

# What is the evidence telling us about preventing violence against children in and through schools in sub-saharan Africa?

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Globally, more than a billion children experience violence each year, with a significant proportion living on the African continent. The sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) region experiences some of the highest levels of violence against children (VAC) in schools, including corporal punishment, bullying and physical fights, as well as physical and sexual violence.<sup>(1)</sup> The dynamics of violence are complex and there is no easy solution, but there is growing evidence that **violence is preventable**. Schools offer a unique opportunity to reach many children daily and address VAC through innovative and systematic approaches.<sup>(2, 3)</sup>

## Methods

This review includes published and grey literature studies published from 1 January 2000 to 31 August 2023. Papers or reports were included in the review if they described a programme implemented in the SSA region, focused on reduction of VAC as a primary or secondary outcome and was implemented in or through schools. Only literature in English was included.

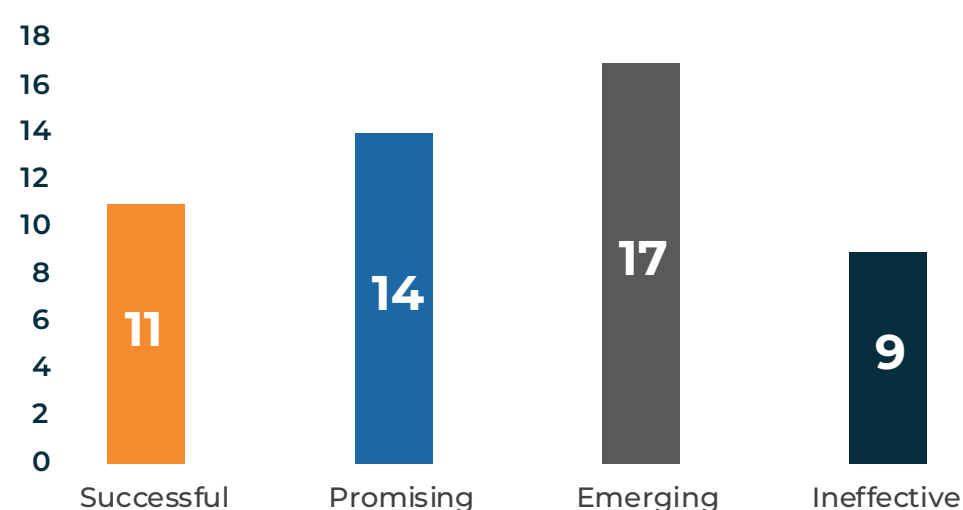
## Key Takeaways

1. It is possible to reduce violence against children; improve behaviours, attitudes, and knowledge; and promote gender equality and healthy power dynamics among young people in and through schools in SSA.
2. Prevention is a process that takes time, accompaniment and cumulation, with most successful programmes of longer duration and intensity.
3. Successful programmes foster synergy by using multiple components and adopting a whole school approach with the school serving as part of the social 'ecosystem' and leveraging every part of that system - within a supportive and engaged policy environment - to strengthen violence prevention efforts.

## What did we find?

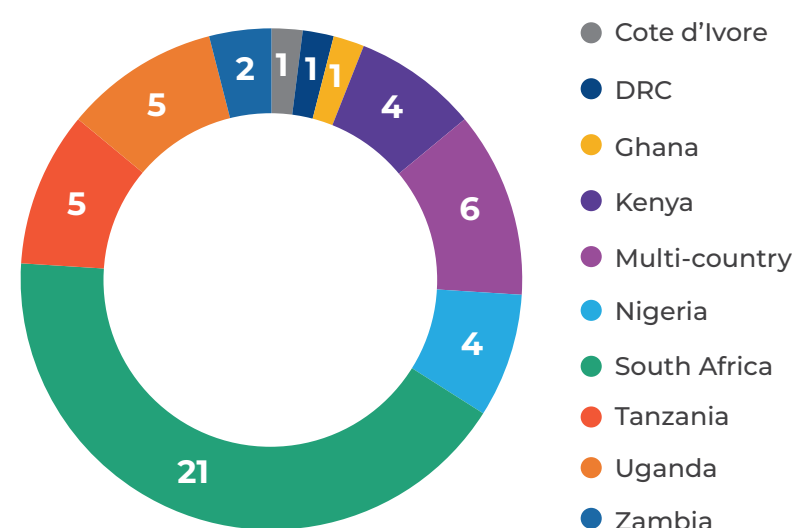
This review included 82 papers and reports that documented 51 programmes in SSA. Most of the studies included in the review used experimental or quasi-experimental methods for evaluating impact of outcomes.

**Figure 2: Programmes identified (N=51)**



More than a third of the papers and reports reviewed were from South Africa, followed by Uganda (18%), then Kenya (11%) and Tanzania (11%), with much less evidence emerging from other parts of SSA (see full report for further details).



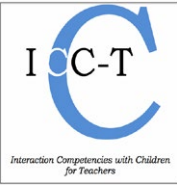

**Figure 3: Country where programmes were implemented**



South Africa had 4 successful programs, Kenya had 2, and Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania and Ghana each had 1. One additional multi-country programme was documented (Kenya, Uganda, Malawi) as successful.

# Successful and promising interventions

The INSPIRE Framework was used to categorise programmes in a pragmatic manner. We adapted these categories based on the main strategies used by programmes in the region and, noting that programmes seldom use a single strategy, we added a whole school approach as its own category. The following table describes four effective areas of interventions along with key examples from the region. More examples of each intervention area can be found in the full report.

Programme Strategies	Approach	Quality of the evidence	Programme Example
Building knowledge and life skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Effective strategy, widely used by <b>25</b> reviewed programmes.</li><li><b>Builds children's knowledge about risky and anti-social behaviours, enhances social and emotional skills.</b></li><li>Promising to empower and build resilience via participatory group processes, school clubs and peer support groups.</li></ul>	Most studies using this approach are poorly designed, using small sample sizes, lacking comparison groups and lacking follow-up data.	 <b>Impower (Kenya, Malawi, Uganda):</b> Curriculum-based rape prevention programme to reduce sexual violence, using empowered self-defence and critical reflection delivered over a 6-week period through 2-hour group-based sessions at school. (4, 5, 6, 7, 8)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>8 programmes</b> focus on promoting gender equitable relationships and norms to reduce the perpetration of sexual and dating violence as well as peer violence among young people.</li><li><b>Successful to shape positive gender attitudes and behaviours</b> by challenging harmful gender norms using participatory group methods and a gender equality framework.</li></ul>	The evidence is based on mainly rigorous study designs, but they tend to lack follow-up studies to determine the sustained effects of programmes.	 <b>PREPARE (South Africa):</b> Curriculum-based intimate partner violence (dating) prevention programme targeting young adolescents (12-14 years), delivered over 21 sessions during Grade 8 Life Skills classes. RCT showed a significant (23%) reduction in the experience of IPV/dating violence.(9)
Psychosocial support for children, parents and teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>8 programmes</b> focused on <b>providing psychosocial support</b> to learners, parents, and teachers.</li><li>Promising approach to <b>addressing the mental health</b> needs of children to <b>reduce aggression, behavioural problems</b> and the <b>mental health impact of child sexual abuse</b>.</li><li>Some focus on <b>building the capacity of teachers</b> to <b>manage learner behaviour</b> and provide emotional support to reduce negative behavioural outcomes among learners.</li></ul>	This is a growing area with a few rigorous studies to evaluate the programmes, but they lack the necessary follow-up studies to determine sustained programme effects.	 <b>Interaction Competencies with Children for Teachers (ICC-T) (Tanzania):</b> Week-long teacher training programme to reduce corporal punishment, foster positive interactions between teachers and learners and to promote better classroom behaviour with ongoing support to teachers in the classroom. 30% reduction in corporal punishment and enhanced quality of teacher-learner relationships.(10, 11, 12, 13)
Whole-school approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>1</b> whole-school programme was identified.</li><li>Aim to <b>transform the whole school ecosystem</b> by <b>engaging administration, teachers, parents, and learners</b>.</li><li>Children are <b>capacitated to deal with conflict non-violently</b>, while also <b>addressing power dynamics between learners and teachers</b> to improve their relationship and <b>create space for learners to express themselves</b> and seek help.</li></ul>	An emerging area with only one programme that has undergone a range of evaluations, including an RCT.	 <b>The Good School Toolkit (Uganda):</b> A phased six-step, school-led process aimed at influencing the operational culture in schools through 68 activities implemented over 18 months to address power relations and promote non-violent discipline. RCT found a 42% reduction in risk of physical violence by school staff, promoted student voice and agency, and increased students' sense of belonging. (14, 15, 16, 17)

## Lessons from practice

Significant investment in programming on VAC combined with research in SSA has notably increased our understanding of what works to prevent violence in and through schools. Through this review of programmes, we highlight some of the main lessons:

- 1) **A whole school approach** that builds and maintains relationships and meaningful roles across the school ecosystem is important for programme success and sustainability.
- 2) **Programme adaptation and contextualisation** is vital and should include programme originators – those who designed the programme – to facilitate a process of knowledge sharing, as well as local stakeholders to ensure ownership.
- 3) **When and how programmes are delivered matters;** embedding programmes into existing structures and operational cultures of schools increases chances of success and sustainability.

- 4) **Teachers are critical** in delivering school-based programmes and can be trained to successfully engage in programme implementation, but support for teachers to ensure fidelity and avoid burnout is important.
- 5) **Engaging young people as active participants** to build their leadership skills and take ownership of programmes is central to fostering effective change agents.

## Conclusion

**VAC prevention is possible in and through schools in sub-Saharan Africa** when interventions are delivered through a calibrated process. Schools are a critical site for engaging multiple actors using synergistic, multi-component approaches to create a systemic shift that can maximise the chance of sustained effects with long-term potential. Schools provide the most viable, efficient and cost effective entry points for preventing violence against girls and boys at scale.