Calling for a comprehensive approach

Violence prevention and early childhood development

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Violence and violent crime are significant social problems in South Africa. Yet currently these problems are only addressed as or after they occur, with the state and civil society missing valuable opportunities to prevent violence before it happens. This article focuses on the intersection between early childhood development services and primary violence prevention interventions. It encourages a developmental approach to violence prevention by promoting healthy physical and social development and preventing direct and indirect exposure to violence during early childhood. The article outlines the extent to which this approach is currently reflected in South Africa's policy framework and proposes areas of intervention based on local and international literature.

Violence is a significant problem in South Africa and an early childhood development (ECD) approach to violence prevention offers a useful new avenue through which to combat this problem.[1] However, the policy framework currently informing both the implementation of violence prevention and ECD services in South Africa is not integrated. This is problematic, as it means that while services are provided, the importance of early childhood as a site where initial exposure to violence frequently occurs is not fully comprehended and addressed in policy.[2] As a result, services do not take advantage of the valuable opportunity to optimise the impact of early childhood interventions by including components that seek to prevent violence. Despite being a matter of

public health, crime and violence prevention is often perceived as being the responsibility of the criminal justice system; an assumption that fails to recognise how the capacity for violent and criminal behaviour develops over time.[3] Addressing the determinants of violence from birth offers an exciting new way to influence the life path of at-risk individuals so that they will be less likely to be future victims or perpetrators of violence.[4]

South Africa has high levels of violence and this impacts negatively on the capacity of individuals to thrive.[5] Homicide, for example, occurred at a rate of 32.2 per 100 000 people in 2013–14, five times the 2013 global average.[6] Crime takes place at high rates and is often excessively violent, while women and children are also exposed to high degrees of violence in the home and their communities.[7] One study, for instance, found that 60 cases of child rape and 13 cases of child abuse were reported in South Africa every day in 2009.[8] Consistent exposure to violence

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is hugely detrimental to wellbeing, particularly when exposure occurs at a young age, and early experiences of violence increase the chances of future violence perpetration and revictimisation.[9]

The high levels of violence in South Africa and the high rates at which children are exposed to violence are therefore not unrelated. It suggests a cycle of violence, where early exposure to violence informs high rates of violence perpetration in the teenage years and adulthood.[10] Combatting violence in South Africa therefore requires intervention as early as possible, when the foundations of healthy development can be more significantly enhanced.

Early childhood interventions can play a vital role, promoting not only physical, psychological, emotional and social wellbeing but also preventing violence.[11] Critical to this approach is prevention of exposure to direct and indirect violence in early childhood, so that the child is not harmed and violence does not become normalised for the child.[12] Promoting development and preventing violence are considered to be interrelated, and reducing any shared risk factors of both violence and developmental difficulties may work to decrease these two negative outcomes overall.[13]

This article argues that the widespread provision of ECD services, which have been prioritised in South Africa as legislated in the Children's Act,[14] and recognised by the Department of Social Development (DSD) as essential to achieving the goals of the National Development Plan,[15] should include the integration of services that focus on preventing exposure to violence. It is widely accepted that ECD interventions:

- Reduce child mortality

- Prevent developmental delay through intensive early intervention and responsive community-based programmes

- Decrease the drain on national resources by reducing school grade repetition and social welfare expenditure

- Build social capital (through enhancing academic performance and strengthening community networks, social infrastructure and service delivery)

- Improve gender relations by promoting better socialisation[16]

However, excluding violence prevention from this scope misses a valuable opportunity to further enhance wellbeing from a young age and potentially decrease the rates of crime and violence in South Africa in the long term. Currently, ECD services consist of basic health provision and early stimulation through the use of registered ECD centres supported by the DSD; however, the reach of these programmes is limited, as for example approximately only 900 000 children of the almost 6 million between the ages of zero and five currently access the DSD's ECD services.[17] There is a need to include programmes that seek to prevent exposure to violence at an early age into the range of services, as well as enhance the capacity and content of current services. Currently, this kind of approach to ECD is not mandated by government policy; ECD services are addressed and conceptualised rather narrowly by policy.

Overview of national policies

A framework of policies is needed to support and guide ECD and violence prevention interventions.[18] While there are currently some progressive provisions on ECD in legislature, for example within the Children's Act, there remain significant gaps in the link between violence prevention policies and ECD in South Africa. For example, there is currently no national strategic plan for violence prevention and response. There is also very little funding available for prevention initiatives in South Africa, despite the prioritisation of 'prevention and early intervention' in the Children's Act.[19] The following section will outline the policies relevant to ECD and violence prevention, and go on to discuss the extent to which a developmental approach to violence prevention is addressed within these policies.

The 1996 National Crime Prevention Strategy

The National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) of 1996 was the first national strategy in the new democratic South Africa that approached the prevention of crime in a developmental manner, promoting an inter-sectoral perspective that included:

- The criminal justice system

- Reducing crime through environmental design

- Public values and education

- Trans-national crime

The 2001 White Paper on ECD

In 2001, the then Department of Education (DoE) adopted the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, which defined the purpose of an ECD approach as being 'to protect the child's right to develop his or her full cognitive, emotional, social and physical potential'.[20] This policy was progressive in its definition of ECD because it acknowledged that ECD should not only ensure early stimulation but also provide a comprehensive approach to the early development of children.

The 2011 Integrated Social Crime Prevention Strategy

The Integrated Social Crime Prevention Strategy (ISCPS), adopted by the DSD, provides for various mechanisms to break the cycle of violence, including early childhood interventions. These interventions are acknowledged to prevent crime and violence and as having the potential to improve the accessibility, transparency and responsiveness of the criminal justice system.[21] The ISCPS states that 'through providing stimulation, nutrition, protection and care, and health services to our children during the critical stages of their development, we make significant contributions to a safe[r] society.'[22] The ISCPS therefore conceptualised ECD through a safety lens and as a form of violence prevention.

The 2012 National Development Plan

The National Development Plan (NDP) is the government's agenda for development until 2030. There are two important areas for intervention relating to ECD and violence prevention in the document: 'improving education, training and innovation'[23] and 'building safer communities'.[24]

The 'improving education, training and innovation' chapter of the NDP discusses ECD in general terms, encouraging a holistic approach to development.

The 'building safer communities' chapter contains two relevant points for the incorporation of ECD services and primary prevention of violence:

- An integrated approach to safety and security that requires coordinated activity across a variety of departments, the private sector and civil society

- Equal protection for all vulnerable groups, including women, children and rural communities[25]

The 2015 draft ECD policy

In February 2015 the DSD published a comprehensive, evidence-based draft ECD policy for public comment. It promotes a comprehensive ECD package with provision for funding frameworks and human resources, and proposes a national, government-run ECD Centre to oversee the implementation of such services. In addition, the policy identifies clear goals for scaling up ECD services and indicators for monitoring, implementation and impact.

Discussion of policies and recommendations

Each of the policies outlined above addresses ECD and violence prevention in general terms, either through the comprehensive conceptualisation of ECD services or through the acknowledgement of the importance of safety at every age. However, none expressly links these two fields or conceptualise what a developmental approach to violence prevention should entail.

Changing social norms

For example, the NCPS approaches crime prevention from a developmental standpoint and includes a focus on public values and education, but does not articulate specifically how crime can be prevented through interventions in early childhood. The 'pillar' of public values and education would have been the ideal place in which to integrate ECD provisions with safety and violence prevention. However, this component of the NCPS was never implemented, and was arguably too broad and poorly defined.[26]

The sphere of public values is critically in need of intervention, as many of the attitudes and violent behaviours that have an impact on children's

wellbeing are condoned by social norms. Corporal punishment, for example, is highly normalised in South Africa, but this practice has a negative effect on a child's wellbeing in a number of ways that include decreasing the quality of the relationship between parent and child, and increasing childhood aggression.[27] Another norm that is common globally is the idea that children are possessions of their parents, rather than individuals with agency and rights of their own.[28] This justifies overlooking children's rights, ascribing them instead with very low social status, which may increase their risk of maltreatment or neglect.[29] Advocating for the more respectful treatment of children, as well as promoting positive discipline techniques, works to decrease the social acceptability of certain types of violence against young children.

The degree to which violent and aggressive forms of masculinity are celebrated in South Africa also calls for interventions to change public values.[30] Hegemonic forms of masculinity promote the idea that men need to be tough, in control and superior; attributes that are easily, and therefore frequently, demonstrated through displays of aggression.[31] Not only does this result in the exposure of young children to domestic violence, it also teaches children, and particularly male children, that being a man requires aggression. Changing norms around how men construct their gender identity in South Africa therefore has the potential to substantially decrease levels of violence. Critical to this is normalising caring and respectful forms of masculinity.[32] Developing policy that seeks to integrate ECD and violence prevention therefore must involve some consideration of the impact of these social norms and efforts to change public perceptions around violence and violence against children. As it stands, none of the policies outlined does so.

Including violence prevention in a comprehensive approach to ECD

The policies outlined above do not, by and large, consider violence prevention as part of a comprehensive approach to ECD. For example, while the White Paper on ECD conceptualises ECD holistically, it does not explicitly make a case for ECD as a violence prevention strategy. Similarly, the

ISCPS considers the intersections between ECD and violence prevention to a greater extent than other policies but does not do this comprehensively. Furthermore, no documents measure the implementation of the ISCPS and the impact that ECD might have on sustainable primary prevention of violence in relation to this strategy.

In its chapter on improving education, training and innovation, the NDP does not conceptualise ECD through the lens of primary prevention of violence and therefore does not contain any proposals to ensure the sustainable prevention of violence through the delivery of ECD services. The section on an integrated approach to safety and security in the NDP focuses on addressing the root causes of crime such as poverty and inequality, and although it acknowledges that a developmental approach to crime and violence prevention is needed, it does not conceptualise this in terms of ECD services. Finally, while the draft ECD policy suggests screening mothers for domestic violence and acknowledges the role of the child protection system, it does not speak to ECD as a sustainable form of violence prevention. This is problematic, as an essential component in a comprehensive approach to ECD is one that involves the prevention of violence.

Considering this, it is important to discuss what a comprehensive approach to violence prevention at an ECD level should include. While current state-provided ECD services focus on health and cognitive stimulation, as noted in the ISCPS, a specific focus on support for and education of parents and caregivers is lacking. Parents have an important role to play in the healthy cognitive and social development of their children, as they model the behaviour from which young children learn.[33] Exposure to direct and indirect violence in the home causes stress and fear that negatively affects children's cognitive development, and also works to normalise violence as a means of problem solving.[34]

Many caregivers and parents struggle to meet the health, care and educational needs of young children because they are overwhelmed with responsibilities and have limited access to resources.[35] Providing social and educational support to a highly stressed parent can be extremely helpful in decreasing the

likelihood of abuse and neglect, and improving the social interaction between parent and child.[36] This can involve educating parents about positive discipline techniques, fostering healthy attachments between parents and children, providing nutritional and health support, and providing guidance on early cognitive stimulation.[37] These services can be provided through home-visiting programmes or group meetings. According to one report, 65 such programmes currently exist in the country, far too few to meet the needs of the population.[38] There is therefore a need for increased parental support as a mechanism through which to promote early childhood wellbeing, and a strategic framework that guides such interventions.

Measuring progress

Developing policies to guide violence prevention interventions at an ECD level is worthwhile for a number of reasons, not least because it will provide a framework against which to measure the impact of interventions on the rate of violence perpetrated against children, and its effects on their wellbeing. Developing suitable indicators for measuring the efficacy of interventions will assist in developing an evidence base from which to establish an effective approach.

According to the DSD's 2013 annual report, there are currently approximately 18 000 registered ECD centres in the country, with the possibility that there are many more that are unregistered.[39] Although there are many formal and informal ECD programmes available, their efficacy in preventing violence in the long term has not been widely tested in the South African setting. A number of parenting programme evaluations have been conducted internationally,[40] indicating an improvement in the quality of parents' relationships with their children and the prevention of child maltreatment and childhood aggression.[41]

One systematic review of home visitation programmes found that child maltreatment was reduced by an average of 39%.[42] A study reviewing evaluations in low- and middle-income countries found that home visiting benefited cognitive development, while another found that parenting interventions improved parent–child interactions and

parent knowledge.[43] There is thus evidence that parenting programmes can successfully promote children's well-being and prevent some violence or maltreatment.

A parenting programme focusing on infancy in Khayelitsha is one of the few to be evaluated in South Africa. The evaluation explored how providing support and guidance to women during pregnancy and six months after birth affected the infant's attachment to the mother and maternal depression rates.[44] The intervention increased the likelihood of a secure attachment between infant and mother, a critical factor in promoting violence prevention.[45]

The long-term impact of parenting interventions on preventing violence later in life is unclear. A longitudinal study found that an effective parenting programme prevented girls from taking up criminal and violent behaviour later in life, but this same effect was not found in boys. The study found that boys in the programme were as likely as those who did not participate in the programme to be involved in crime or violence.[46]

While these evaluations suggest that ECD interventions to reduce violence can be effective, there is a need to expand the evidence base for this, particularly in terms of the unique dynamics of the South African environment. Only once ECD as a primary form of violence prevention has been conceptualised in South Africa, will we be able to conduct evaluations on what works and what does not. ECD has been shown to be an effective means through which to prevent violence in low-, middle- and high-income countries.[47] This should be the rationale for more policy guidance on this issue.

Conclusion

Initiating violence prevention interventions from early childhood may be a critical factor to break the widespread cycles of violence in South Africa. There is currently very little policy guidance on the integration of ECD and primary prevention of violence, despite the prioritisation of both these issues. That said, interest in this intersection is growing, as is evident in the DSD's work to develop a policy that focuses on ECD as a form of violence prevention. The negative impact of exposure to

violence and constrained development during early childhood has been established, and interventions relating to parenting support in particular have been shown to effectively improve children's outcomes. The development of policy and interventions to meet the needs of South African children is vital for the prevention of violence in the short and long term.

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Notes

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13   Ibid.

14   Children's Act of 2005 (Act 38 of 2005), Pretoria: Government Printer, chapter 6.

15   Department of Social Development (DSD), *Annual Report 2013,* http://www.dsd.gov.za/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=27&Itemid=39 (accessed 19 February 2015).

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