Reopening Schools Safely:

Recommendations for building back better to end violence against children in and through schools

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Safe to Learn

As education systems around the world are moving to reopen schools, it is more important than ever to integrate measures to prevent and respond to violence against children in and through schools, introducing interventions and services where they were not in place before, and strengthening and expanding those that already exist. The key messages below elaborate in detail what these interventions and services should comprise. They are based upon the Safe to Learn Call to Action and build on the Framework for Reopening of Schools[1], developed by UNICEF, UNESCO, World Food Program and the World Bank. They have been developed alongside a complimentary set of messages by the Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence.

Reopening Schools in a Changed Context

Many children and youth will have experienced increased violence, mental and emotional stress, during the period of school closures. Initial projections estimate substantial increases in exposure to physical, sexual and/or emotional violence as a result of COVID-19 quarantine as well as disruptions to programs designed to address the existing and ongoing issues of violence against children[2,3], which will likely have especially affected those children already at higher risk of experiencing violence, including children with disabilities, girls, and other often marginalized groups. Where learning has moved to online and other distance learning platforms, children may have been exposed to increased risks of online violence, including cyberbullying and child sexual exploitation and abuse. Access to support services, including psychosocial support as well as sexual and reproductive health services, will have been severely limited during lockdown and social distancing measures.

Other children may be facing additional anxiety as they return to school as previous factors that made school unsafe for some learners will not have disappeared. Children who were targets of bullying and harassment may have felt safer and better able to learn remotely as they did not have to face the daily dread and anxieties around facing their bullies at school, and risk factors for experiencing bullying and other forms of violence at school may have increased. Some children may be dealing with the direct consequences of the disease as well as experience increased stigmatization associated with COVID-19, including those who have family members that have been affected, which could lead to increased bullying.

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Factors that often keep children out of school will have been exacerbated, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized. Increased absenteeism and dropouts affect the ability of schools to provide an entry point for violence prevention and response. This will especially affect those that are already often left behind, including girls, refugees, children with disabilities, indigenous children, those in lower income families, those living in rural or remote areas or in crisis-affected countries as they will be more likely to fall behind with less access to digital platforms for learning. In addition, girls will have experienced heightened expectations of duties and responsibilities at home, affecting their ability to keep up with learning, while rates of early and unintended pregnancies will have increased. For example, approximately 10 million more secondary school-aged girls could be out of school after the crisis has passed[4]. This further entrenches gender gaps in education and may lead to an even further increased risk of violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, early and unintended pregnancy, and child, early and forced marriage.

Absenteeism or non-return to school can be directly related to a student's experience of violence, exploitation and neglect. Child protection issues are a factor in keeping children away from school, including child labor that prevents children from attending, violence at school, including harassment and discrimination, that creates fear, or a child could be kept away from school to hide the physical signs that he or she has been abused at home or elsewhere, or that she is pregnant. On the other hand, teachers and school staff are often at the front lines of identifying and responding to violence against children, so that violence that happens in the home or community may not only be more likely to remain unnoticed when children don't attend school, but children may also be less likely to receive the support they need.

Governments should build awareness of the changed context and learners' needs into reopening plans, recognizing the different experiences of different groups of children, and preparing and supporting education systems to reopen safely. Just as violence prevention and the provision of safe learning environments was a priority before COVID-19, it should remain a focus in any plans and efforts to reopen schools safely.

Priority Actions for Return

Governments should lead a multi-sectoral effort, working with civil society, teachers, parents and caregivers, and children themselves, to ensure that the return to school enables all children to be safe to learn. **We recommend that:**

Schools increase their efforts to provide a safe environment and to promote gender equality and inclusion:

- Existing policies and practices should be reviewed to ensure that schools are taking all possible measures to promote safety and prevent violence against children. School reopening presents an opportunity to prioritize and emphasize a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of violence.

- Through their physical spaces, teaching practices and policies, all schools should continue to strive towards ensuring equality of educational opportunities and outcomes for both boys and girls, including equal participation and support, as well as discrimination-free and inclusive environments. Understanding gender differences and specific needs of different groups of children, who have been affected by the pandemic differently, should be part of 'back to school' planning, particularly for marginalized children.

- Integrating prevention of and response to physical, psychological and sexual violence is critical for providing a safe learning environment for all children. School reopening offers an opportunity to reassess students' needs and reinstitute important prevention and protection measures that may have been missing during closures.

- Specific efforts should be made for school health and protection services to refer learners to specialized services dedicated to providing psychosocial, medical, and legal support. Schools should continue to play a role in promoting safeguarding of children online[5].

- Water and sanitation facilities are critical for a hygienic return to school. Changes to toilets, handwashing, and water facilities should consider accessibility and gender-specific needs such as menstrual health and hygiene needs of girls. Privacy and safety in and around toilet areas remains critical for reducing harassment and sexual violence against girls.

Education systems are supported to prevent absenteeism and dropouts and work closely with child protection systems:

- Dropouts can be prevented by tracking children who are regularly absent once schools reopen and those who do not return at all. Community-based organizations and youth organizations as well as teachers can play a critical role in conducting this follow-up.

- Schools should implement home-school liaison policies and procedures to help schools understand the reasons for a child's absence and take action where necessary to protect a child and prevent further absenteeism and dropouts. Where cases of violence are revealed, the education system should work closely with the child protection system to link children to adequate support services.

- Girls should be allowed to re-enter school regardless of their pregnancy status, and schools should be attentive to the heightened bullying that pregnant adolescent girls are likely to face which can be a factor in absenteeism and dropouts as well.

- School reopening should be accompanied by 'back to school' campaigns that are contextualized, inclusive, culturally relevant, and effective in changing pervasive social and gender norms that disadvantage girls, children with disabilities and other marginalized children.
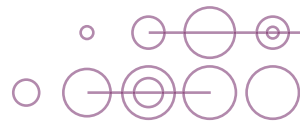
Schools are enabled to support the mental and psychosocial health of returning students and teachers:

- Teachers, counsellors, and school-based health professionals should be supported ahead of school reopening in terms of their own situations during the shutdown. They should be encouraged and supported by education authorities and school administration to work with students and engage with parents and caregivers to understand what students are feeling, how they experienced the pandemic, and what changes it has brought about, in consideration of the different needs and vulnerabilities of students based on gender, disability, and other factors.

- Schools should allow time for learners and teachers to adjust before fully restarting academic lessons and should include sessions dedicated to mental health and psychosocial support in the school's schedules to support this process, which will be necessary to better prepare students to return to academic content.

- In addition to conducting classroom-based discussions and participatory activities, teachers should be equipped with some basic skills to identify children who require additional, individual support, for example those who show signs of anxiety or depression and those who may have experienced violence. Teachers should facilitate access to targeted psychosocial support either in the school or through referral to the appropriate support services.

- It is important to recognize that many teachers will also have experienced stress or are continuing to experience stress, which could lead to increased risk of violence in the classroom and affects teachers' ability to support students. Teachers and other school-based professionals may need psychosocial support as well.

Schools prepare for increased reports of cases of violence against children:

- School staff are typically primary reporters of child abuse and neglect to child protection authorities, and their important role in reporting has become clearer than ever. On top of increased case numbers,

reporting may increase when children return to school, and school counseling, referral and child protection reporting systems should be in place and prepared to respond.

- During this time, it is especially important for schools to have clear, step-by-step guidelines and procedures in place in the event of reports, or suspicions, of any acts of physical, emotional, or sexual violence or neglect, whether occurring in or around schools or elsewhere and whether perpetrated by community members, school personnel, or peers.

Building back better after the crisis hinges on the ability of education and child protection systems to come together to meet the needs of all learners, and deliberately address gaps that have existed before but have increased due to the pandemic. Children themselves should be consulted and empowered to engage in meaningful participation in this process. Holistic education that promotes safe, inclusive and equitable learning environments is more important than ever. This requires commitment from many stakeholders and continued focus on SDGs 4, 5, and 16.2.

[1] See here for the full framework: unicef.org/documents/framework-reopening-schools

[2] COVID-19 Aftershocks, World Vision, 2020: wvi.org/publications/report/coronavirus-health-crisis/covid-19-aftershocks-perfect-storm

[3] New UNFPA projections predict calamitous impact on women's health as COVID-19 pandemic continues, UNFPA, 2020: unfpa.org/press/new-unfpa-projections-predict-calamitous-impact-womens-health-covid-19-pandemic-continues

[4] Girls' Education and COVID-19, Malala Fund, 2020

[5] See Safe to Learn guidance note "Supporting Schools to Provide a Safe Online Learning Experience" for more details and specific recommendations here

Safe to Learn is an initiative dedicated to ending violence in and through schools. Partners include: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the United Nations Girl's Education Initiative (UNGEI), the Civil Society Forum to End Violence against Children, the World Bank, Education Cannot Wait (ECW), the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the Global Business Coalition for Education, Global Affairs Canada, the World Health Organisation, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, and the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.