

A young child with dark skin and short hair is smiling broadly at the camera. They are wearing a yellow t-shirt with a blue graphic. In the background, several other people, including a woman in a red shirt, are visible but out of focus. The setting appears to be outdoors in a community or public space.

Part 1

Life Stage 1:

Infants and young children

0-5 years old

Our focus on parenting and early childhood development initiatives

Children are at their most vulnerable during the first years of their lives: infants, toddlers and young children are completely dependent on others for their care. Yet every day children in this age group witness and experience violence, including **violent physical discipline**, as parents and caregivers struggle with the demands of raising young children.

From the start of life, infants and young children may experience shaking and smacking, harsh words, neglect and abandonment, as well as more traumatic experiences linked to traditional practices. Around one in five child homicide victims is below the age of four, and most are killed by their caregivers.ⁱ

Studies show that when babies and young children do not experience love, safety and protection in the early years, their physical, cognitive and emotional development is jeopardized.^{ii,iii} Prolonged exposure to traumatic experiences and toxic stress can even alter the structure and functioning of children's brains at this formative stage.^{iv} Violence and neglect in early childhood also contributes to long-term problems as adults, and significantly affect children's future life opportunities. In short, what happens to children early in life may cause lasting harm and directly impact their ability to become healthy and functioning adults.^v

At ChildFund, we know that preventing abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence during the early years gives children the best start in life. A 5-year-old who has been well cared for and protected is likely to be stronger and healthier, and better equipped for the challenges of the next life stage. And encouragingly, there is now an established body of evidence suggesting that interventions delivered early in life can help to mitigate many of the adverse consequences of violence.^{vii}

By supporting and empowering parents and caregivers across all of our programs, ChildFund aims to give infants and young children the support they need for healthy development, while reducing their risk of being harmed. Recognizing a universal desire to provide the best start in

Violent physical discipline / corporal punishment is the most common form of violence experienced by young children, affecting three-quarters of children ages 2 to 4 years on a regular basis. In many societies, slapping, ear-twisting, beating with an instrument are forms of humiliating and painful discipline that are accepted as the norm. Predominantly carried out by the parents and caregivers to correct "unacceptable" behavior, violent discipline may be perceived as the right way to socialize a child — or even as a parental duty.^{vi}

ChildFund's Domains of Change and Core Outcome for Life Stage 1: Infants and Young Children 0-5 Years Old

- ✓ Empowered and Responsive Caregivers
- ✓ Safe and Caring Environments
- ✓ High Quality Nutrition and Health Care
- ✓ High Quality Developmental Stimulation

Healthy and Secure Infants

life for one's children, we support parents and caregivers to develop **responsive and protective parenting** practices and to create safe homes and caring learning environments where infants and young children can thrive.

While our health, hygiene, and nutrition programs promote the physical health of children, our early childhood development (ECD) and parenting programs help parents to better understand children's emotional and cognitive development and the importance of parental bonding, stimulation and nurture. Combined, our programs in this life stage take a holistic perspective that focuses on the overall well-being of infants and young children.^{viii}

Responsive and Protective Parenting involves responding promptly to a child's behavior in a way that is appropriate to their needs, rights, and developmental phase.^{xix} A responsive caregiver has skills to provide prompt, safe, and attentive care due to their knowledge of infant and child development, nutrition, health, and early learning and stimulation.^{xxii}

Our learning about protecting infants and young children

There remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the kinds of violence that infants and young children commonly experience in the countries where we work. To address this, our country offices are collecting information about the protection risks that compromise early childhood development and the measures that families and communities take in response. This is not easy; early childhood violence is often "invisible," taking place in the privacy of the home and away from the eyes of the world, making it extremely challenging to detect and address.

In this section, we present some findings from the research we have conducted for infants and young children in Life Stage 1:

- 1 More needs to be done to improve community safety and access to affordable child care options for infants and young children.** As part of our global monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data collection in 2017, we talked to 15,011 caregivers (51% female and 49% male) of infants and young children in 13 countries.^{ix}

We discovered that:

- **More than one-third (34%) of caregivers felt that their community was not a safe place for children.**
- **Almost half (49%) of caregivers reported that children were regularly being left alone or in the care of a child younger than 10 years.**

More needs to be done to understand these findings. In particular, we need to explore why some caregivers feel that their community is unsafe and how this may affect their child care decisions, while also exploring policies and programs aimed at improving affordable and accessible child care.

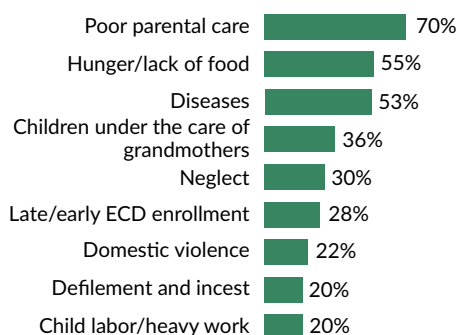
2 The majority of caregivers of infants and young children know where to report harm to children and would take action to report it. Our 2017 global M&E data collection also involved asking 54,954 caregivers of infants and young children from 16 countries about their knowledge of child protection reporting mechanisms and their willingness to report violence against children. We learned that:

- **Two-thirds of caregivers (67%) of infants and young children said that they knew where to report protection issues and that, if a child was being harmed, would report it.**

Despite these overall positive findings, there is still more work to be done in countries where caregivers revealed less knowledge and likelihood of reporting harm against children.^x Some of our more focused inquiries also tell us that these M&E data may not be reflective of the full picture, demonstrating the need for continuing research in this area.

3 **Issues of violence against infants and young children are not always a priority.**^{xi} As part of our early childhood development work in Kenya, we commissioned an ethnographic mapping of community-based child protection mechanisms in the Lunjre and Naya communities of Siaya County, alongside a global literature review of violence against children. This research focused exclusively on the violence experienced by infants and young children ages 0 to 5 years, as well as an assessment of the child protection systems that serve them.

Most Commonly Perceived Harms and Risks to Children 0-5 Years Among Caregivers in Lunjre and Naya Communities, Siaya County, Kenya



The research revealed that:

- **Communities overwhelmingly perceived ‘poor parental care’ as the main protection risk** for children ages 0 to 5 years, with sexual violence (particularly by family members), neglect, child labor, and child abandonment also described as problems.

Alongside poverty, poor parental care was mainly attributed to caregivers' lack of knowledge about the developmental, emotional and physical needs of infants and young children and how these differ from those of older children.

- **Respondents explained that some caregivers were unable (or did not know how) to meet young children's basic needs**, left them unaccompanied while they worked, and sometimes expected them to do potentially dangerous chores such as fetching water and cooking. In particular, children who were orphaned and sent to live with relatives, or who were born to drug-using parents or teenage mothers, were perceived to be at heightened risk of violence in these early years.
- In the face of poverty, unemployment and hunger, **issues of violence against infants and young children were not always a priority** for family and community members. With the formal child protection system considered ineffectual and overwhelmed, instances of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence against infants and young children were rarely reported to government social welfare officers. Instead, community members indicated that they preferred to deal with cases of violence informally, with sensitive issues such as sexual violence and incest dealt with privately within families to avoid shame. This is of great concern to ChildFund as it potentially leaves children at risk of continued sexual violence and without access to treatment and support.

4 Indigenous practices and customary justice systems can have both protective and harmful aspects. In 2017, ChildFund conducted an ethnographic mapping of the child protection system in four indigenous communities (Teduray, T'boli, Blaan and Subanen) in the Philippines.^{xii}

In the community consultations participants described protection risks to children under the age of 6, including **neglect, abandonment, and arranged marriages**. They also shared:

- The ceremonies that recognize the birth and developmental milestones of infants, as well as the **traditional nurturing practices** that ensure they are brought into the fold and protection of the community.
- The practice of **resorting to informal and customary justice systems to address child protection issues** (for children of all ages).

While these traditional justice systems may bring about fast and amicable resolutions, ChildFund is concerned that the harmony of the community may sometimes take precedent over the best interests of the child. For example, in some cases, incidents of rape against children are resolved through “amicable settlement” or compensation payments from perpetrators.

5 Infants and young children are particularly vulnerable as parents and caregivers struggle to secure a family livelihood while trying to fulfill the intensive caring responsibilities of these early years. In recent years, we conducted baseline studies in **Uganda**,^{xiii} **Ethiopia**,^{xiv}

Kenya and Zambia^{xv} for our early childhood development programs. These revealed a range of child protection issues for infants and young children including:

- High levels of **physical discipline** by caregivers (often with the aim of instilling good social behavior) due to limited understanding of responsive parenting and **low engagement of fathers** in child care.
- Child protection violations including **physical and sexual violence, neglect, abandonment, harmful traditional practices** and even attempted murder. Children living in households affected by domestic violence and substance abuse were seen as especially at risk.
- **Environmental risks** including pollution, open sewage, fire and drowning. These pose a particular threat to unsupervised young children and those left in the care of siblings, who may not be mature enough to ensure their safety.
- **Low uptake of birth registration services**, often due to their limited availability and the associated costs. This means that children without proper documents may face difficulties accessing health, education and social services.
- **Limited awareness of and/or willingness to report child protection concerns** to formal child protection services and community-based structures such as Child Protection Committees.
- **Varying availability and quality of ECD services** for young children and, in some cases, inadequately trained caregivers, poor facilities and overcrowding and mistreatment of children.

What is our research telling us?

While these examples provide just a small snapshot of a few selected studies, the findings give us a sense of the protection risks that infants and young children ages 0 to 5 years often face and echo what we see in other communities where we work. These studies tell us that babies, toddlers, and young children – just like older children and adolescents – are not immune to abuse, neglect, and even the worst forms of sexual violence and rape. In fact, infants and young children face unique risks due to their physical vulnerability and near total dependency on adults, particularly their caregivers. The information we are collecting is helping us shape our programs and create a baseline from which to measure our progress as we respond to the protection needs of this age group.

Our response

We know that a child's world revolves around their family during their early years. To give children the best start, caregivers need skills and resources to build safe families and healthy homes.

At ChildFund, we work through community partner organizations to enhance the knowledge and skills of parents and caregivers to nurture and protect infants and young children – and to provide discipline without violence. We ensure that families and communities – including community volunteers and caregivers in ECD centers – understand the risks of violence to children and know how to report abuse to social service providers.

We also reinforce community responsibility for the protection of young children by strengthening community-based child protection mechanisms and linking them to formal child protection services. More indirectly, we help families to provide for and protect children through social protection measures, such as registration for cash transfers, participation in village savings and loans groups, and livelihood strengthening activities.

We are starting to see some progress:

- In **Senegal**, where ChildFund provided structured playgroup sessions and *Learning through Play* initiatives for caregivers of children ages 0 to 3 years, participants reported abandoning violent discipline methods, such as slapping, and taking better care of their children.^{xvi}
- In **Sri Lanka**, “Lead Mothers” trained through our parenting program respond proactively to child protection concerns that they identify during household visits with vulnerable families and follow established protocols for referring children to government agencies and social services for assistance.^{xvii}
- In **Ethiopia**, under our six-year country-wide *Yekokeb Berhan Program for Highly Vulnerable Children* project,¹ our local partner organizations have played a critical role in improving the access of children ages 0 to 3 years to ECD services, training community groups to provide parenting education to vulnerable families, and creating referral pathways to legal, education, and health services.^{xviii}
- In **Bolivia**, ChildFund has recently piloted a *Regional Responsive Parenting Program* for caregivers of infants and young children. Founded upon an analysis of the regions’ best parenting practices, the program uses group work and home visits to change attitudes about violent discipline and to engage fathers in child care responsibilities.^{xix} We now aim to scale up this parenting program across the region.

Below are more detailed examples of how we are using our parenting and ECD interventions to more explicitly incorporate child protection. The case studies illustrate our results and lessons for ongoing and future programming.



CASE STUDY: Supporting community volunteers to protect children in Kenya and Zambia

Our country offices in **Kenya and Zambia** are working to integrate child protection into our early childhood development initiative: *Assuring the Essentials of Optimal Development for Infants and Young Children Affected by HIV and AIDS*^{2, [xx](#)}. Launched in 2013, this program uses a cascaded training model whereby ChildFund staff train networks of community health volunteers who, in turn, provide parenting support to caregivers of infants and young children ages 0 to 5 years affected by HIV and AIDS. The purpose is to help caregivers to build nurturing relationships with their children from birth, providing their infants and young children with the stimulation and responsive care they need. Through home visits, community health volunteers:

- Observe how caregivers interact with their young children and show them how to **discipline children** in ways that don't involve harsh words or slapping.
- Teach caregivers the **benefits of childhood play**.
- Help families to create **safe homes** so that children are protected from injuries and accidents.

- Serve as a **focal point** between families and local health and social welfare systems. For example, if children lack identification papers, the volunteers support parents to obtain birth certificates and other documentation.

Our community volunteers support families in situations of poverty, illness, and household violence, and work with caregivers to solve problems in overwhelming situations – all of which can take a personal and emotional toll. A critical challenge has been supporting and building the capacity of these volunteers, who joined the initiative with very different skill levels, so that consistent support could be given to all families. While pre- and post-training test results revealed an overall increase in participants' knowledge, skills, and abilities, they were not brought to the same level. In response, we have worked closely with our partners to establish a **reflective supervision approach** that provides structured coaching and mentoring to community volunteers, identifies areas for tailored further training, and helps to keep them motivated and committed.

“They are given space to come together to share their challenges, successes, and learning. We also have a clear process for providing them with feedback and praise.”

-ChildFund Early Childhood Development Specialist

This approach has made all the difference to the program, which has retained over 90% of its community volunteers. As an emerging good practice, ChildFund has expanded this learning into its work in **Guatemala**, where reflective supervision approaches have been incorporated into parenting initiatives.

While endline results are still pending for this program, qualitative data from community consultations in late 2017 and field visits in 2018 highlight important caregiver behavior changes, including enhanced caregiver understanding regarding the importance of:

- Disciplining young children in positive ways instead of with physical and verbal abuse and communicating with them “more softly, less harshly.”
- Spending more time with their children, especially providing better supervision and playing with them.
- A balanced diet for their children and exclusive breastfeeding.
- Health and hygiene practices such as bringing their young children to the health clinic when ill, taking measures to prevent malaria, and adhering to immunization schedules.



CASE STUDY: Early childhood development (ECD) programs as an entry point for building systems of community-based child protection in Ethiopia and Uganda

In **Ethiopia** and **Uganda**, ChildFund's country offices supported a stronger community response to violence against young children as part of its early childhood development initiative *Communities Caring for Children Program (CCCP)*.^{3 [xxi](#) [xxii](#)} This five-year program, which ended in 2016, aimed to promote positive parenting practices, establish high quality early childhood development (ECD) centers, and strengthen the ability of communities to prevent and respond to violence against children.

"The Child Protection Committees are our watchdogs on the ground."

-Senior Probation Officer, Uganda

Operating in communities with significant levels of child neglect, abuse, harmful traditional practices, and violent discipline, our partners sought to reduce the risk of harm to young children by working in:

3. Funded by Irish Aid through ChildFund Ireland

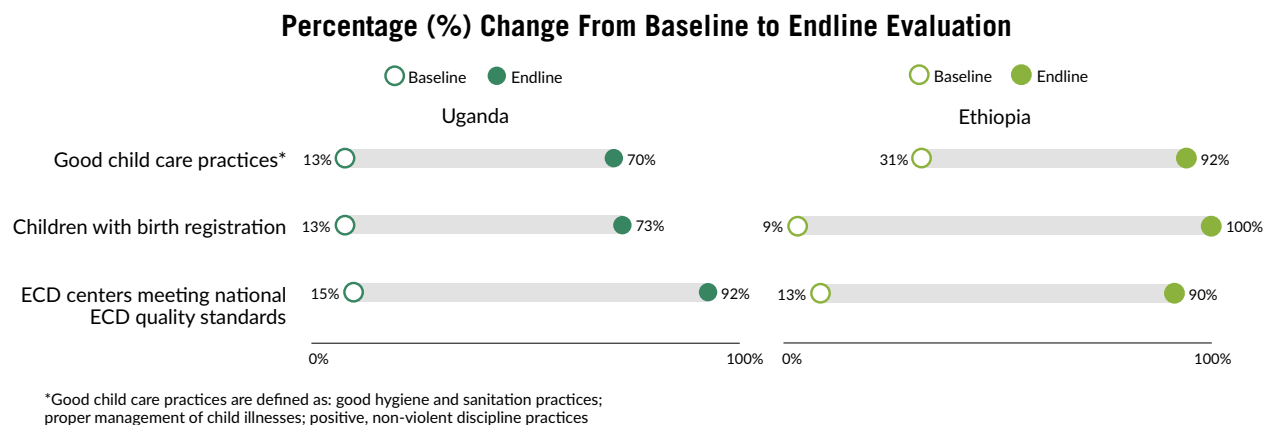
- **Homes:** Building the capacity of community volunteer networks to support families to improve parenting, use positive discipline techniques, encourage violence-free homes, and inform parents about access to health, education and social services.
- **ECD centers:** Training ECD staff and management committees (composed of parents and community members) to identify and respond to any child at risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence.

In **Uganda**, ChildFund extended this model by establishing and training **Child Protection Committees (CPCs)** from the village to district levels, which were then linked to ECD centers, schools, and government social welfare providers through a simple referral system. Communities could report child protection issues to the community CPCs, who would respond or, in more serious or complex cases, refer children to the police or formal social welfare services.

“We really saw a difference. Once families and ECD centers were linked to well-functioning CPCs the community was able to handle and respond to case of abuse much better and faster.”

-ChildFund child protection specialist

In both Ethiopia and Uganda, CCCP has seen encouraging results around parenting practices, including a reduction in violent discipline and improved caregiver engagement (including by fathers) in children’s learning and play.





CASE STUDY: Protecting preschool children from natural disasters in Indonesia

In an innovative project in **Indonesia**, ChildFund used preschools as an entry point for protecting young children during and after natural disasters. Recognizing that young children are particularly vulnerable to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence in emergency situations, ChildFund integrated **disaster risk reduction (DRR)** measures into an early childhood development (ECD) program⁴ for children ages 4 and 5 years on the disaster-prone island of Sumba.^{xxiii}

ChildFund's aim was to create a safer preschool environment and to minimize the risk to children during disasters. To start with, our partners renovated local preschools to make them more structurally sound and enable safe evacuation, then taught pupils how to remain safe during different types of emergencies. Weekly evacuation drills were conducted, and a six-module DRR package

Children are disproportionately affected by disasters.

The impact of earthquakes, landslides and flooding in Indonesia can be devastating on families and children. As well as the potential for loss of life and severe injury, children may become separated from their families and other responsible adults, leaving them vulnerable to harm and distress.

4. Funded by Australian Aid

was rolled out to school staff. At the same time, teachers were taught positive discipline techniques and ways to better engage with their students.^{xxiv}

A rigorous evaluation of the program compared the preschools that received the DRR-ECD intervention with a control group of preschools in nearby villages.^{xxvi} The results demonstrated that:

- The renovated schools were more structurally sound and disaster-ready.
- The quality of adult-child interactions was higher among DRR-ECD schools.
- Children in the DRR-ECD program had greater awareness of safety precautions and emergency actions than children in the control group. This included better knowledge of ways to prepare for emergencies, the different types of natural disasters and their warning signs, where to go (safe spaces) during emergencies, and which adults to turn to for help.

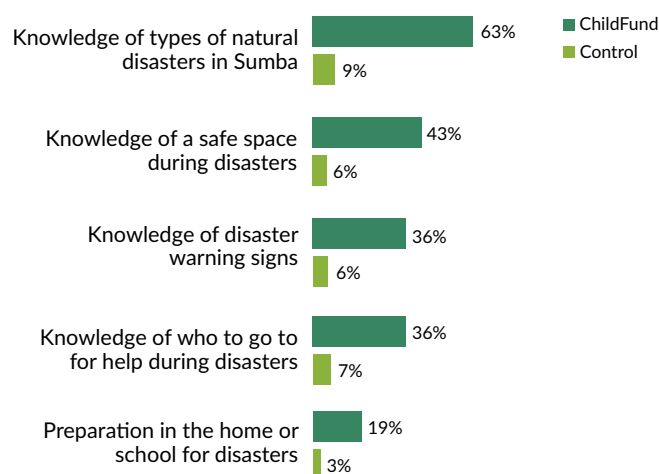
The stress caused by disasters can cause family tension, which may manifesting physical violence and child neglect. Children's learning may also be disrupted if their schools are damaged or if their families lose their livelihoods.

ChildFund's **disaster risk reduction (DRR)** strategies aim to prevent children being harmed during and after disasters. Key to their success is making sure that children know what to do and where to go in an emergency.^{xxv}

Although the evaluation broadly demonstrated a positive impact, a few lessons learned emerged:

- Integrating the DRR components took time away from school readiness activities and overwhelmed teachers with additional responsibilities.
- DRR training needs to be tailored to prioritize the most commonly occurring natural disasters in each context.
- More attention needs to be given to preparing children for what to do during disasters that take place outside of preschool settings - for example, at home - so that the knowledge they gain is sustained and remains relevant as they transition into primary school and grow older.

Evaluation of DRR Knowledge Among Children in ChildFund's Impact Group and the Control Group



Overall, the results from this exciting ECD-DRR initiative suggest that the model could be adapted to other contexts and that preschool programs provide a promising entry point for preventing harm to children during and after natural disasters.

Our future commitment

The more we learn about the abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence that infants and young children may experience in this life stage, the more we understand its devastating impact on their well-being and development.

Our Life Stage Approach reminds us that if young children are to develop into healthy and fulfilled adolescents, their safety and protection in the early years cannot be overlooked. As ChildFund puts its Theory of Change into action for infants and young children, we will use our learning to:

- **Strengthen our support to parents and caregivers** during the critical – and often challenging – first years of raising a child. In the communities where we work, we will continue to listen to caregivers' needs and, with them, design programs that build upon their innate desire and capacity to care for and nurture their children.
- **Strive to understand more about the violence that infants and young children experience** and, most importantly, the factors that lead to or perpetuate different forms of abuse, neglect and exploitation in both development and emergency contexts. As we bolster our data collection methods, so too will we adapt and tailor our positive parenting and ECD programs, building knowledge and skills and giving caregivers the confidence to access help when needed.
- **Continue to involve communities in the protection of young children.** Empowered, community volunteers, ECD teachers, or Child Protection Committees can support vulnerable families, learn how to detect children in trouble and connect them to the help they need. In this way we can help to build a frontline of protection for young children across the communities where we work.
- **Engage community leaders and government representatives** to help them better understand the challenges of protecting children early in life and the critical need to create systems of support for infants and young children. This includes advocating for communities and governments to consider the needs of very young children in the design and delivery of care and protection systems.

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