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LEARNING NOTE

Safe to Learn: Part 1

The importance of positive discipline
and classroom management

In partnership with:



End Violence
Against Children

About International Alert

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Introduction

This learning paper, developed by the Centre for Lebanese Studies, is part of a series of four papers created to capture and collate the knowledge and learning gained through the Safe to Learn project in Lebanon. This project is part of the global Safe to Learn initiative dedicated to ending violence in and through schools. The aim of this series of papers is to share our learning about promoting a safe learning environment at various non-formal education centres. These papers are primarily for educators working with children and are publicly available to all stakeholders to help those working in learning centres to create safe environments in and around their learning centres. The ultimate goal is to help influence and advance both policy and practice in relation to violence prevention.

This first paper explores one key method teachers can use to prevent violence against children. All the ideas presented in the paper are practices tried and tested by the teachers of the non-formal education centres that participated in 'facilitated learning circles' as part of the project.

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.

Due to the key role that schools play in the life of a child, they have been identified as one of the major settings for conducting programmes on the prevention of violence against children. According to a 2019 World Health Organization (WHO) handbook, schools have an important role in protecting children and the adults who work in any educational setting are responsible for promoting a safe learning environment for all school children.³ Thus all school

staff, especially teachers, are responsible for protecting the children in their charge. If teachers succeed in fulfilling their role, they will be aiding students' learning and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own behaviour⁴ and that will ultimately lead to creating a safe environment in which the children can thrive.

The Positive Discipline Model was developed by Dr Jane Nelson in the 1970s.

Its main tenet is giving children agency and getting them to play a meaningful role in focusing on solutions rather than being recipients of punishment.

By adopting this model, teachers and/or parents focus on teaching young people social and life skills so that they become responsible, respectful, and resourceful members in their communities.⁵

In its handbook, WHO provides school officials and education authorities with guidelines on how they can incorporate prevention of violence against children into their routine activities and daily practices.⁶ One key recommendation presented in the handbook is about working directly with teachers on values and beliefs and training them on positive discipline and classroom management. In line with these guidelines, the Safe to Learn project has focused on working directly with teachers and other stakeholders within schools and non-formal education centres. These centres host many refugee children and try to prepare them for joining the formal education system while attending to child protection and the prevention of different forms of violence against children. Through the project's participatory approach, teachers were able to revisit their own values and beliefs, and share experiences about how they can contribute to creating safer environments within their schools and communities.

Lessons from the research

Working with teachers directly throughout the research project, several effective and established practices that fall under the umbrella of 'positive discipline' were recommended by the teachers themselves. The majority of the teachers who were interviewed and those who participated in the facilitated learning circles had experienced the strong relationship between classroom management through positive discipline and creating a safe environment. According to the participating teachers, every action they undertake contributes directly and/or indirectly

to creating a safe environment for children within the classroom and the school at large.

An important starting point for creating a safe environment within the classroom, identified by the participating teachers, is setting clear behaviour expectations right from the beginning of the school year. Involving the students in setting these expectations, or at least discussing them together, has helped teachers hold their students accountable for their own behaviour. Among the many different types of classroom rules, teachers identified the most effective at creating a safe classroom and school environment as those classified under two categories: 1. business and housekeeping and 2. interpersonal behaviour rules.

Business and housekeeping rules

Business and housekeeping rules and expectations pertain to non-academic work procedures. Under this category, teachers can establish rules that would safeguard the students' physical wellbeing and safety. For example, teachers in the non-formal education centres have established rules around the students' seating arrangements because these are of paramount importance in their context. These regulations include the distance of desks from heaters that may harm the students, sanitising classroom materials as per coronavirus (COVID-19)-prevention measures and walking (not running) at a safe distance from others when moving between classrooms.

Another group of business and housekeeping rules that teachers recommended contributes to the children's emotional wellbeing and sense of security. Many teachers establish corners within their classrooms for the different, fun activities that their students can freely engage in, such as having a colouring corner. Some teachers have these spaces outside the classroom due to the small sizes of classes in the majority of the non-formal education centres. The majority of teachers work with the students to create a comfortable and inviting atmosphere within their classrooms, and in the school at large, by getting children to decorate the classrooms and open spaces within the school. Under this sub-category of rules, both the teachers and students we spoke to in the centres stressed the need to maintain the cleanliness of their classroom, playground and the whole school.

Interpersonal behaviour rules

Another category of rules that plays a pivotal role in the creation of a safe environment within the learning centres

is that related to interpersonal behaviour. These rules relate to how students treat each other and interact with their peers and teachers. Having clear interpersonal behaviour guidelines has helped teachers foster positive relationship building among their students and reduced the chance of confrontations. To illustrate, teachers at the non-formal education centres encourage their students to use each other's first name and to refrain from calling their peers by offending nicknames, their clan's name, or the name of the geographic area where they come from. A few teachers have also shown the positive effect of setting rules around using shared materials and the need to return everything to its place and/or owner. This latter rule needs to be coupled with training students on the use of 'please' and 'thank you' as key words that have a tremendous impact on the relationships among the students.

Another crucial aspect of interpersonal behaviour that teachers highlight right from the start of the year is listening respectfully to each other without interruptions and disagreeing in an agreeable way. Teachers suggest training all students on the art of listening and questioning ideas that they do not agree with in a respectful manner. Achieving this goal helps reduce incidences of bullying and verbal attacks among the children to the minimum. Finally, teachers affirm that children in their context should be educated around the meaning of privacy, children's own agency when sharing information, and personal space.

Setting clear standards and expectations in terms of both physical and emotional safety is pivotal to creating a safe learning environment. Based on the examples given by the teachers from the different centres, it is evident that each teacher needs to decide on the most essential rules and expectations in their own context. It is not enough, however, simply to agree the rules/standards; teachers need to explain and model what each rule/standard means and provide the children with feedback as they practise them.

Expectations and rules related to academic performance⁷

- **Quality and quantity of work:** expectations that describe the characteristics of work that make it acceptable, e.g. the teacher might require students to respond to questions in complete sentences with a certain number of words
- **Work habits and work procedures:** rules pertaining to how students go about their work, not the product of work itself, e.g. the teacher can train students to preview directions before beginning any task

Implementing rules and expectations

A few participating teachers identified challenges in getting the children to follow the rules consistently. The teachers attributed these challenges mainly to their inability to follow up consistently on the implementation of the rules. Teachers ascribed this to being overstretched and assessed purely in terms of the children's academic achievements at the expense of social and life skills.

Teachers can find it hard to think of logical consequences to children's violations of the basic rules. Examples might be:

- If a student interrupts his peer when they are talking, the interrupting student's remarks are ignored, prompting the student to act according to the agreed expectations about listening if he wishes to be heard in the future.
- If a student waves her scissors around, she loses the chance to use her scissors for the remainder of the art period.

It is critical that teachers attend to the two categories of expectations and rules discussed above and give them an equal weight to expectations relating to academic performance. Success in implementing these rules consistently is the first step towards establishing safe school communities.

Unfortunately, as with any social context, confrontations and problems can still arise and may lead to violence. In situations where children violate the expectations and contribute to the escalation of violence, teachers and/or other staff members should follow safeguarding procedures and disciplinary measures that are not punitive in nature.

Conclusions

Based on the experiences of the teachers in the non-formal education centres, it is evident that adopting the Positive Discipline Model will help in making children more responsible for their own safety and for the safety of their peers. By giving students agency and holding them accountable for their behaviour, classroom and school safety becomes a shared responsibility instead of being the sole responsibility of educators. For schools to succeed in embracing the positive discipline approach, it needs to be implemented at the level of the school and not only adopted by a few individuals within the school community.

Training and support in developing positive discipline skills, combined with regular professional development meetings, can help equip staff. Through developing their skills in the two pillars of classroom management ('business and housekeeping' and 'interpersonal behaviour' rules and expectations), teachers will be able to guide their students and motivate them to practise their pro-social behaviour and avoid disruptive and aggressive behaviour. Using these skills will result in better relationships with the students, in time transforming the whole classroom and school climate into a healthy one. Attention to these non-academic aspects of the classroom culture will also be reflected in the students' learning and academic achievement.

With the right support, resources and guidance, educators can transform schools into safe havens where children can succeed and thrive emotionally and academically. For this to happen, all stakeholders at the school level need to collaborate to meet the call for action to end violence against children. Safe-school plans and schoolwide programmes need to be developed and endorsed by all stakeholders to reach the desired outcome, namely healthy and safe children, secure school communities, and prosperous societies.

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 WHO, School based violence prevention: A practical handbook, Switzerland, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/media/58081/file/UNICEF-WHO-UNESCO-handbook-school-based-violence.pdf>
- 4 D. Naker and D. Sekitoleko, Positive discipline: Creating a good school without punishment, Uganda: Raising Voices, 2009, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/6228/pdf/6228.pdf>
- 5 About positive discipline, Positive Discipline Association, <https://positivediscipline.org/about-positive-discipline>, accessed 15 January 2022
- 6 WHO, 2019, Op. cit.
- 7 J. Saphier, M.A. Haley-Speca and R. Gower, The skillful teacher: Building your teaching skills, 6th edition, Acton: Research for Better Teaching Inc., 2008, p.5

International Alert
London, United Kingdom
Tel +44 (0)20 7627 6800
info@international-alert.org
www.international-alert.org

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