

# Safe to Learn Action Research

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### BACKGROUND

Lebanon is among the 15 countries globally to have endorsed the Safe to Learn call to action. On this, **International Alert** has partnered with local associations for a 15-month project in Lebanon to prevent and address violence against children (VAC) in and around learning environments.

One aspect of the project was to conduct **evidence-based action research around the capacity of schools and learning centers to create safe learning environments and to reduce VAC, namely bullying and cyberbullying**, in areas with high concentration of refugees in Lebanon.

The focus of the research targeted **schools and learning centers based on non-formal education (NFE)** that are committed on shifting social norms and behavior change towards VAC. Two are part of the Safe to learn program led by International Alert, while the third served as comparative benchmark in the prevention of VAC in learning centers and schools.

<p>SAWA for Development and Aid <i>Bar Elias</i></p>	<p>DAMMA Association <i>Ghazzeh</i></p>	<p>Basmeh &amp; Zeitoneh <i>Bar Elias</i></p>
<p><i>Formal SLA partners</i></p>		<p><i>Non-SLA partner</i></p>

## METHODOLOGY

### *Team*

The contracted team was composed of two senior researchers (Karim El Mufti & John Doughty) and two field researchers (Hiba Kshour & Georges Saba). The first item was to initiate an inception report detailing the methodological aspects of the study, namely in relation with data collection in the field. The latter was divided in two phases which will allow by the end of the research project to reach a comparative analysis to better understand and assess the impact of the NFE centers in tackling VAC and fostering a Safe to Learn environment. Once the inception report was approved by International Alert, the team could unfold its research field work.

### *Research Questions*

Given the overall objective of generating evidence on the effectiveness of approaches to addressing VAC, namely bullying and cyberbullying, using techniques enlisted under the Safe to Learn project in partner learning centers in the Beqaa, the action research pursued the following research questions:

- How effective are center-based and community-based approaches to preventing VAC?
- How do the policies applied in these learning centers protect the best interest of children and support the establishment of a safe learning environment free from any sort of violence? How do these policies support a safe learning environment and address issues of violence against children?
- Does the I.N.S.P.I.R.E. dynamic (*namely N – for norms & values – P for parents & caregivers - and E for education & life skills in this context*) contribute to protecting children against violence?
- How adequately is bullying and cyberbullying being prevented under NFE?
- Does non-formal education effectively contribute to preventing bullying and cyberbullying?

### *Data Collection Tools*

<b>Table 1: Field related Data Collection Tools</b>				
Phase 1: July 7 <sup>th</sup> 2021 – October 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2021				
Phase 2: November 4 <sup>th</sup> , 2021 – December 8 <sup>th</sup> , 2021				
Individual Interviews with Students		Focus Group Discussions		Key Informant Interviews from NFE centers
Aged 7-12 years	Aged 13-16	Children	Parents/cargivers	
Phase 1: 60	Phase 1: 47	Phase 1 : 4 FGDs	Phase 1: 5 FGDs	13 KIIs
Phase 2: 77	Phase 2: 43	Phase 2: 3 FGDs	Phase 2: 2 FGDs	
Total: 227 students interviewed		Total: 14 FGDs		Total: 13 KIIs

The field research was divided into two phases targeting the same three centers but not the same students (except for 37 children interviewed twice allowing to confirm and control the findings) nor parents. This allowed for a comparative approach of the action study and generate more substantial findings over the efficiency of SLA methods in NFE centers in the Beqaa.

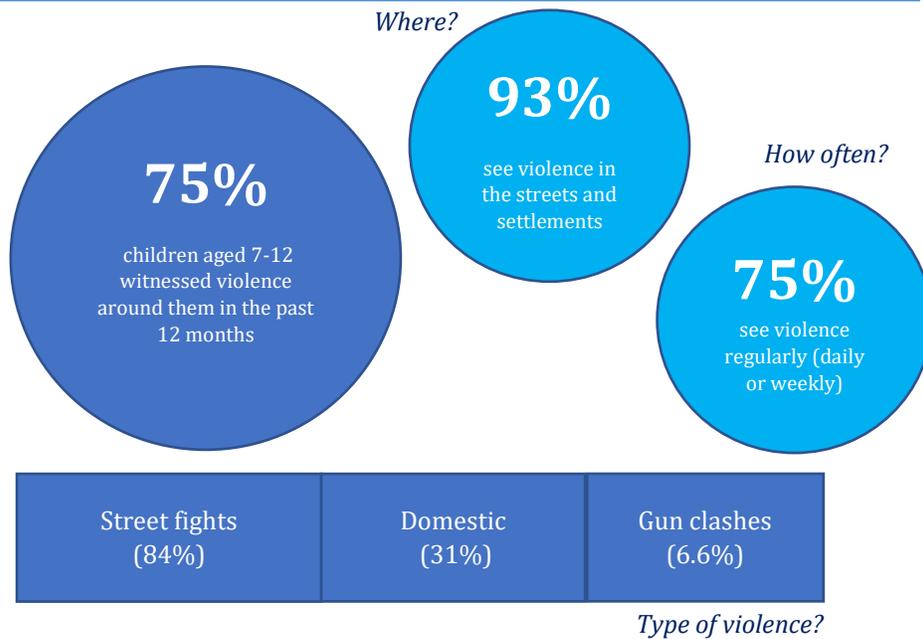
## FINDINGS

### *Children's Exposure to Violence*

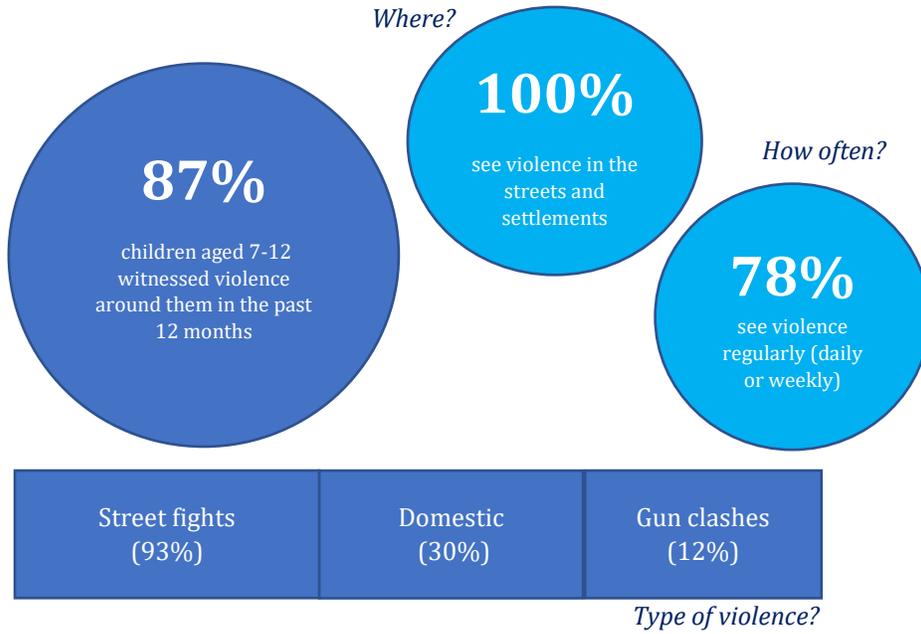
Both phases of the action research confirmed how harshly children from both age groups are confronted to violence, confirming the grave dispositions in which Syrian children live today in their social contexts.

#### 7-12 YEARS OLD AGE GROUP

#### *PHASE 1 - Exposure to Violence by Respondents aged 7-12- multiple answers possible*

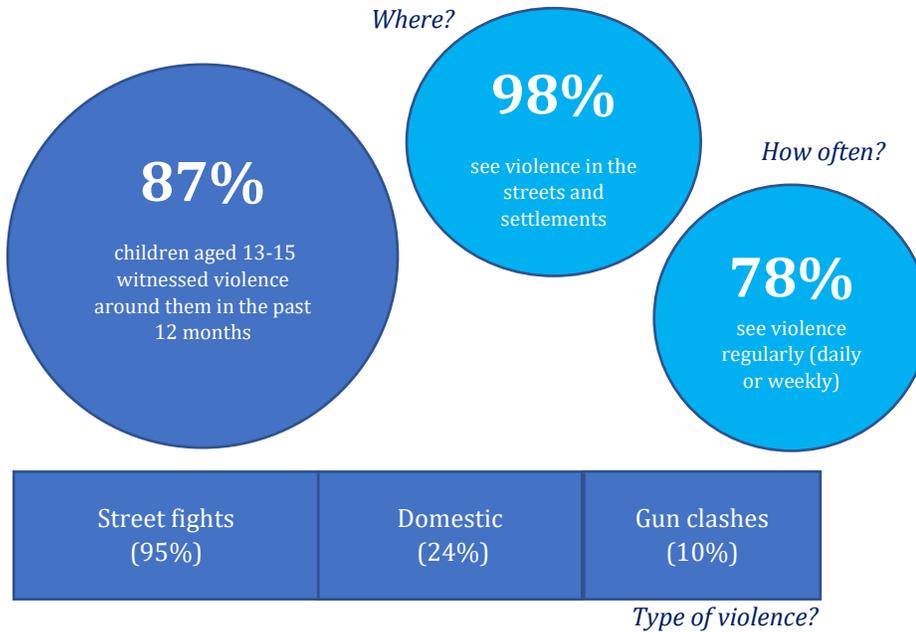


**PHASE 2 - Exposure to Violence by Respondents aged 7-12-  
multiple answers possible**

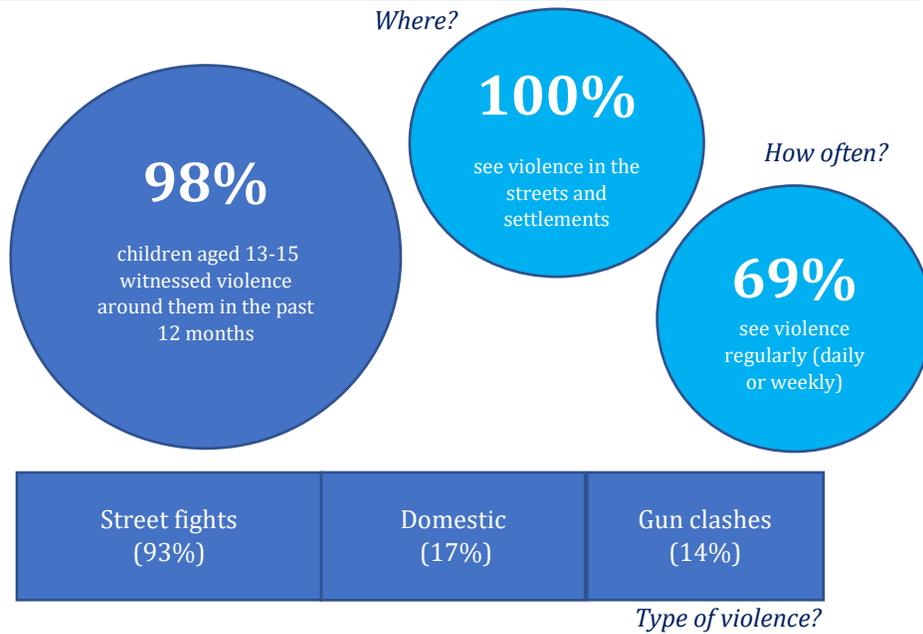


**13-16 YEARS OLD  
AGE GROUP**

**PHASE 1 - Exposure to Violence by Respondents aged 13-15-  
multiple answers possible**



*PHASE 2 - Exposure to Violence by Respondents aged 13-16-  
multiple answers possible*



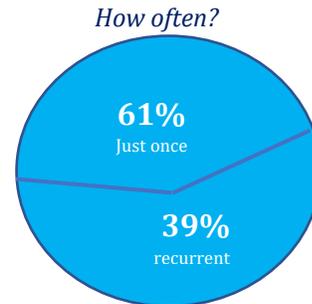
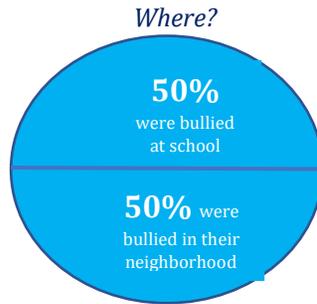
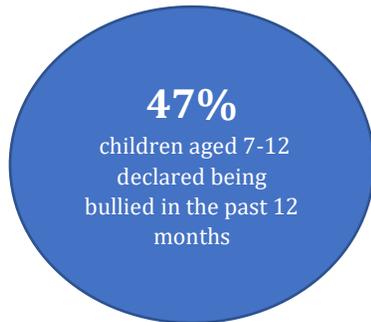
- **Both rounds have shown the high degree of violence encountered by children of all ages in their daily lives, yet limited violence reported at home, namely for older children, which is actually toned down on purpose by the students as literature on domestic violence against children regularly shows.**
- **The scope reaches such a magnitude that children tend to normalize violence around them. This context very likely represents an enabler factor towards harassment and other forms of violence perpetrated by children on other children.**

## Bullying experience of the students

Graphs below show how prominent this phenomenon is among the students met during the field research.

### 7-12 YEARS OLD AGE GROUP

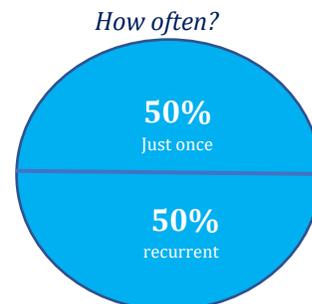
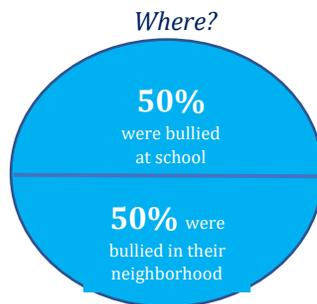
#### PHASE 1 - Bullying Experience by Respondents aged 7-12 - 60 respondents



Physical Violence:	Pushed, grabbed or kicked (8 cases)	Hit, beat or spanked with a hand (6 cases)	Threatened with knife (1)
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Psychological Violence:	Calling rude and hurtful names (12 cases)	Made them feel ashamed (8)	being insulted (6)	Prejudice (6)
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#### PHASE 2 - Bullying Experience by Respondents aged 7-12 - 77 respondents

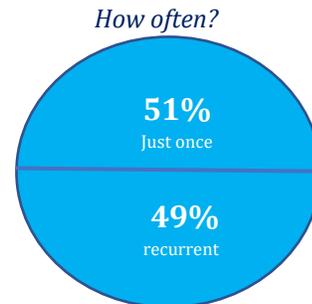
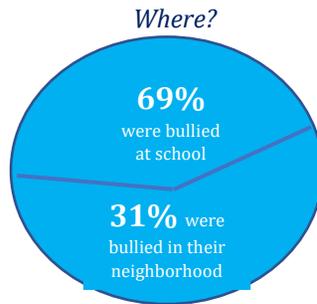


Physical Violence:	Pushed, grabbed or kicked (14 cases)	Hit, beat or spanked with a hand (3 cases)	Threatened with knife (1)
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Psychological Violence:	Calling rude and hurtful names (21 cases)	Prejudice (12)	Made them feel ashamed (7)	being insulted (3)
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**13-16 YEARS OLD  
AGE GROUP**

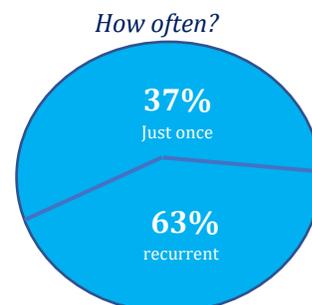
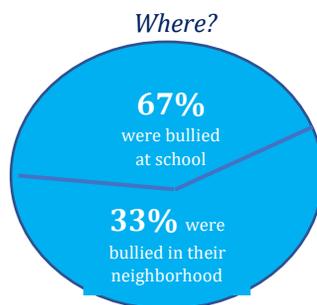
*PHASE 1 - Bullying Experience by Respondents aged 13-15 - 47 respondents*



Physical Violence:	Pushed, grabbed or kicked (6 cases)	Hit, beat or spanked with a hand (5 cases)	Hit with object (1)
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Psychological Violence:	Calling rude and hurtful names (26 cases)	Prejudice (7)
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*PHASE 2 - Bullying Experience by Respondents aged 13-16 - 43 respondents*

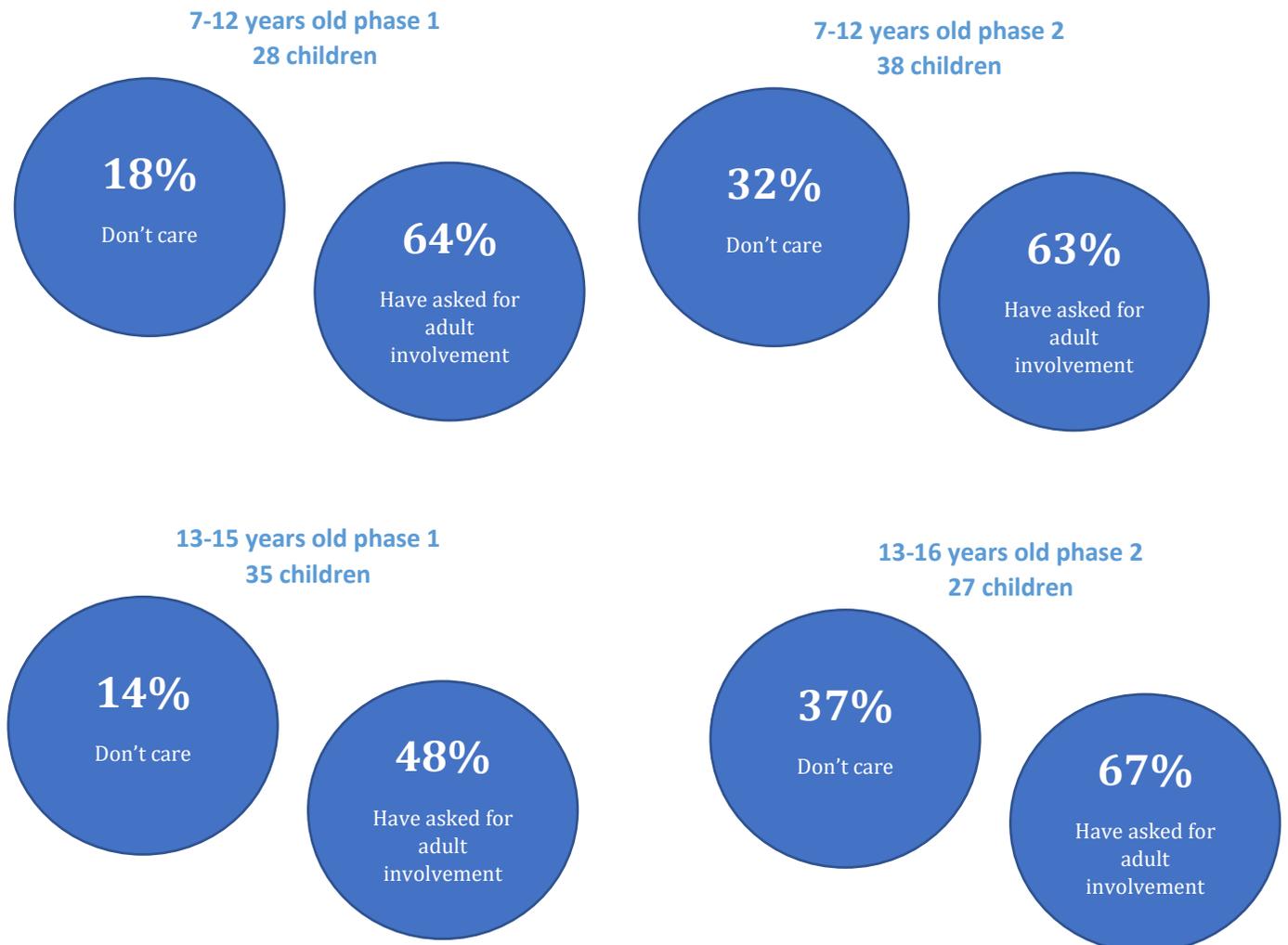


Physical Violence:	Pushed, grabbed or kicked (3 cases)	Hit, beat or spanked with a hand (1 case)
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Psychological Violence:	Calling rude and hurtful names (26 cases)	Prejudice (7 cases)	Made them feel ashamed (4)	Embarrassed because poor (2)
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- The level of bullying observed appears much higher among the older children, even if the ratio decreases from one phase to the next.
- In addition, there is a higher tendency among the older age group for bullying to occur at school (69% and 67% for phases 1 and 2 respectively) whereas the proportion was 50% for younger children.
- Also, forms of physical bullying are more observed among the younger children, whereas psychological forms, such as verbal abuse for instance, are more prominent for the older age bracket.

### Dealing with bullying

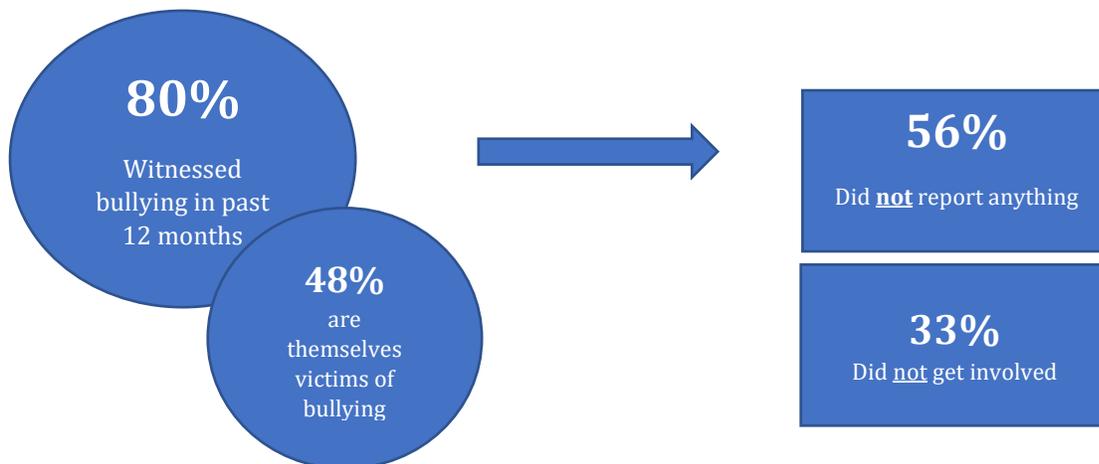


- Findings across both rounds show how challenging it is for children of both age groups to deal with the ordeal of bullying. On one hand, the students endure emotional difficulties making sense of the violence they are directly experiencing, trying to disconnect with that particular reality or for a larger part, take matter into their own hands and fend themselves.
- Having said that, it is interesting to see that the bridges with adults are in fact being crossed, especially among the adolescents whose involvement of parents or staff members significantly increase in phase 2, while the level remains equivalent for the younger students.
- Such engagement isn't entirely quashing the feeling among adolescents to tend to self-resolve their problems, but it is a step in the right direction.

*Witnessing bullying*

7-12 YEARS OLD  
AGE GROUP

Phase 1 - Children aged 7-12 witnessing bullying in the past 12 months - 60 respondents



Phase 2 - Children aged 7-12 witnessing bullying in the past 12 months - 77 respondents



13-16 YEARS OLD  
AGE GROUP

Phase 1 - Children aged 13-16 witnessing bullying in the past 12 months - 47 respondents



Phase 2 - Children aged 13-16 witnessing bullying in the past 12 months - 43 respondents



- A high occurrence of bullying is being witnessed by children by both age groups and across the field rounds with significant ratios of students directly encountering such phenomenon in their daily lives.
- As a reminder, the survey uncovered an unexpectedly low ratio of children between 7-12-year-old victims of bullying (respectively 47% and 49% for both phases), so the fact that 80% and 74% within this age group witnessed violence against other children, whether at school or in the streets, brings out the actual prominence of this type violence in these children's lives.
- For older children, the levels are also significantly high, confirming of the massive phenomenon of how children of Syrian refugees are exposed to this type of violence.

### *Exposure to Cyberbullying*

- Cyberbullying doesn't stand as a particularly significant issue for younger children, possibly as a result of large numbers of students not having access to equipment & technology.
- There also exists a lack of readiness to share this dimension of their activities with adults.
- As a consequence, NFE response to risks of cyberbullying appears less prominent, showing less readiness to monitor, track, anticipate and protect children from such risks.
- This is also apparent through the students' light recollection of the content of anti-VAC activities regarding cyberbullying, in comparison to bullying.

### **NFE Centers' Response to VAC**

The action research uncovered a number of indicators related to the Safe to Learn environment as implemented by the three NFE centers, showing high observance on many actions carried out by these structures, from zero tolerance against VAC to awareness activities with children. However, a lower observance was noted as to actions pertaining to cyberbullying and the active involvement of parents and caregivers.

<b>Table 2: Safe to Learn Action Indicators in the three visited NFEs</b>			
<i>Indicator</i>	<i>SAWA Center</i>	<i>DAMMA Center</i>	<i>Basmeh &amp; Zeitooneh Center</i>
Zero Tolerance against VAC	⊕	⊕	⊕
Psycho-Social Support Department	⊕	⊕	⊕
Referral systems between teachers and social workers for children in emotional distress (bullies or victims)	⊕	⊕	⊕
Active intervention on bullying occurring inside NFEs	⊕	⊕	⊕
Regular Training of staff and teachers on Child Protection.	⊕	⊕	⊕
Activities with children against Bullying	⊕	⊕	⊕
Awareness of Parents on VAC and bullying	⊕	⊕	⊕
Active involvement of Parents & Caregivers	⊗	⊗	⊗
Impact assessment of anti-VAC activities	⊗	⊗	⊗
Activities with children against Cyberbullying	⊗	⊗	⊗
⊕ High observance ⊗ Low observance			

Surveyed children were asked about any anti-bullying and cyber-bullying activities they attended in the past year, as well as how they viewed its content and what they have learned from them, as shown in tables below:

<b>Table 3</b>						
<b>Breakdown of surveyed children aged 7-12 in phases 1 &amp; 2</b>						
<b>Assessment of the anti-bullying activities and sessions in past 12 months</b>						
<i>NFE Center</i>	<i>Number of children who attended sessions (phase 1)</i>	<i>Proportion of positive feedback (phase 1)</i>		<i>Number of children who attended sessions (phase 2)</i>	<i>Proportion of positive feedback (phase 2)</i>	
SAWA	8	7	88%	18	16	89%
DAMMA	19	13	68%	17	9	53%
Basmeh & Zeitooneh	16	13	81%	13	12	92%
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>77%</b>

<b>Table 4</b>						
<b>Breakdown of surveyed children aged 13-16 in phases 1 &amp; 2</b>						
<b>Assessment of the anti-bullying activities and sessions in past 12 months</b>						
<i>NFE Center</i>	<i>Number of children who attended sessions (phase 1)</i>	<i>Proportion of positive feedback (phase 1)</i>		<i>Number of children who attended sessions (phase 2)</i>	<i>Proportion of positive feedback (phase 2)</i>	
SAWA	2	2	100%	4	4	100%
DAMMA	23	18	78%	25	23	92%
Basmeh & Zeitooneh	4	3	75%	5	5	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>97%</b>

- **Students' feedback on the anti-VAC activities at the NFE centers is very positive, with a near-100% for the adolescents during the second round of interviews.**
- **In comparison to the younger children, it seems the trainers are much more aligned with the adolescents' expectations than the younger students, prompting the need to look into this discrepancy.**

## **MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS OF STL ENVIRONMENT**

- **Prominence of VAC and bullying in and outside schools**

As much as it is impossible to totally eradicate VAC and bullying inside and outside schools and despite statements by NFE workers that bullying has diminished in intensity, the findings show children in the observed environment continue to experience and witness violence and bullying.

→ NFE centers need to maintain efforts monitoring and preventing bullying and all forms of harassment, namely inside the schools where violence continues to be present despite the presence of PSPD departments and qualified staff.

- **Evidence of isolation & exploitation**

Findings showed a significant proportion of children respondents having to work, which remain underrepresented in the fieldwork carried out for this action research. At the same time, many students showed signs of isolation, as the findings showed a significant ratio of those not caring, doing nothing and not involving adults in their bullying ordeal.

→ NFE centers need to keep up with the challenge of attracting their students to activities and ensure they reach all students.

- **Persistent disconnection between children and adults**

The field study uncovered that some children, from both age groups, who are victim of bullying or who witness such acts would report it to adults, but the ratio of those not engaging with adults is still significant and suggest fear of incomprehension and even punishment in the event of annoying the adults with these problems. The fact that older students interviewed in phase 2 showed less reluctance in seeking adult support stands an encouraging factor that should be built upon.

→ NFE centers need to address more efforts in convincing students to engage with adults, whether parents or staff members, when facing any form of violence, especially when occurring inside the school.

- **Significant disconnection between NFEs and parents**

Despite the important role played by NFEs with the parents of children attending their facilities, a gap was clearly visible in terms of active engagement.

→ NFE centers need to be conducting more awareness sessions for community members, both at the NFEs and outside in the neighborhood they serve.

- **Silent dangers of cyberbullying**

Findings showed how little prepared youngsters are when it comes to the dangers of social networking and online interactions. Among older children, cyberbullying is present even if in small proportions, but students are shutting adults completely out of the picture, in comparison to other forms of bullying or harassment.

→ NFE centers need to invest more attention and outreach to the dangers of cyberbullying. They should consider running separate activities to provide more focus on this crucial issue.

- **Evidence of awareness messages acknowledgement among children, despite some limitations**

Children generally understand the notions of bullying, whether inside or outside school, and know how to recognize it. In the scope of the research, the three NFEs managed to carry out many sessions, especially with the older students, which attendance figures were turned around in a couple of months.

However, many still favor reluctance in reporting VAC to adults in their own experiences of bullying. This suggests to limitations of the awareness sessions.

→ NFE centers need to create more action towards trust building connections with students.

- **Evidence of SLA efficiency, but with a need of additional calibrating**

Despite the limited resources and the challenging environment, stakeholders of all NFE centers deployed a sense of achievement. First of all, these centers offer emotional and psycho-social support for their students, which is mostly absent from the rest of the formal public schools in the same region, hence giving them a sense of purpose and distinctiveness.

→ NFE centers need to recalibrate some of their anti-VAC modules to make sure students are better prepared to face difficult situations such as sexual molestation, what to do in case of physical attacks, how to involve adults, and in particular their parents and informing them more on the dangers of cyberbullying and online harassment.