

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN: AN EVALUATION OF THE PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT PARTICIPANT ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

A CASE STUDY IN DOMINICA



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"I don't hearing forgive. I just pushing your head in the dirt and make you lick mud like you is a cat drinking milk."

[11-13-year-old female, Southern District]

"I warned him about coming in late again; I punched him – thumped him in his jaw – for rudeness... I drive a punch in his face and he not making that mistake again!"

[Parent, Northern District]

"Children are not to chew in class, over and over you say that, and so you have to give them a little blow."

[Teacher, Northern District]

INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the processes and findings of a project intended to develop a research design and toolkit to assess the protective environment (homes, schools, insitutions, etc.) in relation to violence against children. The project was undertaken in Dominica, which was one of five countries involved in this pilot process worldwide.

In its effort to tackle the high and growing incidence of violence and aggression among and against children and adolescents, UNICEF has focused increased attention on the development of instruments that can increase knowledge and understanding of this problem. Rapid assessment tools are therefore being sought that can quickly "research the issue cost-effectively and in a pragmatic way without compromising high standards of empirical research".¹

UNICEF is also keen for children to have a more active role in the research process. Their greater participation should lead to the development of more relevant and useful measurement tools and more sensitive intervention strategies. Any rapid assessment tool should therefore seek to:

- a. **Offer a comprehensive snapshot of violence and children**, providing information on the various aspects of the occurrence of violence in a child's life and on the strengths and weaknesses of the protective environment.
- b. **Enable participation of children** to ensure that they are not merely respondents from whom information is collected, but are also primary actors in the use of the tool and in the process of researching the protective environment.

- c. **Enable intervention at varied levels** so that the tool in its use benefits children both directly and indirectly.

The objectives of the project thus included analysing current data on the protective environment at schools and identifying the data needs for protective environment assessment in Dominica; ensuring child participation; drafting and finalizing research instruments, research methodology and training materials; and identifying and selecting research instruments/ study methods/ target groups.

The research was expected to touch on all aspects of the protective environment, including:

- ◆ Perceptions of violence;
- ◆ Attitudes towards violence;
- ◆ Behaviours thought to be violent;
- ◆ Typologies of violence;
- ◆ Role of violence in children's life (at school);
- ◆ Experience with violence at school (including identity, age and sex of perpetrator, number of experiences, reason for violence, location);
- ◆ Impact of violence at school on children;
- ◆ Existence and effectiveness of social services;
- ◆ Reporting violence and consequences (i.e., current legislation, enforcement, follow-up);
- ◆ Community awareness and teachers'/ parents' capacities; and
- ◆ Demography of respondents, location.

The main target groups were parents, teachers, experts (key informers) and children in primary and secondary schools.

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HOW THE STUDY WAS CARRIED OUT

Instrument development

It was agreed that this kind of research needed to be an ongoing process in Dominica as the tools needed to be developed, tested and retested so as to arrive at the most workable, efficient and useful instrument. The research was conducted in two phases, the first of which had two parts.

Phase I - Part 1

In this phase, the focus was on the main urban area of Dominica: the capital of Roseau. The results of the material and experiences of this phase were examined and analysed and a report has been prepared and presented to UNICEF.

Lessons learned

- a. While the instrument worked well with the older age groups, it was too long for the youngest age group whose attention span is normally limited.
- b. The instrument needed to be more culturally appropriate and sensitive.

Phase I - Part 2

At this stage a child psychologist and an artist were added to the team of researchers. The material and information gained from this first round were then used to alter and refine the instruments being used. Further discussions were also held with the principal moderators of the focus group in Dominica. Additional modifications were made to the language and length of the instruments.

Most important, however, was that for the youngest participants the material was now woven around a story line that personalized local folk characters and animals. A parrot was chosen as the main character because is a national symbol in Dominica but is also endangered. It was given a name, a family and a

community. Children were asked to identify with the characters and exercise their imagination as they faced a variety of threats and conflicting situations.

Lessons learned

- a. The folk story approach worked exceptionally well. It stimulated and kept the children's attention and facilitated easy and open discussions of the issues.
- b. In environments where violence levels as well as the tolerance of violent conflict resolution tactics may be high, there must be an emphasis in training on ensuring that researchers, facilitators and moderators do not let their own views and practices intrude into the research environment.

Phase II

In the second phase, which is the subject of this report, the study was extended to include schools outside the capital. The instrument was tested among groups of 6-16-year-olds who varied according to age group, gender, socio-economic profile of the school and geographical location (i.e., urban versus rural, as well as from the Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western School Districts). While the main point of entry into the research environment was the school, it was decided that the research instrument should also seek to incorporate family/home situations and experiences since it was recognized that violence in schools was likely to be closely related to experiences with violence in and/or around the home and family.

The measurement and assessment instruments

The research instruments were developed using instruments and measures that have been used in more quantitative efforts within and outside of the Caribbean as guides. The focus was on those measures that have been used for groups

The folk story approach worked exceptionally well. It stimulated and kept the children's attention and facilitated easy and open discussions of the issues.

as near as possible in age to the ones to be investigated in this exercise. A special challenge was to develop measures appropriate for the youngest age groups, while ensuring similar coverage of the issues among all groups.

The themes and issues to be covered were drawn from studies that had successfully measured definitions and perceptions of violence, as well as exposure to violence and its effects. Tools for measuring emotional and physical punishment described in a handbook published by Save the Children were also used as guides.² Questions were then developed for the focus group discussions to cover a number of different areas (see Box 1).

Students were asked for responses to a variety of situations and life events – ranging from fairly everyday situations to potentially traumatic ones. The incidents involved casual acquaintances, friends and family. The search was for the types of incidents that could almost immediately draw out either violence-oriented responses or less confrontational and more peaceful ones.

Focus group discussions

The results from Phase I as well as intensive feedback discussions with the focus groups facilitators from that phase strongly supported the decision to use focus group discussions as the main method of eliciting the information from children of all ages. A 'presentation, enactment and enquiry' strategy was utilized whereby respondents were presented with a scenario by the moderator, then asked to volunteer for role-play of the incident and finally took part in a discussion. In addition to obtaining the immediate responses, moderators were provided with probe questions to further guide and stimulate the discussion.

The scenarios presented varied according to the age group involved. At the end of the focus group discussion, respondents were asked a number of questions designed to assess their

BOX 1: THEMES AND ISSUES TO BE INVESTIGATED

The research sought to cover the following areas:

- ◆ Attitudes to and definitions of violence;
- ◆ Definitions of violence between different groups of persons and in different situations, such as the school yard or at home;
- ◆ General beliefs supporting aggression;
- ◆ Effects of violence on self;
- ◆ Alternative methods of handling conflicts or problems; and
- ◆ Distress symptoms following actual experiences with, or witnessed incidents of, violence.

levels of exposure to various types of violence. All age groups were asked an identical set of questions. The older groups provided the answers by completing questionnaires. The questions were read out to the younger ones, who were also shown pictures that illustrated the situations presented. Focus group discussions were also held with groups of parents and teachers associated with some of the schools. The length of the sessions ranged from two to two and a half hours.

All focus group protocols as well as the scenarios that were used were developed in close consultation with the local Project Coordinator, as well as with all the focus group facilitators/moderators. Particular attention was given to making sure that the language and illustrations were culturally appropriate and meaningful. During the training sessions further modifications were made.

To help ensure the accuracy and completeness of the focus group reports, two note-takers were assigned to each group discussion. At the end of each session, the note-takers and the group moderator worked together in the discussion of the material collected and the

Table 1: Distribution of children, by area and type of school

Area	Primary	Secondary	TOTAL
Main urban area	65	53	118
Rest of Dominica	149	136	285
TOTAL	214	189	403

preparation of the final group report.

Selection process

The schools (listed on page 19) were selected based on information gained from key informants both in and outside the education sector about the socio-economic catchment areas traditionally served by the particular schools. While this is admittedly impressionistic, knowledge of 'low status' and 'high status' or 'preferred' schools has long been part of the conventional wisdom of most Caribbean countries and normally heavily influences the choices and selection of schools that both parents and children seek to make during and through the Common Entrance Examination process.

Teachers were asked to list all the children in the targeted age groups. Parental permission for participation was then required. Once the children arrived, a group of 8-10 was randomly selected by the moderators.

In addition, three groups of teachers and two of parents were selected for focus group discussions in Phase 2. These were chosen on the basis of whether or not they had, or were teaching, children in a primary or secondary school. Specific protocols were developed for parents and teachers. Although the areas dealt with were similar to those covered in the children's groups, questions were added about expectations of the school and educational system, perceived problems with the current educational system and opinions about how these could be addressed.

In the end (Phase 1 + Phase 2) a total of 54

focus groups were held: 43 with children aged 6-16 years and 9 with teachers and parents. There was a total of 403 children (see Table 1), 48 teachers and 25 parents. This resulted in averages per group of 9 for the children, 9.6 for the teachers and 6 for the parents. There were only 4 male teachers and 1 male parent, but this accurately reflects the dominance of the teaching profession by females as well as the relative non-involvement of males in general school activities.

Pre-discussion warm-ups and breaks

To encourage easy and greater participation in the discussions, a number of games and exercises were used at the beginning of each group discussion. These were taken from the UNICEF-compiled 'Manual for Facilitators and Trainers Involved in Participatory Group Events'.³ Group moderators were provided with a choice of exercises that could be utilized; each was selected so as to be as age relevant as possible. Some of the more experienced moderators also presented exercises that they had successfully used before in Dominica. A number of them were adopted for this study.

In addition to taking part in 'ice-breakers' or warm-up activities, the younger children were given several breaks – especially where there was a normal school break in progress. Finally, to encourage participation and retain attention, the younger children were asked to participate in a colouring competition related to the local folk character used.

Gender difference and bias

So as to both represent and counter possible gender differences, the perpetrator as well as the victim in the scenarios could be either female or male, and the pictorial illustrations also utilized both male and female characters. These were then randomly distributed to the children.

In addition, to help counter any possible gender bias related to the moderators, there were an equal number of females and males.

4 PARTICIPANT ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

...the quality and success of focus group research is heavily dependent on the abilities of the moderators and their capacity to facilitate group discussions. It is therefore important to select persons who are highly experienced in its use and in dealing with the particular types of respondents.

Training

There is a too common but erroneous belief that focus group research is easy and can be done by anyone. However, there is now enough evidence that the quality and success of focus group research is heavily dependent on the abilities of the moderators and their capacity to facilitate group discussions. It is therefore important to select persons who are highly experienced in its use and in dealing with the particular types of respondents.

Limited human resource capacity in countries like Dominica will expectedly prevent the adequate and full pursuit of this ideal. A workshop was therefore held for persons with experience in dealing with children in the age group targeted, and who were deemed to have the personality traits suitable for comfortable discourse with these kinds of respondents (see Box 2).

There were two important additions to the training exercises. One was to bring in children from the targeted age groups so as to test the instruments and obtain feedback from them. The other was to schedule a special session for moderators on the importance of separating their research and social personas. A problem had arisen in the second part of Phase I where a moderator used corporal punishment to discipline a child in one of the focus groups sessions. The incident helped to highlight the possible pervasiveness of a culture of violence and indicated the need to directly confront the problem in open discussion with the field researchers. This turned out to be an extremely useful and necessary set of discussions. At the end, the field workers were provided with suggestions about how best to deal with similar situations should they arise.

Finally, possible strategies for dealing with the anticipated short attention spans of young children were discussed as were issues related to ethics, confidentiality and the importance or remaining value neutral at all times.

BOX 2: THE TRAINING WORKSHOP

The workshop was intended to provide training on:

- ◆ The role and objectives of focus group research;
- ◆ The usefulness and limitations of focus group research;
- ◆ Techniques for the effective conduct of focus group discussions and the critical role of the moderator; and
- ◆ The goals and objectives of the project, which was designed to develop qualitative instruments that can quickly gather information on violence and children – generally, and in Dominica.

Another critical task was to enable familiarity with the research instruments for the focus group discussions. This was done through requiring all participants (moderators and note-takers) to practice their use through role-play. At the end of each session the performance of the moderators was discussed, problem areas were identified and deliberated on and best practices were highlighted for possible use by everyone.

Four other important functions of the workshop were to:

- ◆ Encourage maximum commonality in the facilitation of the group discussions and in the coverage of the note-taking.
- ◆ Sensitize participants to the likely range of opinions and indicate possible ways of facilitating the discussions;
- ◆ Try to determine the skills and suitability of the participants for successfully conducting and moderating focus group research; and
- ◆ Allow participants to suggest changes to the phraseology and concepts so as to make them more culturally appropriate.

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THE RESULTS

Since the primary objective was to test the usefulness of a tool, the results focus not so much on the information gathered as on what this information tells us about the accuracy and likely validity of the instrument. Thus, for example, if the instrument appears to be producing counter-intuitive data, or data with several anomalies, then it might be expected that there is significant problem with the tool and how it was administered.

It is important to be clear about what kinds of information can be reasonably delivered by focus group research – especially in light of its growing popularity as a ‘quick and dirty’ methodology. In our view, it is especially valuable as a way of producing in-depth information on a given subject and of providing useful information on subjective meaning and reasoning. It can also produce useful insights on sensitive topics such as the one under scrutiny here. These kinds of data are not easily obtained through one-stop quantitative methodologies – especially where a fair amount of rapport needs to be built up between researcher and respondent before any meaningful data can be obtained. It can also suggest likely trends and patterns.

The methodology used did not seek to arrive at a consensus. Rather, dominant trends as well as the variations in the responses are noted and discussed. Any numbers presented are therefore only used to indicate the tendencies/ trends in this particular set of groups and there is no attempt to generalize. Indeed, the range of and variety in the responses helps to illustrate the processes of change and points of development among the respondents. If those can be fairly accurately determined, then this may also help to identify possible entry points for intervention.

Acceptability of the Instrument

The instrument did not present much of a

challenge and was easily managed. All the respondents reacted very well. The feedback from the moderators as well as the quality of the information received indicate that the discussions were free and open. The focus group discussion format in general, and the role-playing of the various scenarios in particular, proved to be very productive. The protocols were not too lengthy for the older teenagers, though the group of 6-8-year-olds began to tire and lose some interest after the first hour. Their attention was usually regained when it was time to colour and when they were given short breaks or asked to play a game. The story of the parrot and the folk characters really captivated the primary school students’ interest and they easily identified with the characters.

Overall, the students tended to be hesitant initially but became more comfortable and responsive as the session progressed. In cases where there were reticent children in the group, the use of ‘ice-breakers’ and warm-up exercises were found to be effective in drawing them into the general discussion. The students in the urban districts tended to be more responsive than those from the rural districts. The children especially enjoyed, and were frequently excited by, the role-plays. Indeed, it sometimes became difficult to restrain the push for participation. These activities also helped to keep their attention over the long period.

Some moderators also reported that the scenarios for the questions that assessed distress symptoms were very effective in drawing out the children to express how they would feel in particular situations. Some actual conversations and comments are reported below, and it is not difficult to immediately see the frankness and honesty of the responses. The gender of the moderator did not appear to have any significant impact on this. The weaving of the questions and issues into a story that used local folk characters was also very valuable in

Moderators reported that in more than one instance they were so struck by the high levels of exposure to violence being reported that they felt obliged to check if the child understood what he/she was writing, and if any other adult outside of the focus group situation could confirm what was being reported.

another way: it was effectively used with the younger participants to explain and discuss issues of confidentiality and the business of coming out of themselves to imagine possible situations.

Moderators reported that in more than one instance they were so struck by the high levels of exposure to violence being reported that they felt obliged to check if the child understood what he/she was writing, and if any other adult outside of the focus group situation could confirm what was being reported. In such cases, the children were later referred to the appropriate persons for assistance. These occurrences help to strengthen our confidence in the capacity of this instrument to stimulate open and honest discussion. They also reinforce the recommendations from this study about the importance of utilizing group facilitators who have the skills (or have the capacity to acquire them) to deal sensitively with such situations should they arise.

There are one or two questions that may still require some adjustment. However, these problem areas are considered to be fairly minor and easily corrected. It would also seem necessary to place time boundaries on the screening questions that ask about actual experiences and the witnessing of violent incidents. It is quite

possible that those in the older age groups could be referring to incidents that occurred when they were much younger. The current format makes it difficult to draw any firm conclusions about differences in the levels of exposure by age group.

The Violent Environment

Patterns of exposure

An examination of the data obtained quickly shows fairly high levels of exposure to violent events, as well as the fairly high levels of tolerance that one may expect would be associated with those kinds of exposure levels. While the levels of exposure are high, they are nonetheless consistent and follow fairly expected or predictable gendered patterns (Box 3). In terms of the witnessing of violent incidents, the differences are not so clear – suggesting that while actual and personal experiences may be different, both genders occupy similar environments.

The data also suggest that, while the incidence of crime and violence may be on the increase, much of the exposure to violence continues to be confined to peer-group conflicts and the context of punishment and discipline. Since this was not a study of violence in the wider community,

BOX 3: PATTERNS OF EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

- ◆ Boys are more likely to be involved in fights among their peers: the proportion of boys who said that they had never been hit by another child ranged from 21-33 per cent, whereas among girls the range was 37-55 per cent. Similarly, the question about being “beaten up at school” yielded ranges of 67-100 per cent for the girls for the “never experienced” response and 45-77 per cent for the boys.
- ◆ Boys are more likely to receive corporal punishment at home. The comparative ranges are 6-12 per cent for boys and 23-27 per cent for girls with respect to a “never experienced” response. In terms of corporal punishment at school, with the exception of the youngest age group the girls appear more likely to be the ones giving a “never experienced” answer.
- ◆ Girls are more likely to be robbed at school. The range for boys reporting “never” is 43-63 per cent, while that for girls is 21-47 per cent.
- ◆ The younger children and boys in general are more likely to have been chased by gangs at school.

Most teachers accept that non-violent forms of discipline are preferable, and some recognize the possible dangers of using corporal punishment. ...However, the focus groups with the teachers showed that it was sometimes not difficult for them to “do it” even if they did not “want to”.

BOX 4: CHILDREN'S REPORTS OF VIOLENCE BY TEACHERS

“I came late to class, and did not say ‘Good afternoon’. The teacher said that I was rude, so she beat me and sent me outside so that I could come back in and say ‘Good afternoon’.”

[6-8-year-old female, Northern District]

“Once, the teacher told us to put all the nuts away. We didn’t listen; the teacher just took off his belt and started lashing us.”

[14-16-year-old male, Eastern District]

“Once I did not do nothing, and I was in my seat. I go by a boy and the teacher called and bring me to the principal, the principal cane me and the teacher hit me on my chest.”

[14-15-year-old male, Northern District]

“A teacher once locked me inside the class-room and I pee on me.”

[9-10-year-old female, Eastern District]

“Once I was late – the teacher pull down my pants and beat me with a big ruler.”

[9-10-year-old male, Southern District]

“In primary school the teacher told me to go outside and hold two flower pots on one leg. I said I not doing it. Someone told her so she just take an iron and lash me with it and my head got red.”

[14-16-year-old female, Eastern District]

“Once I came late and tell the teacher I was working for my mother. She pull me, hit me and send me outside.”

[6-8-year-old male, Western District]

“In primary school I was talking and laughing and the teacher called me to the front and beat me.”

[11-13-year-old male, Northern District]

this finding is to be expected. It may be recalled that the Phase I report noted that more than half (52 per cent) of the children aged 7-10 years old reported that they had witnessed someone being attacked with a knife, cutlass (machete) or some other sharp object in or around the home; in this same age group almost three quarters (73 per cent) reporting seeing someone at home being hit, punched or cuffed by a member of the family. Even so, actual and personal experience was more limited and tended to involve fist fights with other children or being hit by a teacher or parent/ guardian.

This kind of consistency in the findings encourages confidence in the accuracy and sensitivity of the instruments used. This in turn recommends greater attention to some of the possible implications of the findings that report high levels of violence in the context of punishment and discipline at home and at school. Since the proportion of children who have never been hit by a teacher ranges from 2-60 per cent and averages out at 14 per cent, and the proportion at home also range from 6-27 per cent and averages at 15 per cent, then questions perhaps need to be raised about the possibly indiscriminate use of violent corporal punishment and its effects on encouraging high tolerance levels. A few actual cases illustrate what can and does occur at school (Box 4).

Most teachers accept that non-violent forms of discipline are preferable, and some recognize the possible dangers of using corporal punishment. According to one:

“There’s a student in class with a lot of anger. I guess it is because he saw his father kill his mother. I said I never want to hit him again, because with children like that you never know what they can do.”

[Teacher, Northern District School]

However, the focus groups with the teachers showed that it was sometimes not difficult for them to “do it” even if they did not “want to”.

"In extreme cases like if a child is misbehaving all the time or ignoring you, not paying attention... you give them a touch up."

"I prefer to use a strap."

"The hand is to give them a little pinch now and then."

"For class work, a little boy who always does his own thing? I lay something on him now and then."

[Teachers, Northern District]

Types of physical violence

Specific questions asked about the types of 'weapons' used to deliver corporal punishment also reveal remarkably consistent responses. In every case the stick or cane appears to be the preferred method, followed by the strap or belt and then the hand (see Tables 2 and 3). While this may be expected in the schools where the use of the cane has a long tradition, the prevalence of the stick as a method at home is somewhat surprising.

At the same time, the size of the 'Other' category should be noted. This covers a wide range of instruments including scissors, stones, pencils, pens, screwdriver, needles, blades, cutlass, brooms, bottles, forks, chalk, blackboard dusters and galvanized zinc. Breaking down this category reveals that the use of the stone and cutlass at home can be extremely high (up to 15 per cent of the reported cases among 9-10-year-old boys).

Table 2: Methods used for the delivery of corporal punishment, by age group and actual experience and witnessed – Males

Instrument	Experienced at home		Seen at home		Experienced at school		Seen at school	
	6-8 yrs	9-10 yrs	6-8 yrs	9-10 yrs	6-8 yrs	9-10 yrs	6-8 yrs	9-10 yrs
Stick/Cane	31.8	24.7	45.2	34.5	58.0	54.2	46.5	41.1
Strap/Belt	40.9	29.6	21.5	13.8*	25.8	22.7	20.9	21.4
Fist	18.2	30.9	23.8	41.4	12.9	15.9	23.3	17.8
Other	9.1	14.8	9.5	10.3	3.3	4.9	9.3	19.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	44	81	42	51	31	48	43	56

* Stone

Note: N = Total number of times mentioned. One child would frequently identify more than one method

Table 3: Methods used for the delivery of corporal punishment, by age group and actual experience and witnessed – Females

Instrument	Experienced at home		Seen at home		Experienced at school		Seen at school	
	6-8 yrs	9-10 yrs	6-8 yrs	9-10 yrs	6-8 yrs	9-10 yrs	6-8 yrs	9-10 yrs
Stick/Cane	35.7	31.4	60.0	47.6	46.9	51.5	37.5	45.1
Strap/Belt	9.5	25.7	5.0	–	28.1	27.2	20.0	21.6
Fist	23.8	37.1	25.0	35.7	21.9	9.1	20.0	25.5
Other	31.0	5.8	10.0	16.7	3.1	12.2	22.5	7.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	44	81	42	51	31	48	43	56

Note: N = Total number of times mentioned. One child would frequently identify more than one method.

To the question about the possibly indiscriminate use of corporal punishment, another question may therefore be added relating to the severity of the punishments being meted out. In this connection, the relatively high proportion (25-55 per cent) of the children who report having been burnt at least once by something (candle, hot iron, stove or cigarette) at home, or having witnessed someone being burnt (18-40 per cent) should be noted.

Some of the responses by teachers to minor offences such as lateness were noted earlier (Box 4). The focus groups with parents about

The picture that emerges is one of a fairly violent environment, or at least one in which the high levels of support for corporal punishment facilitates the use of the more extreme measures...

how particular types of offences were punished are instructive:

"Burn their hands." (for stealing)
"Take out two teeth." (for being rude)
"I will break his arm!" (for fighting)
[Parent group, Southern District]

"Beating till beating cannot finish." (for stealing)

"My older daughter was speaking to me in an unfriendly manner and it hurt so much... I watch the chile – my 26-year-old daughter – I had cutlass nearby... I watch the cutlass, but she couldn't see it... I hit her one cuff in her head she fall down... I sit on her... told her not to disrespect me..."

"Personally I hate a liar, and a liar is a thief. So, if you lie I will do you something not to lie again... I will take the mouth you lie with and make it feel hot!"
[Parent group, Northern District]

Tolerance of violence

The picture that emerges is one of a fairly violent environment, or at least one in which the high levels of support for corporal punishment facilitates the use of the more extreme measures (even if not condoned). Perhaps not surprising, therefore, is the violence in the language found at all ages. Predictably, minor incidents such as insults, possible 'fouls' in school games or boyfriend/ girlfriend jealousies called forth less aggressive responses in comparison to those considered to be more major such as deliberately ruining a carefully prepared school project or a violent situation at home. Where an aggressive response to a particular conflict situation seemed called for, the responses almost invariably revolved around violent expressions; but somewhat surprising was the frequency with which minor offences also drew violent responses – even from the youngest children, both females and males. A wide sample from different age groups, genders

and geographical location is presented in Box 5

There are some other fairly predictable variations. First, boys appeared to be more likely to give violent responses – *"Slap him in his face for disrespecting me"* [11-13-year-old boy, Northern district] – while girls seemed more likely to *"cry"*, *"go to parent"* or *"walk away"*. However, great caution must be taken with such a conclusion; more quantitative research is required. Second, those in the more socio-economically disadvantaged areas (such as the schools selected from the Western and Southern Districts) appear to be more likely to give aggressive and violence-oriented answers. And third, in squabbles and quarrels, boys were unanimously expected to have violent fights with each other and a majority expected girls to have a 'cat fight', but for those between boy and girl the responses were considerably more mixed – with most anticipating a less violent confrontation.

It is especially revealing to examine the responses to questions about how the respondent would have handled a given situation – especially where they had expressed preferences for alternative methods. In the scenarios where a teacher's or parent's response to an infraction had been violent – and the respondents not only disagreed with the action taken, but also recommended alternative but non-violent forms of punishment – it was intriguing to find that their own action would not have been significantly different. A number of examples are provided:

- In a group of 6-8-year-old males [Northern District] there was a mixed response (but with most disagreeing) to the mother's harsh (and violent) response to a bit of disapproved behaviour. When asked if there were other forms of discipline that the mother could have used, all described strategies such as isolation and denial of privileges. However, when asked what they themselves would have done most would beat the child, several would deny food for at least 24 hours and

BOX 5: SAMPLE RESPONSES FROM CHILDREN OF HOW THEY WOULD RESPOND TO SITUATIONS OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT

i) Another child ruins a homework project

"I'd clean (severely beat) them up."
[9-10-year-old male, Northern District]

"You better run! I would hit you until you fall down."
[14-16-year-old male, Eastern District]

"Kick him until he vomits."
[11-13-year-old male, Eastern District]

"I just boxing his head."
[6-8-year-old female, Southern District]

"I would give you the paper and tell you to do it over. If you refuse I would puncture your face."
[11-13-year-old female, Southern District]

ii) An accidental collision in the school yard or an insult

"Once a boy bat down my book. At break time I took the scissors and cut his book to pieces."
[11-13-year-old female, Eastern District]

"Break one another teeth or head."
[6-8-year-old male, Eastern District]

"Make the other person's head flat, flat like a frying pan."
[9-10-year-old male, Northern District]

"Shove them first, then cutlass after."
[14-16-year-old male, Eastern District]

"First I giving her something to feel then I going for my brother!"
[11-13-year-old female, Northern District]

"Lash back – these days it is hard to ignore because the person will go and boast."
[14-16-year-old female, Eastern District]

"Jook (stick) her in her vagina."
[6-8-year-old male, Western District]

iii) Punishment from a teacher

"Boy! The teacher that hitting me? I warning them!"
[14-16-year-old male, Eastern District]

"When I come out of hospital I'd hit her back with the same object she hit me with. I'd show her how it feels!"
[11-13-year-old female, Northern District]

"In primary school me and mister (the teacher) were wrestling, the teacher shook me up; I get vex and I box the teacher in her head."
[11-13-year-old male, Northern District]

"The next teacher that coming I giving them trouble because I vex and I don't like anybody to trouble me when I vex."
[14-16-year-old, Northern District]

iv) Punishment at home

Two fairly extreme responses were:

"You cannot look at a 15-year-old and hit them! You could get a cool cutlass in your back!"
[14-16-year-old male, Eastern District]

"If it is my stepmother I would hit her back, and if she is not nice I would put blows on her."
[14-16-year-old female, Eastern District]

Much more common, however, was a comment such as:

"I living under my mother's roof and I am not 18. She tells me to come home early it is her responsibility to punish or hit me."
[14-16-year-old female, Eastern District]

...many felt it necessary to point out that emotional violence could be worse than physical violence. Indeed, some almost preferred physical violence as, unlike emotional and psychological violence, there was an identifiable beginning and end.

one would *"buss (i.e. burst) her skin"*.

- In a group of 9-10-year-old males [Northern District] almost all disagreed with the mother's violent punishment, yet almost all would *"beat him with the hand"* or even *"with a wire"*, or *"dent his head with a pot"*. Only two of them would apply some form of non-violent punishment.
- In a group of 6-8-year-old males [Western District], all felt the child should be punished but objected to the violent methods. Instead, various forms of denial of privileges were recommended. Nevertheless, all but two would themselves *"thump, hit, pinch, beat with a strap, hit with an iron, horsewhip, or use a stick that had prickles on it"*.
- In a group of 9-10-year-old males [Eastern District] all preferred non-violent punishment, but would themselves *"Put hot bakes on him"*, *"burn his hands so he cannot play video games again"* or *"send hot oil on his face."*
- In a group of 6-8-year-old males [Eastern District] only one would not do the same as the above, and they added, *"While ironing my clothes I would rest it on his face when he come in for him to listen"* and *"I would take a knife and hit him on his bottom"*.

Emotional violence

The assessment tool was also able to bring out the importance of emotional violence to the respondents. The younger ones tended to include it in their definitions of violence. Thus for example, bullying, cursing and insulting were put in the same bracket as beating and fighting. Among the older age groups as well as among parents and teachers the difference between the two was recognized, but many felt it necessary to point out that emotional violence could be worse than physical violence. Indeed, some almost preferred physical violence as, unlike emotional and psychological violence,

there was an identifiable beginning and end. Two observations illustrate the point:

"You can hurt my body, but when you hurt my mind you cannot see the scars."

[Teacher, Northern District]

"Physical abuse involves pain and pain will go away after a certain period of time. Emotional the child will always remember. The child might grow up with that."

[Teacher, Western District]

Distress caused by violence

In this environment and with the prevailing attitudes and values, should one then expect to find high levels of immunity to, and lack of concern surrounding, the incidence and perpetration of violence? The questions that sought to assess distress levels that could follow exposure to violence also produced information consistent with the high tolerance and exposure levels found. The respondents were presented with a number of situations that varied in level of severity, but that also placed them in home and school environments. The scenarios included situations among peers as well as with figures of authority and affection.

In this instance, the responses were consistent and perhaps to be expected – thereby indicating the reliability of the measurement tools. Almost invariably, the most traumatizing scenario was that describing violent confrontation between caregivers at home. The majority of the children at all ages would be nervous, afraid, bothered and very sad; most would get nightmares and lose sleep over it.

On the other hand, while many felt that they would be sad for the victims in the situations involving a conflict between their peers, or between a teacher and a child, the large majority (75 per cent) would not really be bothered by it, would not lose sleep or get nightmares over it, and indeed there were some who would enjoy the spectacle (see Box 6).

As might also be expected there were some variations according to age and gender, so that girls and the younger respondents were more likely to be distressed. Those in the more economically disadvantaged areas were also less likely to show distress.

The Usefulness of Apparent Contradiction or Ambivalence

In an earlier section, the differences between what children thought were appropriate forms of punishment and what they themselves would actually do were described. As these variations and apparent contradictions in the responses were examined more closely, the question arose that perhaps what was being observed was not only high levels of immunity to violence or a lack of altruism and empathy, but also some

attempts among the children to carefully define and circumscribe the circumstances in which involvement should take place, and therefore also the types of responses and conflict resolution tactics required. To the extent that the measurement tool could help to highlight and even describe that process, then it could also be used to help identify appropriate points for intervention. It may be that those discussions could be used as a basis for further discussion and counselling.

One potential value of this tool could lie in its ability to pinpoint potentially 'soft' points. In this regard, the 'spontaneous reaction and probe' format was found to be very useful. Children were first asked for their immediate reactions to a given situation, and then specific probe questions were asked. It was soon noticed

BOX 6: HOW THE MAJORITY OF CHILDREN SAY THEY WOULD BE AFFECTED BY SITUATIONS OF CONFLICT

Violent confrontation between caregivers at home.

"I would be shocked, call for help." "I would hit that man blows [as] father wrong."
[11-13-year-old males, Eastern District]

*"Boy! I running for the police." "Nervous."
"Would jump in to help the lady."*
[11-13-year-old males, St. Andrews]

"Will shiver."
[9-10-year-old female, Western District]

"Will get cold sweat."
[11-13-year-old female, Southern District]

"Yeah, it would always be on my mind. I would run for my life!"
[14-16-year-old female, Eastern District]

Conflict between their peers or between a teacher and a child

"I would behave in class but, every time the

teacher came in the class I would get angry."
[11-13-year-old male, Eastern District]

"If the person was close to me I'd feel a way [i.e. bothered], but if not close to me I'd help the person to beat her."
[11-13-year-old female, Eastern District]

I'd feel that the teacher is not fit to be teaching children; I'd take the same duster and hit her in her head."
[11-13-year-old female, Northern District]

"I would feel sad in a way, but I would still jump and say 'fight, fight'."
[11-13-year-old female, Southern District]

"I would laugh them down." "I would be bothered if I know the children." "Boy, you mad? No teacher can do that to me!"
[11-13-year-old males, Northern District]

"I would be afraid of the teacher, and always watch my back; but it is a big joke if it is not you; if it were you it could break you down."
[14-16-year-old male, Eastern District]

...the data have indicated...at least three types of persons here: those with an immediate and aggressive response; those with an ambivalent response where they are not really inclined to violent conflict resolution tactics, but will use them if pressed; and those who are unlikely to follow any but a peaceful path.

that at this stage the discussion opened up quite well and the children were more willing to move away from the more 'correct' answers. Specific efforts were made to ensure that the probe questions were not suggesting answers to the children.

Once the discussions became more involved and open, we were struck by a number of other apparent contradictions or ambivalences. First, there were those who had high levels of exposure to violence at home and at school yet consistently sought to travel the more non-violent path. One implication of this is that those with high exposure levels at home may not necessarily evolve into perpetrators of violence. To the extent that these kinds of non-violent responses in violent environments were also from the younger children – as was the case in one of the Eastern District schools – it may be that this is not simply a part of the maturation process. Second, however, the converse was also found: that is, violent language, but low levels of exposure to violence at home or school. Third, there were those who were clearly seeking to reason and figure out an appropriate reaction or response (Box 7).

Certainly this tool is not able to definitively identify the risk factors for the perpetration of or involvement in violent events. Another kind of study utilizing a different methodology would be required. However, the data have indicated that there are at least three types of persons here: those with an immediate and aggressive response; those with an ambivalent response where they are not really inclined to violent conflict resolution tactics, but will use them if pressed; and those who are unlikely to follow any but a peaceful path. Those with violent language expressions were more likely to be the ones with high levels of exposure and appear inured to the occurrence of violence, but this was not always the case.

To the extent that any kind of variations are uncovered, then possible lines of enquiry and even action may be identified. Thus, for

example, since not all those exposed to violence or who exhibit violent language patterns necessarily tread the same violent behaviour path, it would seem necessary to try to identify those factors that act as deterrents or preventive devices and those that act as triggers for violent behaviours. At the same time, to the extent that the tool is able to identify levels or areas of ambivalence, as well as emerging efforts to move from the automatic and child-like response of 'wiping them all out' to one that seeks to find the best ways to manage relationships and conflict situations, then it can also help to identify the best age points for different types of intervention.

Stages of Child Development

At this point, a comment about the stages of child development is useful. At the present time the multiplicity of theoretical models available to explain and/or predict children's behaviour can be confusing. Most experienced researchers and practitioners accept the fact that no one model can completely account for any given situation. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that children develop in many different ways – mentally, physically, emotionally and socially. They also pass through developmental stages, and at each stage a number of important 'developmental life tasks' present themselves.⁴

An example of childhood developmental tasks highlighted in the literature include 'becoming attached to caregivers', 'developing self-control', 'developing moral attitudes', 'mastering social and other life skills', 'adjusting to school' and 'becoming increasingly independent and self-directed'.

The role of the parent/ caregiver and other important adult role models such as teachers is central to any understanding of a child's behaviour.

Basic child development tells us that the toddler stage (age 2-4 years old) is a self-centred one.

Toddlers tend to see things from their own point of view, and they break the rules because they are experimenting with the world. By the time they reach 5-6 years of age, children become more co-operative and are more able to appreciate another person's viewpoint (although it is hard for them to always remember this). They start to understand that they need to follow rules, but see the adult as a all-powerful being who needs to be obeyed. Then between the ages of 7 and 11, children begin to understand that there are different points of views. They start to exert their authority and want to negotiate. They become more assertive and less fearful of 'powerful' adults (e.g. parents and teachers), who are no longer assumed to know everything. 'Back chatting' becomes more pronounced.

In the next stage, between the ages of 12 and 16, children develop internal standards of what makes a nice person or what is right, though this tends to be driven by their peer group. They are often more forgiving as they can put themselves in the other person's shoes. However, this is also a period of intense emotional needs and fragile self concept – a need to receive peer approval in order to feel good – and sometimes this means acting in a way that goes against previously held views, including at times deeply held religious and moral ones.

It is important to point out that environmental factors might slow down or even stop a particular stage of development. For example, a child may function at a lower emotional or physical level when under extreme stress. Also some children, because of effective parenting or good teaching, may show more 'emotional intelligence' than other children their age and are able to understand their feelings, control their own impulses and anger and show empathy. Such children are less likely to engage in physical methods when solving conflicts or disputes.

It is possible that an understanding of the stages of child development could be useful

BOX 7: THE VOICE OF REASON

"In Dominica that is a customary thing, but not for me." "I think first: what if I hit the person and then they die in my hands?"
[14-16-year-old males]

"It does not make sense to be angry because it happen already." "If you know the situation will get bad you walk away, but if you know the person constantly troubling people you have to stand up for yourself."
[14-16-year-old females]

"Only if it is life-threatening. I have to think of my family 'cause I love my family." "Anybody talks to everybody, so I will not check (i.e. bother with) that." "I would watch him, size him up, and ask him what that for ... there is nothing between the two of us." "Everything you get you should take as it something happens to you."
[14-16-year-old males]

"When you hit a child, the child has classmates and that could affect the child's self esteem..." "The child should realize that the teacher is human and should not give the teacher stress..." "If the child is not accustomed to getting blows at home, that might cause conflict between teacher and child."
[14-16-year-old females reacting to a teacher-child confrontation]

"In situations like that you don't always have to be aggressive."
[11-13-year-old female discussing a possible 'foul' in a game]

"The boy might get vex with you if you push back." "People will say you fighting for man and that is a bad name." "If you care about what people say, you would fight; but I don't care because people should be checking their business."
[11-13-year-old females discussing a fracas over a male]

...some children, because of effective parenting or good teaching, may show more 'emotional intelligence' than other children their age and are able to understand their feelings, control their own impulses and anger and show empathy.

when seeking to reduce the more physical forms of corrective measures chosen by caregivers and teachers when an 'unacceptable' behaviour presents itself.

The Protective Environment

One of the original aims of this study was to examine the extent and effectiveness of the protective environment for children. In Phase I, the institutional and legal environments and infrastructures were examined. It was concluded that, notwithstanding the legal and institutional instruments in place, the limited resources available – material, financial and human – meant that actual practice and reality were very inadequate. However, the report on these issues also concluded that another type of methodology with different kinds of questions would be necessary for a realistic assessment of the presence and effectiveness of a protective environment. There is no new information to suggest that those conclusions should be changed.

Nevertheless, an attempt was made in this phase to assess the children's sense of vulnerability and therefore how protected they might feel. It was also felt that questions about the types of help sought in situations where they had been exposed to violence could throw some light on attitudes towards, or the possible use of, available sources of protection. However, we are not satisfied that the material from this phase has added much to what is already known. Certainly, the focus group discussions with teachers and parents revealed how strongly entrenched are the norms and values surrounding the virtues of corporal punishment. The responses about the use of parents and teachers for protection were mixed. Many children would go to their parents hoping for a useful discussion between parent and teacher about the incident or problem, while others would go hoping for retaliation against the teacher. Some, however, would not go for fear of further corporal punishment:

"Once I lied and the teacher grabbed me and shoved me outside and said 'stay outside little monkey'. I went, because it would be more blows for me when I go home."
[11-13-year-old male, Eastern District]

At the same time, in most instances where students said that they would resort to the higher authority (i.e., the principal), it was largely because it was believed that only principals had the legal authority to carry out corporal punishment, and could perhaps therefore discipline the teacher, as distinct from presenting an alternative form of punishment. Finally, there were those – mostly among the older age groups – who would take matter into their own hands and either personally retaliate or bring in friends or even parents to do the job. In these groups, teachers tend to be seen as a waste of time. Where attacks on teachers occurred (most usually in retaliation), neither the school nor the teacher had the resources to deal with it – with not unexpected consequences for the quality of teaching and classroom management. Teachers become cautious about how to teach and what disciplinary methods to use.

"It's always on your mind and it stresses you out; I do not like violence, and so I am a little paranoid."
[Teacher, Northern District]

And it may encourage an adversarial approach in the classroom:

"If a student attacks - immediately hit them back: or if they insult you, insult them back. If they are rude, embarrass them back and show them who is boss."
[Teacher, Eastern District]

To the extent that the home and school environments are themselves the dominant arenas for violent encounters, then they could hardly be expected to provide much protection without interventions that provide more resources to the schools in particular.

The use of this methodology within an action research framework that promotes ...interaction between original questions and feedback results could be a useful intervention device.

A start has been made by seeking to restrict and even abolish corporal punishment in the schools. All teachers are hostile to this intervention as it is seen to undermine their ability to control the classroom. Given the resource inadequacies in the classroom, the low numbers of qualified teachers and the paucity of staff with counselling and conflict management skills, teachers are indeed left with few options. The widespread use of corporal punishment reported on above implies that even the most minor infractions may be being dealt with in this manner.

The incorporation of teachers and parents into this research process enabled discussion on the range of possible punishments for different types of offences. It also encouraged discussion and reflection on the possible causes of violence and the occasions when corporal punishment is really justified, and recognition that many are in fact uncomfortable with it as a method. The use of this methodology within an action research framework that promotes a constant and regular interaction between original questions and feedback results could be a useful intervention device.

4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the numbers presented here must not be seen to support any generalizations, we think that the material from the focus groups with children, parents and teachers provides a reasonably comprehensive picture of the various aspects of the occurrence of violence in children's lives and the strengths and weaknesses, and therefore the vulnerabilities, of the protective environments such as home and school.

The instruments yielded data that indicate high levels of exposure to violence, as well as a fairly high level of tolerance of violence – especially in the home and school and within the context of discipline and punishment. To some extent this could be due to the deliberate focus on these two situations, and additional work is no doubt needed on the experiences of children in other kinds of environments. However, given that home and school will be the main environments for children in the age groups targeted, and the manner in which the levels of exposure questions were posed, the conclusion seems fair.

BOX 8: SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The instrument found high levels of exposure to and tolerance of violence, especially in the home and school.
- Incorporating culturally appropriate material and local folk characters worked well.
- Moderators and discussion facilitators must have training and experience.
- A manual should be produced to support the training.
- An understanding of the stages of child development could help identify age-specific interventions.
- Alternative dispute resolution skills should ideally be taught to teachers, parents and children (from the age of five).
- A reduction in parents' and teachers' violent responses could lead to a similar reduction in the violence of children's responses.

...sessions on alternative dispute resolution strategies – popular in the ‘conflict negotiation’ literature and workshops – would be helpful. Ideally, these should be taught (in separate workshops) to parents, teachers and school children.

The modified instrument that incorporated culturally appropriate material and the use of local folk characters was easily managed and worked very well. The experience also showed the importance of using moderators or discussion facilitators who are trained and who have some experience with dealing with these types of issues and respondents.

The instrument is not able to determine the causes of violence; nor is it able to assess with any degree of precision or accuracy the effectiveness of a protective environment. However, to the extent that it has been able to facilitate open and honest discussions about the various dimensions of violence, the situations in which it is most likely to occur, as well as the attitudes to its practice (including ambivalences in those attitudes and contradictions between attitudes and the surrounding reality), it also helps to identify both future lines of useful enquiry and possible strategies for intervention.

Given the findings of this study, it is likely that attention (in Dominica at least) will quickly turn to seeking possible explanations for the levels of violence recorded, coupled with a desire to do something about it. Can an understanding of the stages of ‘normal’ child development help in this process? Notwithstanding the current multiplicity of theoretical models that seek to explain and/or predict children’s behaviour, child development theorists would undoubtedly say yes. Certainly, sessions on alternative dispute resolution strategies – popular in the ‘conflict negotiation’ literature and workshops – would be helpful. Ideally, these should be taught (in separate workshops) to parents, teachers and school children. On the basis of the above stages, it would be good practice to begin teaching such skills as early as age five when children enter Reception Classes and can begin to appreciate another person’s point of view.

This brings us to another consideration, which has its roots in the ‘social learning theory’ of behaviour. This seeks to set behaviour in context and provides a means of identifying

behaviours and the way they are maintained. In practical terms it proposes that because behaviour is learned it can be unlearned. Some argue that this is a simplistic view of what they see as intractable problems and, of course, like all theories it does have its limitations. However, because it avoids labelling anyone as a ‘problem’, it might be culturally acceptable and could thus provide Dominica with a framework in which to consider important questions such as whether a reduction in parents’ and teachers’ violent verbal and physical responses could lead to a similar reduction in the violence of children’s responses.

It is important to recognize that the development of effective measurement instruments and assessment tools must normally and necessarily be an ongoing process. This particular instrument has now gone through and greatly benefited from three rounds of testing and modification. While some minor adjustments to one or two questions may still be necessary, we believe that we have arrived at an efficient instrument that is not affected by the gender of either moderator or respondents. It can be used in rural and urban areas, as well as with all age groups. Additional ways may still need to be found to keep the attention of the youngest children over the time period needed to complete the administration of the instrument, as it does not seem feasible or wise to shorten this if adequate coverage of the issues is to be maintained.

A participatory assessment tool on violence against children, which integrates components from this research process as well as other pilot sites across the globe, is now available from UNICEF.

ENDNOTES

1. UNICEF, 'Researching Violence Against Children using Rapid Assessments. A Handbook', Draft 2004, p. 6.
2. Judith Ennew and Dominique Pierre Plateau, 'How to Research the Physical and Emotional Punishment of Children', Resource handbook, Save the Children Sweden, 2004.
3. UNICEF, 'Games and Exercises. A Manual for Facilitators and Trainers Involved in Participatory Group Events. Visualization in Participatory Programmes', Kenya and New York, 1998.
4. The actual stage/ age at which this occurs and the tasks performed vary in the literature depending on one's theoretical orientation, e.g., biological, psychoanalytic, attachment, family/ systems and behavioural or learning theories.

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To address the high and growing incidence of violence and aggression among and against children and adolescents, UNICEF has focused increased attention on the development of instruments that can help in understanding the problem. These instruments are intended to offer a comprehensive snapshot of violence and children, enable participation of children and make intervention possible at varied levels.

As part of this effort, a project was undertaken in Dominica that aimed to analyse current data on the protective environment at schools; identify the data needs for protective environment assessment; ensure child participation; draft and finalize research instruments, research methodology and training materials; and identify and select research instruments, study methods and target groups. This report summarizes the project's processes and findings.