Safe to Learn during COVID-19:

Recommendations to prevent and respond to violence against children in all learning environments

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Safe to Learn

Impacts of the Pandemic

Socioeconomic pressures can lead to increased violence against children, including physical, sexual, emotional, economic violence, abuse and neglect: Past epidemics tell us that confinement and intensified economic pressures on households may exacerbate stress, tension and discord and increase violence against children, exploitation and child labor. Some impacts will be felt throughout the crisis, and some may be felt long after the pandemic is resolved.

Many children will not be 'safe to learn at home': As of April 2020, 91 percent of the world's students have been affected by school closures due to COVID-19. While schools are often places where violence occurs, they also offer a comparatively protective and nurturing space for many children. Especially for the most vulnerable learners -the poorest and most left behind- that rely on school not only for learning and development, but also for food, trusted and accurate information on important issues such as hygiene, and their overall physical and mental health. Schools also offer an important entry point to prevent and address violence against children, which is much less visible when it is perpetrated at home and when children have limited contact with others outside of the home. Learning from home, whether that's a family home, refugee camp or institutional setting, puts many children at an increased risk of violence. Girls, children with disabilities, and other marginalized children are particularly at risk. Children that are experiencing violence will have even fewer opportunities to seek support or access to services.

Because of school closures, learners are missing out on much more than textbook learning: Beyond academics, students are missing out on the social interaction they have with their fellow students and teachers that are essential to their well-being, protection, development and social-emotional skills that are key to enable them to be change agents to prevent violence. Being abruptly withdrawn from friends, teachers and the normalcy they rely on, children will suffer emotionally and psychologically. Furthermore, they miss out on the opportunity to learn essential life skills, such as how to manage emotions, cope with stress, build healthy relationships and resolve conflict without violence.

The pandemic will deepen existing inequalities and vulnerabilities: Unless we disrupt the trend now, existing gender inequalities will be deepened with girls more likely to do unpaid work in the home such as child care, caring for the sick, household chores, and being at heightened risk of child marriage and adolescent pregnancies, in turn increasing the likelihood of children, girls especially, never re-entering the classroom once the crisis abates. Economic pressures and negative impacts of school closures will affect those children most that are already often left behind, including girls, refugees, children living with disabilities, indigenous children, those in lower income families, those living in rural or remote areas or in crisis-affected countries, and those without access to family support networks or online or other distance learning platforms, limiting their access to their fundamental right to a safe and inclusive education.

This is no time to abandon hopes of a better future: As this crisis abates, and stakeholders turn to transition and return, it is education systems that will serve as the foundation for recovery, repairing and renovating the torn fabric of society. Holistic education that addresses both academic and social-emotional learning must not be forgotten within response plans and existing financial commitments should be maintained and increased to ensure progress on SDG4, 5, and 16.2 doesn't experience an intractable regression. Governments and donors must respond now to ensure we can 'build back better', ensuring every child returning to school will be safe to learn.

Safe to Learn Recommendations

Civil society, teachers, parents and caregivers, and children all have a role to play in creating safer learning environments, online, in the home and in the community. **Governments play a vital role in the overall success of these efforts and we recommend that:**

Governments enable a comprehensive cross-sector response to prevent and respond to violence in and through distance learning environments.

- The education and child protection sectors should proactively work together to put child-friendly, effective protection response mechanisms in place that can function through, as well as independently, of school structures.
- Collaborative efforts should prioritize monitoring of at-risk children and families and provide all involved, including children, parents and caregivers, teachers, and community members with access to the right services when cases of violence against children emerge.
- Child protection and social workers should be enabled and supported to continue to provide essential services to children remotely - or in person where it is possible to do so safely, and be provided with the appropriate Personal Protective Equipment.
- Explore the use of accessible technology to provide confidential protective and psycho-social support services, bearing in mind the different needs and vulnerabilities of different groups of children due to gender, age, disability, and other factors.

Governments take responsibility for ensuring children are 'safe to learn at home' - whatever home may look like - and implement plans now to address the short- and long-term impacts the pandemic will have on education systems and student safety:

Distance Learning Plans

- Must prioritize no-tech and low-tech solutions to reach the furthest behind.
- Should include building key knowledge and skills of parents, children and teachers, remote monitoring of learners (e.g. through radio, television or mobile phone technology), and being responsive to the needs of different groups of children and different contexts, including children with disabilities, refugee and other forcibly displaced children, children in institutions, and unaccompanied or marginalized children.

Alternative Curricula

- All school curricula, including those delivered remotely, should include violence prevention measures, psycho-social support, and social and emotional learning activities, embed resilience within the crisis response to create safe learning environments, and mitigate the impacts of trauma during - and after - the crisis.
- These measures must be gender-sensitive and be accessible for and responsive to children with differentiated needs.

Teacher Contact, Training and Counselling Services

- Teachers, who are among those on the frontline to identify children that experienced violence, should be encouraged to maintain appropriate contact with children through messaging or phone check-ins in situations of school closures and provide or maintain school counselling services.
- Clear codes of conduct will need to be put in place or adapted to guide these interactions.

- Teachers need to be provided with adequate support and training to fulfill this important role.

Empower Students

- Students should continue to be empowered and involved in developing prevention programs, and in implementing peer to peer prevention activities.
- School clubs, as an effective way to build support among children and help in the violence prevention and support, could be moved to a virtual format using texting services between mobile phones, or online spaces where possible, under appropriate guidance from teachers.

Maintain the Relationship between Schools and Parents and Caregivers

- Schools should continue to engage with parents and caregivers, and in their regular communication with them, provide advice, resources, and support on positive coping mechanisms and positive parenting to prevent violence against children.

Governments should plan for the reopening of schools and student safety

- Where schools are being used in the COVID-19 response, for example as quarantine centers, care should be taken to protect and recover the facility so that classes can resume effectively in the future. Community awareness and sensitization should be conducted to ensure children, families and teachers will feel comfortable to return to school without fears for their safety.

The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on children's right to be safe to learn in any type of learning environment can only be solved by collaborative action with meaningful involvement of different sectors of government, civil society, donors, NGOs, and communities themselves.

Safe to Learn is an initiative dedicated to ending violence in and through schools. Partners include: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the United Nations Girl's Education Initiative (UNGEI), the Civil Society Forum to End Violence against Children, the World Bank, Education Cannot Wait (ECW), the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the Global Business Coalition for Education, Global Affairs Canada, the World Health Organisation, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, and the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.