

COVID-19: Integration of Child Protection in Return to School Advocacy Brief

East Asia and Pacific Region

Countries in the East Asia and Pacific region were the first to be impacted by COVID-19 and consequently the first to implement containment measures to prevent the spread of the virus. School closure, one of the prevention measures taken by all governments in the region, has impacted over 325 million children and adolescents.

While containment measures were put in place to keep communities and children safe from COVID-19, the home has not been a place of safety for every child. Children and adolescents have been at greater risk of suffering violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect and, for many, their mental health has been negatively impacted. Further, the deteriorating economic crisis will increasingly impact already vulnerable families, and exacerbate risks of exploitation, abuse and harmful practices for children.

Failure to address abuse, exploitation and mental health issues can negatively affect students' education - both attendance and attainment. The impact may lead to absenteeism and school drop-out and contribute to learning difficulties and lower grades.ⁱ And the significant efforts being invested to get children back to school and help students catch up following school closures will be undermined.

With virus transmission coming under control, many countries in the region have begun a gradual reopening of schools. Schools play an essential role in protecting children - it is critical that measures to prevent and respond to violence, abuse and exploitation in and through schools and to address mental health concerns are integrated in the Return to School agenda.

This brief highlights the impact of school closures and other containment measures on children's protection and wellbeing and key actions that can be taken by Governments, schools and teachers to ensure that the needs of children are addressed in plans and policies for reopening schools.

Containment measures and school closures have exacerbated protection risks for students

Violent Discipline: Prior to COVID-19 it was estimated that 3 out of 4 young children are regularly subjected to violent discipline. During containment, parents may have increasingly resorted to physical punishment and psychological aggression. This may be as a result of caregivers and other adult family members becoming increasingly stressed and distressed, the use of dysfunctional coping mechanisms, such as alcohol, and in response to the behaviour of their children, who themselves have been impacted by stress and anxiety.

Sexual Abuse: Child sexual abuse most often happens in the home and is typically perpetrated by a family member. Containment measures have increased proximity of the child with his or her abuser, while at the same time cutting off opportunities for the child to seek refuge outside the home.

Domestic Violence: Prior to COVID-19, 1 in 4 young children was living in a household where their mother was subjected to domestic violence. Witnessing domestic violence has an acute emotional impact on children. During containment, there have been significant increases in reports, with some helplines recording three times the normal level of calls reporting domestic violence, while opportunities for women to escape have been constrained, sometimes with shelters closing or stopping taking new admissions.

Online exploitation and abuse: While access to the online world has provided a valuable opportunity to continue education and a social lifeline for so many children, it also increased the risk of exposure to harmful content, cyberbullying, and online sexual exploitation and abuse, including grooming.

Exploitation and harmful practices: the worsening economic impact on families has increased the risks of exploitation of children, such as child labour, and harmful practices, such as child marriage.

Online and offline risks have been exacerbated by the impact of containment measures, which have: caused disruption of Government, NGO and community based child protection and GBV services; reduced opportunity to access help; and reduced opportunities for signs of abuse and exploitation to be identified, especially through schools, which are often first to identify vulnerable children.

Mental health: In addition, a significant impact of COVID-19 and the containment measures has been on the mental health of many children and young people. This has been caused by fear of them or their family members contracting the virus, the impact of containment measures, as well as increased stress in their family. This has been worsened by the lack of peer-support, limited contact with their friends and the undermined capacity of their parents to provide nurturing care.

Supporting and safeguarding students as they return to school

As schools reopen, they have the potential to play a critical role in identifying child protection and mental health concerns affecting their students, referring them to support services and helping them to recover in the short- and longer-term. It is, therefore, critical that Governments, Ministries of Education, schools and teachers integrate the following actions in the return to school policies and plans:

Ensure schools and teachers are equipped and ready to identify and refer children needing support
Schools and teachers provide a critical opportunity to identify children suffering or at risk of abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect and refer them for support. While recognizing that teachers may be overwhelmed as schools resume and with managing their own stress, it must also be noted that, for some vulnerable children, school may be the first time they are seeing trusted friends and adults. It may be the first time someone outside the family can spot if something is wrong.

- *Every school should have a child protection policy and procedure in place, with clear step by step guidance on how to manage child protection cases. Frameworks for these policies and procedures should be provided by the Ministry of Education to ensure minimum standards for protection.*
- *All teachers and school staff should be trained on the policy, as well as how to manage disclosures and identify protection issues.*
- *Every school should have a trained focal point to handle child protection concerns.*
- *Schools should provide information to their students on where they can seek help at school and out of school.*
- *School management should ensure that referral procedures between schools and social welfare/child protection are in place, prior to schools reopening.*

Ideally, these steps should be taken prior to students returning to school.

Ensure systematic reporting and analysis of absenteeism and school drop out and proactive follow up

In addition to struggling to afford school fees, absence of children may also flag child protection concerns emanating from the economic impact on families, including exploitation and child marriage. Particular attention should be paid to children who are at heightened risk of drop out, such as adolescent girls.

- *Local/district/provincial social welfare/child protection agencies should be an integral part of planning for return to school and should work in collaboration with the education authorities to support vulnerable children to come back.*
- *Schools should work with local communities, the education authorities and social welfare/child protection agencies to proactively follow up with children who are absent.*
- *Led and supported by the Ministry of Education, systematic collection and reporting of data of absenteeism and school drop out should be in place at school, sub national and national level, to enable proactive and strategic steps, including with the ministry responsible for social welfare, to be taken to tackle patterns of drop out.*
- *Policies and regulations in place that inadvertently or deliberately exclude children from school should be reviewed – e.g. requirements for students to have protective equipment which vulnerable families may not be able to afford, exclusion of pregnant or adolescent mothers, exclusion of migrant children. Special attention also needs to be paid to supporting children, who could not access online learning during school closures, in returning to school – e.g. children with disabilities, children without access to the internet, girls who may have been engaged in domestic chores.*

Schools should be a place of safety for children and a platform for promoting zero tolerance for violence and abuse

Schools must be a safe space for students, free from school-based sexual, physical and emotional violence perpetrated by peers, teachers and staff. Schools also need to proactively address bullying, including from stigma and discrimination related to COVID-19.

- *Schools should put in place a zero tolerance policy and approach for all types of violence, including corporal punishment, sexual violence and harassment and peer to peer bullying and violence.*

- *The Ministry of Education and schools should adopt positive discipline and equip teachers with classroom management skills that promote this approach.*
- *Teachers should be equipped to raise awareness amongst students on violence and abuse, including online abuse, create a safe environment for children to share their concerns, and inform children and young people about the steps they can take to mitigate risk and if they are experiencing or have witnessed abuse.*

Schools can support their students to recover from the mental health impact of COVID-19

Children who are struggling to cope with the fears and anxieties over the last few months can be identified and supported. Schools can also provide a platform to provide mental health and psychosocial support to students and referrals to specialized services.

- *Schools and teachers should run activities that promote the well-being of students, especially in the first few weeks when schools reopen, to support students during the transition period. Time should be given for learners and teachers to adjust before fully restarting academic lessons.*
- *The Ministry of Education should provide training on psychological first aid and psychosocial support for teaching staff and school counsellors.*
- *Schools should identify available service providers in their locality that can provide mental health and psychosocial support services for under-18s, make students and teachers aware of these services and put in place a referral mechanism for students requiring this additional support. This should be done in advance of the school reopening, if possible.*
- *Where not in place, school counsellors should be appointed in every school.*

...But only if teachers are supported themselves

A lot of responsibility falls on the shoulders of teachers. They may be dealing with their own grief and loss or worried about financial issues and their own health and safety. They may feel increased pressure to help students catch up on their learning.

- *The Ministry of Education and schools should provide teachers with support, including access to psychosocial support, to manage their own stress and anxieties, as well as those of their pupils.*

Further guidance can be found: [Framework for Reopening Schools](#); UNICEF EAPRO, 2020, [COVID-19: Integration of Child Protection in Return to School - Tips for Teachers and School Management](#); [Messages for Children and Adolescents Returning to School](#); [Template for a Child Protection Referral Pathway Between Schools and Social Welfare/Child Protection Services](#).

ⁱ School-based violence prevention: a practical handbook. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2019. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.