

Perception of Children on

# Parenting Practices



Save the Children



# **Perception of Children on Parenting Practices**

**Save the Children Sweden  
Regional Office for South and Central Asia**

Save the Children fights for children's rights.  
We deliver immediate and lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.

Save the Children works for:

- a world which respects and values each child
- a world which listens to children and learns
- a world where all children have hope and opportunity

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## UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** states that the family has the key responsibility to ensure the fundamental rights of children as it is the primary setting within which children are cared for and parented and where first significant relationships develop and the foundations of their development take place. The CRC also recognizes that governments have the responsibility to provide support to parents and families as duty bearers.

All countries in South Asia have ratified the CRC, which means that the government has accepted the responsibility to fulfil its obligations.

**Articles in the CRC that state the obligations of State Parties to support parents and families for ensuring children's rights include:**

- **Article 3.2:** States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take all appropriate and administrative measures.
- **Article 4:** States Parties shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the present Convention.
- **Article 18.2:** For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.

## PARENTING

**Parenting** may be defined as 'purposive activities aimed at ensuring the survival and development of children. These actions may or may not be performed by the child's biological parent.'<sup>1</sup> The term 'parent' in general denotes the biological relationship of a father or mother to a child, though it may be extended to adults without a biological relationship who are bringing up children. This report will mainly focus on the role of both biological and non-biological parents, though it will also look at the role of extended family members such as the grandparent, aunt, uncle or older sibling.

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<sup>1</sup> Hoghughi Masud (2004). Parenting – An Introduction. *Handbook of Parenting: Theory and research for practice*. p.5.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Save the Children Sweden Regional Office for South and Central Asia in collaboration with its partners in South Asia has carried out this qualitative study that focuses on the perception of girls and boys on parenting styles. The study was conducted in five countries of South Asia – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan – and focused on disadvantaged children in the 8–16 age range including children in poor rural homes, children with disability, indigenous children, trafficked children (trafficking survivors), homeless children (street children and children living in railway platforms), working children, children from brothels, children in conflict with the law, and children engaged in or affected by armed conflict. Parents living in rural households were also interviewed to draw information on their perceptions about parenting.

The study builds a general picture of children's views and experiences and the factors influencing their perception on parenting. It also focuses on the extent to which parenting behaviours may vary according to cultural and socio-economic circumstances. It further demonstrates how gaining children's perspectives greatly increases understanding of the various parenting practices, showing that what children and young people think is not necessarily what adults think they do.

The study explores children's perception on men's role as fathers, women's role as mothers and the factors that influence their thoughts. It also examines parenting styles that may affect children's emotional and social development and their capacity to express their opinions.

### *Key findings from the study*

**Role of fathers and mothers:** Fathers are expected to be providers and protectors and take major decisions regarding children; whereas mothers are expected to comply more with the role of nurturing, caring and home maintenance. This view is based on how girls and boys were socialized to think of what is appropriate and improper for both genders.

**Parental behaviour disliked by children:** Girls and boys do not like to witness domestic violence, especially when the father beats his wife. They also do not like alcoholic or promiscuous parents. Nearly all the children in this study disliked physical and humiliating punishment by their parents and other caregivers.

**Role of other family members:** Grandparents show love, shower them with affection and are always willing to help and comfort their grandchildren. They also provide refuge and protection to children when they get into trouble. The other family members such as uncles, aunts or older siblings also play an important role in their lives.

**Love and emotional support:** All children in the study said that what they want most from parents is to be loved and cared for. However, parents usually do not express love for their adolescent children in outward displays of affection.



**Communicating with children:** Adolescent girls and boys felt that open communication with parents was very important to prevent children from not only making serious mistakes but also to prevent them from indulging in behaviours that threaten their health, safety and welfare. They said that it was the parents' responsibility to talk to their children about sexual and reproductive health, sexual exploitation, HIV and AIDS, drugs, trafficking and armed conflict and to caution them not to fall into the hands of recruiters for armed conflict and traffickers.

**Consulting with children:** Children generally do not get the opportunity to take part in most of the decisions that influence their lives. It is usually the parents and other adults who take decisions on their behalf. They said that parents should consult with them before they decide to withdraw them from school, send children to work, marry girls off at an early age, sell their children or make any important decisions that concern them.

**Spending quality time with children:** Children have fun with their parents during special occasions (holi, eid, diwali, baisabi/sangria, etc.), depending on the religion and culture of the community. Both young and older children love to hear stories. Some children said that they like to eat together as a family.

**Punishment and discipline:** Most girls and boys do not like physical and psychological punishment. They hate it when they are punished for something they did not do. Most of the girls and boys said that they should be given a proper explanation of what they had done wrong, instead of unnecessarily being beaten. Physical and psychological punishments were found to be one of the prime reasons for some children to leave home, quit school and end up in prostitution, jails or in the streets. This revelation challenges the myth that children end up in vulnerable situations only because of poverty.

**Discrimination:** Girls and boys do not like any form of discrimination on the basis of gender, disability, religion, social class, ethnicity and social status of parents. Some children reported being discriminated against by their step-parents. In some cases parents have demonstrated a special preference for one of their children.

**Work and play:** Most of the children expressed their disliking for going to work. Almost all girls and boys said that they liked to play. Younger girls and boys get more opportunities to play. Adolescent girls are not allowed to play outside their homes. Both girls and boys said that they did not get much time to play as they had too much work.

### ***The way forward***

The knowledge gained from the current study will facilitate discussions on how to develop an effective parenting education programme. Parenting education may be defined, then, as the set of programmes, resources or services whose goal is to increase parents' capacities to foster children's health, education, protection and participation in matters that affect them.

Parenting education programmes can start with the development of a parenting manual. This manual can be developed with inputs from children, parents, child development experts and findings from this study. The parenting manual will not only recognize and build upon positive traditional practices but also identify and change practices that are harmful to girls and boys. Parenting education should take account of children's recommendations in the

study and address gender roles, discrimination and the importance of father's role as nurturers.

Parenting education can be cost effective if it is integrated into ongoing programme activities of governments, Save the Children and partner organizations. The national governments, donors, UN agencies and I/NGOs in the region already have established programmes on primary healthcare, reproductive health, nutrition, education, gender, HIV/AIDS and child protection. Some of these programmes work directly with families and adolescents and therefore provide opportunities for these organizations to integrate parenting education.

Parenting education may be incorporated into the national education system, so that girls and boys are prepared for their future responsibilities. School programmes could change the sex-role stereotyping and combat discrimination based on gender, ability, ethnicity, religion and socio-economic status. The media can be an effective delivery vehicle for parenting information and advice for reducing violence against children, and promoting gender equality and child development.

# 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Save the Children Sweden Regional Office for South and Central Asia in collaboration with its partners in South Asia has carried out this qualitative study that focuses on the perception of girls and boys on parenting styles. Girls, boys and experts in child development during many national and international consultations have called for a new vision of parenting practices, based on respect for the fundamental human rights of children. This study recognizes children's right to be heard as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The study builds a general picture of children's views and experiences and the factors influencing their perception on parenting. It also focuses on the extent to which parenting behaviours may vary according to cultural and socio-economic circumstances. It further demonstrates how gaining children's perspectives greatly increases understanding of the various parenting practices, showing that what children and young people think is not necessarily what adults think they do.

The study explores children's perception on men's role as fathers, women's role as mothers and the factors that influence their thoughts. It also examines parenting styles that may affect children's emotional and social development and their capacity to express their opinions. The study focused on parenting styles for children in the age range 8–16 years, as parenting education is generally not provided for parents of girls and boys in this age range in South Asia.

## GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

### Goal

The goal of the study is to promote healthy growth and development of children by helping parents build and enhance their parenting skills.

### Objectives

- To deepen our understanding of parenting styles from perspectives of children
- To understand the variation within the conceptions of parenting styles in the different contexts studied
- To create a space for children where they can be heard in matters that affect their lives, recognizing that children can shape their own future rather than merely being beneficiaries of adult intervention
- To draw out some key findings, issues and messages that are useful in informing future research and can be a basis for parenting education programmes, advocacy and policy development on parenting

## RATIONALE

Save the Children has been working globally, including in South Asia, with families and children to promote children's health, education, protection and participation in issues that matter to children. Save the Children's programmes are based on child rights programming

where they recognize girls and boys as rights holders and social actors, giving priority to children, creating child-friendly environments and providing child-friendly information on issues that affect their lives. Child Rights Programming (CRP) also means:

- Recognizing governments as the primary duty-bearers responsible for addressing and taking actions to promote children's physical, psychological and social development.
- Recognizing parents and family as primary caregivers and protectors and supporting them in this role.
- Recognizing that children's views must be taken into account in developing programmes for children.

With this in view, Save the Children Sweden Regional Office for South and Central Asia has conducted the study **Perception of Children on Parenting Practices** in five countries of South Asia – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan.

This report recognizes the rights of children to be consulted before developing a programme for parents and children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has given children the right to be consulted in all decisions concerning their lives:

#### **Article in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

**Article 12** says that any child capable of forming a view has the right to express views freely in all matters affecting him or her and also that the child's views must be given due weight in accordance with age and maturity.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is their basic right to express their views on what it means to be a 'good and effective parent'.

Most parents want the best for their children. Their goal is to help their child to develop herself/himself into a mature adult in a manner acceptable to society. However, it is clear that many parents at some time require assistance or support to raise their children. Some parents often require detailed information, training and support to child rearing, in order that they may promote the children's physical and mental development and to prevent the occurrence of emotional and behavioural problems, youth crime, risky behaviour, exploitation, discrimination and violence against other girls and boys.

There has been much impressive research on the rearing of children, the situation of children and child abuse in South Asia. However, these are mainly qualitative studies, and parenting behaviour towards children has often been included with the behaviour of teachers and employers. Some of these research studies may be interesting and enlightening but cannot be compared over time or between different places, and often do not form a basis for formulation of policy and development of programmes.

Various studies have shown conclusively that parenting styles and practices have a permanent impact on the growth of the child, and also have influence on his/her individual characteristics when he/she grows into adulthood. Good parenting goes beyond the basic child care like feeding, cleaning, taking care of health and providing periods of rest. It encompasses various other issues which help the child to develop in order to increase social competence, to recognize feelings in self and others, to understand and express emotion, to

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>.

have a good sense of identity – self-confidence and self-esteem, etc. Children who receive good parenting are happy and fulfilled and have the best chance of realizing their potential and talents.<sup>3</sup>

Theories of parenting and programmes designed to promote parenting skills are largely based on the belief that parental styles and behaviour directly affect outcomes for children in terms of their survival, growth, development, protection and participation. Although there is a large body of evidence to support this view, there has been very little research examining children's and adolescents' own views on parenting. Much of the research on parenting has relied upon parents and caregivers as expert informants on parenting styles and children's outcomes, and there has been little attention to children's own experiences living in families in South Asia. Most adults – including child development practitioners – do not think of asking children about what works for both children and parents to achieve the goals desired by parents, children and society. This is probably based on the general belief that children are only partially developed, needy, weak and unable to give ideas and solutions and are prone to error. However, children know a lot about their own lives. If adults listen to children on how they should be raised, the decisions that adults make for children will have a positive, rather than a negative, impact on their development.

Many studies and development programmes throughout the world have proved that children have the capacity to take part in decision making. Children's views and ideas in various national and global studies and programmes have brought very different perspectives, which in turn have brought about significant improvement in the quality of programmes and outputs. Their participation has effected changes in laws and government policies of several countries. So, there is immense opportunity for improvement when children's views are taken into consideration in developing programmes which affect them.

## **SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The study focused on disadvantaged children in a variety of settings, and on children and their families in rural and urban areas. The children were all aged between 8 and 16 years in four major categories: younger girls (8–12 years), adolescent girls (13–16 years), younger boys (8–12 years) and adolescent boys (13–16 years). Both girls and boys were chosen in the sample from all locations and all age groups, except children in jails (boys only) and trafficked survivors (girls only). In total, 61% of respondents were boys and 39% were girls.

A few important groups which were not adequately covered in the present study include:

- Children from urban upper class and middle class society
- Children affected or infected by HIV/AIDS
- Children from minority and other vulnerable groups
- Children who were already married

Parents of most groups of children were also not covered in the study. Thus the study makes no claim to be an exhaustive account of children's perception on parenting. There are various

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<sup>3</sup> Anandalakshmy, S. (2005). *Good Parenting and a Happy Childhood*. Chennai, India: Bala Mandir Research Foundation.

factors influencing parental practices in South Asian society which could not be covered during this current phase due to time and budget constraints.

The sample size is small, as researchers spent considerable time with each group to obtain in-depth understanding of children's perceptions on parenting styles and practices. The focus was on the content and the quality of information rather than the size of the sample.

## 2. THE STUDY DESIGN

The study was conducted during 2007–08 and used various child and youth friendly techniques to explore children's and young people's perceptions on various aspects of parenting.

The study was designed primarily as a qualitative study. Qualitative techniques were used as the study was related to a subject which is sensitive, involves complex factors, is not readily measurable and is concerned with interactions and processes. The research was mainly an exploratory and illustrative study involving in-depth analysis of sample cases.

The report is based on primary and secondary information on children's perceptions on various issues related to parenting styles and practices. While much of the information has been drawn from field visits conducted in the region, some information is based on empirical research by other researchers and literature review.

The study aimed to bring out issues from various groups of disadvantaged children, including children in poor rural homes, children with disability, indigenous children, trafficked children (trafficking survivors), homeless children (street children and children living in railway platforms), working children, children from brothels, children in conflict with the law, and children engaged in or affected by armed conflict. Parents living in rural households were also interviewed to draw information on their perceptions about parenting.

### SAMPLING AND DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

The sample consisted of 384 children and 24 parents.

#### Geographical locations

Field visits were conducted in the following places:

<b>Afghanistan</b>	Kabul
<b>Bangladesh</b>	Bandarban in Chittagong Hill Tracts and Dhaka
<b>India</b>	Tonk and Jodhpur district in Rajasthan, Gorakhpur district in Uttar Pradesh and Kolkata (slums and children's homes), Malda (railways platform) and Murshidabad (brothels) in West Bengal.
<b>Nepal</b>	Banke district
<b>Pakistan</b>	Central Jails in Quetta, Hyderabad, Haripur and Borstal Institute in Faisalabad

#### Age groups

Age and gender were basic stratifying factors among all groups of the sample in order to achieve a balance between four major categories of respondents – younger girls (8–12 years), adolescent girls (13–16 years), younger boys (8–12 years) and adolescent boys (13–16 years). Children above 16 years old were not available for interviews or consultations.

#### Gender

While choosing the sample a well balanced gender mix was given importance. Both girls and boys were chosen in the sample from all locations and all age groups except children in jails

(where only boys were interviewed) and trafficked survivors (only girls). The distribution of girls and boys in the sample was:

	Gender Distribution	
	Girls	Boys
Number	149	235
Percentage	39%	61%

The researchers spent 5 working days with each group of children and used various child/youth friendly and ethical methodologies and tools to draw information from the following groups of children:

**Children living with their families in rural areas:** 9 girls and 11 boys (8–12 years old), 25 girls and 27 boys (13–16 years old) in Tonk and Jodhpur districts of Rajasthan; these children are supported by Gram Vikas Navyurak Mandal (GVNML), Urmul and Save the Children Finland in India. 6 girls and 6 boys (8–12 years old) and 8 girls and 10 boys (13–16 years old) in Gorakhpur district in Uttar Pradesh. Men’s Action for Stopping Violence against Women (MASVAW) facilitated the researchers to conduct the study in Gorakhpur district.

**Working children:** 4 girls and 10 boys living in Malda Railway station in West Bengal, India. An organization known as Praajak runs a programme called ‘Muktangan’ with children of railway platforms in various railway stations. Praajak is supported by Groupe Development. 7 girls and 10 boys living on the street in various locations in Kolkata, India. In Afghanistan, 7 girls and 5 boys (8–12 years old) and 9 girls and 7 boys (13–16 years old) in Ashiana School. Ashiana in Kabul provides these children with non-formal education and vocational training.

**Trafficking survivors:** 20 trafficking girl survivors living in a children’s home run by SANLAAP. This organization, among other things, houses minor girls rescued from prostitution and children of women in prostitution.

**Children growing up in brothels:** 8 girls and 7 boys (13–16 years old) living in a brothel of Murshidabad of India with the support of an organization named Suprava Panchashila Mahila Udyog Samiti (SPMUS) that works with children of brothels.

**Children in conflict with the law:** 88 children (all boys) who were either convicted or awaiting trial (or under trial) in four jails of Pakistan. One jail has been selected as a representative from each province of Pakistan. The sample hence comprises children from Borstal Institute and Juvenile Jail – Faisalabad (Punjab), Central Jail – Haripur (NWFP), Quetta (Balochistan) and District Jail – Hyderabad (Sindh). Save the Children Sweden in Pakistan has been working to improve the lives of girls and boys in prisons in Pakistan. This part of the study was supported by SCS in Pakistan.

**Indigenous children:** The study with indigenous children was conducted in Bandarban district of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The study was conducted with *Marma* children. Marma is the second largest ethnic minority group in Bangladesh, residing mostly in CHT areas. Intensive study was conducted with 18 children from the Marma community: 9 adolescent boys and 9 adolescent girls. Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Art (BITA) and Save the Children Sweden Denmark facilitated this study in the tribal areas in Bangladesh.



**Children with disability:** 9 girls and 6 boys (7–12 years old) and 8 girls and 7 boys (13–16 years old) with impaired hearing studying in Hearing Impaired Foundation of Afghanistan (HIFA), Kabul, Afghanistan. In Dhaka, Bangladesh, intensive study was conducted with 15 children (6 girls and 8 boys) each with a different type of disability living in slum areas in Mirpur. The field visit in Bangladesh was facilitated by Centre for Services and Information on Disability (CSID) and Save the Children Sweden-Denmark.

**Children engaged in armed conflict:** 9 adolescent girls and 15 adolescent boys who were previously engaged in armed conflict. These children are based in Banke district, Nepal. Save the Children US in Nepal supports these children by providing them and their families with livelihood, educational and emotional support. Save the Children also supports conflict-affected families and communities so that they can create a long-term peaceful environment for their children through mediation and peace-building activities.

**Children affected by armed conflict:** 5 adolescent girls and 5 adolescent boys affected by armed conflict in Banke district, Nepal. The children in the study either lost their parent(s) or were displaced during the armed conflict in Nepal. They too are supported by Save the Children US in Nepal.

**Parents:** Focus group discussions took place with 24 parents living in rural households.

## TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES FOR DATA COLLECTION

Different qualitative tools were used for collection of data from the sample. Tools included:

- **Semi-structured interviews**
- **Focused group discussion**
- **Role plays:**
  - Hypothetical themes: story completion (what happens next?)
  - Given real-life theme:
    - My day at school
    - One day at home
    - Best day with my father/mother<sup>4</sup>
    - A bad day with my father/mother
    - Last interaction with my father/mother
- **Drawings:**
  - My home – dream home
  - My father and I / My mother and I
- **Group games / Group exercises:**
  - Game: Form different groups for different answers
  - Game: Sit down when ...
  - Writing exercise: Good father, Good mother
  - Writing exercise: Daily routine
  - Drawing exercise: Mobility map
  - Drawing exercise: Venn diagram

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<sup>4</sup> All references to father/mother include grandparents, other family members and any other caregiver depending on the family situation of the child.

- 'Who decides what' matrix
- 'Whom do we share' matrix
- **Individual exercises:**
  - Card placing
  - *Bindi* ranking
  - Write on the chart
  - Meditation exercise: Think about the happiest day and the saddest day in your life; Dream about a happy day with your family
- **Fish bowl exercise**
- **Sentence completion:**
  - 'I love my father because ...', 'I don't like when my father ...'
  - 'I love my mother because ...', 'I don't like when my mother ...'
- **Story telling:**
  - Story telling and discussion (finding similarities and dissimilarities of children's own life with characters described in the story)
  - Story completion / Story expanding
- **In-depth interviews**
- **Case studies**

## FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Analysis of the collected data was carried out according to identified important indicators:

1. **Roles of parents and family members:** Roles of father, mother, grandmother, grandfather and other members of the family.
2. **Listening to children:** Sharing and listening to children by father, mother, grandmother, grandfather and other members of the family.
3. **Consulting with children:** How are children consulted in key family decisions that affect their lives? About schooling/education, domestic chores, finance – household budgets, health, feeding, play, friends, protection, others.
4. **Time spent** by the child with father, mother, friends and others.
5. **Punishment and discipline:** physical or humiliating punishment: techniques of disciplining by father, mother, other important family members and outsiders.
6. **Discrimination:** (among siblings within the family and with other children outside family): discrimination by father, mother and other important family members.
7. **Work and play:** Household work /play: by the child, by others in the family.

### 3. BACKGROUND TO PARENTING IN SOUTH ASIA

Although there has been impressive progress in improving children's survival, health status and education in South Asia, there are still many children and young people who are excluded from obtaining basic quality of life. Health, education and poverty alleviation programmes have not adequately helped to reduce child labour, child marriage, forced marriage, other harmful traditional practices, trafficking, gender discrimination and violence against children. There is also growing concern about increase in crime committed by children, more children joining armed conflicts, and increase in risk-taking behaviour of children including drug abuse, drinking and unprotected sexual behaviour.

Many girls and boys run away from their homes only to find themselves working in hazardous and exploitative conditions, incarcerated in unfit institutions, or living on the streets or in brothels. In spite of legal provisions for minimum age of marriage, child marriage is widely practised in the region. Girls and boys are becoming more vulnerable to rape and other forms of sexual abuse. Adolescent girls and boys from poor and other disadvantaged communities are trafficked for the purposes of domestic work, child labour or forced prostitution. A significant number of such cases have not been the result of poverty but of parental practices. Hence, there is a need to relook at family dynamics and family practices from children's point of view to identify the factors that are preventing the effectiveness of current economic and social programmes.

Furthermore, many parents and communities in South Asia contribute to children's socialization and often reinforce societal prejudices and discrimination on the basis of gender, age, disability, socio-economic status, language, religion and ethnicity. The roles that the family and the society assign to its children tend to have a determining effect on their future, in terms of access to education, their labour force participation, age at marriage and their physical and psychological health. For instance, although all the countries in South Asia have laws banning child marriage and there is increased government investment on girls' education, girls' marriage at an early age continues to be widespread due to discrimination against girls within the family.

Similarly, there are often reports of Dalit children (the lowest caste in Hindu society) being harassed by children from upper castes of the Hindu society, preventing many Dalit and other marginalized children from accessing education.

It has, therefore, become essential to help families overcome their own learned prejudices towards vulnerable groups as family can play a key role in shaping children's attitude towards girls, disabled people and people from various religious, ethnic, caste and other socio-economic groups. The earlier study of Save the Children in South Asia on **Government Support to Parenting** has made suggestions to enable young girls and boys to hold dialogue with their parents about physical and psychological punishment, sexual abuse,

sexual behaviour, HIV and AIDS, gender socialization and discrimination based on gender, ability, socio-economic status, religion and ethnicity.<sup>5</sup>

In South Asia, the focus of government programmes on parenting education is on early childhood issues with specific focus on feeding, growth monitoring, language development and hygiene education. Recently, some of the government-supported Early Childhood programmes have incorporated child development in their parenting programmes. However, parenting education is yet to be provided for parents who have children in the middle years (7–12) and adolescents.

Girls and boys in various local, national and regional consultations have expressed the view that negative and violent parental behaviour is one of their most significant concerns. Children in the Regional Consultation for the UN Study on Violence against Children in South Asia and in other children's consultations have called for the government and other stakeholders to provide education to parents and caregivers on raising girls and boys in non-violent methods that will enable their optimal development, promote children's participation in families, and ensure gender equality and inclusion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jabeen F. and Karkara, R. (2005). *Government Support to Parenting in Bangladesh and India*. Kathmandu: Save the Children Sweden, South and Central Asia.

<sup>6</sup> Save the Children (2006). *Act Now*. International Save the Children Alliance.

## SOUTH ASIA: ITS PEOPLE AND CULTURE

South Asia still has nearly 400 million people<sup>7</sup> struggling below the poverty line in a population of 1.48 billion, which is the highest among all regions of the world. All the countries of the region fall in the low-income category, except for the Maldives and Sri Lanka.<sup>8</sup> The region is prone to natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, droughts and cyclones. The Tsunami of December 2004 and the earthquake in Pakistan of October 2005 are the latest instances of devastating disasters. The regional mapping exercise carried out in 2004 identified the area as being among the poorest and most malnourished regions of the world, as well as the most illiterate and gender-insensitive.<sup>9</sup> Despite the rapid improvements in infant mortality rate, life expectancy at birth and adult literacy, South Asia is still the second worst region just above Sub-Saharan Africa with respect to social and human development indicators including the Human Development Index and Gender-related Development Index. Exclusion of the voiceless majority, unstable political regimes, poor economic management, internal political unrest and armed conflict in many parts of the region continues to hinder human development.

Communities in South Asia comprise a wide range of social, economic, religious, caste, ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups. Many of these communities live side by side and principles of integration and synthesis have been accepted for many centuries. Each community has its own norms of child-rearing practices, norms that grow out of society's requirements for adult behaviour and prepare children to adopt this behaviour.<sup>10</sup> Adherence to conformity to traditions and cultural behaviour is prevalent in groups within religious, ethnic and linguistic groups. Any transgression from such community social barriers can lead to exclusion and violence against community members, especially women, children and people from marginalized groups.

Traditionally, South Asians have a strong family structure. People learn the essential ingredients and themes of socio-cultural life within the bosom of the family. The basic unit of society is the patrilineal family unit and the most common residential units are joint families, typically consisting of several patrilineally related generations living under one roof, having a common kitchen, working together and cooperating with each other in mutually beneficial social and economic activities. Continuous and growing population, impact of urbanization and economic hardship has increased migration, reduced the strength of the joint family structures and community support and increased the vulnerabilities of children.

The situation varies in different communities and classes, however. In rural areas there are high numbers of joint households with wider kinship groupings and strong family ties; whereas in urban areas, especially in slums, where mostly migrated population stays, the joint family structures generally do not exist and family ties are weaker. Furthermore, the rise in armed conflict in some countries of the region has created difficult conditions for children and their families.

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<sup>7</sup> Alam, I. (2007). Poverty in South Asia. *The International News*, 7 February 2007, Karachi, Pakistan.

<sup>8</sup> Economies are categorized by World Bank according to 2005 GNI per capita; low income countries are defined as countries having GNI per capita US\$875 or less. [www.worldbank.org/data&statistics](http://www.worldbank.org/data&statistics).

<sup>9</sup> Save the Children (2005). *Regional Strategy Paper*. Kathmandu: Save the Children Sweden, South and Central Asia.

<sup>10</sup> Poffenberger, T. (2003). *Child Rearing and Social Structure in Rural India. Towards Cross-Cultural Definition of Child Abuse and Neglect*. New Delhi: Butterflies.

## 4. ROLE OF PARENTS AND FAMILY

From birth through puberty, children enter into progressively more complex interactions with society and their surroundings. The most important components of the surroundings of the child comprise the family members – parents, siblings, other adults – and peers with whom he or she shares the family. Parents and other family members play a central, but not exclusive, role in shaping the lives of their children. However, extensive research shows that parents are the most influential in their children’s lives, shaping their thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

### CHILDREN’S PERCEPTION ON THE ROLE OF PARENTS

Girls and boys were asked to give their views on what constituted a ‘good father’ and a ‘good mother’. The responses gathered from children across locations about the expected roles of a good father and a good mother were analysed and grouped (see Tables 1 and 2). These tables contain more or less universal expectations of children, whether they are rural children or street children. The variation in responses from different groups of children mainly stem from differences in traditions and cultures of the society.

**Table 1      Role of a ‘good father’<sup>11</sup>**

CHILDREN’S PERCEPTION OF A ‘GOOD FATHER’	
<p><b>Providing material and financial support:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides me with all the necessities</li> <li>• Gets something for me as soon as he can when I ask for it</li> <li>• Buys new clothes (at the time of special occasions, especially during religious festivals such as eid and puja)</li> <li>• Buys new books for me every year</li> </ul> <p><b>Taking care of the development of the child and providing guidance:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes me to the doctors when ill</li> <li>• Takes care of my health</li> <li>• Protects me from danger</li> <li>• Advises me for my good</li> <li>• Offers encouragement</li> <li>• Does not let us fight</li> <li>• Does not allow us to steal.</li> </ul> <p><b>Supporting children in having fun:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes me out</li> <li>• Takes me to fairs</li> </ul>	<p><b>Providing opportunities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sends me to school</li> <li>• Does not send us to work in the fields (at the time of study)</li> <li>• Allows us (girls) to play outside</li> <li>• Allows us (girls) to study as much as we can</li> <li>• Treats girls and boys equally</li> <li>• Does not allow early marriage</li> <li>• Allows us to visit relatives during vacation</li> <li>• Takes us out on picnics after annual exams</li> <li>• Allows me to go to temple and wear new clothes during special occasions</li> </ul> <p><b>Showing affection:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loves me very much</li> <li>• Talks to me affectionately</li> <li>• We eat together with the whole family</li> <li>• Takes me on his lap and feeds me</li> </ul>

<sup>11</sup> All sentences in all the four tables were extracted from quotes of children collected at the time of consultations, FGDs or DIs during the study.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes me to relatives' homes</li> <li>• Takes us to weddings</li> <li>• Takes us out on picnics</li> <li>• Gives me chocolate, sweets, fruits, money</li> <li>• Buys umbrella, watch, etc.</li> <li>• Teaches me driving</li> </ul> <p><b>Active engagement with children to support their development:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourages me to study</li> <li>• Pays attention to my studies – buys notebooks, school stationery and uniforms</li> <li>• Helps me with my studies</li> <li>• Drops me off at school</li> </ul>	<p>(younger children)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not make us feel that we are weak</li> <li>• Sits with us</li> <li>• Tells us stories</li> <li>• Feels bad after scolding us or hitting us</li> <li>• Cuddles us after coming back home</li> </ul> <p>(younger children)</p> <p><b>Positive discipline, valuing and appreciating children:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not beat me</li> <li>• Talks to me with respect</li> <li>• Explains to us</li> <li>• Helps us to understand right and wrong</li> <li>• Forgives me</li> </ul>
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**Table 2          Role of a 'good mother'**

<b>CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF A 'GOOD MOTHER'</b>	
<p><b>Taking care and satisfying regular needs:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes good care of us</li> <li>• Cooks for and feeds us</li> <li>• Buys us the things we love</li> <li>• Gives us food on time and what we want to eat</li> <li>• Bathes me</li> <li>• Fulfils our necessities</li> </ul> <p><b>Showing love and affection:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is loving and expresses love</li> <li>• Loves us and also respects us</li> <li>• Talks to us affectionately</li> <li>• Feeds us with love and care</li> <li>• Tells us nice stories at bedtime</li> </ul> <p><b>Providing comfort, sacrifice and place for sharing feelings:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is willing to do anything, any sacrifice for her children.</li> <li>• Wants to make the child happy</li> <li>• Comforts me when I cry</li> <li>• Does not leave me alone anywhere</li> <li>• Lets me accompany her wherever she goes</li> <li>• Runs to me after I return from school</li> <li>• Understands the pain of her child (Only my mother understands my pain and comforts me when I'm frustrated)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Providing opportunities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sends us (girls) to school and tells us to study</li> <li>• Treats girls and boys equally</li> <li>• Does not make us work in the fields</li> <li>• Lets us mix with friends and go out</li> <li>• Lets us play</li> <li>• Lets us participate in special occasions and competitions</li> <li>• Allows us to visit relatives' places during holidays</li> <li>• Allows us to watch TV and sleep when we want</li> <li>• Allows us to sing and dance</li> </ul> <p><b>Providing support and appreciation:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comforts us when the fathers says anything wrong to us</li> <li>• Praises us</li> </ul> <p><b>Providing information and guidance:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gives us information on household matters</li> <li>• Gives us advice</li> <li>• Teaches us good things</li> <li>• Stops us from doing anything bad</li> <li>• Forbids us to say bad things</li> </ul>

Girls and boys also identified some behaviours of parents as ‘not okay’. The ‘not okay’ behaviours of fathers and mothers, as perceived by children, are depicted in Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 3** ‘Not okay’ behaviours of fathers

<b>CHILDREN’S RESPONSES ON WHEN THEY DO NOT LIKE THEIR FATHER</b>	
<p><b>‘Not okay’ disciplining:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beats me</li> <li>• Hits and scolds me for no reason</li> <li>• Lashes out his anger with other people on us</li> <li>• Does not listen to me</li> <li>• Keeps me locked in the house because of my disability and does not pay attention to me (disabled child)</li> </ul> <p><b>Not complying to commitments and lying:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Says he will do something but does not do it</li> <li>• Tells a lie</li> </ul> <p><b>Not providing opportunities and necessities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not buy things he is supposed to buy for us</li> <li>• Tells me to work in the field during school hours</li> <li>• Tells us to wash clothes, do dishes and bring water at the time of study or play</li> </ul>	<p><b>Bad habits:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes alcohol</li> <li>• Gambles</li> <li>• Goes around with bad people</li> </ul> <p><b>Divorce and promiscuous behaviour:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shows wrong attitude and mixes with other women</li> <li>• Abandons my mother</li> <li>• Left my mother and brought home a stepmother</li> </ul> <p><b>Violence:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbally abuses my mother and calls her names</li> <li>• Gets drunk and hits his wife and children</li> <li>• Drinks</li> <li>• Physically and verbally abuses us</li> </ul>

**Table 4** ‘Not okay’ behaviours of mothers

<b>CHILDREN’S RESPONSES ON WHEN THEY DO NOT LIKE THEIR MOTHER</b>	
<p><b>‘Not okay’ disciplining:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beats and scolds me</li> </ul> <p><b>Compelling to work:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compels me to do work (such as looking after cows in the grazing field, going to shifting cultivation, going to the hills for bringing firewood) when we do not feel like it</li> <li>• Does not let us play</li> </ul> <p><b>Unequal treatment:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treats me differently from my brother</li> <li>• Gives a bigger piece of fish to my brother</li> </ul>	<p><b>Not providing regular needs:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not make something when we ask her to</li> </ul> <p><b>Not showing affection:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not take me on her lap. Takes me off her lap and carries the baby only (younger children)</li> <li>• Does not listen to me</li> <li>• Does not express love</li> <li>• Does not pay attention to us</li> <li>• Nags a lot</li> </ul> <p><b>Relationship with men other than father:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tells me to call the ‘uncle’ as ‘father’ and that he would stay with us (child growing up in a brothel)</li> </ul>



### ***Gender socialization and gender stereotyping: Traditional roles of father and mother***

Approximately 75 per cent of children in the study believed that both parents were responsible for children's upbringing, while 15 per cent indicated that the mother had the main responsibility. Less than 10 per cent put the sole responsibility for child rearing on the father.

The study suggests that most children see mothers and fathers very differently. Their perception on parenting involved clearly gendered divisions of responsibility and is in coherence with the hegemonic and stereotypical gender roles prevalent in society. Fathers were expected to be providers and protectors and take major decisions regarding children; whereas mothers were expected to comply more with the role of nurturing, caring and home maintenance. The primary sphere of roles and responsibilities for father is 'out of home' as compared with 'inside home' for the mother. This view is based on how girls and boys were socialized to think of what is appropriate and improper for both genders.

Some children said they would not like to interchange the roles of father and mother. Children are not exposed to male role models doing household chores and caring for their children. They think that women are working only because the men in their lives cannot support them properly.

*'I would not like it if my father cooked or served meals at home. Our neighbours would laugh at him.'* (Girl from a rural household in India)

Children in indigenous communities in Chittagong Hill Tracts are used to seeing their mothers and sisters taking part in economic activities outside the home alongside men. There are role divisions, but women are equally powerful in household decisions. These children did not look down upon men doing household work. A child from this community said, 'I would like my father to help my mother in the household work.' It was interesting to see that some indigenous adolescents who were going to school endorsed the patriarchal role division of father and mother, whereas younger children of the community expected both mothers and fathers to be providers and protectors. This shows that the existing school education may be one of the primary vehicles for reinforcing gender role stereotyping of men and women. This patriarchal view of gender roles was prevalent among indigenous children in comparatively well-off families and in those families where men were educated and had office jobs. Bengali families staying in the area also tended to reinforce gender division.<sup>12</sup>

Children from single-parent homes, mainly mother only,<sup>13</sup> said that their mothers perform the role of both mother and father. They say that their mothers have no choice as circumstances have forced them to become responsible for financially supporting the households. Children growing up in a brothel said that although their mothers were solely responsible for bringing them up, they were expected to treat their mother's clients as their fathers. However, they do

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<sup>12</sup> In one case it was found that the son of a Bengali doctor staying in a Marma village is apparently the leader of a few of his peers of the indigenous community of the village. He has a stereotypical view about gender and all the children who follow him were found to have similar views.

<sup>13</sup> Children being raised by a single father were not available in the sample (only one such child was included in the study).

not have any respect for such fathers. They did not approve of their mother's career. They felt ashamed talking about it and some wished that their mother would quit their profession and become a traditional mother. However, most of them understood that their mother had no other option.

There were some children who were homeless or incarcerated in jails who did not see anything wrong in mothers working outside their homes for the betterment of their families.

*'This is 2007 and women have to work for the betterment of the home and development of the country.'*

*'If mother is educated then she should work in an office.'*

*(Quotes of two boys in jails in Pakistan)*

It is important to recognize that there are costs involved in the maintenance of gender role stereotypes. These costs include limiting opportunities for both girls and boys, ignoring talents and inherent qualities and perpetuating unfairness in society. For instance, a boy may never have the option to take the role of a nurturer and caregiver in the family even if he had the willingness and the skills to be the primary caregiver. Similarly, a girl will not get the chance to complete her education and realize her full potential.

### ***Love and emotional support***

All children in the study said that what they want most from parents is to be loved and cared for. However, parents usually do not express love for their adolescent children in outward displays of affection. Some children said that they knew that their parents loved them even when they did not say it in words.

*'I know my mother loves me. She tells me many times that she loves me. My father also loves me. But he has never said that. He is too shy to talk about these things. He tries to express love by asking me to do things for him, by supporting me if I have an argument with my mother and by getting things for me from the market.'* (Adolescent girl from Dhaka, Bangladesh)

Younger children were much more positive about their fathers than were older children. Younger girls and boys felt cared for and loved by their fathers. The fathers would carry their younger children or kiss them on the cheek sometimes. There is no form of physical expression of love such as a hug or a kiss once the child reaches adolescence, though the father would sometimes stroke the child's head when he is pleased with the child.

Most children from female headed households miss the presence of their father. 'I feel sorry for myself when I see my friends talking to their fathers, eating with them or going to places.' A girl with disability from Bangladesh, living with her single mother, said, 'I dream of my father every night.'

Nearly all the children with disability in the study said that they were closest to their mothers. Fathers tend to be less involved and have more limited interaction with their disabled children than with their non-disabled children. However, some examples of support from the father

were also found. One girl with disability said that she gets some relief when her father comes back from work because then her mother cannot shout at her or force her to work.

*‘Whenever my mother hits me, my father comes to my rescue and consoles me and tells me that everything will be OK.’ (Young girl with disability in Afghanistan)*

But some girls who were victims of rape and trafficking complained about the lack of parental love and understanding. Their parents’ inability to understand the girls’ problems and provide emotional support led them to make a wrong choice and run away from home with the wrong person.

*‘Whenever I did something to upset my parents, they used to tell me to jump under a train. I felt really bad. I used to feel like dying ... I used to feel like committing suicide.’ (A trafficked survivor)*

Another trafficked survivor said, ‘My father never loved me.’

### ***Unacceptable behaviour of parents as expressed by some children***

#### *Parental/domestic violence*

Children did not like to see their mothers being beaten by their fathers. Children in brothels could not stand mothers being beaten by their mother’s boyfriends or clients. Children in jails or children’s homes, working children and some trafficked survivors felt free to leave home as they no longer could stand the constant violence against their mothers. Some of these children on the street or in jails are involved in drugs, alcohol and smoking, possibly due to deeper depression arising from domestic violence. These children often get into fights with other children or get into trouble with the law. This suggests that these children who witnessed violence at homes tend to justify their own use of violence. Research has shown that children who witnessed violence against their mothers by their fathers tend to exhibit more aggressive and anti-social behaviour. Some were also found to show more anxiety, lower self-esteem, depression and anger than children who did not witness violence.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Alcoholic parents*

All children condemned excessive drinking habits of fathers. They said that an alcoholic parent tends to be unpredictable in his behaviour. They said that sometimes he can be really nice and sometimes he can be very violent towards his wife and children. One child of the older group said that he liked his father when he was drunk as the father would then talk to him a lot. Some mothers in brothels also tend to drink excessively and their children find it difficult to communicate with them. They often feel frustrated and angry.

#### *Physical and humiliating punishment*

Nearly all the children in this study disliked physical and humiliating punishment by their parents and other caregivers. (See Chapter 8, Punishment and Discipline.)

#### *Adultery and promiscuous behaviour of parents*

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<sup>14</sup> Edleson, J. (1999). *Problems Associated with Children’s Witnessing of Domestic Violence*. [www.vawnet.org](http://www.vawnet.org).

Some survivors of trafficking, rape victims and street children said that they were truly hurt by the adultery and promiscuous behaviour of parents. There is also a sense of anger towards the parent who has relationships with someone outside their marriage.

*‘My father had affairs with other women. All this was happening in front of my own eyes. I accepted it when I was a child but I hate my father. My mother left me and married my father’s friend. I used to live with them for some time but he was very mean to me.’ (A boy in jail in Pakistan)*

### ***Role of other family members***

Other family members play an important role in the lives of children. There were many children in the study who were brought up by their uncle, grandparent, aunt or elder sister. Most children in the study showed respect to their grandparents for their wisdom. They said that grandparents often bridge the gap between parents and children. They also show love, shower them with affection and are always willing to help and comfort their grandchildren. They also provide refuge and protection to children when they get into trouble. Many children also said that grandfathers or uncles had more prominent roles than their fathers. Grandfathers have more prominent roles than their grandmothers. Grandfathers were often found as ‘father figures’ and role models in children’s lives. In some families, when there is no grandfather then grandmother becomes the main decision maker. Some grandchildren did not like their grandparents as they always found faults with their mothers. Most children in the study, however, had positive attitudes toward their grandparents and older people.

*‘Grandfather is the main person who solves all the problems and gives us advice. He is the main advisor in the family.’ (Working boy of older age group in Afghanistan)*

Older siblings have an important role in providing care to young children. Older sisters, instead of attending school, are forced to stay at home to take care of their younger siblings and engage in household chores. However, children felt that they took good care of them.

Grandparents, uncles and aunts played a much greater role in the lives of children who lost their parents during the armed conflict in Nepal. They realize that it is difficult for children who experienced the death or physical injury of their parents to adjust to these truncated and revised family relations. Some of the families who look after these children are themselves displaced and live in constant insecurity and are finding it difficult to deal with their own trauma and feeling of hopelessness. Furthermore, these families are severely stretched in order to be able to provide care for existing family members, let alone additional members.

### ***Poverty dimension of parental roles***

Children from poor families do not blame their parents for being poor. They acknowledge that parents themselves want to get out of the situation and it is difficult for them to provide the children with basic needs such as food, shelter and education. Poor families in rural households enjoy social and emotional support from extended family members, friends and neighbours. However, extreme poor conditions in families had negative impact on many children in South Asia. Some of the children on the street or living on railway platforms said that they left home due to family poverty: families were not able to feed several children.

Poverty level was also high following the death of one or both parents. Some of the trafficked survivors also said that poverty led their parents to sell them to the traffickers. Some of the children in Nepal became soldiers simply to escape from poverty. They also felt that parents were complacent about the continued poverty and injustice. Some children decided to take up arms in an effort to overcome the immense obstacles to their social and economic well-being.

## **WHAT PARENTS SAY ABOUT THE ROLE OF PARENTS**

Parents, even in difficult socio-economic circumstances, want only the best for their children. Parents may have little or no education but they still want their children to be educated and want to do things for children that make them happy. But norms and traditions have been a strong influence in their parenting styles, where duty and responsibility override individualism as the dominant value system.

The father has great social status and presence in the family but he has little involvement in child rearing. He provides economic support not only for his immediate family but also for his parents and siblings. Fathers are often not aware of the potential benefits of their role as a nurturer on child development. Mothers are simply following what their mothers and grandmothers have done to raise children.

Parents have less stress in raising children as often the children have multiple caregivers and the opportunity to interact with different people. In times of crisis when parents or other caregivers are sick, parents are able to leave children in their neighbours' care.

Most parents assume their children know they love them even when they do not say it in words or hug or kiss them. These parents reason that the children see how hard they work to feed and clothe them. They assume their children understand that they do this for them because they are loved. However, it is unwise to assume that children are secure in their knowledge that parents love them. Studies have shown that children need expressions of their parents' love to tell them that they are worthy of love and respect. For example, children who feel loved will be less likely to look for love in the wrong places ... from the wrong people.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Statman P. *The Best Insurance for Children is Love*. [www.parentingbookmark.com](http://www.parentingbookmark.com).

## 5. COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN

Being listened to and communicated with are basic needs of any human being and therefore of children. The communication between parents and children is particularly important. Communication builds understanding about each other, which is necessary for the parents to guide and care for the child and for the child to learn from parents or to access them for support. Parents who cannot communicate well are more likely to be violent in moments of frustration. A child who is never listened to properly grows up feeling that adults are not interested in him/her, which may create low self-esteem. Communicating with the child also reduces the chances of child abuse as the child gets the opportunity to tell parents about any problem or discomfort and parents get the chance to be there to offer help and protection.<sup>16</sup>

### CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION ON COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Most children consider that communication with parents is important. However, 56 per cent of the older boys did not like to talk much to their parents. The reason behind this gap as identified by children was that parents did not have the patience to listen to them, did not understand the subject they wanted to talk about or had the tendency to lecture or criticize everything that children said. Children also wanted their privacy to be respected. The treatment of children by most parents is heavy with preaching, moralizing, evaluation, judgments and criticisms, admonishing and commanding. But all these actions and attitudes cut off two-way communication between parents and children. Children do not feel like talking to them, as they do not want to be preached to, disapproved of and put down.<sup>17</sup>

Being obedient is recognized to be a good trait in a parent–child relationship in South Asia. This means that there is usually one-way communication where children have to listen to their parents and not the other way round. One girl (rural India) said, ‘Whatever the parents say I listen. I feel bad when they say “No” (to what I want), but I accept.’

Having conversation depends on the mood of the parents. According to some children, parents only listen to things that they want to hear. They do not listen to them if they do not want to. If parents are in a good mood they will listen. Children also acknowledge that parents are usually overworked and do not really have the energy and the time to listen to their children.

Some children said that the only form of communication between parents and children is when parents order them to do household chores such as fetching water, bringing vegetables from the field, going to a relative's house for some work, etc. Sometimes they talked about household problems such as a child becoming sick or somebody coming for the day. Discussions about major family issues, such as finance, were found in only a few cases.

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<sup>16</sup> NSPCC (2000). *Listening to Children: A guide for parents and carers*. London: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC).

<sup>17</sup> Bell, B. *Lessons in Lifemanship – Active Listening with Children and Young People*. [www.bbll.com/ch03.html](http://www.bbll.com/ch03.html).

Fathers are generally busy and have less interaction with children. Children talked to their fathers only when they needed any school stationery, school fees or anything that involved money. They also talked to the father when they were ill. Seventy per cent of younger children said that they could talk to their parents about anything.

*'My father has given me the opportunity to discuss everything with him and he also shares everything about his life with me.'* (Adolescent girl from rural India)

Mothers are usually available at home. So, there are more chances of interaction. Children said that communication was mainly about household matters such as food, groceries, etc. Adolescent girls were found to have a closer relation with their mothers than did the other groups. Some girls said that they talk to their mothers when they have problems or when they need something. They gossip about relatives and neighbours. They also talk about meal preparation.

It was also found that there is little discussion between parents themselves other than household discussions. The mother is afraid of talking to the father and grandparents. The father is afraid of talking to his father. Everyone has friends to share and discuss with.

Children like to talk about school, friends, sports, movies, gossip, village or the workplace. They share and discuss their thoughts, desires, ideas and secrets mostly with their friends. Most children said that they do not confide in their parents about their personal problems. Parents become judgmental and frequently put restrictions on them. For example, if they talked about a friend getting into trouble or falling in love then parents started lecturing them and preventing them from mixing with that friend. So children would rather turn to their friends for advice. Many girls and boys said that they would lie to their parents in order to avoid interrogations, lecturing and scolding.

Some children feel more comfortable sharing their anxieties with their siblings. Nearly all the children have close and neutral relationships with younger siblings but few would share anything with their elder brothers. Elder brothers often beat them or would report them to their parents. Children were closer to their older sisters than to older brothers. The granddaughters got more chance to talk to their grandmothers when they had problems as mothers were too busy with household chores. Younger children (mainly from rural areas) also said that they talk and discuss a lot with their grandparents, uncles, aunts and neighbours. Children said that mothers could usually sense when girls and boys are upset. Some children said that mothers are usually more understanding and empathetic. Both girls and boys said that fathers do not really understand when they are upset about anything.

Children felt that their parents could not understand the problems they faced with their school studies. Nearly ninety per cent said they could not receive help from their parents with their homework because their parents were from disadvantaged communities with little or no education. At most, girls and boys share their class performances or marks obtained. Even so, some of the illiterate parents do encourage their children to do well in their studies. When the father has a higher level of education than that of the child then the child discusses with the father about his/her school studies. When children do not understand their school work they usually go to their teachers or friends for help.

Children and parents feel embarrassed to talk about sex and sexual health. They think it is shameful to talk about sex. Children are also poorly informed about sexual health issues,

usually relying on their peers and the media for information about sex and reproductive health. Parents marry off their daughters without giving them adequate information about sex, contraception, safe motherhood, or sexually transmitted diseases including HIV and AIDS. Most girls reported that their grandmothers, sisters-in-law (usually brother's wife), older sisters or friends were their source of information about periods and childbirth<sup>18</sup>. Boys on the street said that they would not dare talk about sex with their parents or any other family member or else they would be labelled as 'bad boys'. Both girls and boys felt that they should be informed about puberty, family planning and sexual health.

Most young adolescents throughout the region have little if any accurate information about their bodies and their sexual and reproductive health. Widespread sexual taboos and the high value on premarital virginity, especially for girls and young women, means that little if any information is passed on from mothers to daughters until 'needed'. Boys too are also uninformed. Young brides are often shocked and frightened by their (sometimes forced) sexual initiation on their wedding night because they lack even the most basic knowledge of sexual relations. Young women learned most from female family members; young men from friends, family members, religious sources, magazines and films. Some young women said they had no information about sexual relations prior to their marriage. Much of what the boys already knew came from pornographic videos which they secretly watched with friends.<sup>19</sup>

Even if girls are sexually harassed they do not like to share this with their family members as there is a tendency to blame the girl and their guardians for any abuse they may suffer. Boys are also at risk of being sexually abused, but parents do not seem to acknowledge this. Boys do not even like to discuss sexual abuse with others.

Adolescent girls and boys never talk with their parents about romantic relationships. Discussion on a relationship between a girl and a boy is still a taboo in South Asia. Only when they are caught would they talk about it. Most girls said that their parents would be furious with them if they were to talk about liking a boy as the parents would think that it would bring shame to the family. Adolescent girls are not sent to secondary schools as parents think that they might fall in love with boys and bring disgrace to the family. In tribal communities, on the other hand, parents are more flexible so children are also more open about such relationships.

Many children, especially homeless children and trafficked children, complained about the lack of trust by their parents. A few homeless children and some children in armed conflict said that mistrust by parents was one of the core reasons for their frustration and had led some of them to leave their homes. One young boy on being asked why he was not going back to his home responded, 'Why should I go back to a place where nobody believes me.' The trust that develops between parents and child through listening and sharing ensures that the child is more likely to access her/his parents when she/he is unhappy or has any problem in order to describe feelings, share emotions and to ask for support in different aspects of life.

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<sup>18</sup> Rashid Sabina 2001. *Social Interaction and Diffusion of Knowledge: BRAC's Adolescent Reproductive Health Education Programme in Rural Areas of Bangladesh*. Regional Health Forum. WHO South-East Asia Regional (Vol.4).

<sup>19</sup> IWHC (2001). *Young Adolescents' Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in South and South East Asia*. International Women's Health Coalition. [www.iwhc.org](http://www.iwhc.org).



Adolescent girls and boys felt that open communication with parents was very important for preventing children from making serious mistakes and indulging in behaviours that threaten their health, safety and welfare. They said that it was the parents' responsibility to talk to their children about HIV and AIDS, drugs, sexual and reproductive health, sexual exploitation, trafficking and armed conflict and to caution them not to fall into the hands of recruiters for armed conflict and traffickers. Some of the children who ran away from their homes (and later ended up in brothels, jails or on the street, or who joined the armed conflict) said that if their parents had discussed with them openly about such issues they might have stayed. This shows that if parents had given children the opportunity to discuss their problems openly and would not lecture them or be judgmental then children might have taken responsible choices in life.

### ***Peer pressure***

Peers play a more important role in the lives of adolescents than of younger children. Boys, especially, spend more time with their peers. Peer pressure has been positive in influencing boys and girls to continue with their education. However, peer pressure has significantly influenced many girls and boys to join the Maoist groups in the armed struggle in Nepal. Children found it 'cool' to be in the armed group. They would hear from their peers about the great work they were doing, how they were being trained to be soldiers and how they had seen and touched guns and other weapons and ammunition. Girls were impressed with the mobility that girls had in the camps and the money they received by becoming a member of the armed group. Joining armed groups was a sign of manhood for many boys. The girls and boys who joined the Maoist groups were treated like heroes by many people in their own villages and this led many children to join up. This finding is based on the interviews and focus group discussions with children who were previously in Maoist camps.

### **WHAT PARENTS SAY ABOUT COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN**

Parents, too, feel unheard. They would like to know about the daily lives of their children in school and at work. Children are often reluctant to discuss issues with their parents because they think that their parents do not understand.

Few parents complained that when children start going to school they do not want to listen to them. Their children try to avoid household work or give excuses not to help their father with work. They sometimes become rude. They feel that their children are not giving them any respect and that they do not see eye to eye with them on many issues. They do not behave the way they (parents) used to behave with their parents.

Parents feel uncomfortable in talking about sexual and reproductive health with their daughters even at the time of their marriage. It is not in their culture to discuss such topics with unmarried children. Sometimes they ask their daughter-in-law or a married relative to discuss such issues with the girl getting ready for marriage. They do realize that many girls face severe reproductive health problems but once they are married it is the responsibility of their in-laws to provide them with medical treatment. Parents never thought of talking to their

boys about puberty, sex and sexual health. (The information in this paragraph is drawn from the following source-see footnote<sup>20</sup>)

Children's peer pressure was also an area that parents found difficult to deal with. As children become older they tend to spend more time with peers than they do with their parents and siblings. These peers influence the children through the way they dress and act and the attitudes they show. Parents feel that their children do not listen to them and are more influenced by their peers.

Poor communication or no communication is the way of life for many families in South Asia. Parents do not know about the importance of communicating with children. They usually get advice from their elders or other parents when they have difficulties with their children. They grew up with the notions that children should be obedient and listen to their elders, and should be respectful to their parents.

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<sup>20</sup> Hennik M., Rana I., Iqbal R. 2004. *Knowledge of Personal and Sexual Development amongst Young People in Pakistan*. Opportunities and Choices Working Paper No.12 June, 2004.

## 6. CONSULTING WITH CHILDREN

The family is the ideal framework for the first stage of the democratic experience for children. Participation in the family is a need as well as a right. Giving children the opportunity to express their views helps in establishing a special bond with the parents or caregivers. It contributes to smoothing the relationship with them, increased self-confidence and self-esteem. Children's participation in household decisions makes them feel more responsible and provides the opportunity for them to feel valued as individuals. Freedom provided to children to take decisions about their lives increases their capacity to take decisions and thus empowers them.<sup>21</sup> Engaging children in dialogue and exchange allows them to learn constructive ways of influencing the world around them.<sup>22</sup>

Children's right to participation is embedded in the UNCRC:

### Articles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

**Article 12:** States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

**Article 13:** The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

### CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION ON CONSULTING WITH CHILDREN

Children generally do not get the opportunity to take part in most of the decisions that influence their lives. It is usually the parents and other adults who take decisions on their behalf, in the belief that children are not mature enough to take decisions for themselves. In many cases, in the context of joint families in rural areas, parents themselves do not have the authority to take decision when grandparents are alive.

Sending children to work is always the parents' decision. A child is never asked for his or her opinion on the work decided for them by their guardians. Parents decide to send them to work as domestic workers, or work in factories and other hazardous occupations or sometimes to sell their children to traffickers. Working children who come from poor families generally see this work as their responsibility. Children may not like to go to work but they do not criticize parents for it. Adolescents also lack choice about whether they can keep their own earnings or should give them to their parents and elders. Street children had greater say in how much of their earnings they can keep for themselves.

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<sup>21</sup> Khattab, M. (2006). The Right of the Child to be Heard. Committee on the Rights of the Child, Day of General Discussion, 15 September 2006, accessed from <http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/statements/RighttoheardMK15Sep06.doc>.

<sup>22</sup> UNICEF (2003). *The State of the World's Children*. [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org).

Even inside the brothel no one would challenge parents' right to decide their children's future.<sup>23</sup> In brothels, once the daughter reaches puberty the mother coaches her daughter to enter the trade. The daughter has no say in the matter. The daughter also feels that she has no future as she is already labelled as the daughter of a prostitute and an outcast in society.

Mothers usually decide on what is to be cooked. In some households food is decided by what the father brings from the market. In some joint families grandmothers take the decision. Girls and boys do not have much say in what is cooked, although children in better income groups were found to have some say in the menu. They request or ask their mothers to cook something they like.

Children have no say in financial matters or budget of the family.

*'We are never allowed to participate in these discussions. If we say anything on these issues, parents scold us and say, "Small mouth talking like adults".' (Adolescent girl with disability in Afghanistan)*

Fathers generally decide whether or not girls and boys should go to school and till which class they can continue. Many girls said that they were willing to study more but parents did not allow them to do so.

*'My parents did not allow me to go to high school as it was too far from our village. My brother who is younger than me was allowed.'* (Trafficked survivor)

In marriage, a child's consent is never sought. Girls and boys rarely have any say in when and whom they marry, although in the case of the tribal community there is some flexibility in this respect – children are generally asked before marriage if they want to marry the bridegroom chosen by their parents. In other communities parents choose a bride or groom for their son and daughter. They are not even allowed to decide the age when they will be married. Parents will not listen to any opposition to the marriage. Parents often do not explain why they are forcing their daughters to marry at an early age.

It is rare for a child with disability to be consulted on any decisions that are made in the family. She/he is generally not asked for an opinion even when she/he has the ability to give one.

*'I'm the most neglected part of my family. I have a disabled leg, not a disabled brain. But my father treats me like furniture.'* (Disabled boy from Bangladesh)

Some children say they do household work, provide care and support for their younger siblings, and even provide financial support, and hence they should be consulted in matters that affect their lives and the lives of their siblings. Parents should consult with them before they decide to sell their children or marry girls off at an early age or make any important decisions that concern them. They should listen to their children before withdrawing them from school. They should value the opinion of all children, including disabled children. Parents should also discuss with children about where they are sending them to work and

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<sup>23</sup> Blanchet, K. (1999). *Lost Innocence, Stolen Childhoods*. Dhaka: University Press Limited.

prepare them for challenges they may face at the workplace. They should also support them if they want to leave their work.

### **WHAT PARENTS SAY ABOUT CONSULTING WITH CHILDREN**

Parents think that children are not old enough to take decisions. It is not in their culture to talk to their children about major family decisions. They have never really thought about consulting with children as it is not a thing to do in South Asian culture. However, they wanted to know about children's participation and its benefits.

Parents did not think they needed to consult with children on whether or not they wanted to work as it is believed that everyone in the family has a duty to work and help the family. Girls and boys are needed to help their mothers in household chores and sons must help their fathers in the fields or other occupation of the father. Earning a living or supplementing their family income for some children is a matter of survival.

Parents do not like to consult with children regarding their (children's) marriage. They think they know what is best for them. They prefer child marriage in order to prevent their children from getting romantically involved with somebody from lower caste, lower class or other religion. It is very difficult to influence children to follow religion, traditions and customs once they reach adulthood. Often children opposed early marriage for themselves or older siblings but parents could not listen to them as it is impossible to oppose cultural norms and traditions. Parents said that they give priority to social and cultural norms rather than taking their children's viewpoint in order to live with respect and dignity in the community.

## 7. SPENDING QUALITY TIME WITH CHILDREN

Spending quality time with children is one of the most important indicators of good parenting. When parents and children do things together that they both enjoy then this strengthens bonds between the parent and the child.<sup>24</sup> A child's basic learning takes place in the many informal situations that occur daily in the life of the family. These informal occasions for learning include all the times the family members are together doing ordinary things.<sup>25</sup> Different studies conducted in the developed nations have suggested that the amount of time spent with children has lessened because of the faster and more demanding professional lives of parents. However, in this study we have found that even in the rural setting and poor households the amount of quality<sup>26</sup> time spent by parents with children is also quite low.

### CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION ON PARENTS SPENDING QUALITY TIME WITH CHILDREN

Children have fun with their parents during special occasions (holi, eid, diwali, baisabi/sangria, etc.) depending on the religion and culture of the community. They generally get gifts and visit relatives. They also like it when the whole family goes out on a picnic, usually with their immediate and extended family members, neighbours and friends. They like the change of scenery and the good moods of their parents.

Both young and older children love to hear stories. They even love to hear stories about the childhood experience of their parents, grandparents and other family members. Younger children love to listen to fairy tales. Children also like to hear about their father's day at work. Telling stories to children is one of the most powerful ways to strengthen the child-parent bond. Some children watch television with their parents (those who own a TV) and discuss the programmes with them.

There are very few families in both rural and urban areas where all members of the family eat together. In some families, fathers would eat alone, in some the father would eat with the son, and in a very few families the father would eat with both girls and boys. But mothers were always the last ones to eat. Research shows that eating together as a family has great benefits for children and teenagers. Conversations during meals provide opportunities for the family to bond, plan, connect and learn from one another. Family meals foster warmth, security and love as well as feelings of belonging. This encourages closeness, sharing of personal achievements, etc. Eating together is a positive learning experience. It enhances emotional

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<sup>24</sup> *Spending Quality Time with your Children.* [www.Better-Parent.com](http://www.Better-Parent.com).

<sup>25</sup> Van Horn, J.E. (1993). *Parent Education: The Importance of Family Meals*. Pennsylvania, PA: State Cooperative Extension Service.

<sup>26</sup> 'Quality time' is the time spent doing an activity that is meaningful to both parent and child. Quality time is spent focusing attention on the other person and sharing thoughts and feelings. The 'quality time spent' excludes the time of sleeping and other times when children and parents are in the vicinity, but are engaged in their own chores.

well-being and family satisfaction. Studies have shown that it also reduces child substance abuse. It strengthens family ties, therefore increasing the possibility of sharing.<sup>27</sup>

*'I like it when all my family members eat together.'* (Boy from a rural household in India)

In rural areas, especially in cases of joint families, it was found that children spend significant time with their grandparents. Younger children especially spend more time with grandparents and other members of the family such as unmarried aunts (father's sister). Children were often found to be closer to some male members of the family other than the father, usually grandfathers, uncles or elder brothers and sometimes neighbours. Younger children liked to hear stories from them or go out with them and learn about the things they see on these journeys.

Children at risk, such as homeless children, trafficked survivors, children in conflict with the law and children engaged in armed conflict, said they spent very little time with their mothers and almost no time with their fathers when they lived with their families. There is evidence of weak family bonding. This shows that poverty alone is not a sufficient explanatory factor for children to be in these risky situations. Time spent and communication with children is equally important.

*'My mother wants to spend time with the man (babu, the permanent client) after her work. He is always there with her. I don't like him. So, I don't like to be at home except for eating and sleeping.'* (Adolescent boy growing up in a brothel in India)

However, some older children also suggested that they needed space to be left alone and be with their friends. Parents do not spend time with them but tend to monitor and supervise them. For these children, as long as they know that their parents love them and care about them it really does not matter how much time the parent is giving to them. Their parents simply need to keep an eye on them.

## **WHAT PARENTS SAY ABOUT PARENTS SPENDING QUALITY TIME WITH CHILDREN**

Parents wish to spend quality time with their children, but they have to work and fulfil other obligations that prevent them from doing things together. Fathers and other family members are the ones to take them out to fairs and tell them stories. They too enjoy celebrating the religious festivals and picnics with their children.

Parents in rural areas have to work hard and long hours to provide their families with the basic necessities. Mothers complained that alcoholism prevented some fathers from spending quality time with their children. Fathers usually go out to meet other people in the village.

Economic hardship is a reality for some families. Providing food for the family has been the priority and there is hardly anything extra to spend for special occasions. Sometimes religious festivals can become a time of financial burden.

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<sup>27</sup> Hand, B. *The Benefits of Eating Together*. [www.sparkpeople.com](http://www.sparkpeople.com).

## 8. PUNISHMENT AND DISCIPLINE

Physical and psychological punishment of children is a violation of children's fundamental human rights to respect for human dignity and physical integrity recognized by all relevant international human rights instruments and monitoring mechanisms, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

### Article in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

**Article 19** of the UNCRC protects 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.

There exists some confusion between the definitions of punishment and discipline. Giving up physical and psychological punishment does not mean giving up discipline. Discipline is necessary not only for the safety and well-being of the child but also for his or her social, emotional and cognitive development. There are positive ways of disciplining children that do not require physical and psychological punishment and are more effective and beneficial for child development.

There are both short and long term effects of physical and psychological punishment on children. Physical punishment can lead to physical injury and has been associated with many negative outcomes in social behaviour, including aggression, poorer relations, behaviour problems, lack of acceptance by peers, crime and delinquency. Children's cognitive and intellectual developments are adversely affected by parental use of physical punishment. It is also linked to a variety of mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and suicidal tendency. The use of physical and psychological punishment also endorses a pattern of violence which is passed from one generation to the next.

### CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION ON PUNISHMENT AND DISCIPLINE

The most common forms of physical punishment used by parents are beating with a stick, cane or whip, pinching, pulling the hair and ears, slapping the face and head, kicking and punching, pushing and shoving the child. Depriving children of food is also practised by some of the parents. The most common types of psychological violence experienced by these children include humiliation, threat, neglect, being ignored, ridicule, belittling, taunting, calling names, comparing with others, blatantly rejecting the child, witnessing violence, and discrimination.

"If I make a serious mistake my father would use a cane to beat me. For less serious mistakes, he would use his strong legs and feet to hurt me. If the mistake is minor then he would use his hands". (A boy in jail in Pakistan)

Physical punishment reduces for girls as they grow older. Adolescent girls are scolded and humiliated, but fathers generally do not beat adolescent girls although mothers at times use physical punishment. For boys, physical punishment escalates as they grow older. They are subject to harsher physical punishment than girls.



The use of verbal abuse by parents was reported to be common among both girls and boys. They disliked abusive language used by their parents. Alcoholic parents often used abusive language to hurt their children.

Most girls and boys feel that their parents are always nagging. Parents think that their persistent demands, reminders, requests and threats of negative consequences will influence the child to do what they want – don't go out, clean the yard, boil the rice (mainly to girls), do not mix with those children, and so on. The child usually complies but does not feel good about it. Some of the girls who joined the armed conflict in Nepal said they joined the Maoist camp to avoid this constant nagging.

### ***The support of extended family and neighbours***

One most positive aspect that protects children from severe physical and psychological punishment is the support system that the extended families and neighbours provide for raising children. This was more evident in rural and ethnic communities. The extended family or other community members are often a restraining influence when parental tempers get out of control and reduce the likelihood of frustration and aggression of the caregiver that lead to uncontrolled violence against children. A child can run from one family to another to protect herself/himself from being beaten by the parent, older sibling or other members in the household. Grandparents usually calm the parents down when they are angry with their children.

### ***Reasons for punishment***

Several reasons for punishment were narrated by children, including not obeying their parents or their elders, talking back to their parents, refusing to listen to their parents, being stubborn on any matter, not wanting to go to school, not wanting to do any household work, going to places without taking permission of parents, telling lies, stealing, fighting with siblings or peers, not coming back at the right time, accidentally breaking household goods, spending the night out, smoking, spending money unnecessarily, and even for getting hurt while playing. Going out of home and not wanting to do any household work are seen as serious offenses for girls, especially adolescent girls. Parents also resorted to physical and humiliating punishment when there were complaints from the stepmother, neighbours or teachers. The severity of punishment increases with the perceived seriousness of the offense, as felt by parents.

*'My father always beat me; I was beaten for playing football with my friends, for going without taking permission from my parent, for not having said my Maghreb (evening prayer) and whenever my teacher complained about me.'* (Boy in jail in Pakistan)

### ***Who punishes children?***

The study shows that fathers usually discipline boys, while mothers or elder brothers usually discipline girls. In some cases older siblings were found to discipline their younger ones.

Younger children said that mothers do most of the punishing as they usually get irritated more often than their fathers. Sometimes fathers pacify mothers when the mother is angry. Fathers at times also scold the mother when they see that the mother is being unjust with their daughters. Fathers, however, do get angry sometimes. 'When fathers get angry mothers do not do anything to calm the father down,' said a girl child worker in Afghanistan. The mother tries to stay away as she thinks that she might be hit. Girls and boys usually get out of father's way when he is angry. They like it when a grandparent or the other parent tries to calm the angry parent.

The use of physical punishment was found less prevalent in the tribal community. But in that community all children said that they have experienced it at least once in their lifetime. Disabled children are also subject to physical and psychological punishments.

*'He cannot tolerate me and thinks me to be a burden to him. He hits or verbally abuses me nearly every day, but whenever my brothers make the same mistake they are forgiven.'* (Child with disability living in urban slums in Bangladesh)

### ***Effects of punishment***

The study also shows that physical and psychological punishments were found to be one of the prime reasons for many children to leave home, quit school and end up in prostitution, jails or in the streets. This revelation challenges the myth that children end up in vulnerable situations only because of poverty.

Some children suffered injuries arising from severe beating that needed medical attention. There are often bruises and physical injuries due to physical punishment.

When asked about how they felt when they were punished, most of the children said that they felt bad, or angry or sad.

*'It pains in the body when my father punishes me, but it pains in my heart when my mother punishes me. I feel like hitting back.'* (Child with disability in Afghanistan)

*'Everybody gets beaten when they do something wrong. This is normal.'* (Child worker in Afghanistan)

This shows that the message that physical punishment sends to the mind of a child is that violence is acceptable behaviour. It also encourages violence in society as a means to settle conflicts. Children observe and imitate the behaviour of the adult so if the adult shows anger and aggressiveness then children may adopt that behaviour.

Many children said that they do not feel anything as they are beaten so much from childhood that they are now used to it.

*'My mother beats me on every occasion. I don't even understand why I am being beaten. But now it has become a practice. I don't say anything. They themselves give up after 5–10 minutes.'* (Boy Child Worker in Afghanistan)

This shows that physical and psychological punishment is usually ineffective. On its own, it does not teach children right from wrong. It can bring about immediate compliance because of fear of not obeying, but children do not remember the reasons for their punishment and only remember the act of the physical or verbal abuse, and so they repeat the misbehaviour or inappropriate activities.

**Children wished that their parents would explain more about what they expected from them.**

Children have a strong wish to be treated fairly. They hate it when they are punished for something they did not do. Most of the girls and boys said that they should be given a proper explanation of what they had done wrong, instead of unnecessarily being beaten. Parents should also try to listen to children and understand the reason for their children's misdeeds. Children do not mind being hit if they do something wrong, but they do not like to be hit for no reason and when they do not deserve it. However, punishment should not be harsh and cruel, like beating children or using abusive language.

According to children, the parent should also praise. Some children said that they have never been praised in their lives for anything that they have done. 'They should at least praise us when we do something good.'

Nearly all children in the study recommend:

*'Parents should be taught how to discipline and raise their children without resorting to violence.'*

## **WHAT PARENTS SAY ABOUT PUNISHMENT AND DISCIPLINE**

Eighty-three per cent of parents physically discipline their younger children and 64 per cent of young adolescents have been physically hit by their parents. Parents would hit young children when they misbehaved. Parents resorted to physical and humiliating punishment when adolescents showed disrespect to elders and did not comply with a request.

Parents do not like to hit their children or hurt them physically or mentally. They do not think that it is the best way to raise children. They are not aware about the negative effects of physical and humiliating punishment on children. They often do not know what to do when children do not obey, or do not cooperate, or do not seem interested in pleasing anyone in the family. They also said that they were only human and sometimes lost control and did not know how to manage their own anger. They wanted to learn about skills that can be used to raise children without resorting to violence.

## 9. DISCRIMINATION

Many children in South Asia are subject to discrimination on grounds of gender, caste, disability, ethnicity, religion, HIV and AIDS, and economic background. Discrimination has immediate effects on access to resources, social position, etc., but in the long term it adversely affects the psychological functioning of the child, his/her emotional development, self-confidence and self-esteem. Discrimination is the base of many child rights violations. Children who are discriminated against are less likely to access quality education, more likely to be recruited as child soldiers, trafficked or exposed to hazardous work and sexual exploitation, and are disproportionately represented among juveniles who are imprisoned. Non-discrimination is an essential principle of all human rights treaties.

### Articles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

**Article 2:** States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

**Article 23:** States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.

**Article 30:** In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

### CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION ON DISCRIMINATION

On the basis of the reason and manifestation of discrimination, different types of discriminations may be divided into five categories.<sup>28</sup>

#### *A. Discrimination based on gender*

Forms of discrimination against girl children are numerous and vary depending on the tradition and culture of the society. The discrimination against girls in hilly tribal areas in Bangladesh is less pronounced. There is difference in the daily routine, amount and kinds of work done by girls and boys, time availability for work and play, access to school, mobility, food intake, eating order, etc. Girls usually do the household work and have less time to play. Girls inherit their mother's domestic chores and adopt stereotypical gender roles. Girls growing up in the brothel are prepared for sex work like their mothers.

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<sup>28</sup> This may not be an exhaustive categorization, as many other types of discrimination could not be studied. Other types of discrimination may fall in these categories or may need some extra categories. Further research on this issue is required.

Girls are forced to marry early and discontinue their studies. About 70 per cent of adolescent girls were not allowed mobility beyond their immediate community. About 30 per cent could not move freely in their own neighbourhood. Many girls could not enter secondary schools if they were located in another village. Some of the girls in Banke district, Nepal, joined the armed conflict to avoid the constant restrictions on their mobility imposed by their families. Boys who reach puberty, on the other hand, gain greater autonomy, mobility, opportunity and responsibilities outside the home. They too think they are discriminated against as they are forced to work and help their families.

Girls and their mothers eat last and least in their families. Mothers assisted by daughters prepare the food, serve the food and yet they are the last ones to eat. The mother feeds her husband, then her children (usually the boys first) and finally she feeds herself with whatever is left. This sends a message to girls and boys that a girl has a low position in the family and in society.

Girls also receive less health care. Girls are often not taken to the doctor when they are sick. Boys and girls said that when boys are ill they are taken to the hospital, whereas girls are given cheap medicines from the local store.

*‘Girls and boys need to be treated equally.’ (Boy affected by armed conflict, Nepal)*

### ***B. Inter-community discrimination***

Children learn to discriminate against children from lower caste, poor, tribal, ethnic, religious and other marginalized communities. A child from a ‘pandit’ family (high caste in Hindu society) cannot eat with or eat from the same plate as a ‘chamar’ (low caste in Hindu society) girl or boy. Children from upper castes are not allowed to drink water from the people who are from the untouchable or Muslim communities. This rule is created by their families. Parents, adults and the community at large put pressure on children to obey.

*‘They (lower caste children) are dirty. So, we don’t play with them. Whatever our parents advise us is for our own good.’ (Child from higher caste in India)*

*‘As tribal we feel discriminated. Bengali children think that we are lower than them.’ (Tribal child from Bangladesh)*

Many children do not support this type of discrimination. Most of the children are of the opinion that these discriminations have reduced since their parents’ generation and will be obsolete after some years.

### ***C. Discrimination based on social status of parents***

Children of sex workers, alcoholic parents, single parents or poor parents are subject to discrimination in their communities. About 53 per cent of children in the brothel in India (in the study) attend schools. However, once their identity becomes known, they face ridicule from their classmates and a condescending attitude from their schoolteacher. Parents of other children do not want children of brothels to attend the same school.

*'We are poor, so we are not allowed to play in the bigger portion of the field. Children who live in brick houses occupy the bigger field where they play football or cricket. We can only use very limited space, where we cannot play most of the games we want. We feel bad but cannot do anything about it.'* (Child in urban slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh)

Parents can be helped to teach their children about respecting and caring for poor and other marginalised children.

#### ***D. Discrimination based on ability***

Most children with disability felt that they were loved by their parents. However, children with disability noticed that their parents were biased towards their non-disabled siblings. Parents are sometimes ashamed of having children with disability. An Afghan disabled girl said that parents do not like to invest much on disabled girls as they do not have the chance to fetch bride money.

*'My father gives new books to my other brothers and sisters every year. But I don't get new books as I'm disabled. I feel terribly bad. I'm not responsible for my disability.'* (Child with disability from slum in Bangladesh)

All children expressed the need to give every child equal opportunity with whatever individual capacity they have. Some children expressed that they themselves bully children who are physically or mentally disabled, too fat or too thin, who have black complexion or who are physically weak. But they agreed that this was not justified behaviour.

#### ***E. Intra-family discrimination***

##### ***Discrimination by step-parents and discrimination between siblings***

Discrimination by step-parents was found to be very common among the children in the study. Some children ran away from homes because of step-parents and their abusive treatments. Stepmothers and stepfathers often discriminated against their non-biological children. They gave more food to their biological children. Some of the trafficked girls said that they ran away from home because of regular beating by their step-parents. One girl's stepmother even introduced her to the trafficker.

In some cases parents demonstrated a special preference for one of their children. This can cause the development of sibling rivalry, which can have negative consequences not only on children who feel they are less loved but also on the child who is given preferential treatment.<sup>29</sup> The light/fair-skinned daughter is always given preferential treatment by family members and this often makes the dark-skinned sibling jealous. Parents find it difficult to marry their daughter off if she is dark-skinned, which makes her a burden to her parents. Beautiful daughters in Afghanistan were given higher priority as they would fetch higher dowry from the bridegroom's family.

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<sup>29</sup> Boyle, W.: *Sibling Rivalry*. [www.angelfire.com/md/imsystem/sibriv3.html](http://www.angelfire.com/md/imsystem/sibriv3.html).

Brothel children feel discriminated against compared with siblings who were not brought to the brothel by their mothers. The mother usually brings only one child to the brothel and does not let her other children know about her profession. The child who stays with the mother feels unlucky. 'Sometimes, when I talk about bringing my elder brother here she shows reluctance.' ... 'I often wonder at the discrimination.' ... 'I feel jealous of my brother also.'

## **WHAT PARENTS SAY ABOUT DISCRIMINATION**

There are strong cultural pressures on parents to marry their daughters young. The parents restrict girls' mobility or prevent girls who have reached puberty from attending schools as they place a high priority on preserving the chastity of young women before marriage. They teach girls household work as it prepares them for marriage.

Parents have also said that it is more important to take greater care of a boy than a girl as the daughter's responsibility to take care of her parents ends at marriage, while the son's lasts for life. This shows that in a society where there is no social security system, the question of support for aging parents is very important. Most parents have compassion for children with disability and their parents. They were grateful to God that they did not have any children with disability.

Young parents too are against discrimination based on caste, religion, ethnicity and economic background, but they are afraid to break the norms and societal practices. They themselves grew up learning about prejudice and discrimination but did not have the courage to challenge the elders and the influential religious leaders in the society.

## 10. WORK AND PLAY

Childhood is a time for learning and playing. Working during childhood – both domestic chores and economic activities – is the reality for many children in South Asia. Some types of work make positive contributions to a child's development and welfare of the family where they learn responsibility and develop particular skills which are often beneficial for their future. However, some types of work are harmful to their physical and mental development and deprive children of their childhood, education, potential and dignity.

Play is the child's natural medium of communication. It is also a universal language among children. Regardless of children's culture, language or historical background, children are able to play. Play, as conclusively shown by several studies, is essential to the development of children as it contributes to their cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being. It helps children experience fun and joy. Through play, children develop their personalities and a positive sense of self. Play unlocks children's creativity and imagination, and develops the foundation for language, reading, thinking and problem-solving skills as well as motor skills. Through play, children learn to process and manage emotions, and understand and interpret the world around them. Play helps children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate and to resolve differences. In addition, parent-child play provides important opportunities for parent-child bonding.<sup>30</sup>

### Articles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

**Article 31.1:** States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

**Article 31.2:** States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

### CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION ON WORK AND PLAY

Most children work to help themselves and their family to survive. More boys than girls work outside their homes. Street children in urban areas are engaged as wage labour, helpers in shops, domestic helpers, workers in factories, etc. Most of the older boys in rural areas work in taking care of animals, planting and harvesting in the fields, helping their fathers in small trades, bringing fuel wood and going to the market. Girls in rural areas are involved in household chores, including cooking, sweeping, washing clothes, looking after their younger siblings, fetching water and making beds. Girls are also involved in agricultural work during the peak seasons. Some of the boys said that they were willing to help their mothers with household work but mothers usually did not let them do such work.

*'People would laugh at us if we fetch water or sweep the floor.'* (Boy from a rural household in India)

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<sup>30</sup> Ginsburg, K. (2006). *The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds*. Academy of Pediatrics. [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org).



Almost all girls and boys said that they liked to play. Most of the children expressed their disliking for going to work. Both girls and boys said that they did not get much time to play as they had too much work, though younger girls and boys got more opportunities. Those girls and boys who attended schools had to spend their free time on studies and homework.

*'I love the day when I get a chance to play, but it happens rarely.'* (Girl from the indigenous community in Bangladesh)

Children enjoyed themselves when they played with their friends and siblings. None of them owned any fancy toy. They used any scraps they could find in their environment and used their imagination. Boys would play tag, catching the ball, kabadi, chappal chori (hiding slippers), football or cricket. They play with an old football, tennis ball, car tyres and sticks. Boys love to play cricket and they usually use branches of trees to make their wickets and bats. Boys also like to climb trees. Girls like to play tag, skipping with ropes and house (where children pretend to be mothers, fathers and other members of the family). All girls and boys said that they enjoy playing ludo, badminton and carom. Younger children enjoy hide and seek, and running around with friends. Most street children, children in armed conflict areas and children in brothels did not have access to safe play areas.

Adolescent girls spend most of their leisure time watching television if they have access to one. Boys too spend a lot of time watching television. But they are free to play outside with their friends. Adolescent boys also enjoy hanging out with their male friends. Some even play cards. Most of the working children who lived without their families would spend a significant amount of leisure time and money on playing with video games and cards, watching internet pornography, smoking and using drugs. Children could not spend time reading as they did not have access to books other than their school books. There were not any libraries in their localities where they could borrow books. Even the NGOs that supported these children could not provide them with story books, novels and other reading materials. Parents of these children are too poor to spend money on story books.

Parents often put restrictions on children's time of play and other forms of leisure. Boys get more time to play than girls. Parents do not like it when older children play and watch television before finishing their household work. A boy also said that his mother did not encourage him to play. So he played whenever she went to work. If she caught him playing she would beat him.

*'Sometimes, I go to my neighbour's house to watch television instead of doing my household work. Whenever she catches me watching television she beats me.'* (Girl from India)

Adolescent girls are not allowed to play outside their homes. Some girls themselves think they have grown up and so they do not play outside their homes. Parents also do not want their adolescent girls to play outside as it is not a common practice in the community. Parents usually get angry and unhappy when they play outside.

Even some boys were also not encouraged to play. Boys who were from relatively well off families were always told by their parents to focus on school work rather than play. Their parents did not see play as anything that is good for their children. Some younger girls complained that their mothers did not want them to play every day. Some of the girls from

the indigenous community said that they never played before coming to ‘Shishu Jagat’<sup>31</sup> (the Children’s Club run by the project).

Parents sometimes restrict who their children play with. Parents from upper castes often discourage children from playing with children of lower castes. Many parents do not allow children to play with children of brothels. Although most parents do not prevent their children from playing with children with disabilities, many children themselves do not like to play with them. Adolescent girls and boys are not allowed to play together. Whenever the researchers asked the girls if they wanted to play with boys, they would laugh at the question. Girls and boys are expected to have friends and play with children of the same gender. Girls think that no girl would express that she would like to play with boys. Boys, on the other hand, did not mind playing with girls but said that it was not in their culture to mix with girls. Younger girls and boys, however, were allowed to play with each other.

None of the children from any group were found to play with their parents. ‘They (parents) always forbid us to play. How can they play with us?’

*‘People will laugh at him if my father plays with me.’ (Boy from rural India)*

*‘If parents take children for picnic and play with them, their mind and body will be healthy.’ (Boy in jail in Pakistan)*

Children said that parents should allow children to play and not scold them for playing. Younger children liked the idea of parents playing with their children.

*‘Parents can teach us many things during play. Good games make our brain sharp.’ (Working girl from India)*

## **WHAT PARENTS SAY ABOUT WORK AND PLAY**

Parents think that work is compulsory for children from poor communities. Parents need help in their regular household chores and non-household work. They could not afford to hire workers like the rich families. Parents themselves are overstretched with work. Parents interviewed in this study are from low income groups and they themselves have little choice about how to structure children’s work, education and recreation.

Some parents were also not happy about letting their children watch too much television as they learn things that are contrary to their culture and traditions. The children shirk their responsibilities towards their family when they spend too much time watching television.

Parents do want their children to play and think that at their age they ought to play with other children. However, parents were afraid of sending their children to play outside their home for various reasons: bad company, unsafe environment, street fights and drugs. They were not comfortable with the environment outside as there is always a possibility for their children to

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<sup>31</sup> BITA (Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts) and Save the Children Sweden-Denmark are implementing this programme in Bandarban district (in Chittagong Hill Tracts) of Bangladesh.

become spoilt. They pick up bad language and bad habits and tend to neglect their responsibilities towards their household duties and school work.

## 11. THE WAY FORWARD

The study recognizes children's and parents' participation in development of programmes for them rather than treating them as passive recipients to receive knowledge and services. Children have a much greater say in this study. The study tried to reflect the challenges children face with their parents and their recommendations for improving parent-child relationships.

Children have given importance to developing a positive parent-child relationship by recommending parents to love and provide them with emotional support, listen to them, enable them to talk freely about things that matter to them, consult with them on family decisions that affect their lives, spend more quality time with them, use non-violent methods of disciplining them, promote non-discrimination and allow them to play more.

Parents have also expressed their problems and their lack of adequate knowledge on parenting practices that benefit children's development. Findings from the study are expected to help in creating public debate and dialogue in developing effective family support and parenting education programmes that will benefit children, parents and society.

**Parenting education may be defined, then, as the set of programmes, resources or services whose goal is to increase parents' capacities to foster children's health, education, protection and participation in matters that affect them.**

It is very important to value what children have said on good parenting. It is even more important to understand why they have said it. For instance, many children liked the mother in her traditional role as nurturer performing her duty as a parent within the home. Does that mean we continue to reinforce this gender stereotypical role? In fact it has helped us to realize that it is extremely important to have special focus on gender stereotype, gender socialization and gender discrimination to help children, their families and communities to overcome such learnt perception and behaviour. It has also helped us to realize that there is a need to focus on fatherhood and fathering as many children felt the need to have a more positive relationship with their fathers. Working with men on issues of fatherhood and parenting education will lead to greater involvement of fathers in child care and positive outcomes for children.

Parenting education and family support has become necessary not only to protect children from risky situations but also to bring about an inclusive and just society. Investment in working with parents and adolescents (as future parents) is a valuable investment for the next generation. Investment in parenting education can help parents to protect children from maltreatment and exploitative conditions. The study shows that some children who became child prostitutes, street children, prisoners or soldiers said that adverse parental practices led them to leave home and end up in such vulnerable situations. If governments spent more on prevention programmes such as family support and parenting education programmes then they would be able to spend less on child protection programmes such as anti-trafficking, child labour, child marriage, child abuse, girls' education, juvenile justice, and children affected by armed conflict.

Similarly, if parents' programmes included guidelines on gender discrimination, sex education, sexual and reproductive health, child marriage and positive discipline then there would be significant reduction in child abuse and violence against children and more girls and boys would complete their high school education and may pursue further studies. Extensive studies have shown that girls' education has led to a decrease in the birth rate, improvement in children's health and more developed human resources. But girls' education cannot be increased and child marriage cannot be reduced unless governments allocate adequate resources to bring about attitudinal and behavioural change towards girls and women. Promoting parenting education that focuses on inclusion and diversity will enable every child to access her/his rights to health, education and other services and will create even more productive human resources and an inclusive society. There is, however, a need to undertake more research to understand the economic and social advantages of the government focusing more on parenting and family support programmes.

Parenting education programmes can start with the development of a parenting manual. This manual can be developed with inputs from children, parents, child development experts and findings from this study. The parenting manual will not only recognize and build upon positive traditional practices but also identify and change practices that are harmful to girls and boys.

Parenting education can be cost effective if it is integrated into ongoing programme activities of governments, Save the Children and partner organizations. The national governments, donors, UN agencies and I/NGOs in the region already have established programmes on primary healthcare, reproductive health, nutrition, education, gender, HIV/AIDS and child protection. Some of these programmes work directly with families and adolescents and therefore provide opportunities for these organizations to integrate parenting education.

Parenting education may be incorporated into the national education system, so that girls and boys are prepared for their future responsibilities. School programmes could change the sex-role stereotyping and combat discrimination based on gender, ability, ethnicity, religion and socio-economic status. The media can be an effective delivery vehicle for parenting information and advice for reducing violence against children, and promoting gender equality and child development.

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