

# Promoting positive discipline and preventing corporal punishment

## The Children Assistance Program (CAP), Liberia

### THE CONTEXT IN LIBERIA

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- Corporal punishment is not legally banned in school or at home in Liberia. While the government issues stern warnings to schools that corporal punishment or any punishment that causes physical and moral injury is not allowed, these warnings are not always followed.
- Sexual exploitation and abuse against women and children increased rapidly due to COVID-19, with regular reports of sexual abuse, especially rape.
- When schools reopened after lockdown, some parents could not afford to send their children back to school. Children reported feeling unsafe at home as there was increased prevalence of violence during the pandemic, including an increase in teenage pregnancies.

### THE PRACTICE: PROMOTING POSITIVE DISCIPLINE AND PREVENTING CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

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To halt the use of corporal punishment, CAP conducted a scoping study on kinship care. This established that children suffer both physical and mental health problems as a result of corporal punishment. The study showed that there was a need to design programmes that **educate parents**, including kinship caregivers, about the **most effective forms of positive discipline** to help guide children's behaviour. In addition, child protection organisations needed to step up advocacy on the ban of corporal punishment in schools and communities.

### HOW THE PRACTICE WAS IMPLEMENTED

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#### Step 1 – Baseline survey

A baseline survey was conducted prior to the outbreak of the pandemic to establish the effects of corporal punishment on children. Based on its experiences in child protection and the use of participatory scoping study tools, CAP used a qualitative methodology to understand the use of corporal punishment on children in schools and homes. Preparatory meetings were held with the Ministry of Education who provided a list of schools. CAP then undertook random sampling to select schools.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, CAP developed questionnaires for the scoping study and conducted one-on-one interviews with respondents. The respondents were principals, teachers, parents, guardians, students, and out-of-school children.

Respondents were drawn randomly from 16 private and two public schools. Over 200 participants were interviewed including in-school children, out-of-school children, principals, teachers and parents/guardians.

## SURVEY FINDINGS

- Children are subjected to corporal punishment both in schools and homes.
- **100%** of children said they are afraid of corporal punishment.
- **90%** of adult respondents acknowledged that corporal punishment **is not** an effective method of disciplining a child.
- **80%** of adult respondents acknowledged that corporal punishment **does not** lead to development of good character.
- Corporal punishment has negative physical, emotional and psychological effects.
- Some of the effects of corporal punishment include pains, body blisters, fear, poor academic performance, demotivation, low self-esteem, loneliness, isolation and dropping out of school.
- **75%** of adult respondents said they **support** a policy/law that makes it illegal to use physical/corporal punishment to discipline children.
- Canes are used in **100%** of schools.

## Step 2 – Stakeholder meetings

Stakeholder engagement meetings were held to share the survey findings. Participants included the Ministry of Education, school principals, representatives from other organisations, parents and guardians, and CAP representatives. They discussed the use of positive discipline as an alternative to corporal punishment in schools and communities, leading to school administrators being willing for CAP to carry out advocacy campaigns in their schools.

Stakeholders welcomed the idea of promoting positive discipline as an alternative to corporal punishment. They agreed to:

- Fully cooperate and support the project.
- Collaborate on the promotion of the use of positive discipline as an alternative to corporal punishment in schools and communities.
- Work with relevant authorities in ensuring that government policy on corporal punishment is adhered to.

## Step 3 – Advocacy campaigns and sensitisation

Advocacy campaigns on the use of positive discipline as an alternative to corporal punishment were carried out in schools and communities. Several different strategies were used.

- Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials were developed. Fliers with messages promoting positive discipline were distributed by field staff and posters were placed on schools and buildings.
- Field staff also engaged with school authorities, students, parents and guardians, and out-of-school children, explaining the importance of the project.

- Media coverage was key. CAP developed a positive discipline jingle that was aired on two radio stations. CAP's executive director and two field staff took part in radio talk shows to explain the importance of positive discipline as an alternative to corporal punishment. Listeners had the opportunity to ask questions.

## HOW THE PRACTICE WAS CONDUCTED IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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In the initial period, with the safety measures that were required, face-to-face elements of the programme were suspended. All activities were done in line with COVID-19 protocols as recommended by the Ministry of Health. In the later stages, each activity was conducted with a small number of participants.

## IMPACT

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- After more than six months of the campaign's implementation, a reduction of violence against children in families was noticed.
- Students in eight schools and children from 55 households in the communities reported reduced or no incidence of violence at home. Prior to the project most of these families believed that corporal punishment was the best way to discipline a child.
- Although establishing behavioural changes in families took time, there was an evident reduction of violence and abuse of children in the domestic space.

## WHY THE PRACTICE WAS EFFECTIVE

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### Stakeholders' involvement

- CAP staff engaged with the local authority in each community. This was important firstly to explain the importance of the project and get the leadership's full support and cooperation, and secondly, to get the community involved and help them to clearly understand what they needed to do.
- All stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, National Legislature, schools, parents, churches and mosques, were fully involved right from the beginning of the advocacy campaigns.
- The authorities have since started adhering to the government's policy against corporal punishment in schools.
- Behavioural changes have been seen in teachers, parents and children. Most importantly, children are happy that corporal punishment is gradually lessening.