

# Preventing child maltreatment: a guide to taking action and generating evidence



and

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

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#### **Foreword**

Common sense frequently associates the problem of violence with the security and justice systems. Only more recently, with the progressive development and engagement of professionals working with public health, has there been an increasing recognition that a broader disciplinary approach must be engaged in the struggle to end violence. A multi-disciplinary approach should ensure not only an integrated strategy to respond to violence effectively, but as importantly, a consistent and evidence-based strategy to prevent it.

This broad expertise is even more important when it comes to dealing with violence against children inside homes and families. While there is no doubt about the need to assist victims and to guarantee their safety, priority should always be given to preventive measures. The Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children compiled many studies and examples of experiences reported by governments that indicate the definitive importance of having a preventive strategy that combines the expertise of many professionals and which is solidly anchored in reliable data collection.

The traditional "privacy barrier" between the domestic and public spheres has inhibited the evolution of policies and legal instruments to prevent violence within the family and provide services for those affected by it. The absence of accurate and comprehensive data is one of the clear indications of the presence of this veil, hampering the development and evaluation of successful strategies to address this serious problem. Despite international human rights and child rights standards, some national legal frameworks remain insufficient when it comes to establishing a clear prohibition of violence within the home.

The World Health Organization has consistently called the attention of the world to the crucial importance of preventive policies, involving the public health sector, and the urgent need to improve data collection. The International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) combines a unique multidisciplinary global coalition of professionals that in the last two decades has lead the development of a great number of strategies to recast approaches to stopping violence against children. Most recently, ISPCAN has collaborated with a range of partners to develop instruments to improve data collection on violence against children in the family and elsewhere.

This guide combines the accumulated expertise of both organizations and provides the necessary tools and information to governments, civil society and international organizations in their efforts to prevent and respond to violence against children. Now it is in the hands of those stakeholders to make full use of it.

Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro Independent Expert UN Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children

### **Preface**

In a 1999 issue of the journal Child Abuse and Neglect, the internationally renowned child maltreatment prevention expert David Finkelhor commented on what was needed to advance an agenda for eliminating child maltreatment and what had been achieved.

First, we need good epidemiological data to see the location and source of the child abuse problem, and also to be able to track and monitor its response to our efforts. This is something we currently do not have, at least at the level that would satisfy any even generous public health epidemiologist. Second, we need experimental studies to evaluate new and existing practices, so we can agree on what works. Currently, we have practically none, outside of a couple in regard to home visitation and couple in regard to sexual abuse treatment. There is more experimental science in the toilet paper we use every day than in what we have to offer abused children or families at risk of abuse.<sup>1</sup>

Seven years later, UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international professional associations have made substantial progress in raising awareness about the magnitude and severe consequences for all societies of child maltreatment. Good epidemiological data, however, remain scanty and there is a dearth of evaluated prevention practices. Most epidemiological studies since 1999 come from North America, and – except for independent studies in a few western European countries and the 1997–2003 WORLDSAFE studies in Brazil, Chile, Egypt, India and the Philippines – there are almost no methodologically sound epidemiological studies. The evidence base for prevention is even more unequally distributed, with most studies based in North America.

This failure to evaluate programmes aimed at eliminating child maltreatment has occurred at the same time as governments, NGOs and international agencies worldwide have committed themselves to addressing child maltreatment as a human rights concern within the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The *United* 

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