

Preparing parents, protecting girls: The role of parenting education courses in preventing violence against girls¹

GAGE consortium

Key messages

Every day, girls across Ethiopia experience violence. They are at high risk of being hit and insulted by their parents, teachers, siblings, peers, and romantic partners. Many undergo Female Genital Mutilation. A significant minority are pushed into marriage with adult men while they are themselves still children. Still others are sexually harassed and assaulted as they go to school and work, or support their families by fetching water and fuel, and socialise with their friends.

Parents have the potential to play a central role in ending violence against girls. By refraining from using violence against their children—and actively teaching their sons and daughters about rights and respect—they can reduce the violence to which girls are exposed and empower their daughters to recognise violence, report it and get the help they need to end it.

Parenting education courses can prepare parents for this central role and support them to end the cycle of violence against girls.

Scope of the problem

GAGE research has found that girls face violence in the home, school and community (Presler-Marshall et al., 2022). Of the caregivers who completed our survey, 55% admitting to having hit or slapped their daughter or son in the last 30 days. Nearly 10% reported severely beating their child in that time frame.

In addition, 63% of adolescent girls reported having been violently disciplined by a teacher and 23% reported having been physically bullied by a peer. Reported rates of sexual violence in urban areas and Amhara were staggeringly high; nearly one-in-five girls reported having been assaulted. Actual rates are likely to be far higher, given that 20% of adolescents believe that a family should reject a daughter who has been raped.

The Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey also finds high rates of violence against girls (OSA and ICF, 2017). Nearly half (47%) of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have undergone FGM and 40% of young women aged 20-24 were married before their 18th birthday. Nearly 25% of married girls aged 15 to 19 report experiencing physical or sexual violence at the hands of their husband in the last year and of those, 60% never told anyone about the violence.



Adolescent 4th-grader girl with her mother at her shop
Oromia, Ethiopia © Nathalie Betrtrams/GAGE 2022

Impacts of parenting education courses

A recent evidence review by GAGE found that parenting education courses help prevent violence against girls (Marcus et al., 2019). Programmes improve parent-child communication and parents' monitoring of their children's whereabouts, decrease adolescent aggressiveness, and reduce parents' support for and use of violent discipline. Parenting education programmes with tailored curricula can also shift parents' beliefs about gender norms, reduce parents' and girls' support for child marriage, and improve knowledge and communication about sexual violence.

The most impactful parenting education courses have several similar features. They are carefully adapted to local culture and they enrol a broad group of parents—through schools and door-to-door outreach—who can then share ideas throughout the community. They use hands-on activities, such as role plays, that allow parents to practice the skills they are learning and provide participants with take-home study materials, which can then be read by others in the household and community.

Parenting education courses are also strengthened when they are delivered by facilitators who are both well trained and already respected, include home visits, help caregivers develop peer support networks, and link participants with broader services that reduce household stress levels.

The most effective courses provide parallel programming for parents and adolescents, teaching parents about adolescence and how to parent young people as they transition from childhood into adulthood. They highlight the value of teaching adolescents about how their own bodies and minds are developing and how to keep themselves safe. Most importantly, they bring parents and adolescents together to practice open communication and mutual respect.

Key topics to prevent violence against girls

The GAGE evidence review on parenting courses highlights that the following content is especially important to support transformative change in terms of reducing girls' risks of violence now and across their life-course:

Adolescent development: Parents need to understand the physical and cognitive changes their children are undergoing—and how the invisible changes are in many ways the most important because even

when young people look like adults, they typically lack impulse control and must be protected from their own immature decision-making. Beyond that, adolescents' experimentation and disobedience is a positive sign of maturation and parents need reassurance that this too shall pass. Adolescents would benefit from analogous programming to make them more aware of their own 'blind-spots' and the value of adult support.

Non-violent discipline strategies: Parents need discipline strategies that help them help their children grow in the right direction. Research shows that physical punishment does not help children learn what is right-only what is wrong, can lead to rebelliousness in adolescence, and cascades across generations. Consequently, parents need to be taught how to work with their children to set clear family rules, including non-violent consequences for breaking those rules, and to use praise to motivate and encourage their children to do well.

Communication: Parents need to be taught to actively listen to what their children are saying and to speak in ways that their children will hear. This is especially important in adolescence, given that young people are beginning to make decisions that jeopardise their own and others' safety and if young people are to report risks they must feel supported to do so. Courses should include the value of taking time to spend with children, learning to be silent, 'listening' to body language, respecting privacy, valuing adolescents' perspectives alongside parents', and openly and honestly answering young people's questions—even when they require parents to admit mistakes. Adolescents would benefit from analogous programming, to help them learn to communicate and negotiate effectively and respectfully with their parents.

Gender norms: Parents—and adolescents—need to be encouraged to think through how gender norms impact expectations about what different family members do and how they behave. For example, expecting girls to readily acquiesce to adult demands—while tolerating boys' non-compliance—teaches girls to be docile and boys that they may break rules with impunity. Similarly, encouraging boys to take pride in their strength and fighting prowess sets the stage for them to use violence against others—including girls and their own future families. Parents and adolescents also need to be taught the risks of FGM and child marriage, which include intimate partner violence, that survivors of sexual assault are not to blame, and that all persons have a right to live lives free of violence.

Endnotes

- ¹ In Ethiopia, a parenting education manual, drawing on this evidence, has been developed by GAGE and ESSSWA and shared with MOWSA and the Alliance members. This manual will be launched nationally with the aim of providing a key resource for the government and NGOs working with children and adolescents to support parents to improve their parenting practice

References

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Further background

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year (2015–2024) mixed methods longitudinal research and evaluation study. It follows the lives of 20,000 adolescents in six low- and middle-income countries in Africa (Ethiopia and Rwanda), Asia (Bangladesh and Nepal) and the Middle East (Jordan and Lebanon).

The GAGE consortium, managed by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), includes 35 partner organisations from around the world known for their expertise in research, policy and programming in the fields of adolescence, gender and social inclusion. GAGE is funded by UK aid from the UK government.

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