



Preventing violence against children in schools: Contributions from the Be Safe program in Sri Lanka



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ABSTRACT

Violence against children is a global public health issue with serious social, economic, physical, and emotional impacts. This study evaluates the effectiveness of a school-based program aimed to prevent and respond to physical, sexual, and psychological violence against children in Sri Lanka from the perspective of parents. A cross-sectional retrospective study design was used. A total of 835 parents of children who participated in the program were surveyed across seven districts in Sri Lanka. Dose-response analyses were conducted to assess for correlations between program exposure and perceived prevention of violence against children. Low to moderate correlations were found between exposure to the program and perceived child safety in schools, school policies, and in the community. The findings provide preliminary evidence of program effectiveness; however, more efforts are needed to validate and sustain outcomes. Implications for future violence prevention programming, along with the use of dose-response evaluations, are discussed.

1. Introduction

Prevention of violence against children is a global public health and development priority (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2016; United Nations Secretary-General's Study, 2006). Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines violence against children as “all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or children negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse” (Child Rights International Network, 2017). It is well documented that children exposed to violence are at risk for impaired physical, emotional, and social development, with broader social and economic impacts (Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012; Fang et al., 2015; Korbin, 2003; Stark and Landis, 2016).

Children in humanitarian settings are presumed to face an increased risk of exposure to violence (Stark & Landis, 2016). A humanitarian setting is one in which an event (e.g. armed conflict, natural disaster, political unrest) or series of events has resulted in a critical threat to the health, safety, security, or well-being of a population (The Sphere Project, 2011). Sri Lankan children, in particular, are especially vulnerable to violence, given the aftermath of the Asian tsunami in 2004 which devastated a large part of the country, along with the long-lasting civil war which came to an end in 2009 (Catani, Schauer, & Neuner, 2008; Catani et al., 2010; United Nations, 2011). For example, Catani et al. (2008) found a relationship between war violence and violent behaviour inflicted on children. Furthermore, studies have suggested an unsettling high rate of child sexual abuse in Sri Lanka, with children of low socio-economic status being the most susceptible (de Zoysa, 2002). A recent study in 2013 suggested that violence against children

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has considerably increased in Sri Lanka, especially towards the end of the last decade (Arachchige, Shiroma, & Shirajanie, 2013).

Despite the alarming evidence of violence against children in humanitarian settings, efforts to prevent and respond to the violence remain scarce (Hundeide & Armstrong, 2011; Hyder & Mac Veigh, 2007; Stark and Landis, 2016), with limited efforts focusing on the Sri Lankan context (Catani et al., 2010, 2008). There is an urgent need to provide children with the means to protect themselves. Children spend most of their time in school, and school plays an important role in the learning and development of children. As such, schools present an opportunity to help children develop the knowledge and skills necessary to keep them safe. To this end, the Canadian Red Cross Society, in partnership with the Ministry of Education of Sri Lanka, and endorsement from the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society, implemented a school-based violence against children prevention program called Be Safe. Be Safe was implemented in primary schools across the country from 2008 to 2014 and targeted boys and girls between the ages of 5 and 9. The goal of the program was to create and maintain environments that are safe from violence and abuse for children in 10% of schools under the Ministry of Education by 2014.

Although Be Safe has officially ended in 2014, the relationship between program activities and reduced violence against children have yet to be determined. To support evidence-based programming and development of approaches to respond to violence against children, a rigorous evaluation was warranted. Dose-response evaluation represents an approach to examine the link between program exposure (or dose) and program outcomes. This approach has been widely-used in the evaluation of clinical trials, and more recently, in the evaluation of program interventions in controlled research contexts (Grieco, Jowers, Errisuriz, & Bartholomew, 2016; Jørgensen et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2016). However, dose-response evaluations have not been well applied to large-scale interventions in complex humanitarian environments.

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of the Be Safe program in Sri Lanka using a dose-response approach from the perspectives of parents. Specifically, the objectives are to: 1) determine the extent of perceived prevention of violence against children; and 2) determine if variability in program exposure is associated with variability in level of outcomes achieved. This study adds to the knowledge base of effectiveness of violence against children prevention programs in Sri Lanka, with implications for violence against children prevention programming in other humanitarian contexts internationally. Furthermore, this study advances evaluation methodologies that seek to understand the relationship between program exposure and program outcomes in long-term and complex programming environments.

1.1. Overview of the Be safe program

Engaging teachers to provide education early in life is an important strategy for preventing child abuse and neglect (Fortson, Klevens, Merrick, Gilbert, & Alexander, 2016; World Health Organization, 2016). Be Safe is a personal safety, school-based program for children ages 5–9, with a focus on preventing sexual abuse (Canadian Red Cross, 2016). Through simple key messages and child-friendly learning resources, Be Safe introduces young children to the concepts of safe and unsafe touching, children's rights, adult's responsibilities to protect children from harm, and safe and supportive friendships. Going further, Be Safe introduces simple and personal safety rules (e.g. say NO, get away, tell someone you trust, keep on telling until someone helps you).

This program also provides detailed guidelines for educators, information for parents, and templates and tools to help schools communicate with parents and assist administrators to implement Be Safe. There are seven types of resources: 'Asha the Elephant', 'Be Safe! lesson cards', 'Be Safe! classroom poster', 'Be Safe! booklet *Your Body Belongs to You*', 'Be Safe! song cassette and CD', 'Be Safe! bookmark', and 'Be Safe! leaflet for parents and adults'. The resources used by teachers aimed to build capacity and skills of children. For instance, the 'Be Safe! lesson cards' involved story-telling, interactive games, and role-playing to teach children about how everyone has a different and a unique body, which deserves to be safe and treated with respect. These lesson cards also helped to familiarize the children with concepts such as body ownership, how to determine unsafe environments, avoid unsafe situations, and seek help. The lesson cards took around 20–30 min to teach and were delivered in all classrooms over a period of 10–12 weeks. The classroom sizes ranged from 20–30 children depending on the district and size of community. The teacher adapted the sessions as appropriate to consider the needs of different ages and cultural backgrounds of children.

1.2. Development, implementation, and monitoring

Be Safe was developed from 2005 to 2007 and was piloted in early 2007. The Ministry of Education was involved in the development phase from the very beginning. During this phase, parents, teachers, and children, along with representatives from nearly 70 organizations working in child protection, were consulted. After incorporating recommendations from the pilot, a memorandum of understanding between Canadian Red Cross and Ministry of Education was signed in 2008. The program ran from 2008 to 2014 in all 25 districts of Sri Lanka, and in 2238 schools. Building on this program, the Ten Steps program was added which focused on providing support for schools to create policies, structures and other mechanisms to protect children from violence. Ten Steps was implemented from 2010 to 2014 in eight districts in 223 schools. A total of 186,545 parents and teachers, and 125,027 students were reached by these two programs. Around 23% of schools in Sri Lanka were reached by these programs, which is more than double the program's target goal of creating safe environments in 10% of schools by 2014.

A total of 150 master trainers were recruited by in-service advisors from 97 Zonal Offices in nine provinces in Sri Lanka. The Canadian Red Cross trained the master trainers in basic counselling skills. Then, each master trainer trained two to four teachers from each project school. Upon successful training, the teachers were equipped to integrate Be Safe elements into their classrooms and to deliver the Be Safe messages to their students. However, teachers were instructed not to start training children until their parents were educated about the program. Awareness building sessions for parents were conducted by teachers during or after school hours.

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