

Rise Up Policy Brief

2026



Safe to Learn: A Breakthrough Approach to Ending Violence Against Children through Safe and Enabling Schools

Executive summary

Violence in and around schools undermines children's safety, learning, and well-being. It weakens trust in education systems and pushes the most marginalized learners out of classrooms that should protect and empower them. Yet, violence is not inevitable. The evidence is clear, and proven approaches exist to prevent, reduce, and respond to it.

At the 2024 [Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children](#) more than 48 governments pledged to create safe and enabling learning environments. Delivering on these pledges requires moving from commitment to sustained reform, using

data to guide decisions and embedding violence prevention within education systems.

[Safe to Learn](#) is a global initiative working to end violence in and around schools. Through its [Call to Action](#) and [Technical Package](#) Safe to Learn's 19 partners work with national governments to strengthen data- and evidence-informed education sector plans, reinforce cross-ministerial accountability, and integrate violence prevention and response into education policies, budgets, and monitoring processes.

The questions we sought to answer

- ✓ How can stronger data and diagnostics be used to inform national and global strategies to end violence in schools?
- ✓ What are the barriers and enablers to embedding child protection within education systems?
- ✓ How can coalitions and cross-sector partnerships support governments to deliver on their Ministerial pledges to end violence against children?



A public health approach to child protection

This policy brief presents strategies that include all of the public health pillars. More specifically it strengthens:

- Data driven and evidence-based solutions
- Effective governance and multi-sectoral coordination
- Child, survivor and community participation in solutions

The issue: highly prevalent violence in schools violates rights, and threatens learning, equity and national development

Violence in and around schools remains one of the most pervasive threats to quality education, inclusion, and child well-being. Globally, 246 million learners experience physical, sexual, or psychological violence each year, including widespread bullying affecting one in three students aged 11–17.^[1] Despite decades of evidence, corporal punishment has only been fully prohibited in a third of countries.^[2] Marginalized learners – especially girls, children with disabilities, refugees, and those in crisis settings – face heightened risks, including sexual and psychological violence.^{[3][4][5]} With increased reliance on digital technology, one in five young people experience online harassment, adding a new dimension to school-related violence.^[6]

Violence in schools is not only a violation of rights, but a profound threat to learning, equity, and national development. It drives absenteeism and dropout, lowers academic performance, and contributes to anxiety, depression, and trauma. Fear suppresses curiosity, while trauma disrupts memory, attention, and relationships, skills essential for learning and development.^{[7][8]} Harmful social and gender norms continue to legitimize violence as discipline and silence those who experience it, allowing abuse to be normalized and repeated. The consequences ripple outward: teachers face stress and burnout, school environments deteriorate, and cycles of violence are reproduced across generations. The cost to societies is immense, with school-related violence estimated to reduce lifetime earnings by up to US \$11 trillion, globally.^[9]

Barriers to embedding child protection in education systems

Efforts to embed child protection within education systems are crucial but often undermined. Fragmented or weakly enforced legal frameworks, unclear institutional roles, limited coordination between sectors, and weak monitoring and reporting systems hinder the ability to protect children. In many contexts, violence prevention is still viewed as a child protection issue rather than an integral component of foundational learning, leading to limited ownership within the education sector. Harmful social and gender norms continue to legitimize corporal punishment and silence victims, while data on school violence is often underused or not linked to decision making.

Financing is also a major constraint. Domestic and international financing for violence prevention in schools remains low. There is an urgent need to recognize safe learning as an education sector priority, a pre-requisite for inclusion, foundational learning and achieving the 2030 agenda.

Data and accountability: from evidence to action

Data is critical in order to understand challenges and existing mechanisms to address violence and provide guiding points to country specific policy recommendations detailed below.

While global surveys offer useful insights, data on school-related violence remains incomplete, inconsistent, and infrequent, making it difficult to plan, budget, and monitor progress. The [Center for Global Development's \(CGD\) Data Hub](#), which compiles information from nine international surveys, highlights that while valuable data exists on school-related violence, significant gaps persist. For example:

1. Most data focuses on peer violence, while less is known about sexual abuse and corporal punishment perpetrated by adults. Sixty three per cent of countries have data on the prevalence of bullying among peers, but only 17 per cent have information on sexual violence perpetrated by school staff, and no survey captures whether violence occurs during children's journeys to and from school.
2. Young children, children with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ students are severely underrepresented in surveys, leaving policymakers without crucial insights into the experiences of the most vulnerable groups.
3. Most available data provides only a static snapshot of the problem, and is often more than a decade old, making it difficult to track progress. Only 36 per cent of countries repeated the same survey to observe trends, primarily on peer bullying.^{[10][11]}

Addressing these gaps and integrating data collection into education systems is critical for understanding the full scale of violence, supporting the monitoring of changes over time, and strengthening the evaluation of prevention and response programs, particularly large-scale government interventions. Filling these gaps can accelerate action, protect children, and ensure safer schools for all.

Policy recommendations

1. Embed violence prevention and response through the Safe to Learn Call to Action

Violence prevention and response is not an ‘add on’ but an essential component to achieving foundational learning and quality, inclusive and transformational education. Violence-free environments underpin literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional development, ensuring that every child – in all their diversity – can learn, thrive and grow.

The [Safe to Learn Call to Action](#) provides a guiding framework for embedding these principles systemically. Its five pillars: strengthened laws and policies; school-level prevention and response; social and gender norms and behaviour change; investment; and generation and use of evidence, offer a roadmap for aligning global, regional, national and subnational actions. When applied across levels, the Call to Action enables governments to create safe, inclusive, and enabling schools and implement action towards their Ending Violence Against Children (EVAC) Ministerial pledges. To date, 19 countries have endorsed and are implementing the Call to Action.

2. Use data and diagnostics to inform policy, programming, and reform

Evidence and diagnostic processes are central to building accountable, effective systems. The [Safe to Learn Diagnostic Tool](#), complemented by survey data such as the Together for Girls [Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys \(VACS\)](#), and education monitoring tools, provides governments with structured insights on coordination, capacity, and system performance. However, more timely and frequent data is needed to understand the magnitude of school-related violence and assess the effectiveness of interventions. Survey data alone is not enough; governments also need standardized reporting, clear response protocols, and strong multi-sectoral coordination, so incidents are addressed as they occur, and children feel safe to report.

Linking survey findings with the Safe to Learn assessments can enable policymakers to translate data into actionable priorities, including planning, budgeting, and tracking progress towards EVAC Ministerial pledges. Recognizing diagnostics as strategic investments ensures reforms are informed by evidence and progress is continuously monitored. Aligning domestic and partner resources around common [benchmarks](#) and sector priorities further strengthens coherence and long-term impact. This evidence-driven approach enables continuous learning, adaptation, and cross-sectoral accountability.

3. Ensure sustained and coordinated financing

Investment in safe and enabling learning environments is most effective when embedded within national education sector plans, budgets and monitoring systems. Sustainable financing requires recognizing violence prevention and response as part of the core education mandate, not a separate initiative. Even when financial resources are limited, governments can mobilise existing education budgets and prioritise scale-up of approaches that work, ensuring violence prevention and response remains an integral component of education delivery while broader financing grows.

Crucial actions such as implementing national action plans, establishing school procedures, disseminating policies, and equipping teachers with practical guidance can be advanced with modest resources, especially when built into existing structures. Embedding these measures within sector planning and review processes reinforces national ownership and ensures that progress on violence prevention is both consistent and sustainable.

Tanzania: Using data and diagnostics to drive system reform

Tanzania provides a compelling example of how linking data and diagnostics can drive reform. After two rounds of the VACS, in [2009](#) and 2024^[12], the government is now piloting the Safe to Learn diagnostic exercise with support from Together for Girls and HakiElimu (as part of the Safe to Learn Coalition).

The diagnostic exercise maps how policies are implemented, how teachers and school systems respond to incidents, and how data flows between schools, districts, and ministries. These insights help to identify gaps, improve training for education personnel, and strengthen child-protection integration within education-sector plans, demonstrating how evidence, when paired with diagnostics, can move systems from information to action.



Policy recommendations

4. Strengthen cross-sectoral coordination and accountability

Cross-sectoral coordination is the backbone for effective, sustainable prevention and response of school-related violence. Delivering on EVAC Ministerial pledges requires sectors and national stakeholders to act through one coordinated system. When education, child protection, justice, health, and social services share referral pathways, data, and follow-up responsibilities, schools can be better supported, protecting children without delay. Embedding this coordination into sector reviews, inspections, and school improvement processes keeps progress on the agenda and turns cooperation into sustained practice.

Uganda: Coordinated action to end violence in and around schools

In Uganda, there is strong coordination between government ministries and civil society organizations. This is exemplified by government-created spaces such as the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Child Wellbeing, which brings together government ministries, development partners, and CSOs. This group jointly developed the pledges announced at the EVAC Ministerial Conference, which included nationwide scale up of the locally developed [Good School Toolkit](#), and commitment to banning corporal punishment in all settings.

Accountability is reinforced when responsibilities are clear and information is shared. Joint indicators, systematic case tracking, and regular feedback between schools and protection actors ensure referrals lead to results. Grounding this coordination within national systems helps sustain momentum and build lasting trust among children, families, and educators.

Jordan: Linking education to national protection systems

In Jordan, the National Council for Family Affairs coordinates the national child protection system through the National Family Protection Team, which developed the AMAN digital platform: a case management system that links institutions across the social, justice, and health sectors. Within this framework, school counsellors under the Ministry of Education refer identified cases of school-related or domestic violence to the Family and Juvenile Protection Department. Cases are recorded in the AMAN platform and monitored to ensure continuous response and integrated care. This model illustrates how a nationally led referral and reporting system, grounded in clearly defined cross-sector pathways, can deliver timely, coordinated, and child-centered protection services.^{[13][14]}



Implementation and next steps – from evidence to transformation

Effective reform requires more than data collection – it demands the integration of evidence into institutional processes and everyday practice. Translating research into action involves embedding insights into decision-making frameworks, enabling continuous learning and adaptation. When evidence is treated as a dynamic resource rather than a static report, it can inform costed time-bound action plans and improve implementation outcomes.

From diagnosis to design

Surveys and diagnostics generate insight, but progress depends on use. Ministries can convene education, protection, and finance actors to translate findings into costed, time-bound action plans, aligned with education-sector reviews to drive accountability.

From pilots to systems

Promising initiatives (positive discipline, reporting hotlines, referral networks, etc.) gain lasting impact when scaled through system levers such as teacher training, supervision, data frameworks, and education-sector planning. Embedding proven approaches within government systems transform short-term gains into sustained practice.

Conclusion

School-related violence continues to undermine children's learning, development, and wellbeing outcomes. Sustained progress will rely on routine accountability, improved data use, coordinated delivery across sectors, and predictable financing. By institutionalising these measures, countries can move from commitment to implementation and create safer and more effective learning environments.

Leadership and coordination

Reform is not always limited by funding. Integrating violence prevention into existing functions, i.e. education sector plans, school and system-wide procedures, teacher development, and curriculum renewal, relies on leadership and coordination just as much as new resources. When protection is understood as fundamental to quality it attracts attention and effort even in tight fiscal environments.

Building incentives and accountability

Linking safe school indicators to school reviews, teacher support and supervision, and district monitoring strengthens accountability for results. Transparent reporting on progress, including EVAC Ministerial pledge updates, supports oversight and can help to maintain policy focus.

Cross-sector collaboration

Sustained progress requires coordination across sectors. Clear roles, shared procedures, and structured referral pathways can strengthen coherence across ministries and ensure that schools can identify, report, and respond to violence through a unified system-wide approach.

The Safe to Learn Call to Action and Technical Package offers an approach for integrating violence prevention and response into laws, policies and budgets, education sector plans, and school level interventions, including referral mechanisms. Strengthening these elements within national education systems can support more consistent prevention, reporting, and response.



Additional information and references

The **Safe to Learn Technical Package** supports implementation of the Call to Action. It includes the [Programmatic Framework and Benchmarking Tool](#), which combines practical guidance for designing and delivering comprehensive violence prevention in and through schools with a national-level assessment of current policies and systems. This is complemented by the [Diagnostic Tool](#), which offers deeper analysis across national, sub-national, and school levels to identify system gaps, inform targeted planning, and prioritize actionable reforms.

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6. WHO/Europe (2024). [Health Behaviour in School-aged Children \(HBSC\) study. Vol 2: Bullying and Cyberbullying](#)
7. UNICEF (2022). [Guidance on Social and Behaviour Change for Ending Violence Against Children](#). New York: UNICEF.
8. UNICEF (2021). [The Impact of Community Violence on Educational Outcomes](#).
9. World Bank & Safe to Learn (2021). [Ending Violence in Schools: An Investment Case](#).
10. These statistics are also based on a paper which analyzes the data gaps of the Data Hub: Evans, David, Hares, Susannah, Smarrelli, Gabriela, and Wu, Dongyi (2025) [When the data you have aren't the data you need: The availability of school-related violence data in low- and middle-income countries](#). World Development, 188.
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12. The full report is not yet published, however, [preliminary findings reveal a decline in violence against children](#).
13. National Council for Family Affairs (NCFA). [AMAN National Case-Management System](#).
14. UNICEF (2025) [Minister of Social Development Launches Automated Domestic Violence Case Management System](#). Press release.

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To learn more about Safe to Learn or how to get involved, visit www.safetolearncoalition.org or contact us at safetolearn@unicef.org

The [ISPCAN Rise Up Policy Forum](#) is a global initiative to catalyse progress in child protection through a public health and system strengthening approach. It brings together governments, researchers and practitioners in a community of practice and learning, to build on and translate into action the pledges made during the 2024 Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children.



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