The extent and consequences of physical punishment

Physical punishment in the home and at schools is widespread in South Africa. Whereas 57% of parents reported smacking their child in 2005,[7] 89% of women and 94% of men reported physical punishment by their caregivers before the age of 18 years in a study in the Eastern Cape.[8] A large proportion of them – 85% of males and 69% of females – reported beatings with a belt, stick or other hard object.[9]

Physical punishment also continues at high rates in schools across the country despite being prohibited by the South African Schools Act.[10] Nationally, approximately 50% of learners experience physical punishment at school, with the highest prevalence (74%) in KwaZulu-Natal.[11]

There has been much debate about the negative effects of physical punishment. Proponents argue that 'mild' forms of physical punishment, such as spanking and smacking, are not harmful for children and are different from physical child abuse. Yet, a number of studies show that even 'mild' forms of physical punishment can have detrimental short- and long-term effects on children (see Figure 1).[12]

Figure 1: Associations between physical punishment and negative outcomes

INCREASES
- Risk of physical abuse
- Child aggression
- Child delinquent & antisocial behaviour
- Adult aggression
- Adult criminal and antisocial behaviour
- Risk of abusing own child or spouse in adulthood

DECREASES
- Moral internalisation
- Quality of parent-child relationship
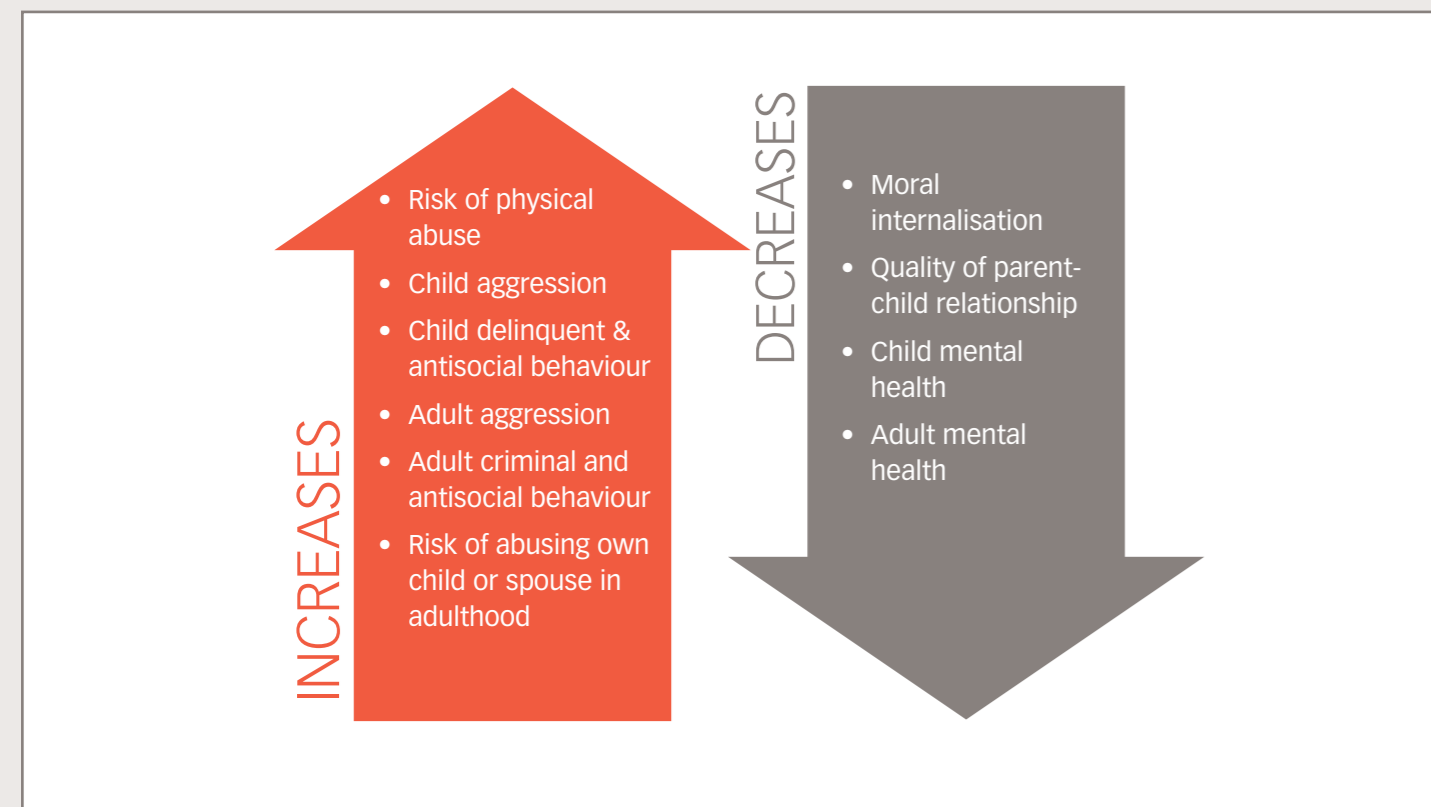- Child mental health
- Adult mental health

Figure based on findings reported in Gershoff ET (2002) Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviours and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128(4): 539-579.

Research further demonstrates that 'mild' physical punishment (e.g. spanking with an open hand) often overlaps with 'harsh' forms of physical punishment (e.g. beatings that can cause injury). In high income countries, 75% of physical child abuse occurs in the context of physical punishment, and children who are spanked by their parents are seven times more likely to also be severely assaulted by their parents.[13]

In addition to physical punishment, physical child abuse is widespread in South Africa: Between 34% and 56% of children report lifetime physical abuse, which is mostly perpetrated by parents and primary caregivers, followed by teachers and relatives.[14] In extreme cases, physical child abuse can be fatal. In South Africa, approximately 45% of child homicides happen in the context of child abuse and neglect with such deaths mainly occurring in the under-five age group, either in the home or by someone known to the child.[15] Preventing physical punishment is thus critical to prevent more severe forms of violence against children, including severe and fatal child abuse.

> 75% of physical child abuse occurs in the context of physical punishment.

Endnotes

1   United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2007) *General Comment No. 8 (2006): The Right of the Child to Protection from Corporal Punishment and Other Cruel or Degrading Forms of Punishment*. CRC/C/GC/8. Geneva: UNCROC.
2   United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child [in 1 above].
3   South African Constitution, sections 10, 12, 28(1)(d), (2);
    Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25*. Geneva: United Nations. Articles 3 & 19(1);
    Secretary General of the Organisation of the African Union (1990) *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, OAU Resolution 21.8/49*. Addis Ababa: OAU. Articles 4 & 16(1).
4   United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2016) *Concluding Observations on the Second Periodic Report of South Africa*. Geneva: UNCROC;
    African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (2014) *Concluding Recommendations by the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) on the Republic of South Africa Initial Report on the Status of Implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*. Addis Ababa: ACERWC.
5   South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. Section 10.
6   *YG vs the State* 2018 (1) SACR 64 (GJ). The organisation Freedom of Religion South Africa, which was admitted as a 'friend of the court' in the case, has applied for leave to appeal the judgment.
7   Dawes A, De Sas Kropiwnicki Z, Kafaar Z & Richter L (2005) *Corporal Punishment of Children: A South African National Survey*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.
8   Jewkes RK, Dunkle K, Ndunad M, Jamaa PN & Purene A (2010) Associations between childhood adversity and depression, substance abuse and HIV & HSV2 incident infections in rural South African youth. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34(11): 833-841.
9   Jewkes et al [n 8 above].
10 South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. Section 10.
11 Burton P & Leoschut L (2012) *School Violence in South Africa: Results of the 2012 National School Violence Study*. Cape Town: Centre for Justice & Crime Prevention.
12 Gershoff ET (2002) Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviours and experiences: A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128(4): 539-579;
    Machisa M, Christofides N & Jewkes R (2016) Structural pathways between child abuse, poor mental health outcomes and male-perpetrated intimate partner violence (IPV). *PLoS ONE*, 11(3):e0150986;
    Gershoff ET & Grogan-Kaylor A (2016) Spanking and child outcomes: Old controversies and new meta-analyses. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30(4): 453-469.
13 Durrant J & Ensom R (2012) Physical punishment of children: Lessons from 20 years of research. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 184(12): 1373-1377.
14 Burton P, Ward CL, Artz L & Leoschut L (2016) *The Optimus Study on Child Abuse, Violence and Neglect in South Africa (Research Report)*. Cape Town: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, University of Cape Town;
    Meinck F, Cluver LD, Boyes ME & Loening-Voysey H (2016) Physical, emotional and sexual adolescent abuse victimisation in South Africa: Prevalence, incidence, perpetrators and locations. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 70(9): 910-916.
15 Mathews S & Martin L (2016) Developing an understanding of fatal child abuse and neglect: Results from the South African child death review pilot study. *South African Medical Journal*, 106(12):1160-1163.
16 Statistics South Africa (2016) *South Africa Demographic and Health Survey 2016: Key Indicator Report*. Pretoria: Stats SA.
17 Davies P & Mac Pherson K (2011) Why Is Crime in South Africa so Violent: A Rapid Evidence Assessment. Oxford Evidentia.
18 Fulu E, Miedema S, Roselli T, McCook S, Chan KL, Haardörfer R & Jewkes R (2017) Pathways between childhood trauma, intimate partner violence, and harsh parenting: Findings from the UN multi-country study on men and violence in Asia and the Pacific. *Lancet Global Health*, 5:e512-522.
19 Cislaghi B & Heise L (2016) *Measuring Gender-related Social Norms: Report of a meeting, Baltimore Maryland, June 14 – 15 2016*. Learning Group on Social Norms and Gender-based Violence of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.
20 Lansford JE, Deater-Deckard K, Bornstein MH, Putnick DL, Bradley RH (2014) Attitudes Justifying Domestic Violence Predict Endorsement of Corporal Punishment and Physical and Psychological Aggression towards Children: A Study in 25 Low- and Middle-Income Countries *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 164(5):1208-1213.
21 Lansford et al [n 20 above].
22 Cislaghi & Heise [n 19 above].
23 For an overview of evidence see Röhrs S (2017) *Shifting Attitudes and Behaviours Underpinning Physical Punishment of Children*. Briefing Paper. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.
24 Jewkes R, Gevers A, Shamu S, Mahlangu P, Shai N, Lombard C & Chirwa E (2017) Outcome of the Randomized Controlled Trial to Evaluate the Skhokho Violence Prevention Intervention in South African schools. Conference paper presented at SVRI Forum, 18 – 21 September 2017, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
25 Jewkes et al. [n 24 above].
26 Shamu S, Gevers A, Mahlangu BP, Shai PNJ, Chirwa ED & Jewkes RK (2015) Prevalence and risk factors for intimate partner violence among Grade 8 learners in urban South Africa: Baseline analysis from the Skhokho Supporting Success cluster randomised controlled trial. *International Health*, 8(1):18-26.
27 Shai N, Mahlangu P, Gevers A & Jewkes R (2015) The Effectiveness of a Parent-Teenager Relationship Strengthening Programme in SouthAfrica. Conference paper presented at SVRI Forum, 15 – 17 September 2015, Stellenbosch, South Africa;
    Jewkes et al. See no. 24 above.
28 Shai et al. [n 27 above]; Jewkes et al [n 24 above].
29 Shai et al. [n 27 above].
30 Shai et al. [n 27 above].
31 Shai et al. [n 27 above].
32 Devries KM, Knight L, Child JC, Mirembe A, Janet Nakuti, Jones R, Sturgess J, Allen E, Kyegombe N, Parkes J, Walakira E, Elbourne D, Watts C & Naker D (2015) The Good School Toolkit for reducing physical violence from school staff to primary school students: A cluster-randomised controlled trial in Uganda. *The Lancet Global Health*, 385:e378-386.
33 Amisi M (2017) Uganda Study Tour Report. Pretoria: Department of Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation. Unpublished report.
34 Devries et al [n 32 above].
35 Devries KM, Knight L, Allen E, Parkes J, Kyegombe N & Naker D (2017) Does the Good Schools Toolkit Reduce Physical, Sexual and Emotional Violence, and Injuries, in Girls and Boys equally? A Cluster-Randomised Controlled Trial. *Prevention Science*, 1-15. doi:10.1007/s11121-017-0775-3.
36 Kyegombe N, Namakula S, Mulindwa J, Lwanyaaga J, Naker D, Namy S, Nakuti J, Parkes J, Knight L, Walakira E & Devries KM (2017) How did the Good School Toolkit reduce the risk of past week physical violence from teachers to students? Qualitative findings on pathways of change in schools in Luwero, Uganda. *Social Science & Medicine*, 180:10-19.
37 See for instance: Baker-Henningham H, Walker S, Powell C & Meeks Gardner J (2009) A pilot study of the Incredible Years Teacher Training programme and a curriculum unit on social and emotional skills in community pre-schools in Jamaica. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 35(5):624-631;
    UNICEF (nd) *Violence against Children Study in Jordan*. Retrieved 12 December 2017 at: https://www.unicef.org/jordan/protection_6079.html.

Reducing physical punishment of children

Using schools as nodes of intervention

February 2018

Policy brief

Physical punishment is one of the most widespread forms of violence against children in South Africa. Research shows that physical punishment can have detrimental short- and long-term effects on children's health and psychosocial development. Interventions, policies and programmes targeting physical punishment are therefore urgently needed. This policy brief discusses the prevalence of physical punishment in South Africa, its effects on children and the links between physical punishment and intimate partner violence. The policy brief then presents findings from two school-based interventions that reduced physical punishment: *Skhokho Supporting Success* and the *Good Schools Toolkit*. The policy brief concludes with a set of recommendations for future research and interventions.

Background

Physical punishment refers to "any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light".[1] Physical punishment can thus take many forms and includes beatings with an open hand or with a tool (e.g. caning), kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, burning, scalding and forced ingestion.[2] In South Africa physical punishment is widely used by parents, caregivers and teachers to discipline children.

Physical punishment is invariably degrading and is in conflict with children's best interests and their rights – to dignity, to bodily and psychological integrity, and to be protected from maltreatment and degradation. These rights are protected under domestic and international law including the Constitution, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC).[3]

The international committees overseeing the implementation of the UNCRC and the ACRWC have asked the South African government to prohibit all forms of physical punishment and to build the capacity of parents, caregivers and professionals working with children to administer non-violent forms of discipline.[4] While physical punishment has been prohibited in South African schools for over 20 years,[5] the common law allowed mild forms of physical punishment in the home until a recent judgment by the South Gauteng High Court.[6] This judgment struck down the common law defence of 'moderate and reasonable chastisement', which previously permitted parents to use physical punishment. However, as illustrated by the legal prohibition of physical punishment in schools, a legal ban alone will not curb the use of physical punishment.

> Physical punishment is invariably degrading and violates children's rights.
>
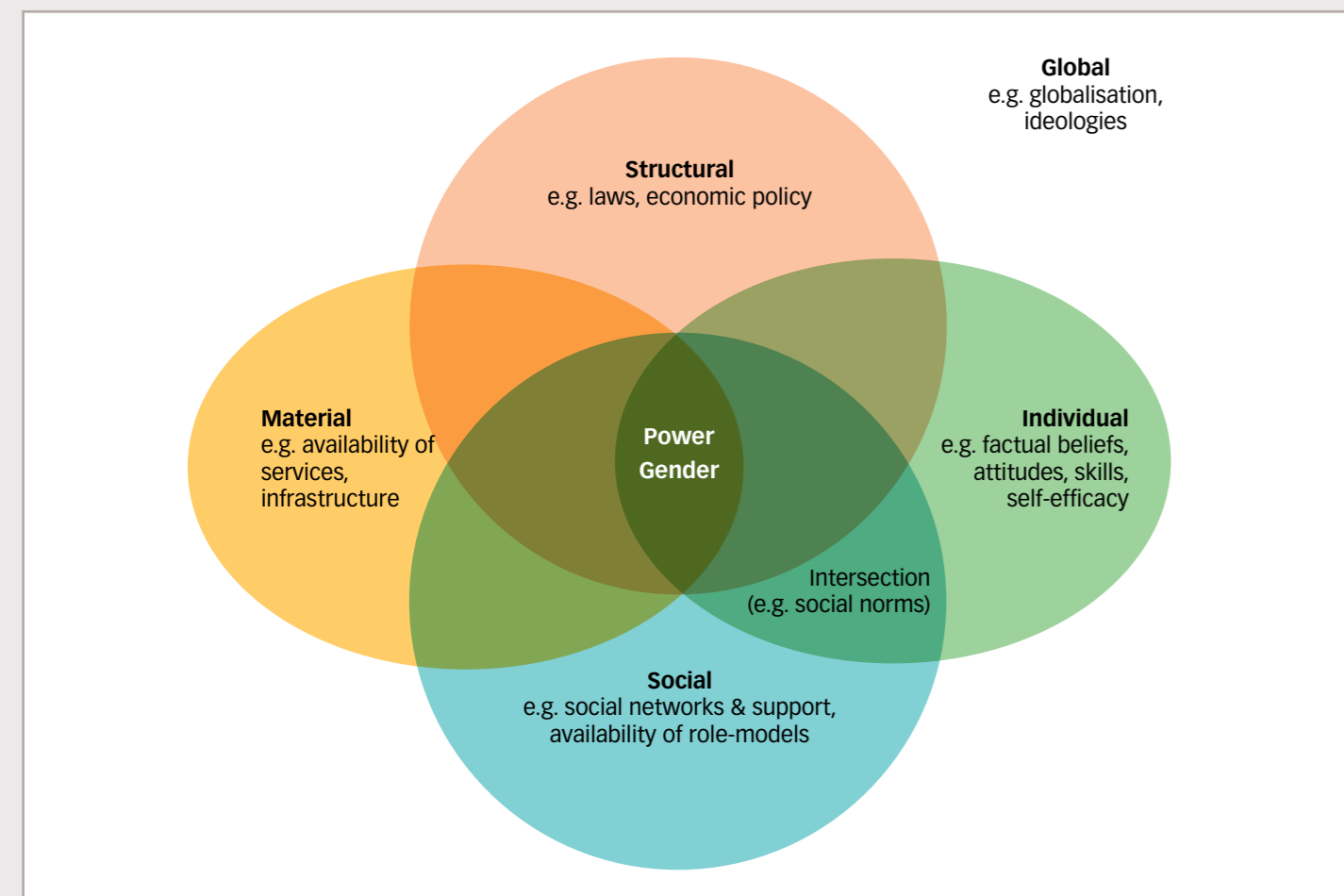> *United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007*

The relationship between physical punishment and intimate partner violence

South Africa is also faced with high levels of intimate partner violence (IPV).[16] The underlying causes of violence are complex with a multitude of intersecting factors contributing to high levels of violence across society.[17] Yet, it is clear that IPV and violence against children often co-occur and have a number of shared risk factors. The social and cultural context that permits the use of physical punishment similarly fosters the use of IPV and tolerates men's violence towards women. In the same way, men's use of violence and controlling behaviour towards an intimate partner often extends to the use of physical punishment to discipline children. A growing body of evidence illustrates that boys who experience physical violence have an increased risk of perpetrating IPV and violence against their own children later in life.[18]

Underlying social norms are thus carried forward from one generation to the next as men are viewed to have authority over women and children – both within the family and in the wider community. While the pathways that lead from childhood trauma to the perpetration of violence (or further victimisation) in adulthood are complicated, evidence also indicates that women who experience IPV are more likely to use physical punishment with their own children driving an intergenerational cycle of violence.[19]

The detrimental effects of physical punishment on children and its links with more severe forms of child abuse and IPV highlight the urgent need for behaviour change interventions. In light of the widespread use of physical punishment in the home and at schools, interventions need to be able to be taken to scale.

Changing individual attitudes and social norms

Behaviour change interventions should be informed by sound theory and evidence. Social Norms Theory suggests that both individual beliefs and social norms (or unwritten rules about what kinds of behaviour are acceptable) can strongly influence behaviour and behaviour change.[19] In relation to physical punishment this has been confirmed in a 25-country study which found that both social norms *and* individual beliefs and attitudes predict caregivers' use of physical punishment.[20] It is therefore necessary to not only shift individual beliefs and attitudes but to also address the social norms that perpetuate the use of physical punishment.[21]

Figure 2: Framework for behaviour change

Social Norms Theory extends this analysis even further to consider how a broad range of factors operating at the global, structural, material, social and individual level interact to determine behaviour as illustrated in Figure 2.[22] Interventions to reduce physical punishment should thus ideally be multi-pronged and address individual attitudes, social norms and other factors that support the use of such punishment. However, further research is needed to examine the role of social norms and their relationship with other risk factors in the use of physical punishment in South Africa. This evidence should then inform behaviour change interventions.

Reducing physical punishment – schools as nodes of intervention

Evidence on large-scale interventions that successfully reduce the use of physical punishment in the home or at school is scarce in low- and middle-income countries.[23] Emerging evidence from South Africa and Uganda suggests that school interventions – targeting school staff and/or parents and caregivers – have the potential to effectively reduce physical punishment.

Skhokho Supporting Success

Skhokho Supporting Success is a multi-faceted school-based intervention developed by the South African Medical Research Council (Gender & Health Research Unit) to prevent IPV among Grade 8 learners in South Africa. The intervention recognises homes and schools as sites of abuse and psychological distress, but it also acknowledges how parents and teachers can be a source of support, strength and resilience to adolescents. Thus, targeting parents, children and the school environment are important to support IPV prevention and responses.

Skhokho Supporting Success is an IPV and positive discipline intervention targeting learners, parents and teachers.

Skhokho Supporting Success seeks to strengthen: (1) the school's capacity to implement its Life Orientation (LO) curriculum which covers gender and IPV; (2) teachers' capacity to teach the LO curriculum, use positive discipline and promote respect for human rights; and (3) the parent-teenager relationship to prevent IPV among teenagers.[24] The school component of the intervention provides teachers with training on positive discipline and behaviour management, stress and coping, and putting policies and values into action.[25] The intervention also offers workshops for parents and their adolescent children facilitated by trained facilitators where participants learn about communication skills, conflict resolution, positive parenting, positive discipline, and adolescent development. In 2015 and 2016, *Skhokho Supporting Success* was rolled out in secondary schools in Tshwane District, Gauteng, where eight schools received both the school and parenting intervention, a further eight received

only the school intervention, and a further eight received no intervention.[26] The effectiveness of the school and parenting intervention was evaluated using qualitative and quantitative methods. The write-up of the quantitative findings is underway.

Initial findings from the qualitative evaluation show that awareness of alternative, non-violent discipline as well as the negative effects of physical punishment was a critical first step in curbing the use of physical punishment amongst parents and teachers.[27] Both teachers and parents reported having reduced the use of physical punishment. Teachers indicated that the intervention empowered them to manage learners' behaviour more effectively in the classroom, and enabled them to manage their own emotions, a key factor contributing to the use of physical punishment at school.[28] Parents described how they had stopped beating their children and using other harsh discipline.[29] They also reported improvements in their relationships with their children and being proactive in managing their children's behaviour instead of managing problem behaviour retrospectively.[30]

Teachers and parents who participated in Skhokho Supporting Success reported having stopped physical punishment.

Skhokho Supporting Success shows that interventions can address both IPV and other forms of violence, such as physical punishment. The preliminary findings further suggest that the intervention is able to shift teachers' and parents' use of physical punishment, but the pathway of change (i.e. how the change happened) needs to be further investigated as the intervention only had a limited impact on the ideologies (i.e. beliefs and attitudes) underpinning physical punishment.[31]

Good School Toolkit

Another school-based intervention is the *Good School Toolkit* which has been developed by the Ugandan NGO Raising Voices. This intervention and has been

successful in reducing physical punishment in Ugandan primary schools. The *Good School Toolkit* takes a whole-school approach and supports students, teachers and administrative staff through a series of six steps designed to foster mutual respect; facilitate student participation and leadership; foster critical reflection on power relations and violence; and provide staff with alternatives to physical punishment.[32] The intervention also includes activities with parents and community members in order to garner support for the changes within the school and to initiate a more widespread shift in attitudes underpinning physical punishment.[33] The *Good School Toolkit* was implemented in 21 primary schools in Uganda over the course of 18 months and succeeded in reducing physical punishment by school staff by 42%.[34]

600 Ugandan schools have implemented the Good Schools Toolkit.

The intervention also reduced school staff's use of emotional violence towards learners as well as peer learner emotional and physical violence.[35] The success of the intervention has been attributed to improved teacher-learner relationships, increased knowledge of alternative discipline methods and the shifting of learners' and school staff's views of and attitudes towards physical punishment.[36] Based on these achievements, the *Good School Toolkit* has since been implemented in 600 primary schools in Uganda and has been adapted for Ugandan secondary schools with increased emphasis on peer violence, gender inequities and dating violence.

The Good Schools Toolkit reduced physical punishment by 42%.

Evidence from *Skhokho Supporting Success* and the *Good School Toolkit*, as well as other programmes,[37] indicates that schools can be successfully used as points of intervention to reduce physical punishment. School-based interventions should therefore be considered in addition to other interventions, particularly given their potential to be scaled up. The impact of school interventions on changing individual attitudes and social norms – which may be critical for achieving sustained impact – should be further explored.

Recommendations

Physical punishment continues to be widely used by teachers and parents. At the same time, South Africa is faced with high levels IPV. Both forms of violence can have long-lasting detrimental effects on children and feed into the intergenerational cycle of violence.

- **Prohibit physical punishment in all settings.** To ensure legal clarity, the Children's Act should be amended to include a specific provision that prohibits all forms of physical punishment – including physical punishment in the home. Government must raise awareness of the legal prohibition of physical punishment in schools and in the home.
- **Build capacity for positive, non-violent discipline among parents, caregivers and teachers.** Government must raise awareness about the negative effects of physical punishment and educate professionals, parents and other caregivers about positive discipline and children's rights.
- **Explore the role of individual attitudes and social norms on physical punishment, including teachers, parents and other caregivers' perspectives on physical punishment.** Attitudes and social norms have been found to influence the use of physical punishment elsewhere, but their

role has not yet been examined in South Africa. In order to target interventions effectively and create sustainable behaviour change, local research should investigate to what extent the use of physical punishment by parents, other caregivers and teachers is driven by individual attitudes, social norms and/or other factors.

- **Use schools as nodes of intervention.** Emerging evidence suggests that school-based interventions can reduce physical punishment by teachers and parents. Government should review the evidence on school interventions in South Africa and other low- and middle-income settings and then adapt and test scalable interventions in South African schools, including primary schools.
- **Develop integrated programmes to address the co-occurrence and intersections between IPV and physical punishment.** Further local studies are needed to explore how interventions can address mutual underlying risk factors including individual attitudes and social norms that support IPV and physical punishment.
- **Rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of interventions.** Evaluations should examine pathways of change, including 'intermediate' factors that facilitate behaviour change.