnerabilities perpetuating the multi-generational transmission of violence were present in the participating caregivers. Such vulnerabilities included economic stress, food insecurity, intimate partner violence, poor mental health, exposure

of the caregiver to violence at a young age and substance abuse. The parenting programme, by design, was unable to address and ameliorate many of these vulnerabilities. However, by embedding parenting programmes within the broader ambit of social services, caregivers have access to statutory services that can reduce these vulnerabilities. This would enable caregivers and their families to benefit from a range of services provided by the Ministries of Basic Education, Social Development, Health, Justice, Home Affairs, police and local government – amongst others²¹. Through this embedding, which provides a range of family support services to vulnerable families, families receive the support that they need to reduce vulnerabilities that could help prevent possible future incidents of domestic violence and support diverse families to provide nurturing care to children.

CONCLUSION

Violence prevention interventions are key to building an innovative and inclusive society where every individual can reach their full potential. PATCH and CWBSA's implementation experience shows that parenting programmes are an effective strategy to reduce violence against children and improve children's wellbeing. However, in order to increase the effectiveness and impact of such programmes, interventions need to be implemented over a longer period of time and within networks of support that can respond to, and ameliorate, the many stressors that caregivers and their families are exposed to. Programmes of this nature should simultaneously seek to improve the wellbeing of caregivers and their relationships with themselves and their children – not just their parenting skills. Furthermore, by integrating and embedding violence prevention initiatives within the broader structure of statutory services in South Africa, civil society, government and funding organisations can create the enabling conditions that support caregivers and families to create safe and supportive environments for their children whilst feeling better supported themselves.

Learning brief by Iris Nxumalo (DGMT Innovation Manager).

20 Lachmann JM. 2019. DGMT Learning and Reflection Meeting with PATCH and CWBSA. Cape Town: South Africa.

21 Martin P *et al.*

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