



GPCwd Task Force on Child Protection

Position Paper

The Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Research and Studies into Violence against Children.

About the GPCwd and Child Protection Task Force

The GPCwd is a global multi-stakeholder coalition, representing more than 240 organisations, including international, national and local NGOs; Disabled people's organisations (DPOs); academia; young advocates; governments and the private sector. The GPCwd Task Force on Child Protection focuses on the protection from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect for children with disabilities. Initially it will work on three key strategic areas that have specific impact on the lives of children with disabilities; the transition from residential to community and family-based care; access and effectiveness of child protection systems; and inclusive child protection responses in crisis, conflict and emergency situations. For more information about the Task Force and its publications visit: www.gpcwd.org

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In 2013, UNICEF produced the State of the World's Children with a specific focus on children with disabilities; particular mention was made to the lack of data: "We contribute to [children with disabilities'] exclusion by failing to gather enough data to inform our decisions. When we fail to count these children, we are failing to help them count for all they should in their societies."¹

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¹ UNICEF, 2013. Children with disabilities. The state of the world's children 2013. New York. P.iii

1. Context

Children with disabilities² are at a significantly higher risk of experiencing physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect and other forms of violence than their non-disabled peers. A wide array of studies focusing solely on children with disabilities have considered and drawn attention to this. A 2012 study found that children with disabilities are 3.7 times more likely to suffer any form of violence than their peers without disabilities.³⁴ An earlier study, which looked at hospital records of 39,000 individuals in the USA, found that 6,000 children in the population had been victims of violence. 64% of these children had a disability, of whom more than half had been exposed to multiple forms of violence.⁵ Other studies have found high exposure of violence among children with disabilities in East Africa⁶ and an increased risk of sexual violence against children with disabilities in Burundi, Madagascar, Mozambique and Tanzania.⁷ The GPcwd Task Force for Child Protection has recently produced an in-depth literature review which presents a further vast evidence-base of children with disabilities' increased risks of exposure to violence, which can be accessed on the web site of the GPcwd.

2. Exclusion of children with disabilities in studies on violence against children

There is an extensive body of evidence which shows that children with disabilities are at significantly increased risk of being subjected to violence. Despite this, even the renowned UNICEF country surveys into violence against children in Cambodia, Haiti, Kenya, Malawi, Swaziland, Tanzania and Zimbabwe⁸ have omitted to include, or have consciously excluded children with disabilities from the scope of the research. This may in part be due to an inability to understand how to access data about children with disabilities, particularly when they may be 'hidden' in certain contexts and environments; there may be limited knowledge or awareness about data gathering tools which allow children with disabilities' inclusion; a lack of resources to aid communication may also contribute to these issues; and a lack of training for field personnel and researchers studying impact on children in community and domestic violence settings.⁹ The exclusion of children with disabilities from research will inevitably lead to their exclusion from child protection systems. To avoid this, steps should be taken to ensure that children with disabilities are active and consenting participants in all studies on violence against children.

² The taskforce defines disability as to include physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional, and developmental impairments including developmental delays and atypical behaviour.

³ Lisa Jones, Mark A Bellis, Sara Wood, Karen Hughes, Ellie McCoy, Lindsay Eckley, Geoff Bates, Christopher Mikton, Tom Shakespeare, Alana Officer (2012), Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies, *The Lancet*, retrieved 14.12.2012

⁴ UN News Centre, 2012, Children with disabilities more likely to face violence, says UN-backed study, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=42456&Cr=disab&Cr1>, retrieved 14.12.2012

⁵ Sullivan, P.M., & Knuton, J.F. (2000). Maltreatment and disabilities: A population-based epidemiological study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 24(10), 1257-1273.

⁶ Stöpler L (2007) *Hidden Shame: Violence against Children with Disabilities in East Africa*. Terre des Hommes, Nederland

⁷ Save the Children (2011), *Out from the Shadows: Sexual Violence against Children with Disabilities*. http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/out_of_the_shadows_3.pdf

⁸ Sommarin, C. (2015) *Researchign children's rights in the digital age violence against children surveys*. UNICEF, London 12 February 2015. Available online: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/Research-Projects/Researching-Childrens-Rights/pdf/Ppt/Clara-Sommarin.pdf>

⁹ As is highlighted in the 2013 Violence Against Children study on Malawi for example which states: "Males and females with mental disabilities who did not have the capacity to understand the questions being asked and those with physical disabilities (e.g., hearing and speech impairment) that prevented the interviewer from administering the surveys were also excluded from the study" (p.49).

3. Future development of integrated child protection systems

The Task Force has noted and welcomes trends which show an increasing understanding of child abuse and exploitation and a push towards the development of integrated child protection systems.

Integrated systems need to be fit for purpose for all children. Children with disabilities are more likely to 'fall into' child protection systems both because of their increased risk of experiencing abuse, neglect and violence and because of a lack of adequate integrated child protection services which are able to respond to these risks and children's specific needs. Non-integrated child protection systems are unable to respond to children with disabilities' needs which may lead to inappropriate removal from family care and placement in institutions where especially young children are at risk of experiencing developmental delays and disability as a result of the institutionalisation.¹⁰

As has been pointed out above, children with intellectual and other disabilities are also at substantially increased risk of sexual harm.¹¹ Failing to include children with disabilities in the development of responses to trafficking and exploitation is therefore a major concern.

The current exclusion of children with disabilities, and a failure to reflect their particular protection needs in the above-mentioned surveys is likely to lead to misrepresentation and the understanding of violence against children overall. This in turn will hinder the development of effective child protection systems which meet the needs of all children. For children with disabilities to count, they need to be counted. Conversely, ineffective child protection systems lead to significant human and child rights violations and this in turn leads to many short and longer-term financial and other costs to society.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The lack of inclusion of children with disabilities in research into violence against children demonstrates an institutionalised failure to recognise their needs and rights and this appears to be ingrained in current efforts to develop improved child protection systems. It is necessary to take urgent action to address this failure at all levels.

The inclusion of children with disabilities in studies and research concerning violence against children is an absolute necessity if we are to improve child protection systems for all children. To leave them out is to leave them behind and failure to count them is an indication of how little they count at societal and global level. Therefore, the GPc wd Task Force on Child Protection calls for all governmental and non-governmental agencies working on child protection and violence against children to:

- Ensure the protection needs of children with disabilities are mainstreamed and integrated into the research parameters and focus of all studies into violence against children. To achieve this, inclusion should be promoted at the highest levels of all child focused international organisations and agencies.
- Develop integrated child protection systems that fully mainstream and answer the needs of children with disabilities by ensuring that particular vulnerability and risk issues are addressed in any frameworks that seek to protect all children.
- Ensure that children with disabilities' issues are mainstreamed into practice and delivery of child protection measures by including them in child protection legislation, guidance, policy and procedures and supporting professional training that includes a focus on their needs.

¹⁰ Nelson, C.A., Bos, K., Gunnar, M.R. and Sonuga-Barke, E.J.S. (2011) The neurobiological toll of early human deprivation. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*. Vol 76 (issue 4), pp 127-146.

¹¹ Lisa Jones, Mark A Bellis, Sara Wood, Karen Hughes, Ellie McCoy, Lindsay Eckley, Geoff Bates, Christopher Mikton, Tom Shakespeare, Alana Officer (2012), Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies, *The Lancet*, retrieved 14.12.2012