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for every child

**CHILDHOOD IN JAMAICA**

**Stained by Violence**

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# VIOLENCE HAS NO PLACE IN CHILDHOOD

It is the entitlement of every child to grow up without being physically harmed in the name of discipline, without being bullied at school, without being assaulted or raped by predators and without suffering injury or death by violent means.

It is the right of every child to be fully protected from all forms of violence, in all settings – and it is the duty of anyone charged with the care and protection of children to ensure this.

In Jamaica, too many children do not have this protection. Their lives are being stained by violence – often at the hands of people they love and trust.

In a beautiful island nation known for the warmth of its people and the vibrancy of its culture, the ugliness of this violence – which permeates every parish in the country – stands in stark contrast.

So widespread is the challenge that close to 80 per cent of Jamaican children experience violence in their homes and/or communities. For many of these

children, violence has become a normal, everyday part of life.

This is a heavy burden for children to carry, and it is one that impacts them not only during childhood but well into their adult lives. Research provides significant proof that trauma in childhood – including violence – alters the development of the brain and can lead to a range of detrimental outcomes.

While it is never too late in a child's life to try to fix the damage caused by violence, it is always better to prevent it from happening in the first place. All the evidence points to the critical importance of ensuring that the first three years of a child's life are free of traumatic violence.

Violence of any kind is unacceptable. It is also preventable.

We can and must do all that we can, working together across the society, to give children the violence-free childhood they deserve. UNICEF Jamaica is strongly urging the Government of Jamaica and organizations and individuals across the society to acknowledge the extent of violence against children and intensify their efforts to end it.

**No violence against children is justifiable. All violence against children is preventable.**

Citing the latest available data, this booklet seeks to highlight major challenges with violence against children in home, school and community settings – and calls for concrete actions that are in line with the Government of Jamaica's Plan of Action for an Integrated Response to Violence against Children (updated in 2019).



# VIOLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

In Jamaica, exposure to violence starts very early in life – as toddlers learn to walk and talk and explore their new world. Data show that caregivers use violent discipline to punish very young children – between the tender ages of two and four – more than older children.

It is well known that the brain undergoes its most powerful stages of development within the first three years of life, making the period of early childhood a time of significant sensitivity to risk factors. According to the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, “early experiences affect the development of brain architecture, which provides the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health.

Just as a weak foundation compromises the quality and strength of a house, adverse experiences early in life can impair brain architecture, with negative effects lasting into adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

## TOXIC STRESS

Healthy brains grow as a result of healthy experiences and stable relationships, whereas

violence and instability are toxic to brain development. Children who experience violence are exposed to toxic stress – defined as prolonged, strong or frequent adversity in which the body’s stress-response system remains activated.

This condition produces high levels of cortisol, a stress hormone that disrupts the process of brain development by limiting the proliferation of brain cells. This toxic stress damages health, learning and behavior, which can lead to lifelong problems.

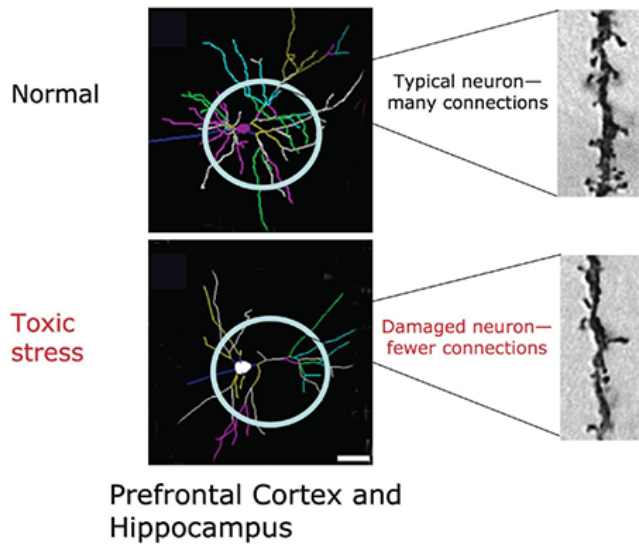
*During the first years of life, neurons form new connections at an astounding rate of 700 to 1,000 per second.*  
(Shankoff, 2009)

Research around the world shows solid evidence that violence against young children has negative effects on all aspects of early child development – social, physical, emotional and cognitive. There is no doubt that the effects of childhood trauma – including violence – substantially increase risks for a range of lifelong negative outcomes, including school drop-out, drug abuse, depression, diabetes, heart disease, suicide, further victimization or involvement with violence and crime.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup><https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

<sup>2</sup>Long term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect. [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/long\\_term\\_consequences.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/long_term_consequences.pdf)

## Persistent Stress Changes Brain Architecture



Source: Harvard University Center for the Developing Child, Radley et al. (2004), Bock et al. (2005)

Studies show that pre-schoolers who have been hit by their primary caregiver within the first two years of their lives are twice as likely to exhibit emotional and behavioural problems as their peers who had not been hit. In adulthood, they were found to be one and a half times more likely to suffer from drug-related problems.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF EARLY INTERVENTION

Although children of all ages experience abuse, scientific evidence indicates that the youngest ones are at greatest risk of unresponsive care, neglect, severe injury and death.

Early childhood is therefore a critical time when the benefits of early interventions are increased, and the negative effects of risk can be reduced.<sup>3</sup>

Neuroscience teaches us that early moments matter – early stimulation and preventative intervention is more effective than remediation at later stages in life.

Numerous scientific studies support the conclusion that providing supportive, responsive relationships as early in life as possible can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress caused by violence and other childhood trauma.

## POSITIVE DISCIPLINE

**Myth:** A spank here and there is not so bad; it puts young children in their place. In fact, it is the best way for a young child to learn that there are limits and consequences to certain actions.

There are many non-violent ways to teach children appropriate behaviour. Young children who receive corporal punishment are learning that violence is appropriate to solve problems.

Also, science continues to prove that violence instils fear and can be a source of high stress, rather than being a positive tool for educating young children. It is important for adults to set a positive example for toddlers' behaviour through their own actions, those of other children and other adults and significant caregivers around them.



# VIOLENCE AT HOME

## VIOLENT DISCIPLINE

Violent discipline at home is by far the most common form of violence experienced by Jamaican children. Eight out of ten Jamaican children under age 15 are subjected to violent methods of discipline at home, which include psychological aggression and corporal punishment. One of every 15 children under age 15 are victims of severe physical punishment, which includes practices such as hitting or slapping a child on the face and hitting or beating a child hard and repetitively.

The data also reveal a worrisome equity issue. The children who are most likely to be subjected to violent discipline are the youngest and the poorest. Young children between ages two and four are more likely than older children to be violently punished. While 79% of the children in the poorest households are subjected to corporal punishment at home, the proportion drops to 52% among the richest households. In addition, the use of severe physical punishment is five times higher among children in the poorest families than those in the wealthiest.

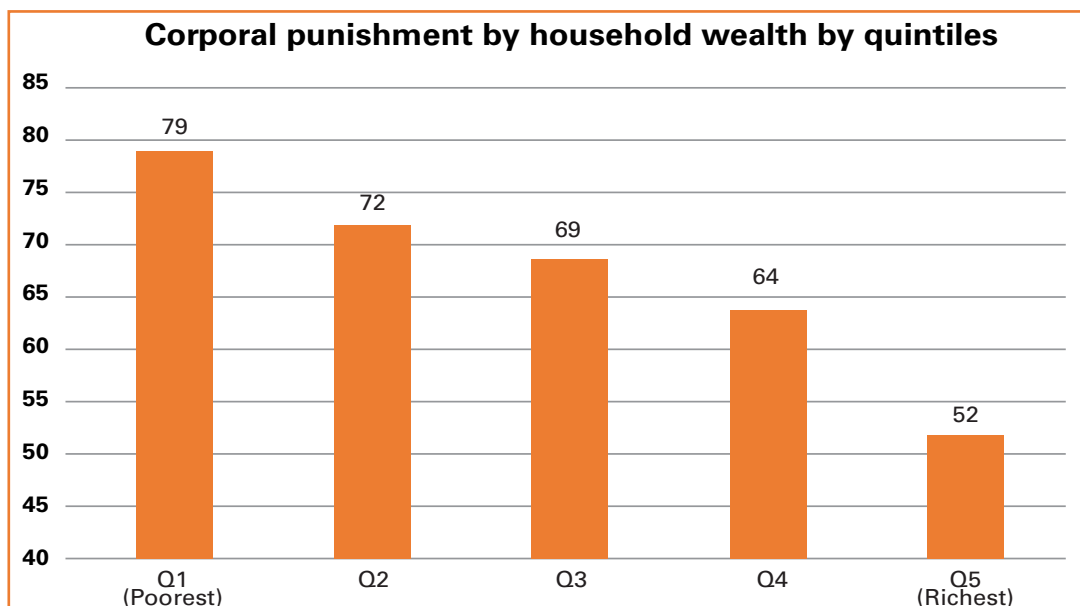


**85%**  
of children  
under age 15  
experience violent discipline  
(physical or psychological)  
at home



**6%**  
of children  
under age 15  
are subjected to severe  
corporal punishment

Percentage of children aged 2 to 14 years old who are subjected to corporal punishment by wealth.



Source: Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), 2011

**Violent discipline is a violation of a child’s right to protection from all forms of violence.** While the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes and respects the responsibility of families to provide children with direction and guidance, Article 19 mandates States parties (governments) to take all appropriate measures, including enacting legislation, to protect children from all forms violence while in the care of parents, guardians or other caregivers.

Jamaica is yet to become one of the countries where children enjoy full legal protection from corporal punishment at home. The right to inflict “reasonable and moderate” punishment on children is recognized in common law, and legal provisions against violence and abuse are not interpreted as prohibiting corporal punishment in child rearing.

Despite the alarming levels of violence experienced by young children, only 3 out of 10 caregivers in Jamaica believe that physical punishment is necessary for disciplining children. This suggests that in many cases, violent methods may be used as a result of parents’ anger and frustration, prevailing social norms or lack of knowledge of non-violent responses.

There are alternative methods of positive discipline which allow parents to guide their children, teach them

appropriate behavior, self-respect and respect for others, and which yield healthy and lasting outcomes.

### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Young children are also indirectly harmed by family violence happening at home, such as when their caregivers are subjected to intimate partner violence or when they witness this taking place.



The Women’s Health Survey 2016 shows that women in Jamaica who witnessed violence at home when they were a child, or who lived with mothers who were victims of intimate partner violence are at a heightened risk of experiencing abuse when they become adults. One in three 3 women who experienced both physical and sexual violence had seen their mother beaten by her partner as a child. Further, almost half (48 per cent) of the women who are victims of intimate partner violence were beaten as children.



# VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL

Schools should be child-friendly environments where all children feel safe. However, for many students in Jamaica, the presence or threat of violence at school interferes with their right to an education.

Violence makes children fearful, impedes their learning and compromises their ability to benefit fully from educational opportunities.

Research shows that children who feel unsafe at school perform worse academically, and are at greater risk of drop-out and becoming involved in drug use and delinquency.

## PEER-TO-PEER VIOLENCE

Once children enter school, friendships and interactions with peers take on an increasingly important role in their lives. In Jamaica, this passage is also associated with exposure to new forms of victimization. While peer-to-peer violence can take several forms, physical fights

and bullying by schoolmates are by far the most common in Jamaica.

In a school survey conducted in Jamaica in 2017,

one out of three students aged 13-15 years old said they had been in at least one physical fight, and one out of four adolescents 13-15 years old said they had been bullied.

*There are many lessons children should learn in school. Violence is not one of them.*

Another study conducted in 2015 showed that six out of 10 students have been bullied at some point in their lives. Almost a third of the students feared going to school because of bullying.

Students of both sexes are at about equal risk of being bullied, but Jamaican boys are almost twice as likely to be subjected to physical violence and threats (44% among boys; 25% for girls).

Bullying does not happen in a vacuum: 9 in 10 students have seen a child bullied at school. While 75% said that they reported it, only 34% actually found that this made a difference.

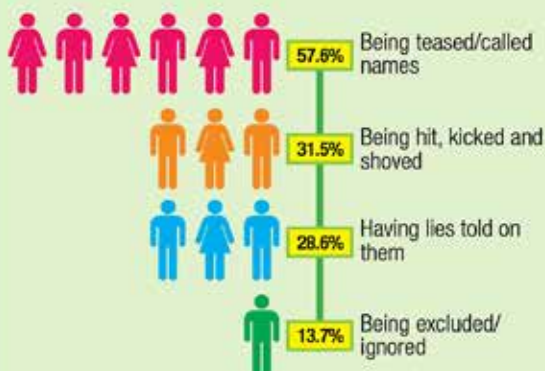


# BULLYING IS WIDESPREAD

6 in 10 students say they have been bullied at some point in their lives



Children say the most prevalent types of bullying are:



## CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

School violence can also manifest as corporal punishment inflicted by teachers, sexual harassment and violence from school personnel, assault (with or without the use of weapons) and witnessing the victimization of others.

Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child explicitly mandates that children be protected from violent discipline while at school, outlining that “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child’s human dignity and in conformity with the present Convention.”

Yet, in Jamaica, children above six years old lack full legal protection from this form of violence. While there is limited data about children’s exposure to corporal punishment by teachers, corporal punishment is still lawful in Jamaican schools – with the exception of early childhood institutions. There is no provision against the use of corporal punishment in the Education Act 1965 or in the Education Regulations 1980, and teachers are justified in administering “moderate and reasonable” corporal punishment under common law.



1 out of 3 students aged 13-15 have been in a physical fight

Source: Global school-based student health survey, 2017

# BULLIES AND FEAR

Almost 30% of students surveyed fear going to school because of bullying.



1 in 4 children who have been bullied face their abusers while travelling to and/or from school.





# SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

Sexual violence is one of the most unsettling violations of children’s rights, and one of the most rampant forms of violence against children in Jamaica.

Sexual violence can affect children at all ages and in different settings. While both boys and girls can be the target, girls are generally at heightened risk. Although children of every age are susceptible, adolescence is a period of pronounced vulnerability. In Jamaica, adolescent and young women are disproportionately affected by sexual violence, with 83% of reported rapes to the Jamaica Constabulary Force in 2015 being of girls up to 24 years old. The majority of rape victims are between 10-17 years old.

Survey data from 2016 show that in Jamaica, around 2 out of 10 adolescents girls 15-19 years old have been subjected to sexual violence, and 1 out of 10 adolescent girls have been forced to have intercourse in her lifetime. Among women who were forced to have sexual intercourse, in more than half of the cases this first experience took place against their will before the age of 19.

*Scars.  
Shame.  
Silence.  
No child should  
suffer sexual  
violence.*

Sexual violence is a key contributing factor to the existing vulnerability among girls. Widespread inter-generational and transactional sex, gender disparities, harmful social norms and a culture of silence are among the challenges which have resulted in an alarming situation for girls and young women in Jamaica. The perception that some forms of violence are an ordinary part of growing up can make child victims less likely to report or think of themselves as in need of help.

## Sexual Violence

Sexual violence against children encompasses both sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children and can be used as an umbrella term to refer jointly to these phenomena, both with regard to acts of commission and omission and associated to physical and psychological violence.<sup>3</sup>

Acts of sexual violence can range from direct physical contact with the use of force or restraint to less direct forms such as unwanted exposure to sexual language and images. Regardless of type, all sexual victimization of children is both intrusive and traumatic.

Intimate partner violence is a significant contributor to violence against adolescent girls and young women – commonly perpetrated by either a current /former boyfriend (36%) or their current husband or partner (16%). Other relatives were reported as perpetrators in 12% of the cases and 19% were friends or acquaintances. The perpetrator was a stranger in only 15% of cases.

### GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Violence against girls and women persists for many reasons. In Jamaica, it is partially rooted in unequal gender roles adopted since childhood and adolescence, where ‘manhood’ is defined in terms of dominance and ‘womanhood’ is constrained by the fulfilment of certain rigid codes of conduct.

Almost 8 out of 10 women in Jamaica think it is natural for a man to be the head of the family, and 7 out of 10 believe that a woman’s role is to take care of the home. Three out of 10 declare that it is a wife’s obligation to have sex with her husband. These beliefs around gender roles are transferred from generation to generation. Today, nearly two in ten Jamaican adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 think a husband or partner is justified in hitting or beating his wife or partner under certain circumstances.

Formal support services for victims of abuse continue to be limited in Jamaica. According to the 2016 Women’s Health Survey, the majority of women who recently experienced physical or sexual partner violence told someone about the abuse (81 per cent),

but almost two-thirds of them did not seek any help (63 per cent). For those who tried to get assistance, they turned to the police (32%), health care system (12%) and court system (5%).

It is concerning that four out of 10 women who sought help indicated that they did not receive it. Those who did get help received support mainly from family and friends. Among women who recently experienced physical or sexual partner violence and did not report it, the main reason mentioned for not seeking support was that “violence is normal, and it was not serious” – which is evidence of the deep roots of violence among Jamaicans.

Experiences of sexual violence in childhood hinder all aspects of development – physical, psychological and social. Apart from the physical injuries that can result from sexual violence, children are also exposed to other lifelong consequences such as exposure to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, early pregnancy or mental health challenges.

## Violence and Sexual Orientation

Children who develop a non-traditional sexual orientation and/or gender identity are facing serious acceptance challenges in Jamaica, often accompanied by discriminatory and violent reactions from society. Boys, in particular, face very serious difficulties both resolving and expressing a non-traditional sexual orientation because of societal and cultural ideas of masculinity and a legal framework that does not provide adequate protection. According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Jamaica has no law which prevents discrimination against an individual on the basis of his or her sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.



# VIOLENT DEATHS AMONG CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Globally, the highest homicide levels among children and adolescents are found in Latin America and the Caribbean. Around 25,000 adolescents aged 10-19 years old are killed in the region every year, making homicide the leading cause of death among adolescents.

Jamaica ranks 4th in the world for homicide rates - creating an environment for children that is saturated with high levels of violence. Jamaica is among the top countries globally with the highest mortality rates among adolescents due to homicide, with 14 deaths per 100,000 adolescents 10-19 years old.

Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF) statistics indicate that in 2017 there were 55 child murders, which represented an increase of 34 per cent above 2016. Boys are at particular risk of homicide, accounting for 65 per cent of victims; but very troubling was the increase in the number of girls murdered, which rose from 8 in 2016 to 20 in 2017.

Most child murders occurred in the nation's capital, in the adjoining parishes of Kingston and St. Andrew (15), followed by St. James (13). JCF statistics for January-November 2018, indicate that 44 children (30 boys and 14 girls) were murdered during that time period, mostly in the parishes of Kingston and St. Andrew.

*Prevention is the best cure for violence.*



According to the Jamaica Crime Observatory's 2016 and 2017 Report on Children and Violence, child murders occurred most frequently on the streets and in homes. The weapon of choice was the gun. Most murders were gang-related.

Statistics related to shootings indicate the alarming degree to which children are being victimized in a nation where gun violence is widespread.

According to the JCF, 150 children were victims of shootings in 2017 (104 males, 46 females). Children in the 10-17 age group had a higher prevalence of shooting victimisation (122) than their younger counterparts in the 0-9 age group (28).



# ENDING VIOLENCE TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

Adolescents are perpetrators as well as victims of murders and shootings. In 2017, 35 males aged 12-17 and two females aged 15-17 were arrested for murder; while two females aged 12-14 and 26 males aged 15-17 were arrested for shootings.

Guaranteeing children's rights to a childhood that is free of violence in all its forms is not just a pre-condition for their protection in early childhood – it is to help ensure their healthy growth and future development later in life.

UNICEF Jamaica works with a range of partners to prevent, reduce and mitigate the impact of violence. We focus on providing therapeutic services for children affected by violence, developing policies and legislation that protect children, and helping communities, parents and children to prevent violence and to engage at-risk youth through programmes delivered in communities.

UNICEF is calling for more action and greater investments to end violence against children – in line with the National Plan of Action for an Integrated Response to Children and Violence, which should include:

*Gangs and gun violence are a deadly mix for children.*

- **Addressing the factors that contribute to violence against children,** including economic and social inequities, social and cultural norms that condone violence, inadequate policies and legislation, insufficient services for victims, and limited investments in effective systems to prevent and respond to violence.

- **Collecting better disaggregated data on violence against children** and tracking progress on the National Plan of Action for an Integrated Response to Children and Violence 2018-2023 through robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks.



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# ENDING VIOLENCE

## ACTIONS NEEDED

We are urging specific and urgent action to:

### PROHIBIT CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

- Corporal punishment is the most common form of violence against children in Jamaica. Legal amendments are required to prohibit corporal punishment in all settings – including in homes and settings where adults have authority over children – together with an explicit repeal of the common law defense.
- It is imperative that a bill to amend the Education Act is passed to prohibit corporal punishment in schools. This legislative reform must be accompanied by initiatives to change behaviour and social norms, including efforts to educate parents, caregivers and anyone involved in guiding children on positive parenting practices and non-violent alternatives to discipline children.
- Positive parenting includes guidance on how to handle emotions or conflicts in a manner that encourages sound judgement and responsibility and preserves children's self-esteem, dignity and physical and psychological integrity.

### PREVENT SEXUAL VIOLENCE

- While there have been some legislative advancements recently to address the sexual abuse of children, far more effort is required in an environment where sexual violence – particularly against girls – appears to be entrenched and normalized.
- Work is needed to address a range of issues including social norms, gaps in legislation and the provision of services for victims, ineffective enforcement of laws and factors that prevent or affect reporting.
- Several government and civil society agencies who provide services for survivors of sexual violence and who work on prevention efforts agree that as a first step it is critical to undertake a national campaign to generate a much better understanding of the nature and scope of the challenge, to help parents/caregivers better protect their children and for girls and women to better protect themselves.



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