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Safeguarding children in the GCC

A framework for the education sector

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Executive summary



For quality learning to take place at the primary and secondary school levels, countries need to have robust protection frameworks for children. Children, society's most vulnerable members, need to be educated, nurtured, and protected. This is a basic social requirement with long-term socioeconomic benefits. A failure to properly protect children from all forms of abuse can impose severe mental and physical damage on the children concerned and creates social and economic costs. However, by investing in the protection of children, countries preserve and enhance their human capital, which can over the long term improve economic productivity.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)¹ countries are stressing the importance of child protection and education authorities' role in ensuring it because children spend so much time in educational settings. They are becoming more proactive and are launching child protection initiatives. In some places, however, the approach can be piecemeal as it lacks an institutionalized child protection framework.

To ensure the systematic prevention, detection, and management of child abuse, governments must establish comprehensive frameworks for child protection at a national level. Child protection requires proper reporting and intervention procedures grouped into seven pillars: a solid governance model; unified standards for the definition and identification of maltreatment; mandated — but safe — reporting; confidentiality in information management; safe recruitment of school staff; the introduction of child protection notions into the curriculum; the designation of Child Protection Liaison Officers (CPLO) at schools. These pillars are embedded within a comprehensive legislative and policy framework.

The child protection imperative

Child maltreatment is a worldwide problem. In this report, it refers to any form of physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, or exploitation of a person below the age of 18.

Maltreatment can have a devastating effect on the physical and mental development of children, lasting beyond childhood and adolescence into adulthood. Children who have been maltreated are more likely to face social difficulties, to suffer from behavioral problems, and to display high-risk conduct. These are problems that all GCC governments seek to guard against on basic moral grounds — because it is the right thing to do to protect the most vulnerable members of society. However, there are additional reasons to combat child maltreatment, including the impact on human capital and future workforces. These concerns should prompt government officials to strengthen their protective policies and institutions. In many of these efforts, countries' school systems can make an important contribution and be a first line of defense for children.

The challenge in the GCC

In common with governments around the world, GCC governments are seeking to ensure a high level of child protection. Some of this requires refining the legislative framework. It may also involve raising awareness of the problem within communities, so that people are able to effectively detect and report child abuse. Education also plays a role. It is important to ensure that school officials do not worry about reporting suspicions of child maltreatment and that they feel confident that cases will be dealt with expeditiously and professionally. As is the case with many countries, accurate data on the phenomenon of child maltreatment is hard to come by, which can make it difficult for governments generally, and ministries of education in particular, to build a strong baseline on the topic. Without such a baseline, it is challenging to implement effective performance management models. Although no country has perfect information in this area, some countries have more mature frameworks and better information. For instance, in the U.S. it is estimated that around 3.3 million cases of child maltreatment were investigated or responded to in 2014.² U.S. authorities started to amass reliable statistics on the extent of child maltreatment after mandatory reporting laws went into effect in 1967, with 60,000 cases reported in 1974.³

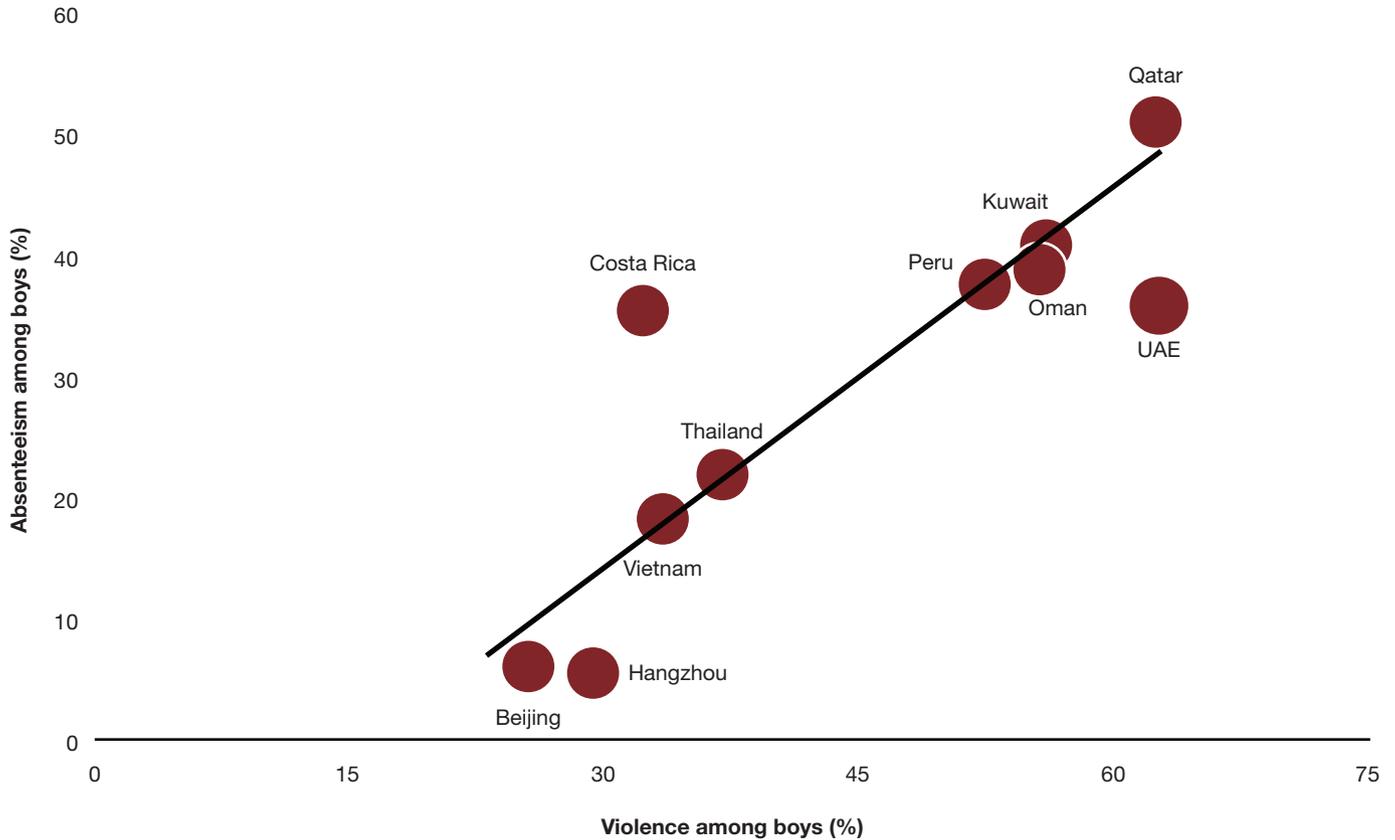
Although the data in the GCC may not be as well developed, the region's governments take the issue seriously. Educators understand that child maltreatment can affect education outcomes in the GCC. Consider the Global school-based student health survey for students ages 13 to 17 years that studied statistics on violence and absenteeism for some GCC states and for high performers like Beijing, Hangzhou, and Vietnam. A bivariate analysis shows that high levels of violence against children are associated with high degrees of truancy and that there is a particular issue in the GCC (*see Exhibit 1, page 6*). In addition to truancy, students who are the victims of violence are more likely to have low self-esteem, to be unemployed once they get out of school, and even if employed, to receive lower wages than young individuals not victimized by violence in school.⁴

It is important to ensure that school officials do not worry about reporting suspicions of child maltreatment.

Exhibit 1

GCC countries have high rates of male youth violence and absenteeism

Violence and absenteeism among male youth by countries/cities



Source: World Health Organization and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Global school-based student health survey among students ages 13 to 17; Beijing, Hangzhou 2003, Costa Rica 2009, Qatar 2011; Peru, UAE 2010, Vietnam 2013, Oman, Kuwait, Thailand 2015 (<http://www.who.int/chp/gshs/en/>).

GCC states have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child⁵ and strengthened national legislation in social, health, education, and economic areas. They have not, for the most part, implemented comprehensive child protection legislative frameworks. In most countries, the prohibition against violence was achieved in schools but not in family settings; the legal age of employment was raised in public sectors but not in private settings and family businesses; and the minimum age for both criminal responsibility (7 years old in some places) and marriage have remained lower than in other parts of the world. These gaps can make it more difficult when it comes to dealing with child maltreatment.

Steps forward

Recognizing the seriousness of the problem, GCC governments have recently developed some initiatives to strengthen child protection. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, the National Family Safety Program aims to protect families and children from violence and abuse, and publishes booklets to raise awareness about child maltreatment on the part of parents, in the community, and between and among children. Qatar has included child protection in its National Development Strategy and is focusing on preventing the online abuse of children, a growing concern everywhere. In Oman, the 2014 Children's Act established mechanisms for the mandatory reporting of cases of abuse and neglect by physicians, teachers, and other professions. In the UAE, a new Federal Law on Child Rights was passed by the Federal National Council in the spring of 2016. The law guarantees a child's right to life, to a name, to health care and education, and to protection from economic and sexual exploitation; it also allows childcare specialists to remove children from their homes against parents' wishes and without judicial permission in cases of perceived imminent danger.

The seven pillars of child protection

For these efforts to be successful and gain the expected benefits, it is important that governments understand the pillars of successful child protection, and that they tackle the topic as a whole, in a systematic and comprehensive manner. Child protection involves measures and structures designed to prevent and respond to maltreatment that come together in six main functions.

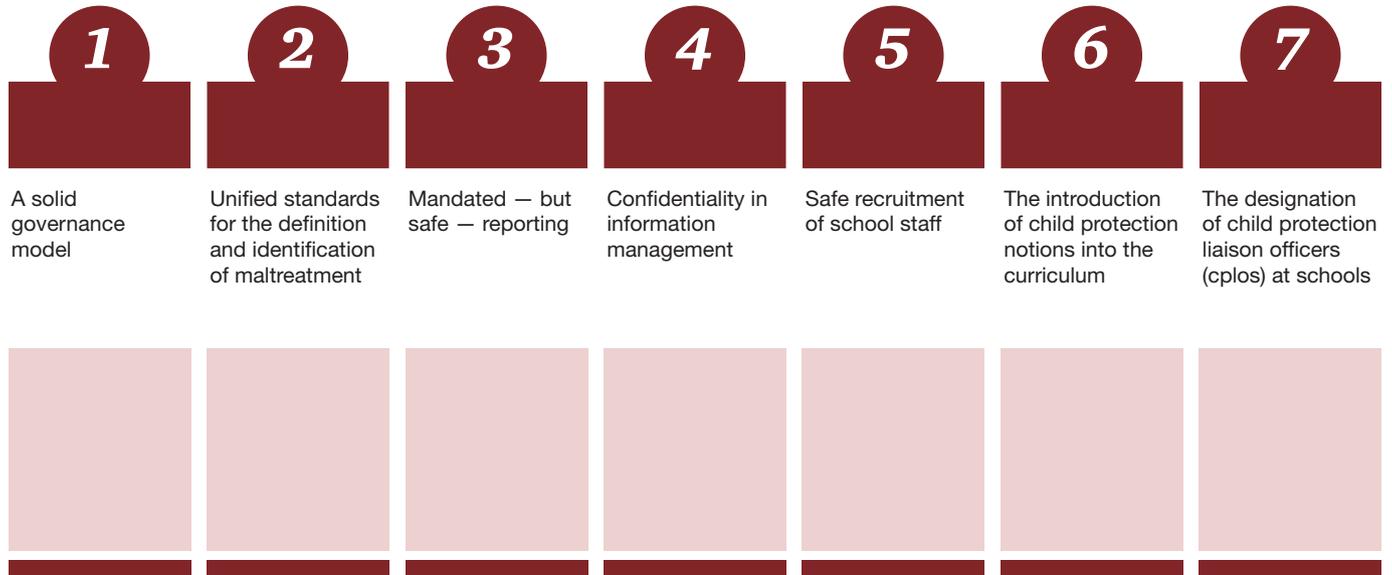
The first step is to detect/suspect maltreatment, which implies recognizing signs of abuse or neglect. This step is followed by the reporting of the detected/suspected cases to the relevant authorities. Once a case is reported, an investigation takes place to determine appropriate interventions, which could include removing the child from harm or providing end-to-end victim support services (monitoring and intervention). Records of the case should be properly and confidentially maintained by the relevant entities and officials throughout the process. In addition to dealing with cases in an appropriate way, child protection also involves preventing maltreatment in the first place, which implies a continuous effort to raise awareness of the issue and develop safeguarding mechanisms.

For these child protection functions to be effective, governments need an overarching framework of laws, policies, and structures (*see Exhibit 2*). In particular they need:

1. a solid governance model
2. unified standards for the definition and identification of maltreatment
3. mandated — but safe — reporting
4. confidentiality in information management
5. safe recruitment of school staff
6. the introduction of child protection notions into the curriculum
7. the designation of Child Protection Liaison Officers (CPLOs) at schools

Exhibit 2

The seven pillars of child protection



Source: Strategy&

Many of the elements of the framework focus on schools because after the home, school is the place where children spend the most time. In the GCC, children spend most of their day in school, six hours in elementary and middle school settings and almost eight hours when they get to high school. School is also where abuse that has occurred at home is most readily suspected or detected.

A solid governance model

A solid governance model is critical as it defines the roles of the numerous entities and officials involved in child protection and allocates responsibility. The Ministry of Social Services typically sets the overarching national-level policy, while the Ministry of Education develops policies for child protection specific to education settings. At the operational level, a number of entities interact, including school management, the police, social services institutions, and health services entities. The role of schools is primarily to detect and report cases, whereas the investigation and intervention activities are handled by social services, health services, and the police. Each entity or official should have specified roles and responsibilities, and coordination mechanisms should be developed among stakeholders, ranging from structured forms of collaboration (partnerships, protocols), to more informal liaisons (such as shared training and networks).

Unified standards for the definition and identification of maltreatment

Proper detection of suspected maltreatment requires unified standards for the definition and indicators of each type of abuse/neglect. Indeed, in order for a person to identify/suspect a case of maltreatment, that person needs to understand and be able to recognize signs of abuse or neglect. As such, each of the four main types of maltreatment (physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect) should have a standard definition agreed upon and used by everyone, associated with a set of indicators, both physical and emotional. In education settings, these definitions and indicators are used by school staff to help them detect/suspect maltreatment. Exploitation, the fifth category of maltreatment, usually involves a child who is not enrolled in school and as such is generally outside the purview of education officials.

Mandated — but safe — reporting

It is important to create a safe environment for mandatory reporting to encourage reporting of detected/suspected cases. These two concepts are often in conflict: If the person required to report maltreatment faces possible retaliation from an alleged perpetrator (including the threat of job loss), by definition there is no safety. Thus, legislation and policies must provide protection for those reporting maltreatment, in particular whistle-blowers who detect poor management of cases or the suppression of evidence.

“Mandated reporters” typically include educators (teachers and volunteers), medical practitioners, psychologists, social workers, mental health professionals, child care providers, and the police. They also include ancillary staff, such as administrators, bus drivers, contractors, cleaners — anybody who interacts with children in an education setting. Mandatory reporting should be mentioned in the legislation, in child protection policies, in job postings, in written acknowledgment statements to be signed by the mandated reporter prior to employment, and in training for all relevant professionals.

Confidentiality in information management

Confidentiality is critical for record keeping and information-sharing activities. It is important that the appropriate information is shared with the right person, always keeping in mind the child’s welfare as the ultimate concern. For instance, the identity of the victim, the reporter, and the alleged perpetrator should only be disclosed to the authorities that are directly involved in investigation and intervention. Within the school, only the CPLO should know. For this reason, information sharing, both within a single entity and across entities, is typically guided by well-defined protocols or agreements.

Safe recruitment of school staff

A key element of prevention is to strengthen existing recruitment practices to enhance the vetting of staff who are allowed to interact with children. This is an area where there is always room for improvement. Enhanced practices include rigorously validating employment histories of candidates through references, performing specific background checks to identify any past criminal record involving a child, and assessing physical and mental fitness of the candidate to interact with children. This requires proper training of the HR staff in charge of recruiting, continuously updated screening and evaluation methods, and strong coordination mechanisms with various security authorities locally and globally.

Introduction of child protection notions into the curriculum

Another critical prevention mechanism is the injection of child protection notions into curricula to raise children's awareness of maltreatment. These notions should be adapted to each school grade and aim to teach children how to recognize maltreatment, how to identify trusted adults, how to reach out to trusted adults to report maltreatment, and how to develop protective strategies and resist maltreatment. Lessons are typically delivered interactively, including through workshops, role playing, and videos, and complemented by parents at home.

Designation of CPLOs at schools

Within schools, the principal, a senior staff member, or a trained professional social worker should be designated as the CPLO and take the lead on child protection matters. The CPLO serves as a focal point, receiving referrals of suspected child abuse cases from staff, students, and parents, and channeling these referrals to relevant authorities while maintaining secure records of the reports. Additionally, the CPLO acts as the school's central resource on child protection, providing advice and expertise to staff and ensuring that they get appropriate training. Moreover, the CPLO stays abreast of the latest local policies on child protection and updates the school's policy, ensuring that the school's staff and parent body are fully aware of its terms. Regular training and orientation sessions allow the CPLO to stay up to date in terms of knowledge and capabilities development.

A comprehensive legislative framework

A comprehensive legislative framework is a vital element of child protection. Without key laws on child protection, it is difficult to enforce policies and regulate the necessary processes described above. Legislation on child protection in education settings is typically in five categories:

- Child welfare laws, which define measures to safeguard children and promote their welfare
- Laws on education institutions, which define their role in safeguarding children
- Laws on educators, which define procedures to license and screen educators and protect those who report maltreatment
- Laws that define the mechanisms for effective handling and prevention of different types of child maltreatment
- Privacy laws, which define measures to protect personal information

Legislation operates at the national level. To enforce it, ministries, education authorities, and individual schools need to introduce policies. An overarching child protection policy is typically developed by the ministry of social affairs, which then allows the ministry of education (or national education authority) to develop the detailed child protection policy for education settings.

The overarching policy covers the role of educators in child protection, the required code of conduct, guidelines on record keeping and information sharing, as well as associated issues (such as allegations of maltreatment by school staff, the definition of the child protection curriculum, tactics for dealing with bullying, and information provided to parents). If a country has regional or district education authorities that supervise groups of schools, then these authorities will need to ensure that the overarching policy is clearly communicated to schools and it will need to communicate this compliance back to the national ministry/education authority.

At the individual school level, each school is required to develop an individual child protection policy that adheres to the overarching child protection policy developed by the ministry of education. In addition to this child protection policy, other supporting policies are also needed, such as a confidentiality policy, a whistle-blowing policy, a policy for school visitors, and a staff vetting policy.

Conclusion

The GCC countries have taken important steps toward protecting children in recent years. As these countries invest more in education, they also need to put more time into solidifying their emerging child protection practices and framework. To provide more reliable coverage and reporting, GCC governments need to institutionalize their child protection frameworks so that all work by education and social affairs agencies is conducted systematically, with cases managed professionally, and whistle-blowers protected. This will allow them to have a more accurate grasp of the extent of child abuse and be better able to treat instances when they occur.

Endnotes

¹ The GCC countries are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

² “Child Maltreatment 2014,” U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, and Children’s Bureau, 2016 (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cm2014.pdf>).

³ John E.B. Myers, “A Short History of Child Protection in America,” *Family Law Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 3, Fall 2008 (https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publishing/insights_law_society/ChildProtectionHistory.authcheckdam.pdf#page=8).

⁴ Glen R. Waddell, “Labor-Market Consequences of Poor Attitude and Low Self-Esteem in Youth,” *Economic Inquiry*, Vol. 44, No. 1, January 2006.

⁵ United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child, New York, 20 November 1989 (https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&clang=_en).

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