

Communities of practice for social systems strengthening to improve child wellbeing



Enhancing Child Safety and Protection in the Home and the Community: Lessons from the CoP study

LEILA PATEL, SADIYYA HAFJEJEE AND MATSHIDISO SELLO



CSDA
CENTRE FOR
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
IN AFRICA



Children in South Africa face high levels of violence in their homes, schools, and communities. Many experience poverty and experience physical, emotional, or sexual abuse and neglect, often from a young age. Systemic failures and a siloed and fragmented approach to service delivery leads to children falling through the cracks in the welfare, education and health systems. This undermines their sense of safety and belonging, compromises their mental and physical health, and ultimately affects their ability to thrive and grow. Addressing these challenges requires systemic change and an integrated approach—one that not only protects children but strengthens the support systems around them.

About the Community of Practice (CoP) Intervention

In 2020, the Community of Practice (CoP) for Child Wellbeing launched an innovative, school-based intervention aimed at improving the wellbeing of children by strengthening the circles of support around them. This four-year, multi-sectoral initiative brought together partners from the health, education, mental health and social development sectors to deliver integrated services in no-fee paying public schools in **Johannesburg** and **Moutse Limpopo** between 2020 and 2023.

At each site, a team of professionals including social workers and nurses from the three social sectors assessed the children using a digital Child Wellbeing Tracking Tool to identify learners at risk. Based on the assessments, children at high risk were identified and tailored interventions were delivered. This included access to primary healthcare services, food aid, psychosocial, educational, parenting and caregiver supports.

Through three waves of research conducted in 2020, 2021 and 2022, the CoP study demonstrated the value of a coordinated, school-based family and community centred support model—one that acknowledges the complex environments children grow up in and actively works to strengthen their care and protection through local systems of collaboration.

Children at High Risk: Care and Protection

The CoP tracked various metrics in the protection and care domain to assess if children have direct or indirect exposure to violence in their home or community.

What we found in Johannesburg

For children in Johannesburg, researchers found that exposure to violence remained relatively stable and high throughout the study.

	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3
Exposure to some form of violence at home or in the community	58%	60%	60%
Caregiver has safety concerns for their children	63%	50%	50%
Victim of abuse	8%	8%	8%

What We Found in Moutse, Rural Limpopo

Exposure to Violence:

- **46%** of children had been exposed to violence in their home or community
- **12%** were victims of abuse
- **40%** of caregivers were worried about their child's safety

Children at High Risk: Safety Concerns

We assessed children's risk across six areas. Here's what we found in the safety category:

In Johannesburg Risk Levels by Wave:

- **Wave 1:** 38% of children at high risk
- **Wave 2:** 60% of children at high risk
- **Wave 3:** 62% of children at high risk

In Moutse specifically:

- **48%** of children were at high risk in the safety category

What support was provided to high risk families?

Children categorised at high risk in any of the six domains was offered a tailored package of support to address their specific needs. This included a suite of support services:

1. At risk children were linked to social workers who conducted home visits
2. Inclusion of 45 families in the Sihleng'imizi Family Strengthening Intervention programme, which aims to enhance caregivers knowledge, skills and parenting practices.
3. Victims of abuse were referred to the Department of Social Development for statutory child protection services.

Over the three year period we saw improved outcomes for children who received social worker interventions such as home visits, and we also saw a reduction in the use of harsh discipline by caregivers who participated in family strengthening interventions^{1,2}.

What Changed with Support?

Harsh Discipline Decreased:

- **Wave 1:** 10 families used harsh discipline
- **Wave 3:** Only 1 family used harsh discipline

This shows that with awareness, knowledge and skills, children's exposure to violence can be reduced.

¹ Mbowa, S., Patel, L. and Sani, T. (2024). *Can a family strengthening Intervention improve child wellbeing outcomes for early grade learners?* (Research Brief). Centre for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg. The research brief can be found [here](#).

² Greyling, T and Segabi, Q. (2024). ROI Report: Interventions and child wellbeing. Assessing the impact of interventions on child wellbeing. Centre for Social Development in Africa. University of Johannesburg.

Learnings

Differences emerged in how caregivers, teachers, and nurses assessed children's risk of abuse, highlighting the need for a clear, shared definition to strengthen early identification and response. Parental and family engagement, for example when caregivers and siblings spend time reading, singing, and interacting with children, supports child development and safety. These findings point to the importance of both professional alignment and active caregiver involvement in improving child wellbeing.

Recommendations

Early Identification and Intervention

- Use digital tools and integrated in-school assessments (like the Child Wellbeing Tracking Tool) to identify at-risk children early.
- Enable timely referrals to specialist community support services.

Workforce and Service Delivery

- Address high social worker caseloads and shortages.
- Strengthen delivery of social work services in schools through the Departments of Basic Education, Social Development, and Health.
- Invest in staff development and training to scale innovation and improve impact.

Integrated Systems and Resources

- Build well-resourced, innovative systems for early identification, coordinated response, and sustained support.
- Ensure strong cooperation between government departments.
- Provide adequate human, financial, infrastructure, and digital resources.

School, Community and Family Support

- Expand targeted, school-based services to prevent poor outcomes like abuse, neglect, and violence.
- Strengthen community safety initiatives and support community-based, collaborative approaches (like the communities of practices).
- Provide family-strengthening interventions to improve caregiving and resilience.

Visit our website for more information <https://communitiesforchildwellbeing.org/>
or contact Prof Sadiyya Haffejee sadiyyah@uj.ac.za