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Child Abuse & Neglect

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabuneg

A mapping of parenting support policies worldwide to prevent violence against children

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Violence against children
Parental violence
Parenting support
Government
Parenting policy

ABSTRACT

Background: While recent systematic reviews indicate that parenting interventions reduce negative parenting behaviours, including child maltreatment, only 26 % of governments worldwide indicate that parenting support programs reach all parents in their country.

Objective: This mapping study investigates which countries have a government policy to provide such parenting support aimed at reducing child-directed violence.

Setting: To analyse parenting support within the broad cultural and historical contexts, this study covers all 194 countries and territories worldwide.

Methods: A systematic stepwise online search was conducted to establish the existence, or not, of a parenting support policy to prevent violence against children and in the case that a policy was identified, the sectoral policy portfolio in which the policy was published.

Results: Findings showed that almost half of countries globally have a policy relating to parenting support to prevent child maltreatment. The highest concentration of such policies is in the European, Southeast Asia and Western Pacific Regions and globally parenting support are mainly stand-alone policies or embedded within a child protection policy.

Conclusions: Ideas around parenting support have evolved over time however the link between policy and practice as well as the reality of implementation modalities remains unclear. The translation of policy to practice merits further attention if we want to reach every parent in the world who needs it.

1. Introduction

Child maltreatment is a global public health problem (Krug et al., 2002). Such maltreatment includes the perpetration of physical, sexual and psychological/ emotional violence and neglect of infants, children and adolescents aged 0–17 years by parents, caregivers and other authority figures, most often in the home but also in settings such as schools and orphanages (World Health Organization, 2022). A synthesis of available data demonstrates the severity of the issue, with estimated prevalence rates of 12.7 % for sexual abuse, 22.6 % for physical abuse, 36.3 % for emotional abuse, 16.3 % for physical neglect, and 18.4 % for emotional neglect (Stoltenborgh et al., 2015).

Parenting support interventions have the potential to address this global health issue. There is growing evidence that changing the

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106484>

Received 26 April 2023; Received in revised form 25 July 2023; Accepted 21 September 2023

Available online 1 October 2023

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behaviours of parents and other caregivers through parenting support interventions contributes to preventing child maltreatment (Chen and Chan, 2016; Desai et al., 2017; Knerr et al., 2013), likely because although a large proportion of children experience maltreatment at the hands of their parents or caregivers, the majority of these parents or caregivers are not malevolent but lack the capacity to find alternatives to violent punishment (Gilbert et al., 2012). Parenting support interventions can also bring other positive outcomes such as improved early child development, increased attendance at routine health visits, improved nutrition, and enhanced mothers' and children's mental health (Britto et al., 2017; Pedersen et al., 2019).

Despite the strong evidence base and the multiple positive outcomes of parenting support interventions, only 26 % of governments worldwide indicate that parenting support programs reach all parents in their country who would benefit from such programs (World Health Organization, 2020). This limited coverage of parenting support interventions may be due to a number of factors. In some countries, parenting is entwined with ideological values, whereby government intervention is not deemed necessary or appropriate. In other countries, the lack of such interventions may be due to limited human and financial capacities or that policies focus on specific developmental periods (e.g., early childhood) or outcomes (e.g., education), thereby limiting the scope and coverage of interventions (Daly, 2015).

To better understand government approaches to prevent violence against children, the goal of this study is threefold: 1) to identify which countries have a government policy relating to parenting support that includes a dedicated focus to preventing child maltreatment, or that have a dedicated policy to prevent violence against children that specifies referral to parenting support as a means to achieve this; 2) to analyse, in countries that have a parenting support policy, where this is located within the national policy portfolio; and 3) to describe, also in countries that have a parenting support policy, the modalities of violence-preventing parenting support service provision. We focus on policies in this study because in the realm of child and family support, policies have repeatedly shown to have impact in promoting child well-being (Engster & Stensöta, 2011). Similar to other areas of family policy (e.g., national paid maternity leave policies, which have proven to have beneficial effects on child development (Van Niel et al., 2020)), we assume that the existence and implementation of a parenting support policy will contribute to an increase in the availability of parenting support interventions, which in turn has the potential to reduce parental violence towards children.

By undertaking a mapping of parenting support policies aimed at reducing child maltreatment, this study contributes to the growing evidence on the impacts of social protection policies in relation to parenting support and the prevention of child maltreatment. More specifically, the study will provide novel insights into the policy landscape enabling parenting support in countries across the world and will offer new guidance for policymakers and practitioners to identify gaps and opportunities for scaling up parenting support interventions to prevent child maltreatment.

1.1. Prevalence and consequences of violence in childhood

Child maltreatment can take different forms (e.g., physical, sexual, or emotional violence, or neglect), can be perpetrated by individuals who have different types of relationships with the victim (e.g., parents, peers, intimate partners, mentors, teachers), and can occur in different settings (e.g., home, school, online, community/ neighbourhood, care facilities). Child maltreatment is challenging to study because it often happens behind closed doors and because data collected differs according to countries' definitions of child maltreatment, the type of child maltreatment studied, and the coverage of statistics (UNICEF, 2014).

Looking specifically at violence perpetrated by parents or caregivers, the only existing comparable data is data collected in 56 countries between 2005 and 2013, which shows that approximately 6 out of 10 children aged 2–14 years experienced corporal punishment by adults in their households in the past month (UNICEF, 2014). On average, 17 % of children experienced severe physical punishment (i.e., being hit on the head, face, or ears, or being hit hard and repeatedly); in some countries this figure exceeded 40 % (UNICEF, 2014). The prevalence of physical punishment is similar for girls and boys, and young children (aged 2–4 years) are as likely as older children (aged 5–14 years) to be exposed to physical punishment, including harsh forms (UNICEF, 2014). Parents who were physically punished as children are more likely to physically punish their own children (UNICEF, 2014). Child maltreatment data disaggregated by region is limited therefore the *Know Violence in Childhood* (2017) report used the econometric method of multiple imputation to arrive at national estimates of missing prevalence rates. The data shows that, in terms of physical punishment and/or psychological aggression of children (aged 1–14) in the previous month, 86 % of children in West and Central Africa faced corporal punishment at home, compared to 62 % of children in Central and Eastern Europe. And even in industrialised countries, where prevalence was lowest, the estimated prevalence was 58 %.

Violence in childhood can have a range of adverse impacts at the personal, family, community, and societal levels (Krug et al., 2002). At the personal level, adverse impacts can include injuries, sexually transmitted infections, mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicide), substance abuse, cognitive impairment, or death (Krug et al., 2002). At the family level, violence in childhood has been linked to poor attachment between parents and children and low levels of family cohesion (Heilmann et al., 2021). Impacts at the community level include the perpetuating of social norms reflecting misogyny and the acceptance of violence (Heilmann et al., 2021). Beyond the direct impact of violence on children and their surroundings, the financial cost of violence against children to society is staggering. A study conducted in South Africa, for instance, estimated that the economic value of disability-adjusted life-years lost to both fatal and nonfatal violence against children equalled USD 13.5 billion, that is, 4.3 % of South Africa's annual gross domestic product (Fang et al., 2017). In addition, reduced earnings attributable to childhood physical and emotional violence were estimated at USD 2.0 billion and USD 750 million, respectively (Fang et al., 2017).

1.2. Preventing violence through parenting support interventions

In response to the increasing recognition of the magnitude, consequences, and cost of violence against children, and as part of a commitment to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal target 16.2 to ‘end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children,’ the WHO and key partners published an evidence review of current approaches to prevent and respond to violence against children.¹ One of the seven intervention strategies distinguished in the review was parent and caregiver support. In alignment with the evidence review, and for the purpose of this study, a parenting intervention is defined as a ‘structured intervention directed at parents or other key caregivers of the child that is designed to improve parent–child interaction and the overall quality of parenting that a child receives’ (Backhaus et al., 2023). It is sometimes part of more holistic family support which may also include financial, material, and social support.

Similar to the scope of welfare state policies more broadly (Titmuss, 2006), the scope of parenting support interventions can also be classified as universal (i.e., interventions for all parents), selective (i.e., interventions for selected parents such as parents with disabilities, foster or adoptive parents and fathers’) or targeted (i.e., interventions for at-risk parents such as parents of children in conflict with the law, or sexually abused children). The core content of effective parenting interventions to prevent violence against children generally include the following components: practical instruction on positive-parent child interaction, use of positive encouragement, techniques for non-violent disciplining, problem-solving, socioemotional coaching, and developmentally responsive supervision (UNICEF, 2020). They normally consist of a structured series of sessions, using a range of learning activities, where parents learn to apply parenting principles to their own child and family context, and are often manualized (i.e., implemented according to specific guidelines). Parenting interventions can be delivered by professional or paraprofessional staff and delivery strategies include group-based learning (at home, in a centre or online), individualized support or multi-disciplinary strategies.

Expanding on the evidence for the prevention of violence against children, in 2021 the WHO commissioned a systematic review focusing on parenting interventions in low- and middle- income countries (LMICs) for parents of children aged 2–17 years and another systematic review that examined the effectiveness globally of the most widely distributed parenting interventions focusing on children aged 2–10. The systematic reviews, including a total of 435 randomized controlled trials from 65 countries, suggest that parenting interventions improve a range of parent, child and family outcomes. Almost a third of the studies were conducted in the Pan-American Region, followed by a quarter conducted in both the European Region and the Western Pacific Region, with the final quarter shared by trials from the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the African Region and the South-East Asian Region. Parenting interventions were found to reduce negative parenting behaviours, including maltreatment, and improve positive and nurturing parenting behaviours across all contexts and types of interventions examined. The effect of parenting interventions on maltreatment and negative parenting did not vary by poverty level of the country, gender of the children, education level of the parents, family-level poverty or the age of the children or parents in the trials (Backhaus et al., 2023).

1.3. Scaling up parenting support through government policies

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted by almost every country and territory, stipulates that “parents or legal guardians have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child” and that “State Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities” (UNCRC 1989, General Assembly Resolution 44/25, Article 18). The Convention also explicates that State parties must “take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child” (UNCRC 1989, General Assembly Resolution 44/25, Article 19).

However, despite the designated responsibility of governments, a survey of decision-makers in 155 countries undertaken between mid-2018 and mid-2019 found that they all indicated that interventions to prevent violence against children had failed to reach scale in their setting (World Health Organization, 2020). More specifically, the survey found that while 80 % of countries reported having at least one national action plan to prevent violence against children, just one in five plans were fully funded. Furthermore, while 56 % of countries were found to provide some national support for implementing the so-called INSPIRE strategies (1), this varied markedly by strategy and WHO region. With respect to parenting support interventions, which include home visiting and centre-based parent support approaches, only 26 % of decision-makers indicated that all parents who needed it were reached in their country. The estimated reach ranged from 78 % of countries in the European Region to under 50 % of countries in the Eastern Mediterranean and Asia regions. Looking at the specific approaches, coverage ranged from 39 % for home visiting approaches and 48 % for centre-based parent support in high-income countries, as compared to 10 % and 17 %, respectively, in lower-middle-income countries.

Bringing parenting support to scale to prevent violence against children appears to have primarily gained traction in Europe. Since the 1990s, parenting support has been incorporated into national strategies and legislation in several European Union (EU) countries, and there is a trend among EU member states to provide parenting support through universally accessible services (European

¹ The review was published in a document entitled INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence against Children, which illustrates evidence-based model interventions that represent either effective, promising or prudent practice. The interventions are presented according to seven strategies that were defined based on a strong convergence in guidance already published by INSPIRE’s participating agencies. Using an acronym, the strategies are: Implementation and enforcement of laws; Norms and values; Safe environments; Parent and caregiver support; Income and economic strengthening; Response and support services; and Education and life skills.

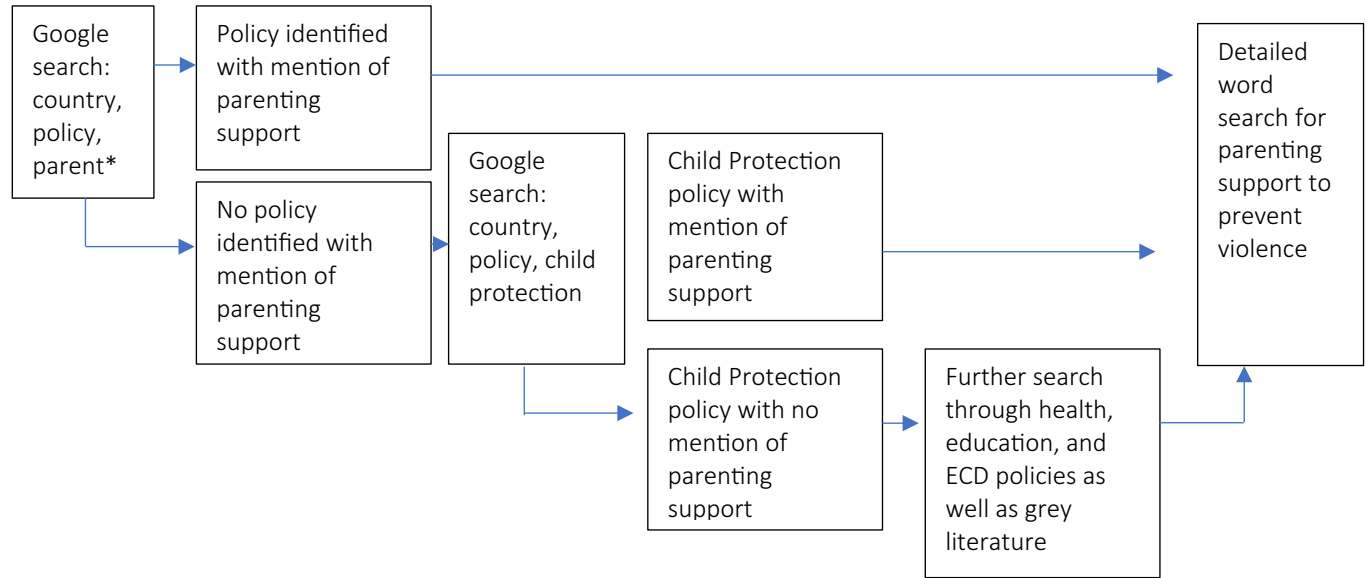


Fig. 1. Flowchart for the online search of parenting support policies.
NB: Given the iterative nature of the searches (e.g., websites leading to other websites/other articles/reports), our focus was on downloading the key parenting support document rather than tracking the number of searches, materials, and articles.

Commission's Directorate, 2013). To date, however, it remains unclear which other countries, in addition to several identified EU countries, have a dedicated government policy to promote parenting support in view of preventing violence against children. The absence of such data means the evidence base for future policy development and sustainable scale up of parenting support interventions is limited.

1.4. Current study

To better understand the limited coverage of parenting support interventions in some parts of the world, this study maps the availability of government policies relating to parenting support to prevent violence against children, identifies the policy portfolios in which parenting support is located, and examines the modalities of parenting support service provision. Building on the seminal work of Daly et al. (2015), which provided an in-depth review of family and parenting support policies in nine diverse countries, this study expands the scope to all 194 countries and territories. At the same time, it narrows the focus to parenting support policies with the aim of preventing violence against children, rather than family support policies more generally.

2. Study design

A mapping review was conducted to discover, categorize and synthesize existing knowledge on the topic of parenting support policies (Grant & Booth, 2009). Mapping reviews can be distinguished from scoping reviews because the subsequent outcome may involve either further review work or primary research and this outcome is not known beforehand (Grant & Booth, 2009). To conduct the mapping, the assumption was that information on a country's parenting support policies, or the policies themselves, are accessible online through common search engines. For the purposes of this study, policy was defined as 'a document that sets out the main principles and defines goals, objectives, prioritized actions and coordination mechanism, for providing support' (Schopper et al., 2006). Policies that promote parenting support can be included in various government documents, including national development plans, child rights policies, policies on child maltreatment, policies on child and family social protection, policies on early childhood development and education or health policies. This implies that a search for information on relevant policies had to be conducted in an inclusive manner, covering a range of policy portfolios. This also implies that the search had to be conducted using an inductive iterative process (Yom, 2015), which would allow a refinement of search terms over time.

The search process of the mapping review was focused on establishing (a) the existence, or not, of a parenting support policy to prevent violence against children, (b) the existence, or not, of a violence prevention or child protection policy that included parenting support, (c) reference to parenting support to prevent violence against children within another sectoral policy, and (d) in the case that a policy was identified, the policy portfolio in which the policy was published (stand-alone parenting portfolio; child protection portfolio; or health /education portfolio).

To ensure that we identified relevant information that could be included in documents in a diversity of policy domains, we undertook a multi-step online search, using the Google search engine, for each country and territory worldwide (see Fig. 1). Web searches were conducted in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch (i.e., languages spoken by the authors), to identify information on relevant policies using the following keywords: '[country name]', 'policy' and 'parent*'. When possible, the authors used machine translation for additional languages. Information was collected on policies for the ten-year period from 2010 to 2020. Information on national recommendations, guidelines, and progress reports were excluded.

The initial search provided results from a range of policy portfolios, including health, justice, education, youth, social affairs, and human rights. When the search yielded a policy on parenting support to prevent violence against children in a national development plan, a stand-alone policy to support parenting, or a child rights policy, then the policy document was located and downloaded. The assumption was that national parenting support policies aimed specifically at preventing violence against children are rare. Therefore, if one reference was found then the search was completed. If the search returned multiple versions of the same policy, only the most recent version was utilized.

If the initial search yielded no results, a further search was conducted using the following keywords: '[country name]', 'policy' and 'child protection'. The term 'child protection' was used instead of 'violence against children' or 'child maltreatment' as the iterative search process demonstrated that the latter terms were rarely used in a policy title. For countries for which the online search yielded no information on a policy to prevent violence against children through parenting support, a targeted exploration was undertaken of the websites of government ministries charged with child and family protection, early childhood, education, and health. For these countries, we also searched UNICEF country websites and the website of the Committee on the Rights of the Child where state parties submit regular implementation reports (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc>) to ensure the search was sufficiently exhaustive.

An in-depth analysis was undertaken of all identified policy documents, using the search term 'parent' to assess whether the policy was related to parenting support to prevent violence against children or whether the parenting support was intended towards other outcomes. To ensure inclusivity, policy text embedded in websites (i.e., not presented as a downloadable document) or with alternative descriptions of parenting support (i.e., not focusing on traditional terms such as positive-parent child interaction, positive encouragement, or non-violent disciplining) were also included in the database. The policy documents that were found were stored and will be made available on the Global Initiative to Support Parents (GISP) knowledge-sharing platform in order to enable cross-checking and more detailed exploration for specific countries as well as to support implementation and advocacy efforts.

3. Results

Globally, two results are apparent: a) approximately half of the countries in the world have a government policy that refers to parenting support to prevent violence against children, with considerable regional variations, and b) parenting support policies of countries within the same region may be located in very different policy portfolios. It is important to note that a government policy may be developed by one or several ministries or parties, however this search named the portfolio in which the policy was currently located online. Given the importance of understanding parenting support in broader cultural and historical contexts, we present more detailed results by geographical region, using the categorization of the World Health Organization to align with the *Global status report on preventing violence against children* (World Health Organization, 2020).

During the iterative search process, it became apparent that the relevant policy documents did not include information on parenting support service modalities. Had there been more detailed information, our study would have gone a step further by conducting deductive coding of delivery modalities of parenting support (i.e., home visits, in group settings and comprehensive interventions), or categorization by the policy's focus on universal, selective, or indicated.

Table 1 shows that 46 % of countries worldwide (ninety out of 194) have a policy in which reference is made to parenting support to prevent violence against children. Regions where more than half of the countries have such a government policy include the Southeast Asia Region (SEARO), the Western Pacific Region (WPRO) and the European Region (EURO), where these figures are eight out of eleven countries, sixteen out of seventeen countries and thirty-three out of fifty-three countries, respectively. In the Americas Region (AMRO), seventeen out of thirty-four countries have a policy that includes reference to parenting support to prevent violence. For the African Region (AFRO) and the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMRO), twelve out of forty-seven countries, and four out of twenty-two countries, respectively, have such a government policy.

The systematic search for parenting support policies to prevent violence against children revealed six more specific findings. First, the term 'caregiver' was sometimes used in addition to 'parent' but never in isolation as a standalone term. This finding possibly implies that while caregivers (i.e., anyone responsible for the child's daily care and support) can be diverse, government policies still focus on primary caregivers, who generally are a parent or other family member. Second, decentralized countries (e.g., Switzerland and the United States) may not have federal policies but policies at the sub-national level. Third, other countries, like Australia, Canada and Chile, have a wealth of government-led parent supporting interventions that have been absorbed on the government website, but do not have a published policy. Fourth, the concept of parenting support was sometimes embedded in different types of language, such as 'strengthening educational models', 'promoting responsible behaviour' and 'inculcating family values'. Fifth, when searching for parenting support policies, many policies appeared that were not directly relevant for this study, such as policies on parental leave, divorce, adoption, and one-child policies. Moreover, 'issue-specific' parenting support policies were found, such as those in support of standalone mothers or migrant families, or policies to prevent the institutionalization of children into orphanages. Countries' parenting support policies may therefore be targeted at specific groups but not at the entire population of parents. Last, the search revealed that

Table 1
Overview of countries with and without a policy per region.

| Region | Countries where a policy was identified | | Countries where no policy was identified | |
|--------------|---|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| SEARO | 8 countries: Bhutan; India; Indonesia; Maldives; Nepal; Sri Lanka; Thailand; Timor-Leste | 73 % (8/11) | Bangladesh; Democratic People's Republic of Korea; Myanmar | 17 % (3/11) |
| WPRO | 16 countries: Australia; Brunei Darussalam; Cambodia; Cook Islands; Fiji; Japan; Malaysia; Mongolia; New Zealand; Papua New Guinea; Philippines; Samoa; Singapore; Solomon Islands; Vanuatu; Viet Nam | 59 % (16/27) | China; Kiribati; Laos; Marshall Island; Micronesia; Nauru; Niue, Palau; South Korea; Tonga; Tuvalu | 41 % (11/27) |
| EURO | 33 countries: Albania; Armenia; Austria; Belarus; Belgium; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Bulgaria; Cyprus; Czech Republic; Denmark; Estonia; Finland; France; Georgia; Germany; Iceland; Ireland; Israel; Italy; Malta; Montenegro; Netherlands; North Macedonia; Norway; Poland; Republic of Moldova; Romania; Serbia; Slovakia; Spain; Sweden; Ukraine; United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland | 62 % (33/53) | Andorra; Azerbaijan; Croatia; Cyprus; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Latvia; Lithuania; Luxembourg; Moldova; Monaco; Portugal; Romania; Russia; San Marino; Slovenia; Switzerland; Tajikistan; Turkey; Turkmenistan; Uzbekistan | 38 % (20/53) |
| AMRO | 17 countries: Bahamas, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Peru, United States of America, Uruguay | 50 % (17/34) | Antigua and Barbuda; Argentina; Barbados; Belize; Bolivia; Cuba; Dominican Republic; Guatemala; Honduras; Nicaragua; Panama; Saint Kitts and Nevis; Saint Lucia; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; Suriname; Trinidad and Tobago; Venezuela | 50 % (17/34) |
| AFRO | 12 countries: Benin; Burkina Faso; Burundi; Kenya; Malawi; Namibia; Rwanda; Senegal; Seychelles; South Africa; Uganda; United Republic of Tanzania | 26 % (12/47) | Algeria; Angola; Botswana; Cabo Verde; Cameroon; Central African Republic; Chad; Comoros; Cote d'Ivoire; Democratic Republic of the Congo; Equatorial Guinea; Eritrea; ESwatini; Ethiopia; Gabon; Gambia; Ghana; Guinea; Guinea-Bissau; Lesotho; Liberia; Madagascar; Mali; Mauritania; Mauritius; Mozambique; Namibia; Niger; Nigeria; Sao Tome et Principe; Sierra Leone; South Sudan; Togo; Zambia; Zimbabwe | 74 % (35/47) |
| EMRO | 4 countries: Jordan, Egypt, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Palestine | 18 % (4/22) | Afghanistan; Bahrain; Djibouti; Iraq; Kuwait; Lebanon; Libya; Morocco; Oman; Pakistan; Qatar; Saudi Arabia; Somalia; Sudan; Syrian Arab Republic; Tunisia; United Arab Emirates; Yemen | 82 % (18/22) |
| Total | 46 % (90/194) | | 54 % (104/194) | |

most countries worldwide have a policy on early childhood development that includes parenting support targeted at, for example, pregnancy, childbirth, postnatal care, infant care, health and nutrition. Unless these parenting support policies were directly aimed at preventing violence against children, they were not included in our review.

Based on the review of which countries have a policy or not, Fig. 2 offers a breakdown of the policy portfolio in which the policy was located. Of the ninety countries that had a published policy, 52 % had a stand-alone policy on parenting or referenced parenting support in a child rights policy. A further 37 % included parenting support in a policy relating to child maltreatment. The remaining 10 % of the ninety countries referred to parenting support within either a health or education related policy.

In Asia, including SEARO and WPRO, in all but one of the twenty-four countries where parenting support policies were identified, these were either a stand-alone policy (63 %) or a policy aimed specifically at the prevention of violence against children (33 %). In EURO, of the thirty-three countries that had a policy referring to violence-preventing parenting support, twenty had a stand-alone policy (61 %), twelve policies appeared as part of a child protection policy (36 %), and one country included parenting support across the life course in an early childhood development policy (3 %). Of the countries in AMRO, six had policies that refer to parenting support through a stand-alone government-wide policy (35 %), six had it embedded within a violence prevention or child protection policy (35 %) and five had it embedded in other policies (29 %). In AFRO, of the twelve of countries where we found a published policy related to violence-preventing parenting support, four had had a stand-alone policy (33 %), seven included it in a violence prevention or child protection policy (58 %) and one country included this in their health policy. Of the four countries in EMRO, two had a stand-alone policy on violence-preventing parenting support (50 %), and two included it in the health policy or the national strategy for human resource development (50 %).

4. Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to map systematically which countries have a government policy relating to parenting support to prevent violence against children, and, in countries that have such a policy, to analyse where it is located within the national policy portfolio. Complementing existing literature on parenting support provisions, our study provides further insight into governmental commitment to supporting parents with the goal of ending parental or caregiver violence.

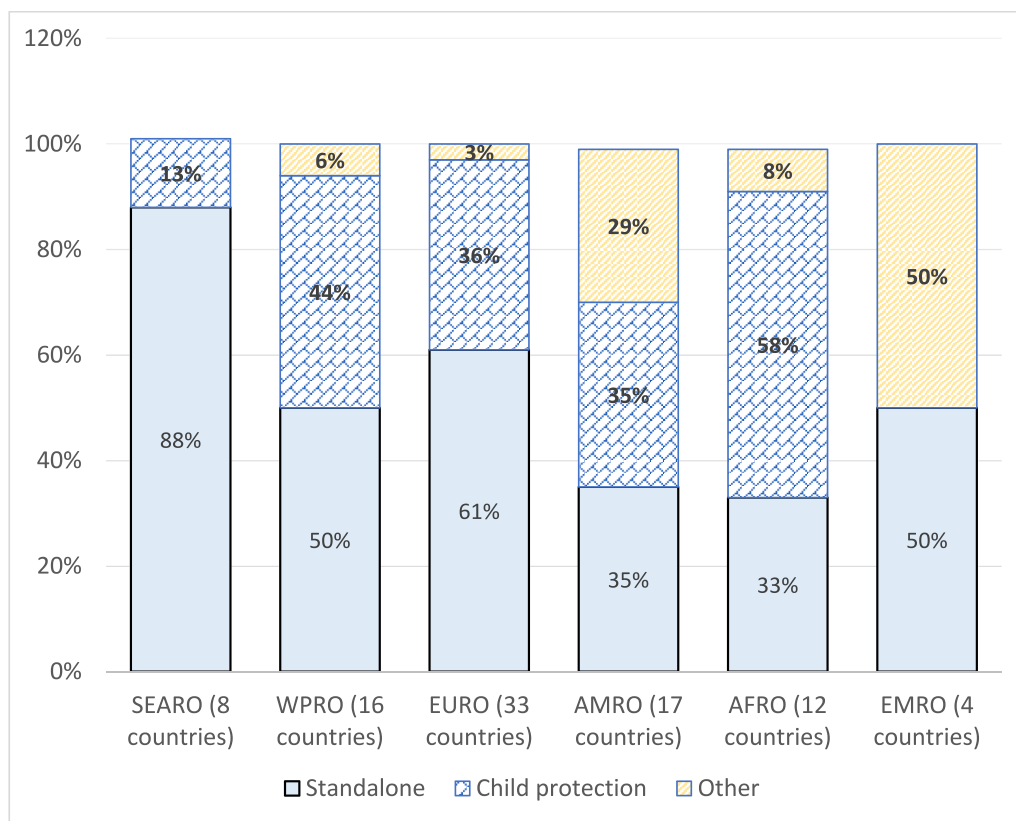


Fig. 2. Overview of where the policy was situated for the ninety countries that had a published policy which referenced parenting support (i.e., percentage of countries in each region where the policy is standalone, within child protection or within another other policy). Note: SEARO = Southeast Asia Region, WPRO = Western Pacific Region, EURO = European AMRO = Americas Region, AFRO = African Region, EMRO = Eastern Mediterranean Region.

The findings show that almost half of the countries worldwide (ninety out of 194) have a policy that refers to parenting support, and that the highest concentration of such policies is in the European, Southeast Asia and Western Pacific Regions. Of the ninety countries that have a parenting support policy to prevent violence against children, the policies are located within the following national portfolios: Children, youth and family services (forty-seven of the ninety countries); Child protection (twenty-seven of the ninety countries); Education (six of the ninety countries); and Health (four of the ninety countries). The further aim of the study, to understand the related modalities of service provision, could not be met due to lack of details within the policy documents.

Taking a historical perspective, it was only in the 19th century that children were first seen as needing special care and protection because of their vulnerability (Gupta, 2001). Alongside the understanding of children's vulnerability, the role of parents also evolved naturally from the previously held notion of autonomous parents who did not need anyone to tell them how to raise their children, to the current emphasis on evidence-based parenting support interventions to protect children (Lundqvist, 2015). Hermanns (2012) argues that whereas traditionally family policies focused on creating conditions to combine parenthood and work-related obligations, today, governments have become more interested in improving children's life chances and parenting skills. He argues that individuals deciding to have children want to be 'good parents'. This would concur with findings from this study, whereby almost half of the governments in the world today are committing to supporting parents to help them become 'better parents'. A particularly noteworthy example of this evolution is EURO where, in 1998, the Council of Europe established the Programme for Children, which ran until 2000. Then, in 2013, it established the European Platform for Investing in Children which provides information about policies that can help strengthen the capacities of children and their families, in terms of violence prevention and beyond. Its purpose is to share best practices in policymaking for children and families, and to foster cooperation and mutual learning in the field by bringing together government, civil society and European Union representatives. As other regions, such as WPRO and SEARO, also have a high proportion of countries with policies to support parenting, it will be interesting to see whether over the years similar regional platforms will be set up to share policies and practices around parenting support interventions.

Where parenting support policies sit within national portfolios is generally linked to a country's historical approach for providing support to families (Daly et al., 2015). Over the past decades, and across the world, parenting support was predominantly oriented towards mothers and babies and was considered a public health issue (Lundqvist, 2011). In Sweden, for example, parenting support started in the 1930s with free antenatal clinics and child healthcare centres, family counselling, and parenting education (Lundqvist, 2011). Currently, Swedish parenting support policy officially defines parenting as 'an activity which gives parents knowledge about children's health, emotional, cognitive and social development and/or strengthens parents' social network, focused on children between naught and seventeen years old' (Widding, 2018). For other governments, such as Iran for example, parenting support is today still embedded within the health sector. These are just two examples indicating the plethora of different ways that policies may be developed and where they may be located. A dedicated approach to parenting support to prevent violence against children (i.e., stand-alone policy) may imply more direct political commitment to the issue, resource allocation, and clear policy objectives which may in turn facilitate rapid implementation due to greater political pressure and accountability. On the other hand, the main benefit of mainstreaming parenting support into existing policy domains, such as health or child protection in this case, is the opportunity to synergise human and financial resources (Tosun & Lang, 2017). More research is needed to understand the relative advantages and disadvantages of these different social policy approaches.

We note three limitations of the study. Firstly, while the parenting-support policy discourse may have changed in countries over time, the impact on parenting practices remains unclear (Hopman & Knijn, 2015). Conceivably, there are countries where parenting interventions are being implemented at scale without a government policy or vice-versa, there are countries where a parenting support policy exists but where interventions are in fact not being implemented. Further research is needed to understand the association between having a national parenting support policy and whether or not this increases the coverage of parenting support interventions. Secondly, while the mapping of parenting support policies was intended to be comprehensive, important limitations were language (e.g., no coverage of Arabic, Russian and Chinese) and access to policies that were not available online. However, to be as complete as possible, the authors used machine translation and were thorough in reviewing the academic literature, the grey literature, and UN websites to uncover and analyse the national policies. A third limitation of the study is the description of 'policy' as a static document in time rather than as the incremental and iterative process that generally defines it. The authors focused on policy documents and texts on government websites however countries may be having ongoing discussions or may be implementing interventions that are not reflected in this snapshot of policies. The key strength of this study is that it is the first of its kind, providing valuable global baseline information for further research on parenting support policies aimed at preventing violence against children, both worldwide and within countries.

Our findings show that a significant number of countries have developed parenting support policies to prevent violence against children. Further research would help to understand the barriers and facilitators encountered in developing the policy. These barriers and facilitators in policy development, may range from a change in law or political leadership to the increased availability of evidence-based interventions or a change in societal or cultural norms around parenting support or the prevention of violence against children. Again, in countries that have a policy, further research would include documenting how the policy was developed; whether it resulted from a top-down or bottom-up approach driven by practitioners and parents, or a two-way process where policy and practice interact. It would also involve understanding whether the policy includes parenting support interventions being implemented in terms of primary, secondary, or tertiary prevention, as well as understanding how the policy considers the complementarity of different interventions.

Parents and caregivers worldwide play a pivotal role on the front lines of protecting children and promoting their well-being. Evidence shows that parenting support interventions prevents harsh and dysfunctional parenting practices. Having a government policy is key to ensuring that structured parenting interventions are available at scale, and that all parents that need it (whether

actively soliciting or not) can receive the support. By knowing which countries have a government policy to support parenting to prevent violence against children, researchers can better understand how country-specific policies and programs are evolving. Additionally, policy makers and implementers can use the global and country specific data to advocate for the development of a policy, the strengthening of existing policies or for the enforcement of a policy. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure universal access to parenting and caregiver support as a key primary prevention strategy to help end parent- and caregiver-perpetrated violence around the world.

Declaration of competing interest

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to thank Catherine Ward, Yulia Shenderovich, Lucie Cluver and Mary Daly for their support.

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