

A close-up photograph of a woman wearing a light blue hijab, looking off to the side with a gentle expression. She is holding a young child with dark skin and curly hair, who is looking directly at the camera with a curious expression. The background is softly blurred, showing warm, golden light filtering through what appears to be a window or a screen.

**Violence  
prevention  
must start  
in early  
childhood**



OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON  
**VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN**

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## The Agenda 2030 vision

A world free from fear and from violence, where no one is left behind, is the inspiring, ambitious vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Agenda 2030 recognizes the crucial role played by early childhood development in creating peaceful and prosperous societies, and gives important impetus to realizing the right of every child to grow up in a safe, nurturing environment through two specific targets:

- 1 Target 16.2: End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence and torture against children.
- 2 Target 4.2: Ensure all children have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education.

To make progress towards achieving these two targets violence prevention must begin in early childhood, thus allowing children a chance to fulfil their potential, pursue opportunities and participate fully in society as productive citizens.

## A question of children's rights

Ending violence in children's lives and investing in early childhood are first and foremost a question of children's rights, further supported by scientific evidence which shows that a violence-free early childhood matters: the first 1,000 days of a child's life are the foundation for a person's whole future development. Violence in early childhood is a stressful, painful experience for a child in the immediate term, with the further risk of mid- and long-term consequences. The optimum physical, intellectual and socio-emotional potential of children depends on receiving loving care and enjoying a nurturing environment from the very start.

## Breaking the vicious cycle of violence

Scientific research shows that early childhood stress - including exposure to violence - compromises children's development, health and education,

with long-term negative mental and physiological consequences. Neuroscience advances have vastly increased our understanding of how a child's early brain development can be impacted by exposure to violence. Violence can alter the developing brain's structure and function which can impact language acquisition and cognitive functioning, resulting in social and emotional competency deficits and generating fear, anxiety, depression and the risk of self-harm and aggressive behaviour.

Alterations to the brain resulting from childhood violence can also shape later adult behavior. Longitudinal studies show that children exposed to violence are more likely to: be victims of violence later in life and become perpetrators, using violence as adults against domestic partners and their own children; and, be at increased risk of engaging in criminal behavior. Breaking this vicious cycle for the child, the adult and for society - requires that every child lives free from all forms of violence from the very start.

## **Positive opportunities or negative consequences**

Neuroscience research shows that the human brain develops wider and faster during its first 1,000 days than at any other stage of life, and that during this crucial developmental period the foundation for a person's future well-being is laid. A nurturing and caring environment provides positive opportunities for child development, helping to secure children's health, nutrition, early learning and sense of belonging. Promoting positive attachments with caregivers helps children to develop resilience in the face of adversity, while early childhood interventions protect children against stress, laying the foundation for learning at home and at school.

A violent and abusive childhood environment on the other hand, can lead to negative consequences. Enhanced neural plasticity during childhood makes this a particularly dangerous time for children to experience violence. Exposure to stressful experiences calibrates biological and neurocognitive systems to suit threatening, uncertain situations. As processes needed for 'normal' brain architecture are modified, a functional alternative is developed to compensate and adapt accordingly. This adaptability, however, does not always serve a positive purpose and

can create a range of problems for children, including ill-health, anxiety, depression, poor school performance, risky behaviour and self-harm.

Most acts of childhood maltreatment are forms of toxic stress which can result in the production of abnormal levels of stress hormones which

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can disrupt the activity of the brain's hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. Consequently, children exposed to violence may develop an exaggerated physiological response and abnormal reactivity to subsequent stressors. This can affect their tolerance to stress and their ability to control it in the future, leading to increased feelings of anxiety and the risk of developing psychological dysfunctions such as mood disorders, aggressive behaviour and depression.

## **Extent of violence against children**

A 2016 study in *Pediatrics* estimated that over one billion children experienced some form of violence in the previous year. In its major 2016 series on early childhood, *The Lancet* estimated that 250 million children younger than five years of age in low and middle-income countries risked falling short of their potential because of the adversities they faced in their early years. And, as highlighted in UNICEF's '*A Familiar Face*' report, close to 300 million children aged 2-4 years old experience psychological aggression and/or physical punishment by their caregivers at home. Six in ten children aged 12 to 23 months are subject to violent disciplinary practices, and almost half endure physical punishment. In certain countries, shouting, yelling or screaming are common forms of discipline for one-year-olds, and 176 million children under five years of age witness domestic violence.

## **Obstacles to ending early childhood violence**

Despite the growing scientific evidence of the dangers of violence in early childhood, there is insufficient awareness – including amongst policy-makers, care-givers and the general public – of the negative impact that violence has on children's health and development, and of the social returns from investment in a violence-free early childhood. Promoting enhanced understanding of the negative impacts of violence, and of the positive impacts of preventing violence in early childhood is a crucial step in changing relevant behaviours and investing in supportive policies.

Another major obstacle to ending violence against children is the perception of early childhood as being primarily a period of transition

and evolving capacities towards adulthood - and only then is a person a fully-fledged person with inherent human rights. This perception must be challenged: the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes all children as rights-holders who must be respected and protected, rather than being treated as passive recipients of services or 'not-yet persons'.

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## **At-risk children from disadvantaged environments**

Research on the neuroscience of childhood maltreatment has documented the consequences of socioeconomic status as a stressor and the health-related consequences of exposure to neglect and abuse. The impact of growing up in institutions, particularly before two years of age, on long-term mental and physical health has also been examined. Every child needs support in early childhood, but at-risk children from disadvantaged environments, including those placed in residential care, are least likely to receive it. Disadvantaged families are often strained to the limit, with limited access to quality services and fewer resources to invest in early childhood development; as a result, many at-risk children miss out on the growth that is the foundation for success in school, career and life.

## **Consequences of a lack of investment**

Early childhood interventions may cost as little as \$0.50 per child per year when combined with existing services. A lack of investment in children's early years may, however, hold them back before they reach school age, leading them to endure a lifetime of disadvantage. A poor start in life can lead to a loss of about a quarter of average adult income per year. In addition, countries may forfeit as much as two times their current expenditures of GDP on health and education.

## **Costs of inaction and high returns from investment in early childhood**

The economic costs of inaction in addressing early childhood violence are high. Violence against children is estimated to cost the global economy over US\$7 trillion a year through its direct impact on children, families and societies, and on the adult lives of its victims. What this enormous figure neglects are costs resulting from limitations placed on children to enjoy healthy, fulfilling lives as productive members of society. Global experience shows that promoting integrated early childhood development policies, which include interventions to prevent and eliminate violence against young children, make economic sense, reducing costs associated with children's health problems, low school performance, as well as with the reduction in their potential. Clearly, early childhood is where violence prevention must

begin and it is also when investment can achieve a particularly high return. There is a growing body of evidence showing that violence prevention in early childhood is a highly cost-effective strategy leading to better health, education and social outcomes. These, in turn, contribute to increased national wealth while reducing the social expenditures incurred in dealing with the long-term consequences of violence in childhood.

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## Three strategies and a unique window of opportunity

Early childhood presents a unique window of opportunity to break the vicious cycle of violence, abuse and neglect. An increasing body of evidence points to successful strategies that contribute to this goal:

### **1. Legal prohibition of all violence against children, including within the home:**

Legislation sends an important message to society about practices that are acceptable or non-negotiable, helping to shape attitudes and behaviour. The protection of children in their early years begins with the enactment of a comprehensive legal ban on all forms of violence in all settings. Today, more than 50 States have adopted such an explicit legal prohibition on the use of violence as a form of discipline, correction or punishment, including in schools and the home. Many other countries are taking measures to move in the same direction.

### **2. Implementation of strengthened social protection policies to support families in their child-rearing responsibilities and to prevent child abandonment and placement in institutions:**

Public policies are not neutral to children. Investment in young children provides an important entry point to strengthen families' nurturing and protective role, to prevent child abandonment and placement in alternative care, and to support children at risk of violence. Parenting skills programmes that go hand in hand with social protection interventions help to promote a nurturing family environment, reduce the risk of social exclusion and deprivation, prevent family stress and tackle social norms that condone violent forms of child discipline.

### **3. Promotion of integrated and cohesive actions by all sectors responsible for violence prevention and response:**

Violence is a multifaceted phenomenon that can be addressed only through a multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approach. Strong, effective cooperation is needed across all actors and sectors, including

health, nutrition, education, financing, and social and child protection, to address the multiple risks faced by young children and their families, and to ensure access to violence prevention and response services of quality.

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## Addressing the consequences of child maltreatment

While the ultimate goal is to prevent and eliminate violence starting in early childhood, some examples of what can be done to address existing consequences of child maltreatment include:

- Socially rich environments can serve as a buffer against the impact of adversity and can help change the violent behaviours of caregivers. Caregivers who were initially neglectful and uncaring have positively changed their behaviour when given increased opportunity to observe other caregivers interact with children and to benefit from social support services.
- Caregivers of children who suffered maltreatment can be trained with skills in quality parenting, and provided with tools to stimulate and enrich neurodevelopment and cognitive stimulation.
- Child victims of violence can benefit from care and support to cope and manage their stress regulatory systems and improve their stress management capacities.
- Providing child victims of violence the opportunity to experience quality peer interactions and benefit from peer support systems can help improve and address the negative consequences of neglect in their early years.
- Psychological interventions can help decrease the risk of developing psychopathologies or reverse mental health problems, providing children with emotion regulation, self-regulation and self-control skills.

## Importance of strong political leadership

The importance of strong political leadership in assuring the best start in life and the elimination of violence in early years cannot be overstated. James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics, noted that: “investing in early childhood education is a cost-effective strategy, even during a budget crisis” leading to better education, health, social and economic outcomes that increase revenue and reduce costly social spending. “The highest

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## **High time to achieve Agenda 2030’s vision**

The child rights imperative to end all forms of violence against children, the body of science showing the devastation violence can cause in young children’s development and in their later years, the research documenting effective strategies to end it, and the huge costs to society all cry out for our urgent action: violence prevention must start in early childhood.

The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda targets to end all forms of violence against children and ensure access to quality early childhood development are accelerating national level action to bring positive change to children’s lives. This will help promote just, inclusive and peaceful societies for all. It is high time to bridge the gap between international commitments and reality on the ground and to speed up collective efforts towards achieving the vision of 2030 Agenda - children deserve no less!

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The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children is an independent global advocate in favour of the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children, mobilizing action and political support to achieve progress the world over. The mandate of the SRSG is anchored in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international human rights instruments and framed by the UN Study on Violence against Children.

Office of the Special Representative of the  
Secretary-General on Violence against Children  
304 East 45<sup>th</sup> Street,  
17<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10017

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