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## Review Article

# THRIVES: Using the best evidence to prevent violence against children

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**Abstract** More than 1 billion children – half the children in the world – are victims of violence every year. As part of the Post-2015 sustainable development agenda, the UN has issued a global call-to-action: to eliminate violence against children. Essential to preventing violence against children is guidance to countries on using the best available evidence to address this problem. **THRIVES** provides this evidence. It represents a framework of complementary strategies that, taken together, have potential to achieve and sustain efforts to prevent violence against children. These strategies, which span health, social services, education, and justice sectors, include Training in parenting, Household economic strengthening, Reduced violence through legislative protection, Improved services, Values and norms that protect children, Education and life skills, and Surveillance and evaluation. For each **THRIVES** area, we review evidence for effectiveness and identify programmatic or policy examples. This framework will facilitate commitments to effective, sustainable, and scalable action.

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Annually, more than half the world's children are victims of violence.<sup>1</sup> The various forms of violence—physical, emotional, and sexual, as well as witnessing violence in homes and communities—share high potential

for life-long consequences, yet also share opportunities for effective approaches to prevention.<sup>2</sup>

National survey data show violence against children is surprisingly common.<sup>1,3</sup> Data from the United States (U.S.) demonstrate 48% of children were exposed to violence in 2011, while findings from 24 low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) show 63% of caregivers reported using recent violent discipline (reliance on physical force or verbal intimidation to punish unwanted behaviors and encourage desired ones). Sexual abuse (any forced or coercive sexual act or attempt to obtain such an act by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim) is also common, affecting 18% of girls and 8% of boys. Population-based surveys show self-reported child physical abuse is 75 times higher, and child sexual abuse, 30 times higher, than official reports.<sup>3</sup>

Though violence is often hidden, its consequences eventually surface.<sup>3</sup> Childhood violence increases risks of injury, HIV, mental health problems, and reproductive health problems. It also leads to graded increases in cardiovascular disease, cancer, lung disease, and diabetes. The high prevalence and vast consequences of violence against children lead to hundreds of billions of dollars in associated costs.<sup>1</sup>

Mounting evidence demonstrates violence against children is preventable. There is strong reason to believe that increasing country capacity to implement effective prevention programs and policies could reduce violence towards children globally. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has developed THRIVES, a select group of complementary strategies to help countries sharpen their focus on priorities with greatest potential to reduce violence against children (Figure 1).

We used the best available evidence to classify these strategies, which span health, social services, education, finance, and justice sectors, as *effective*, *promising*, or *prudent practice*, based on criteria described in Table 1. However, we cannot classify as effective every program addressing a particular strategy. What follows are descriptions of THRIVES strategies, along with a review of supporting evidence.

## Training in Parenting

Interventions that build safe, stable, and nurturing relationships between parents/caregivers and their children are effective in preventing

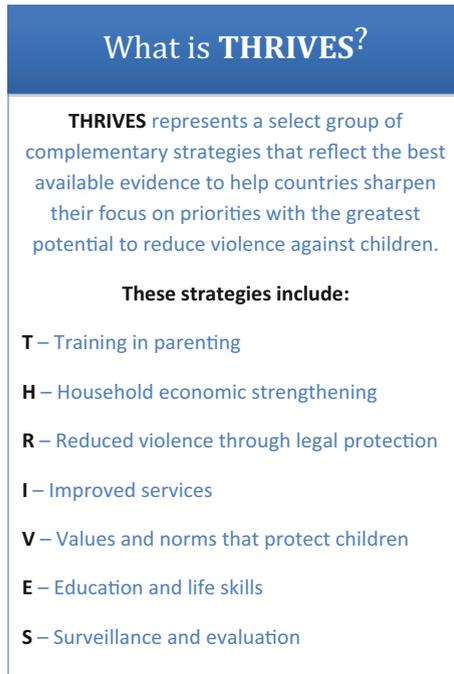


Figure 1: THRIVES components.

violence towards children. They may also prevent the development of violent behaviors in children, which in turn may reduce many types of violence occurring in adolescence. Parenting interventions can reduce a range of potential outcomes, including *child maltreatment* (physical, sexual and psychological/emotional violence, or neglect, of infants and children by parents, caregivers, and other authority figures, most often in the home) and *bullying* (perpetrator is unrelated to victim and repeatedly inflicts physical, psychological or social harm, often occurring in schools and other settings where children congregate).<sup>4-10</sup>

### Programs and policies

Effective parenting interventions vary by delivery modality. While trained personnel implement some programs through multiple sessions in homes, others deliver them in small group settings, or as part of comprehensive programs. In *home visitation programs*, staff train caregivers in infant care, nonviolent discipline (such as removing

**Table 1:** Classification of THRIVES strategies according to level of evidence

Level of evidence	Criteria	Classification of strategies <sup>a</sup>
Effective	(a) 2 or more high- or moderate-quality studies using randomized trial and/or quasi-experimental designs finds favorable, statistically significant impacts in one or more violence against children domains (maltreatment, bullying, partner violence, witnessing intimate partner violence); OR (b) “Recommended” by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, Cochrane, or Campbell reviews of evidence for reducing violence	Training in parenting; Improved services for victims and perpetrators; Education and life skills
Promising	(a) 1 High- or moderate-quality impact study using a randomized trial and/or quasi-experimental design finds favorable, statistically significant impacts in one or more violence against children domains, OR (b) At least 1 high- or moderate-quality study using randomized trial and/or quasi-experimental designs finds favorable, statistically significant impacts in one or more risk or protective factors for prevention of violence against children (educational attainment, positive parenting skills, communication between parents and children about violence prevention, etc.)	Household economic strengthening; Values and norms interventions
Prudent practice	(a) Determined by global treaties/resolutions as critical for reducing violence against children, OR (b) Demonstrated by observational studies as associated with reductions in violence against children	Reduced violence through legal protection; Surveillance and evaluation

<sup>a</sup>Classification made based on the greatest amount of available evidence for a given approach within a particular strategy; for example, ‘improved services for victims and perpetrators’ includes effective therapeutic approaches, such as cognitive behavioral therapy; and the ‘improved services’ strategy also includes case management approaches, which are promising.

privileges or explaining why a behavior is wrong), child development, family planning, life skills, and economic self-sufficiency.<sup>4</sup> These programs, such as *Nurse Family Partnership*, may serve high-risk mothers or all mothers, and often focus on the first 2 years of life. Evidence for their effectiveness is strong according to the Community Guide, with a median 39% reduction in maltreatment.<sup>4</sup> Programs outside the U.S, such as *Philani Plus*, which uses mentor mothers to train parents, are promising, showing increases in cognitive development measures.<sup>5</sup>

Behavioral interventions delivered in *small groups* also build caregivers’ capacity to help protect children from violence.<sup>6,7</sup> These programs serve parents of children from young ages up to pre-teens



by building skills in anger management, problem-solving, nonviolent discipline, and media safety. LMIC have implemented group parenting programs like *Families Matter!* that focus on increasing protective factors (e.g., monitoring, parent/child communication).

Finally, *comprehensive programs* may integrate parenting training, including three components: curriculum (taught for and/or by teachers), school environment (physical space), and training for caregivers/parents. Some comprehensive programs, such as *Positive Action*, focus on well-being through development of social-emotional skills, responsible choices, and goal-setting skills with their children.<sup>8</sup> Others, such as *Safe Dates*, include both a school-based and family-based focus on preventing violence by peers or romantic partners, and include building parents' skills in conflict resolution, communication about violence, and/or monitoring behavior; these reduced violent behaviors from 20 to 70%.<sup>9,10</sup>

## Household Economic Strengthening

Strengthening economic conditions of households is a promising strategy for preventing violence against children. Strong evidence links economic circumstances to a variety of health, education, and relationship outcomes correlated with violence.<sup>11,12</sup> Economic strengthening can benefit children by decreasing children's exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) and, thereby reducing the likelihood of later becoming victims or perpetrators. In addition, increasing access to economic resources enables women to invest in their children's education, thereby helping protect them from violence.

### Programs and policies

Economic strengthening programs that are promising for protecting children include *cash transfer* programs and those that integrate *microfinance* or *group savings and loans* with gender equity training. *Cash transfers*, which provide regular income to reduce household economic vulnerability, improve parental monitoring, and reduce child maltreatment and symptoms of childhood aggression.<sup>13,14</sup> Rather than providing cash, *microfinance programs* supply loans for income generation, and *group savings and loans associations* allow women to start small businesses using loans from a group whose members save

money together. Evaluations show that, when combined with gender equity training, these latter two programs can reduce violence by up to 50%.<sup>15,16</sup>

## Reduced Violence through Legal Protections

Strengthening and enforcing legal policies for children are prudent steps in preventing violence.<sup>17,18</sup> Laws prohibiting violent behavior represent a societal statement that these are wrong and, therefore, can help shift prevailing norms. The threat of incarceration may deter potential perpetrators from violent acts; and incarceration deprives perpetrators of opportunities to inflict further violence. Laws can also be useful in reducing exposure to key risk factors, such as alcohol abuse. Potential outcomes of legal protections include reductions in physical and sexual abuse.

### Programs and policies

There are four areas where legal protections could be particularly helpful. First, laws banning *corporal punishment* of children, in which parents/caregivers, teachers, and others inflict pain as retribution for an offence, can reduce use of severe corporal punishment against children and change related harmful attitudes.<sup>19</sup> Although 76% of countries have laws banning corporal punishments, only 30% of these report enforcement of such laws.<sup>2</sup>

As harmful alcohol use is an established risk factor for violence, laws regulating *availability and accessibility of alcohol* are important facets of prevention.<sup>20</sup> Reduced sales hours and lower outlet densities are associated with reduced levels of violence. Empirical evidence shows higher prices for alcohol can decrease consumption and reduce alcohol-attributable mortality.<sup>20</sup>

Although most countries have laws prohibiting *sexual abuse of children*, their strength varies based on legal definitions of who is a child and what constitutes child sexual abuse, and extent of enforcement. For example, though virtually all countries have laws prohibiting *statutory rape*, in which an adult engages in sexual intercourse with a minor below the legal age of consent (varies by country from 12 to 18 years) less than two-thirds enforce them.



Enforcement is even less common for laws against contact sexual violence without rape (for example, unwanted sexual touching, but excluding intercourse and non-contact sexual violence (such as threatened sexual violence, exhibitionism and verbal sexual harassment)).<sup>2</sup>

UN Women regards gender equality as a basic human right, and 139 countries constitutionally guarantee *legal equality between men and women*. Such guarantees can help countries to amend laws discriminating against girls and increase equal access to education and protection from *harmful traditional practices*, such as female genital mutilation.<sup>21</sup> Countries such as Colombia have used such authority to amend laws discriminating against girls.

## Improved Services for Survivors and Perpetrators

Several approaches to providing services to victims and perpetrators of violence against children are effective. Their benefits include decreases in recurrence of victimization and mitigation of consequences, such as trauma symptoms.<sup>22</sup> Because experiencing violence early in life is associated with increased risk for subsequent victimization or perpetration, providing services for children may prevent later involvement in violence.

### Programs and policies

The various types of services for victims and those at risk for perpetration share a focus on providing support, either tangibly (e.g., housing) to promote independence, or psychologically (e.g., counseling) to promote healing. The most effective include counseling, intimate partner violence (IPV) screening combined with interventions such as support groups, shelters, and advocacy/case management approaches. Both professionals and trained lay providers can deliver *counseling*, particularly cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), to help survivors of childhood violence build coping skills and change how they think about their violent experiences. Evidence shows short-term CBT interventions for individuals or groups are effective, reducing trauma symptoms and functional impairment from 37 to 56%.<sup>22,23</sup>

Combining *intimate partner violence screening* services with interventions can help identify victims and link them to services. The U.S.

Preventive Services Task Force recommends screening paired with intervention, based on reports of moderate effectiveness.<sup>24</sup> Both *support group* and *shelter services* provide emotional support or temporary housing, and show promise in decreasing trauma symptoms.<sup>25,26</sup> *Shelter services* help identify ways to return home safely or find alternative housing, both important for survivors in life-threatening circumstances. Finally, *case management*, where advocates help survivors obtain community resources (shelter, foster family support, employment, legal assistance, etc.), is promising as it reduces recurrence of violence.<sup>27</sup>

## Values and Norms Interventions

Changing social norms is a powerful approach for preventing violence against women and children.<sup>28</sup> Gender and parenting norms are particularly relevant. *Gender norms* define appropriate behaviors for how men and women, girls and boys, relate, whereas *parenting norms* include beliefs about how parents should discipline their children. Studies show individuals and communities that sanction harmful gender and parenting norms are more likely to perpetrate violence against children. Potential outcomes of interventions addressing harmful values and norms include increases in favorable beliefs towards gender equity, nonviolent approaches to parental discipline, and reductions in perpetration of violence by intimate partners or parents.

## Programs and policies

Several promising types of interventions, including *small group programs*, *bystander interventions*, *community mobilization programs*, and *media campaigns*, seek to change individual and community beliefs about harmful values and norms. Although most work focuses on gender norms, those knowledgeable about interventions increasingly view parenting norms as vital to violence prevention as well. In *small group programs*, multi-session interventions aim to change adherence to harmful norms and promote gender equity. Community leaders engage others within their spheres of influence to conduct skills-building workshops that address masculinity, leadership, and equity.



Evidence shows that norms change with programs such as *Yaari-Dosti*, which promotes gender equity by addressing positive aspects of respectful masculinity, or *Coaching Boys Into Men* in the U.S. that markedly decrease IPV perpetration.<sup>29,30</sup>

*Bystander interventions* often engage youth to promote protective norms by taking appropriate steps to intervene when they observe behaviors that put others at risk. Programs like *Green Dot* empower youth to prevent violence against dating partners and acquaintances.<sup>31</sup> *Community mobilization interventions* show promise through training leaders to activate community members to prevent violence by changing values, norms, and behaviors via trainings, media, and advocacy.<sup>32</sup> An evaluation of SASA!, which empowers participants to be change agents within communities, showed a 52% reduction in physical violence and decreased social acceptance of violence.<sup>32</sup> Finally, *media campaigns* deliver education to communities to change norms and behaviors via advertising or television formats.<sup>32</sup> Evidence suggests programs like *Soul City* in South Africa influence attitudes by strengthening equitable and non-violent norms that protect intimate partners and children from violence.<sup>33</sup>

## Education and Life Skills Building

Gains in education, shown by increases in primary and secondary school enrollment, attendance, and completion for girls and boys, as well as implementation of life skills programs, are effective in reducing violence against children.<sup>34–42</sup> Gains in education protect against both victimization and perpetration of childhood sexual violence, youth violence, partner violence, and childhood marriage. These advances also protect against consequences of violence, including HIV. Schools can reach large numbers of children with health-related interventions that build skills in communication, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation, all of which are important for reducing violent behaviors.

### Programs and policies

Addressing factors that keep youth out of school, such as gender inequity and poverty, as well as providing children with knowledge and skills to support alternatives to violent behavior are important avenues

for preventing violence. Programs that show potential include both *school enrollment/attendance* and *life skills programs*.

*School enrollment/attendance programs* that provide partial or comprehensive *material support* can help girls stay in school. For example, *Comprehensive School Support* for orphan girls demonstrated those receiving fees, school supplies, uniforms, health/hygiene supplies, and in-school helpers had an 82% reduction in school dropout and a 63% reduction in early marriage.<sup>36</sup> Another effective program provides *school-based early education* in preschool settings, combined with family support through elementary school.<sup>37</sup>

*Life skills programs* delivered in schools that help prevent violence by building skills in emotional regulation, prosocial behaviors (actions demonstrating concern for the rights, welfare, and feeling of others), communication, decision-making, goal-setting, and bullying prevention, are effective.<sup>39</sup> The U.S. Task Force on Community Preventive Services found strong evidence that universal, school-based programs decrease rates of violence among children by a median of 15% across programs and grades.<sup>39</sup> Programs that specifically address *dating violence* serve middle or high school students, and studies have found that these programs are effective in changing gender stereotypes, improving communication, managing emotions, and preventing sexual assault.<sup>40,41</sup> *Adolescent girls' empowerment* programs, like *IMpower*, which build skills in self-confidence, limit-setting, conflict resolution skills, and physical self-defense, can reduce sexual assault by nearly 40%.<sup>42</sup>

## Surveillance and Evaluation

Population-based national surveillance data, facility-based data, and evaluation studies are necessary to effectively plan, implement, and assess the impact of programs addressing violence against children. These data are particularly useful for monitoring progress called for in key global treaties and resolutions.<sup>1</sup> It is only through accurate measurement that we can understand problems caused by violence against children and identify, target, manage, and improve appropriate interventions. Monitoring can provide essential information on the extent, nature, and consequences of violence in a country; subgroups in need of tailored programs; and use of the effective



prevention strategies. Evaluations provide critical information on whether interventions to prevent or respond to violence against children are effective. As evidence from LMIC grows, there will be a critical need to evaluate both new innovations and adaptations of interventions shown effective in high-income countries. Finally, it will be important to evaluate the net impact of implementing multiple THRIVES components.

As with evaluation, surveillance systems for violence against children are weak in most LMIC. Because administrative systems only detect a small proportion of acts of violence against children, self-reports ascertained via representative surveys, such as national Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS) or Multiple Indicator Surveys (MICS), may be considered the gold standard for measuring the magnitude of the problem, identifying vulnerable groups, driving change, and measuring progress.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusions

As part of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations has issued a call-to-action relevant for every nation: to eliminate violence against children. Essential to preventing violence against children is guidance to countries on the best available evidence to address this problem. CDC's THRIVES package describes a select group of complementary, multi-sector strategies that represent critical components for preventing violence against children. The aim of this package is to foster collective impact through coordinated partnerships that leverage knowledge, programs, and resources. Strong or promising evidence of success in high-income countries, with growing evidence from LMICs, underpins each strategy.

The World Health Organization, in collaboration with UNICEF, UNODC, PEPFAR, USAID, World Bank, U.S. Department of State, CDC, and Together for Girls, currently leads the development of a unified package across these agencies, called "INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children." These strategies have adapted and combined similar guidance from WHO, UNICEF, PEPFAR, and USAID with the CDC THRIVES package. Variation across organizations is minor, and shared strategies include income and economic strengthening, changing social norms, safe environments, parenting and



caregiver support programs, implementing legal and policy reform; improvements in response service access and quality; education and life skills, and a cross-cutting focus on both strong multi-sector coordination mechanisms and monitoring and evaluation systems.

In light of the call to all nations to end violence against children as part of the 2030 SDGs, there is great potential for a unified and aligned prevention package across key organizations to tangibly accelerate global action for children. Strong population-based surveillance of the full range of types, locations, and perpetrators of violence against children, as well as of access to key prevention strategies, will be essential to target prevention, monitor progress, and drive the urgent action endorsed by the United Nations in the 2030 Global Sustainable Development Agenda.

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## Editors' Note

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