

Preventing teacher violence against children: the need for a research agenda



From Uganda to Jamaica to the USA, violence against children at schools is widespread.^{1,2} Teachers are often the perpetrator of this violence,³ using corporal punishment and sexual and emotional violence against their students. Surprisingly, national prevalence data on teacher violence against children are still not routinely collected in most countries, but surveys show that 90% of primary school students in some areas of Uganda,⁴ more than 90% in Jamaica,⁵ and 7% of students in Mississippi, USA⁶ have experienced physical violence from teachers.³

Despite this high prevalence, and the range of known negative health and social impacts of exposure to violence in childhood,⁷ there are few interventions available to address violence from teachers towards students that have been robustly evaluated. In *The Lancet Global Health*, Helen Baker-Henningham and colleagues⁸ have published results from their cluster randomised controlled trial of the Irie Classroom Toolbox intervention to reduce violence from teachers towards children in pre-primary schools (aged 3–6 years) in Kingston, Jamaica. The Irie Classroom Toolbox was adapted from the Incredible Years intervention in the USA and refined over a decade.⁹ The intervention is explicitly teacher-focused and aims to help “teachers to gain skills, motivation, and opportunity to use positive discipline techniques”.⁸ Teachers are supported via an initial 5-day workshop, and monthly hour-long, in-classroom, follow-up sessions over 8 months. Baker-Henningham and colleagues⁸ well documented and careful process of adaptation resulted in an intervention that significantly reduced teachers’ use of violence. At 12 months post-intervention, 44 (42%) of 105 teachers in the intervention group but only 27 (32%) of 85 teachers in the control group used no physical violence against their pre-primary pupils over the previous 2 days.

The Irie Classroom Toolbox is highly relevant for resource-poor environments, as it does not require teachers to have pre-existing expertise. It is also simple to implement and is therefore likely to be adaptable to diverse settings. These results are particularly interesting because the intervention is implemented in pre-primary

schools, and it is likely that preventing experiences of violence against children at this early age will have knock-on positive effects for children’s health and positive development. This one intervention might pay long-term dividends across multiple sectors.

Although these findings are encouraging, the work of preventing violence from teachers towards students is still at an early stage. Further research is needed in at least four broad areas. First, we need to develop a deeper understanding of why teacher violence continues to be widespread in different countries and learning environments, so that we can successfully challenge this behaviour. Second, we need much more research to develop and systematically test different intervention models to address teacher violence, which also account for children’s varying experiences of violence as they navigate through pre-primary and primary schools, secondary schools, and tertiary education. Third, we need research on the geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural contexts that might be contributing to normalising teachers’ use of violence, so that we can understand the systems that underpin both continued use and cessation of violence. Fourth, we need investments to adapt the few proven intervention models into scalable programmes that can be widely implemented.

Finally, we should also invest in refining research methods so that we can collect data to monitor school violence in a safe way. Baker-Henningham and colleagues’ study⁸ successfully used observations to document teacher behaviours. Such observations might provide more objective measures about some forms of violence and are crucial for documenting the experiences of younger children who cannot self-report their experiences. However, direct observations are likely to influence teacher behaviour, and in trials of anti-violence interventions, will introduce bias in the same direction as any intervention effect. Conversely, self-reports might lead to underestimates of prevalence, especially for more hidden or stigmatised forms of violence. Careful thinking about how to measure the effects of interventions is required. Care must also be taken to ensure that children who experience abuse, and

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teachers who use severe forms of violence, are referred to existing structures for further support. This can be especially challenging in settings where referral systems are weak and under-resourced.

Despite these considerable challenges, schools afford us a great opportunity for interventions that have implications for children well beyond their cognitive development. Schools are governed by public policy, and routinely gather large numbers of children in the presence of adults with a duty of care. Therein lies an opportunity for influencing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, and therefore cost-effective prevention of violence against children.

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