

About International Alert

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Introduction

This series of learning papers developed by the Centre for Lebanese Studies captures and collates 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 these learning papers is to share the learning about promoting a safe learning environment at non-formal education centers.¹ The learning 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 centres. The ultimate goal is to help influence and advance both policy and practice in relation to violence prevention.

Violence against children (VAC) is one of the most serious social problems, not only in Lebanon, but all over the world. In addition to being a violation of children's rights, VAC is considered a major global public health concern that threatens the safety and wellbeing of children everywhere.¹ Around one billion children experience violence every year in all its different forms – physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect.² As revealed through the documented numbers, the reported cases of violence against children are staggering. A World Vision report³, which was based on a mixed-method national study, reveals that three out of four children (which adds up to around 3 billion children worldwide) are exposed to violent child discipline (VCD). As for the Middle East and North Africa region, the report shows that 85% of the children aged 2-14 are subjected to VCD. Most common forms of violence are those exercised at home followed by those exercised at school.⁴ These alarming numbers had pushed the international community to raise a red flag and announce child protection as one of its main Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

At the national level, Lebanon has witnessed an escalation in the problem of violence against children in the past decade due to spillover effect of the Syrian conflict that started in 2011.⁵ In 2021, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) published a report that shows an alarming increase in the number of reported cases of violence against children and warns that due to the deepening crises in the country, 50% of the children are at serious risk of physical, emotional or social violence.⁶

¹ Non-formal education centres are alternative pathways that were set up to meet the needs of the vulnerable children in Lebanon. They mostly offer academic support and psychosocial support.

After public schools opened classes for Syrian refugee children, the number of students in public schools has doubled with around an equal number (210,000) of Lebanese students and Syrian students being enrolled.⁷ Due to this increase in numbers, more and more teachers who are "struggling to cope" have started resorting to corporal punishment.⁸ Many of those teachers who had used different forms of corporal punishment were never questioned, where until 2014, teachers were exempted "from liability for inflicting 'culturally accepted' level of physical pain on children in the name of discipline".⁹ This lack of liability has pushed some marginalized students, such as Syrian refugees, to drop out of school and join non-formal education centers to avoid the different forms of violence and abuse.¹⁰

The Safe to Learn project

To materialise SDG 16.2 on ending "abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children" by 2030, the UN Secretary General launched the Global Partnership and Fund to End Violence Against Children in 2016 as the sole entity to focus on this SDG. In the spirit of the End Violence Fund, the Safe to Learn global initiative was launched in 2016. The growing coalition behind this initiative includes major partners such as the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UNICEF, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the World Health Organization (WHO), among many others.

The initiative aims at bringing together partners from both the education and child-protection communities in hope of finding collaborative approaches to keep children safe in and around schools. Due to the key role schools play in the life of a child, they have been identified as one of the major settings for conducting programmes that aim at violence prevention such as the Safe to Learn project in Lebanon. The ultimate goal of the initiative is to end all forms of violence in and around schools, so that "children are free to learn, thrive and pursue their dreams".

Globally, 15 countries have endorsed the Safe to Learn Call to Action, which aims at ending violence in and around schools by working directly with governments, civil society organisations, communities, teachers, and children themselves. Lebanon was one of the countries, which were first to endorse the call. In the spirit of that call to action, the Safe to Learn project was launched by International Alert in October 2020. International Alert collaborated with four

partners – Basmeh & Zeitooneh, Sawa for Development and Aid, Damma Association and the Centre for Lebanese Studies – for over a year to identify the best practices adopted by each organisation within its own context. The ultimate aim behind the collaborative effort was to identify practical recommendations on how to create a safe environment for children in and around schools and non-formal education centres, and share these recommendations with stakeholders working in education and child protection.

From practice to learning

The research team at the Centre for Lebanese Studies, in coordination with the other project partners, has worked on generating and collecting evidence by conducting an appreciative inquiry study. In one component of the study, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews around the best practices adopted by teachers, administrators and protection team officers at six non-formal education centers. The work centred on practices within the non-formal education centres as they host the most vulnerable refugee children in Lebanon, and prepare them for joining the formal education system. Moreover, several of the NGOs that run these non-formal education centres have established child protection policies and implemented initiatives to test and try new approaches to VAC prevention. It is also known that non-formal education centres in Lebanon have more autonomy in decision making regarding what programmes to engage in, unlike the public schools that have to abide by decisions made by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

Based on the analysis of the interviews with the non-formal education centers' staff, certain needs were identified and were shared with project partners. Staff from the partner organisations agreed on four themes that they would like to investigate further together based on their shared experiences. Accordingly, four facilitated learning circles (FLCs) were conducted to explore the selected themes. The participating educators from the non-formal education centres shared their experiences and together came up with recommendations to be shared with other educators in similar contexts. The themes of the four FLCs are focused on positive discipline, teachers' wellbeing, supporting safe learning for children with learning challenges and child safeguarding. The ideas resulting from the FLC discussions were collated and presented in the four learning paper under this series.

Additional sources

End Violence Against Children website: <https://www.end-violence.org/>

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Endnotes

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