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LEARNING NOTE

Safe to Learn: Part 4

Mainstreaming of child safeguarding
in non-formal education and psycho-
social support

In partnership with:



End Violence
Against Children

About International Alert

International Alert works with people directly affected by conflict to build lasting peace. We focus on solving the root causes of conflict with people from across divides. From the grassroots to policy level, we bring people together to build sustainable peace.

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Introduction

This learning paper was developed by International Alert in partnership with Basmeh & Zeitooneh, Sawa for Development and Aid, Damma Association, and the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS). It is part of a series of four learning papers created to capture and collate the knowledge and learning gained through the Safe to Learn project in Lebanon. The aim of these learning papers is to inform organisations working in education, child protection and social stability in Lebanon and the region about how to create safe environments in and around their learning centres and proactively prevent violence against children in education.

Safe to Learn is an initiative dedicated to ending violence in and through schools, so children are free to learn, thrive and pursue their dreams.¹

To date, Lebanon, along with 14 other countries, has endorsed Safe to Learn's call to action, which sets out principles, commitments and measures to end violence in schools.²

In 2021, International Alert, in partnership with Basmeh & Zeitooneh, the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS), Damma Foundation and Sawa for Development and Aid, took part in the Safe to Learn initiative to prevent and address violence against children in learning environments in Lebanon. The objective of the project was to increase the evidence base and capacity of learning centres in Lebanon to reduce violence against children in areas with high concentrations of vulnerable populations, including refugees.

Child safeguarding is the responsibility of organisations to ensure their staff, operations, and programmes do no harm to children and take all reasonable measures to minimise the risks of harm to children and vulnerable adults. Every organisation working with children can come across incidents, allegations, worries or suspicions about (possible) child abuse perpetrated by parents, caregivers, teachers and others, including children themselves.

Recent research conducted by International Alert in the framework of the project showed that 98% of children aged 13-16 had witnessed violence in the past 12 months, as had

three in four children aged 7-12. These children reported witnessing all forms of violence, from street fights to verbal harassment and intimidation. Many of these children were victims of violence themselves. Almost half (49%) of the younger children surveyed in the learning centres of the Safe to Learn partners had been bullied in the past year, most commonly through verbal abuse and public shaming. Older children are even more affected, with 63% reporting that they had experienced bullying. Some children considered bullying to be 'normal', while others thought it was rooted in differences, racism or jealousy.

In the spirit of the End Violence Fund, all partners committed to taking active steps to improve child safeguarding policies and processes during the project. This learning paper outlines what partners learnt in the process and draws on the work of the Child Safeguarding Committee in the course of 2021 and the reflections of educators and child protection officers shared during a facilitated learning circle in January 2022.

How do centres ensure children are safe?

Partners' learning centres have policies and procedures in place to ensure children are safe in the centres and on their journeys to and from the centres. The policies recognise the need to safeguard all children and stipulate the values and responsibilities that apply to all staff, volunteers and consultants. The procedures outline how safeguarding incidents and concerns should be reported, investigated, and followed up, and the people concerned informed of the outcomes. All centres have complaint mechanisms in place and trained child protection officers responsible for investigation and follow up. People in the organisations have clear knowledge, commit to following the policies and abide by clear guidelines on appropriate and inappropriate behaviours. Safeguarding focal points have clearly defined roles and responsibilities and staff engage children and communities on child safeguarding. The child protection teams organise awareness sessions, conduct investigations and refer children in need of additional assistance to specialised services. Outreach staff and educators inform all children and their caregivers of the rights children have and how the centres protect those rights.

What works in child safeguarding in and around the learning centres?

Within the Safe to Learn project, partners took different steps, individually and collectively, to improve safeguarding and establish what works based on monitoring and reflection.

- **Translating what the child safeguarding policy means in day-to-day work**

Although not initially foreseen in the project design, the Child Safeguarding Committee was established to support and monitor the implementation of safeguarding measures. The terms of reference of the committee specified that its purpose was “to ensure and stimulate cooperation between project partners with regards to child safeguarding, so as to ensure that there is a clear, common response in prevention and handling of incidents”. It helped translate the content of policies into the context of day-to-day work by encouraging bottom-up thinking on child safeguarding (as opposed to the top-down process of policy development within organisations). Within the committee, partners agreed on the basic procedures everyone needed to follow, created a monitoring checklist, and collaboratively developed the child safeguarding risk matrix for the project.

Composed of the child safeguarding focal points in each organisation, the committee met nine times in the course of the 18-month project. It developed tools, monitored, and followed up on the implementation of the project safeguarding guidance, and extrapolated learning to inform this paper.

Practical actions identified in the safeguarding guidance note included:

- developing key messages that outreach staff can use to inform caregivers on child protection during enrolment of children into activities at the centres;
- obtaining consent from children and caregivers for participation in activities, for collecting information for monitoring and research, for taking photographs, and for referral (although not required by the organisational policies, partners saw value in obtaining written consent from children aged 13 and above because they saw this practice as empowering); and

- storing both referral data and children’s registration data in password protected computers.

- **Risk analysis and risk mitigation**

The committee developed a detailed child safeguarding risk matrix. The process allowed the team to look closely at risks to children that could arise in the implementation of all activities within the project, such as bullying and harassment, including cyberbullying, risk of dropout and child labour due to the deteriorating economic situation, and risk of parents threatening to withdraw or withdrawing children from activities to apply pressure for additional support. The committee listed more than 20 potential risks and respective mitigations, the most pertinent of which were added to the monitoring checklist. Safeguarding focal points then followed up with their teams to ensure the mitigation measures were put in place. The collaborative risk analysis was identified as good practice. Risk matrices need to be frequently updated in dynamic contexts.

Practical actions identified in the risk matrix included:

- developing tips and tools for educators to help them identify and respond to violence and other safeguarding concerns during online sessions;
- educator-led discussions on online safety with students and caregivers due to increased risks during online learning;
- informing children how to report if they are a victim of harassment or bullying, in the centre or on the way to the centre, considering the heightened levels of social tensions and increased frequency of harassment reported by refugees in national studies;
- discussing bullying and harassment during sessions, and displaying child-friendly visual materials on bullying in the centres; and
- referring households considering child labour to cash assistance and food security projects in their area, due to increased prevalence of poverty and resort to child labour.

- **Regular monitoring and reporting as a mechanism to ensure implementation**

The safeguarding focal points developed and used a monitoring checklist to follow up on agreed measures. The monitoring process helped centres keep track of their safeguarding commitments and not let them slip through the

net amid hectic implementation of education and psychosocial support (PSS) activities. The checklist included questions on informing beneficiaries of safeguarding, identification of cases and concerns, response, referral and reporting, and data management. The limitation of the checklist was that it was filled by the safeguarding focal point in each organisation with a certain degree of subjectivity, particularly regarding questions related to the skill levels and abilities of staff members. The reason for this subjectivity was that the organisations lacked questionnaires or observation tools to assess their employees' objectively.

Areas in which all partners recorded progress included updating the safeguarding policies and developing them in the organisations where they were missing, translating the policies to Arabic, ensuring that all staff sign the policies, ensuring that outreach staff were able to communicate on safeguarding and ensuring that educators were able to explain consent to children. Some of the progress was likely supported by the work of the committee, which developed and shared a list of key messages that outreach staff could use in the communities when enrolling students for new cycles of learning. Refresher trainings for staff also helped educators explain consent, inform students of safeguarding and answer questions. As a next step, centres need to consider setting up a system to assess staff members' skills objectively, possibly as part of training and coaching processes.

The monitoring process showed that additional support is needed to produce and update safeguarding mainstreaming (annual) plans to ensure continued progress and keep the issue on the agenda of senior management. Another issue that needs further attention is the limited ability of educators to identify safeguarding issues when working with students online. Although key indicators were discussed in

training sessions and educators were offered tips, this did not result in increased identification during online teaching, and the registered cases were significantly fewer than in previous years, when the sessions were delivered in the centres. In addition to lower identification, complaints were also very few, likely due to vulnerable families deprioritising safeguarding concerns amid pressing issues such as food, utilities and healthcare.

- **Make all staff responsible for child safeguarding**
Child safeguarding is the responsibility of all staff and not only the child protection staff at the centres. Educators have a central role to play both in stopping an incident when it occurs and in prevention. The research revealed that students are more likely to report a bullying incident after they have attended sessions discussing violence and bullying; however, one in three students would nevertheless not report an incident to an adult. Reporting is closely associated with trust between the child and the adult and teachers are best placed out of all centre staff to build confidence with their students, make themselves approachable and reassure students that they would support them without judgement.

Who can make children safe in and around the learning centres?

Educators should...

- **Act when you see violence and stop it.**
Safeguarding refers to any form of abuse and exploitation. In many cases educators are instructed to directly report a case to the child protection specialists in the organisation; however, in instances such as bullying, verbal altercations or harassment,

Case study

A teacher observed a hyperactive child in class and decided to contact the parents, with the help of the protection team. The mother explained that the atmosphere at home was tense and discipline tough. The teacher and the protection officers developed a plan. The teachers started engaging the child in class, giving the student the responsibility of being a classroom helper. The teacher also signed up for additional training on working with children with special needs and learning difficulties. The teacher and the protection officer invited the father of the child to come in and started building a relationship with him and discussing the wellbeing of the child.

which are very common for vulnerable children, educators can intervene directly and stop the children from hurting each other. The Safeguarding Committee developed a bullying guidance note for educators recommending that the educator steps in to stop a bullying incident involving a student in or outside the centre. If the bullying has not escalated to a serious incident, the educator can inform all bystanders how they can act if they witness bullying in future and how to seek help, then organise a meeting with both the bully and the victim in private and preferably with the support of child protection colleagues. In the facilitated learning circle that International Alert convened to discuss experiences with child safeguarding, educators shared that they wanted to be more proactive but often felt that their organisation's policies obliged them to refer any incident, no matter how small, to the child protection team. Literature shows that when educators feel competent about bullying, they "intervene more frequently with positive strategies".³

- **Use any incident or concern as an opportunity to start a conversation with the students on bullying and violence, and other safeguarding risks.**

Any incident in the centre, a known incident in the community or even a rumour are opportunities for discussions about violence and exploring with the children ways to prevent and respond to violence. Such incidents can also offer an opportunity for the educator to work on developing empathy and reminding students how to report incidents and concerns, while preserving the anonymity and confidentiality of the persons involved. The Toolkit on Prevention of Violence against Children developed within the framework of the Safe to Learn project offers a series of activities that educators can use to build cohesive classes and help children see how they can resolve their differences without violence and bullying.

- **Report and help the child protection focal point to follow up on safeguarding incidents.**

While procedures are in place for reporting cases to the child protection team, more efforts are needed to strengthen collaboration between education teams and child protection teams, and to help them work together in the best interest of the child. Teachers are often the most trusted adults in the learning centres due to the frequent contact they have with students and where an incident does not implicate them directly they can offer valuable emotional support to students, be they victims, witnesses or perpetrators. Teachers can help notify parents of the bully and the victim and offer them guidance on how to support their children. Educators are also best placed to gradually create supervised social interactions between the bully and the victim in the class, through group work and activities, while ensuring a safe environment.

Child protection staff should...

- **Act and stop an incident.**

The first step in keeping children safe is to stop the violence. Child protection staff, just like any other staff member or volunteer in the centre, need to stop incidents of bullying or harassment between children.

- **Investigate and report with full respect of the confidentiality.**

This must be done in line with centres' policies and procedures.

- **Refer cases to additional assistance.**

Where additional support is needed, cases should be referred both internally to other departments and externally to specialised services, such as legal aid, healthcare, or specialised counselling. Referral to emergency assistance, including cash and legal protection, is critical in the current context due to the high economic vulnerabilities and high social tensions.

Case study

In one of the learning centres, the psychologist found out that a female student had been sexually harassed by the community leader in the informal settlement where she lived. The child protection team approached the student and her family and gained their trust and consent to press charges against the alleged perpetrator. Following an investigation, the protection team initiated a legal case against the community leader.

- **Give feedback to the people involved.**

Inform them of the outcomes of the investigation.

- **Discuss with the educator how the case can help with prevention.**

Depending on the case sensitivity, decide if the teacher can hold a discussion session in class. Incidents such as bullying or harassment with many witnesses offer a good opportunity to engage all students in identifying solutions. Role plays can help students see how different behaviours provoke different responses.

Management staff should...

- **Keep policies updated and accessible to all staff and volunteers.**

Organise inductions for new staff and ensure that consultants working with children are briefed and sign up the Child Safeguarding Policy in place at the centre.

- **Train staff and volunteers, including refresher trainings.**

Include staff from different departments in training, use real examples of child safeguarding cases and concerns, and emphasise the need for joint-working. Ensure knowledge management, especially in departments with high turnover of staff.

- **Collaborate across departments and across organisations.**

This is to ensure that the most vulnerable children and their families are protected.

Authors' note

The case study examples in this learning paper were collected by the project Safeguarding Committee as examples brought by the safeguarding focal points from previous experiences to show different situations faced. They were outside the framework of the Safe to Learn project.

Additional sources

Safe to Learn, Project child safeguarding guidance note, 2021

Safe to Learn, Action research on the prevention of bullying, Endline report, 2021

Safe to Learn, Project guidance note for educators on addressing bullying, 2021

Safe to Learn, Toolkit on prevention of violence against children, 2021

Safe to Learn, Five outreach messages on child safeguarding, 2021

Bullying guidelines for teachers, Learning for Justice, <https://www.learningforjustice.org/professional-development/bullying-guidelines-for-teachers> (accessed 6 July 2022)

Endnotes

- 1 For more information see: <https://www.end-violence.org/safe-to-learn#context>.
- 2 For more information see: <https://www.end-violence.org/safe-to-learn#call-to-action>
- 3 L. De Luca et al, The teacher's role in preventing bullying, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2019, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01830/full>

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