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Protecting Ugandan Children from harm at home

Executive Statement

Despite the 1995 Constitution establishing the duty of parents to care for their children, Ugandan children continue to experience multiple forms of violence at home. In addition to physical violence, other forms of violence faced by children include sexual violence either through forced sex, inappropriate touching or sexual harassment. Furthermore, children experience economic violence—through denial of school fees, money for uniforms or health care—as a form of punishment. Previous research shows that 98 percent of children in Uganda experience harsh forms of disciplining—such violent experiences can affect future wellbeing.

Extent of violence faced by children

A 2005 study examining the violence faced by children in Uganda found that the majority of the children sample were physically punished either at home or at school. Specifically, the 2005 Raising Voices study, which examined 1,406 children from 5 districts in Uganda, showed that 98 percent of the children had experienced physical and emotional violence—particularly through caning, slapping, pinching, being insulted or being shouted at. Most of the physical violence occurred either: at home (39%), school (27%) or both (32%).¹

At the same time, the experiences children have in their early lives—and the environments in which they have them—have lifelong impacts. Evidence shows that child experiences of violence affect whether children grow to become healthy and productive members of society.² In Uganda, the 1995 Constitution establishes the duty of parents to care for their children. Specifically, section 4 of Article 31 on the rights of the family states that

“It is the right and duty of parents to care for and bring up their children.”

In addition to the constitutional dictates, the 2008 Education Act made it mandatory for parents to provide all other scholastic inputs not provided by the state. Specifically, Section 5 on the duties of stakeholders in education and training stipulates that parents and guardians responsibilities include.³

(b) *Providing parental guidance and psychosocial welfare to their children;*

(c) *Providing food, clothing, shelter, medical care and transport;*
(e) *Participating in the promotion of discipline of their children.*

Despite the constitutional and statutory provisions, children in Uganda continue to experience multiple forms of violence at home. In addition to physical violence, the Raising Voices Study identified other forms of violence faced by children. Specifically, 76 percent of the sampled children had experienced sexual violence either through forced sex, inappropriate touching or sexual harassment. Moreover, 74 percent of children reported experiencing economic violence—through denial of school fees, money for uniforms or health care—as a form of punishment.

On the other hand, households in Uganda play a central role in promoting children’s health, development, education, and protection. However, despite the dominance of parents over the household care environment for children, there is limited research in Uganda on how parenting determines children’s exposure to violence. Specifically, there is limited information on attitudes and behaviours associated with protective or harmful parenting practices in the country.

A survey of parenting practices in 3 districts

This brief identifies how children can be protected from harmful parenting practices in Uganda. It is based on a qualitative survey conducted in three districts of Uganda—Kampala, Ibanda and Lira. The survey supplemented the **2015 Violence Against Children Survey (VACS)** that assessed lifetime prevalence of exposure to sexual, physical, and verbal violence among 13-24-year-olds.⁴

The qualitative survey sought to understand how caregivers and children describe and understand parenting practices and how such information can inform policy responses to protect children from various forms of violence. In each district, 60 children and 60 caregivers were selected to participate in the study. In total, ethnographic interviews generated approximately 6,000 responses on what constitutes protective and harmful parenting among communities in Uganda.

Parental involvement in education

During interviews, both children and caregivers rated formal and informal education as being largely positive, linking education to a child’s future. Figure 1 shows that paying school fees and providing children with school supplies were the most frequently cited features of parental involvement in schooling. Furthermore, ensuring a child’s future was, in some instances, considered a sacrifice. A child respondent from Ibanda district explained

“She puts her children first. When they need books, she cultivates more vegetables and sells them.”

Conversely, not paying school fees was the one of the most cited attributes of negative parenting. Inadequate support for education was often linked to parental indifference or neglect. A child in Kampala described a parent neglecting the schooling role as one who

“does not pay school fees for his children and they no longer study”. (Child, Kampala).

Safe homes

Parents ensure safe homes by protecting children from harm. As shown in Figure 2, respondents indicated that parents protect their children mainly by providing adequate shelter and exhibiting non-violent behaviour. Indeed, domestic violence and abuse was the most cited form of an indication of an unsafe home environment. Extreme forms of violence were identified as beating, punching, kicking, or striking a child with large objects.

Child care

In addition to education and protection, providing adequate feeding and hygiene was another frequently cited positive parenting practice. Figure 3 shows that caring for children is the second most frequently cited good parenting practice, after investing in the children’s future. In particular, keeping children clean through bathing, washing their clothes, and ensuring an adequate supply of soap was frequently cited as a core attribute of positive parenting. On the other hand, Figure 4 shows that lack of care is the most frequently cited negative parenting practice, identified by 30 percent of respondents.

In addition to providing shelter, parents also protect children through nurturing, e.g., by walking, driving, or otherwise accompanying children to and from school. A woman in Kampala explained that this practice ensures that

“Parents help children not to be stolen by strangers and protect them from other dangers while ensuring they are attending school each day.”

Figure 1: Parenting and schooling

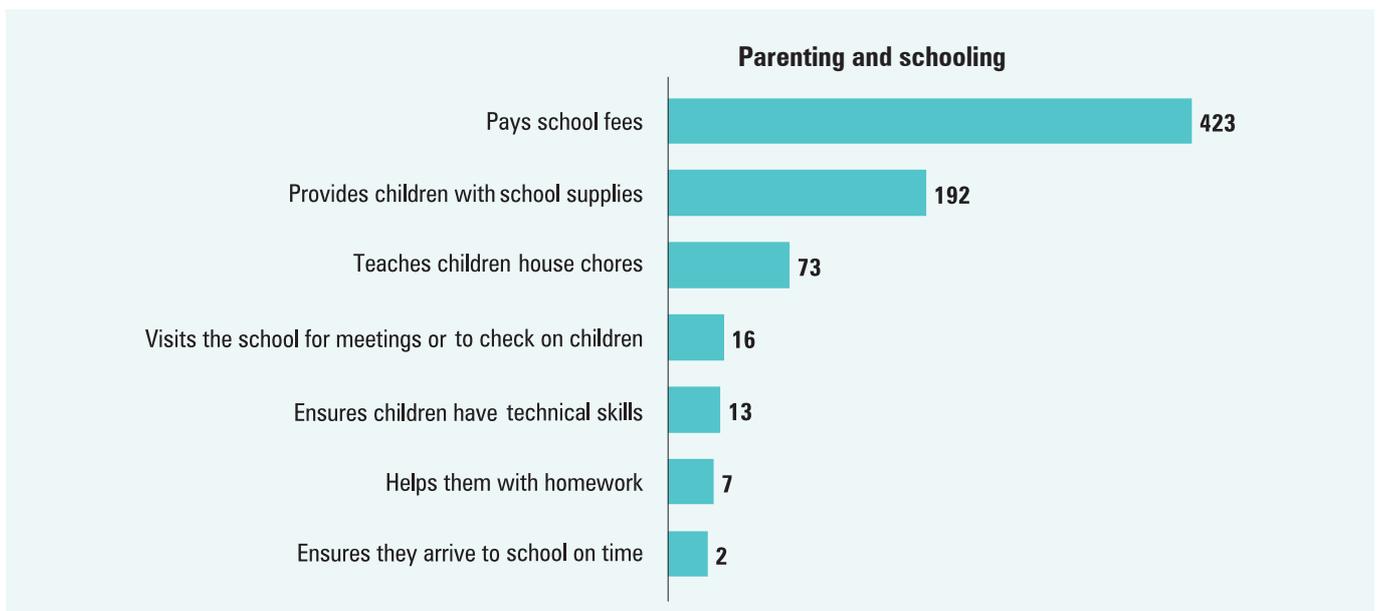


Figure 2: Ensuring safe homes

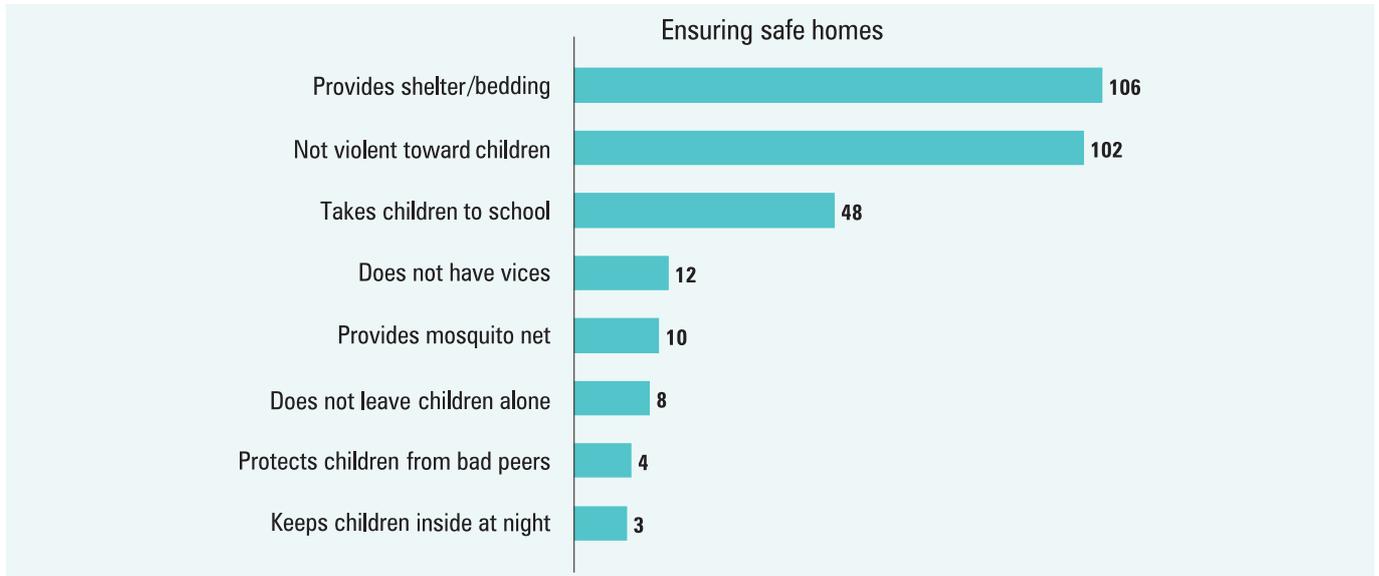
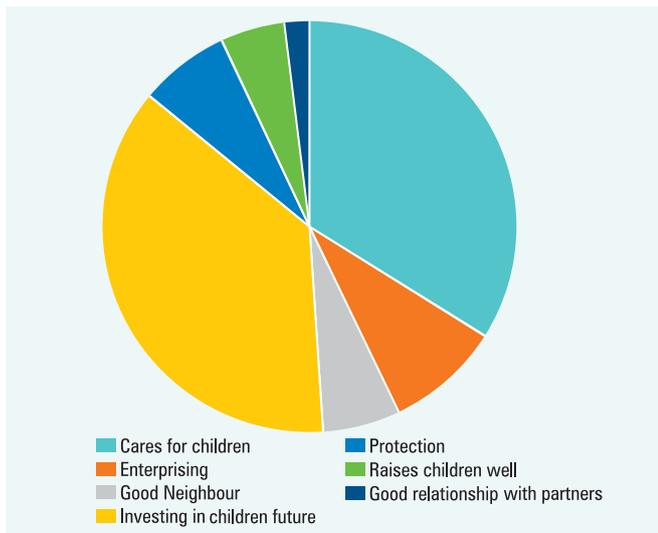


Figure 3: Good parenting practices



Alcohol and child abuse

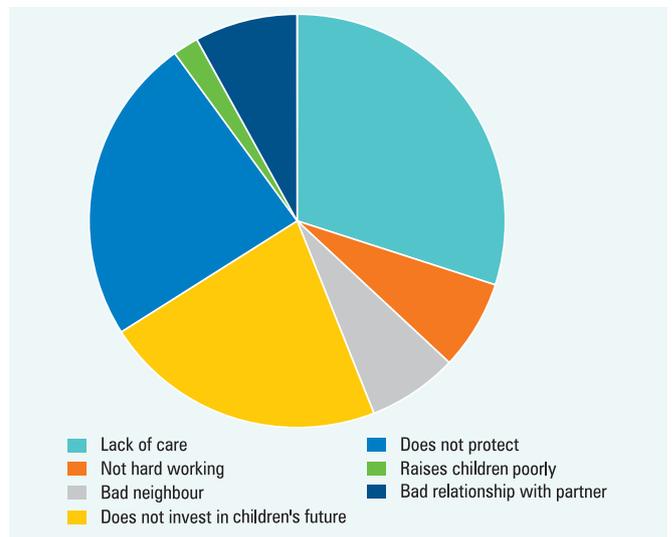
Household violence and abuse was frequently linked to excessive alcohol intake. One female adult in Lira explained:

“He over drinks alcohol and doesn’t care how his home looks and over beats his children. Over-drinking makes the children live in fear when their father is at home.”

Giving advice and appropriate (non-violent) discipline was also cited as a core element of positive parenting. One female child respondent in Kampala described a parent who disciplines but does not necessarily physically punish a child as follows:

“She doesn’t beat her children. Even if the child makes a mistake, she just advises, which makes the child feel loved and therefore grow well. Beating children scares them away from the parents. So when they have a problem, they will fear to approach them.”

Figure 4: Bad parenting practices



Corporal punishment

For some parents in Uganda, corporal punishment may not necessarily be considered as child abuse. Instead, some parents perceive corporal punishment as an appropriate form of discipline. Indeed, the Raising Voices study—which also interviewed 1,093 adults—revealed that 82 percent of the parents used corporal punishment against their own children. In the VAC study, corporal punishment was perceived as appropriate for disciplining children

or teaching children manners when used jointly with the provision of advice, counselling, and warnings. One child in Kampala noted.

"He disciplines his children well. For mistakes such as fighting, he advises them not to repeat it. When they do, he beats them lightly to repeat it but when they do, he beats them not badly. This helps his children to learn good manners because if they don't people will not like them. This helps his children to learn what is bad and stop doing it." (Child, Kampala).

In addition to child abuse, domestic violence between parents was frequently linked to negative parenting often leading to unsafe home environments. Domestic violence in the VAC study was characterised by wife beating, verbal abuse, and having multiple sexual partners. These features were consistently cited as setting poor examples for children. One woman in Lira explained.

"He fights with his wife and this is not good because it makes life hard for the children and it demonstrates a bad example as a parent".

On the other hand, a child in Kampala noted that

"This man drinks alcohol and comes back home to beat his wife when the children are seeing, which is a bad example to the children." (Child, Kampala).

Another female adult respondent from Kampala underscored the importance of non-violent households and described non-violent relationships as follows:

"He has a good relationship with his wife. When he has a misunderstanding with his wife he endeavours to solve it away from the kids like in his bed room. Their kids have never seen their father abuse their mother and this nurtures them very well."

What can be done?

The adults and children in the three districts identified basic behaviours that caring parents can undertake to protect children from harm. These behaviours range from making significant economic sacrifices to pay for school fees and health care, to ensuring a child's safety through simple, replicable actions, such as walking one's child to and from school. The research also identified common characteristics of harmful parenting. Denying

children education and employing violence in the home as a principal means of discipline or resolving disputes are behaviours and attitudes that place children's development at risk.

As earlier mentioned, although the Universal Primary Education (UPE) caters for tuition fees for pupils in government supported schools, it does not cater for other scholastic materials like uniforms and meals while at school. Our results show that the failure to provide for such important school supplies is frequently identified as causing harm to children. The ministry of education should remind parents and guardians of children attending school on this critical responsibility. Through the media, the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Sports should make parents and guardians aware of this statutory responsibility and continuously remind them of their duties e.g. the beginning of each school term. In addition, district local governments should enforce the above UPE provisions—for parents to adequately provide school supplies. District councils can come up with ordinances that compel parents to provide this additional support for children attending school. Finally, the parliament of Uganda should come up with sanctions for parents who are able but neglect meeting the schooling responsibilities of their children.

Second, the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) has recognised the family as the smallest unit of society where all development and production begins and a source of social support and guidance for its members. In this context, the ministry has developed a National Road Map on the Year of the Family 2017 in Uganda. In the quest to place the family at the centre of national development, the road map proposes developing a toolkit and manuals. The results of the VAC study can inform the development of such an information tool. In particular, community norms or practices as well as the low-cost positive parenting practices identified, such as walking children to school and ensuring proper child hygiene, should be popularised in such kits.

Finally, the MGLSD should intensify efforts to highlight child abuse and domestic violence as practices harmful to child upbringing. Radio messages should be used to encourage parents to use other forms of discipline and to discourage domestic violence.

Endnotes

- 1 Naker, D (2005) *Violence Against Children: The Voices of Ugandan Children and Adults. Raising Voices.*
- 2 National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2010).
- 3 Education (Pre-Primary, Primary and Post-Primary) Act 2008

- 4 Boothby, N., F. Mugumya, A. Ritterbusch, J. Wanican, C. Bangirana, A.D. Pizatella S. Busi and S. Meyer (2017) "Ugandan Households: A Study of Parenting Practices in Three Districts" AfriChild Centre for the Study of the African Child, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, and the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, USA