

## CHANGING PEOPLE'S MINDSET CRUCIAL

# Counting the cost of child abuse on many levels

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MANY South African children have experienced sexual, physical or emotional abuse before they turn 18.

While reports of child sexual abuse usually engender moral outrage, physical abuse of children goes largely unnoticed, particularly when such abuse occurs in the home and is seen as "discipline".

As this is Child Protection Week, it is crucial to recognise the mounting social and economic costs of physical abuse of children to the country.

The findings of the recently published Birth to Twenty Plus (BT20+) study – which followed more than 2 000 children in Soweto from birth to 22 (also known as Mandela's Children) – shows that 99% of these children were exposed to some form of direct or indirect violence in their lifetime.

The contribution of physical abuse as a type of violence perpetrated against children is significant and its long-term effects on the life of a child are devastating.

Many people believe we have the right to beat children, but do not realise the impact it has on them. A child can't distinguish between "discipline" and physical punishment that hurts and causes pain.

"Physical punishment also affects how the child develops, it affects their cognitive development and leads to aggression. Physical punishment causes fear, rather than discipline," says Professor Shanaaz Mathews, director of the Children's



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Institute, University of Cape Town (UCT) and co-investigator on the BT20+ study.

Children who experience physical punishment are also more likely to display aggressive behaviour. As Mathews points out: "We see this clearly in the BT20+ study, where more than 65% of primary school-aged children and 89% of adolescents were reported to have used violence."

The effects of physical punishment continue into adulthood. Children who experience physical violence are more likely to abuse their own children and partners as adults. This drives the perpetual cycle of intergenerational violence.

In addition to the social costs, physical abuse costs the South African economy billions. In their study Violence Unwrapped: The Social and Economic Burden of Violence Against Children in South

Africa, Save the Children calculated the economic burden of violence against children in South Africa.

The study estimates that physical violence against children cost South Africa R103.8 billion in 2015 – or 2.6% of its gross domestic product (GDP).

Currently, violence-prevention programmes account for less than 1% of the combined national and provincial Department of Social Development budget. Furthermore, all provinces with the exception of one, planned for decreases in the share going to these services over the period of 2016/2017 to 2018/2019.

What, then, can be done to prevent violence against children?

The first step is to recognise that everybody has a role to play in protecting children from violence. This starts in the home where parents and caregivers should stop using physical and emotional violence against children.

For many parents and caregivers, this will require a significant change in attitude and behaviour.

Giving up physical punishment does not mean giving up discipline. Parents and caregivers can use positive discipline to teach their children about boundaries, and right and wrong. The government needs to step in here and raise awareness about the negative effects of physical punishment and how to use positive discipline.

Individuals should also take more responsibility for children in their community. When they see that a child is being abused, this



**LONG-TERM IMPACT:** Violence and abuse of children stays with them for their rest of their lives.

Picture: Independent Media Archives

needs to be reported to social services. Child abuse is not a private matter.

The government's response to physical abuse of children also needs strengthening, with each department playing a role in violence prevention.

Efforts on the part of key government departments such as the departments of Health, Education and Social Development have been lacklustre, and constitute a major failure in their role to protect children from physical violence.

In terms of physical abuse, the Department of Health is ideally placed to establish a surveillance system, which includes screening children for abuse and neglect at clinics and hospitals to ensure early intervention.

As Lucy Jamieson, senior researcher at the Children's Institute, points out: "Early identification of abuse and referral to tailored-support programmes can prevent more severe forms of abuse, including fatal child abuse."

"Early" means starting in pregnancy by screening the mother and where possible the father for signs of stress, mental illness and domestic violence."

In addition, health professionals

should be providing psychological and mental health services to children who have experienced abuse.

The Department of Social Development, which has many duties in terms of protecting children from violence, fails abused children on numerous levels.

Child protection services are in a dire state and parenting programmes that teach parents and caregivers positive discipline are scarce.

The South African Police Service downplays reports of physical abuse of children as "discipline" and not worth investigating. Until a law prohibits the use of physical punishment in the home this is unlikely to change.

The Department of Basic Education needs to address the continued use of corporal punishment in schools as well as other forms of violence against learners.

Although physical punishment in schools was prohibited by the 1996 SA Schools Act, it continues at high levels with between 22% and 74% of learners reporting being hit or caned at school in the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention's 2012 National School Violence Study.

Recently, a seven-year old girl at a primary school in Gauteng was

allegedly slapped across the face by her teacher and sustained damage to her eardrum.

"The continued use of physical punishment in primary and secondary schools is extremely concerning. The Department of Basic Education has developed policies and protocols on how to deal with incidences of physical punishment in schools, but training opportunities on how to use positive discipline in the classroom are scarce."

In addition to offering training, the department should consider testing interventions that have been shown to reduce teachers' use of physical punishment in other low and middle-income countries, such as the Ugandan Good Schools Toolkit.

Provincial departments of education must ensure that teachers and principals who are using physical punishment are held accountable.

Furthermore, just like health professionals, teachers have a legal obligation to report suspected deliberate neglect and child abuse – whether physical or sexual – to a designated child protection organisation, a social worker or a police official so that the issue can be investigated and the child be referred for services, if necessary.

The state needs to respond much more quickly than it currently does. Look at the state of our services and you will see it's not a political priority and that there's a gaping hole in the government's response.

A first step would be to increase the budget for violence-prevention programmes.

Physical abuse of children is a national crisis that is extracting both social and economic costs from the state as well as our children. This crisis can only be addressed through concerted efforts by the government and society.

Parents, caregivers and teachers need to stop using physical punishment with the government providing them with support. This can be achieved by creating awareness on how to use positive discipline – both in the home and in the classroom – and by shifting societal norms that underpin the use of violence against children.

There is also an urgent need for the government to start holding people accountable for using physical punishment and to ensure that children who have experienced violence receive adequate support services.

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