Conducting research on violence with young children: a mixed-methods study in South Africa

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Background

• Research has shown that adolescents exposed to violence are competent research participants (Neelakantan et al., 2022)

• Very little participatory research with young children under 10 who experience violence (Schneider et al., 2015).

• Evidence does suggest that preschool aged children are able to reliably and meaningfully appraise conflict and threat that they witness or experience (Miller et al, 2014)

• Children and young people can offer perspectives that strengthen adult capacity to understand children’s lives and these insights are vital in identifying the need and the development of service innovation and policy (Grace et al., 2019)
Study Design

**Young Carers 1**
- 2010
- N=1665
- Age 10-17

**Young Carers 2**
- 2011
- N=1648
- Age 11-18

**INTERRUPT_VIOLENCE**
- 2022/2023
- Quantitative
  - N=1450
  - Age 22-30

- Qualitative: 30 families (N=90)
  - Age 6+

**Pilot study**
- 2021
- Age 22-30
  - N=200

**LONGITUDINAL**

- Age 40+

- Age 4+

- Age 11-18
- Age 40+
Why a Pilot Study?

• Focused on testing the questionnaires and study protocol with different population from original study
  o Use quantitative and qualitative questionnaires
  o Administer cognitive interviews to learn more about what worked well/what didn’t work for the questionnaire
  o Ensure the distress protocols and referrals working well
Why a Pilot Study?

• Very important to ensure the main study runs smoothly, especially for young child interviews

• Need to make sure that the questions are not causing harm or leaving participants vulnerable and unsupported
Research Objectives

1. To understand child comprehension and ability to participate in quantitative and qualitative research on violence.

2. To determine the recruitment feasibility of young children in a study on intergenerational violence.

3. To inform the main study procedures based on the findings from the pilot intervention.
Ethical approval

- University of Edinburgh
- Mpumalanga Department of Health
- University of the Witwatersrand
- North-West University, South Africa
- Supported by Mpumalanga Department of Social Development
- Study employed full-time social worker to link children and families to care
Participant eligibility

• Xitsonga speaking
• Living in rural Mpumalanga.
• Children between the ages of 4-7 whose caregiver had already participated in the adult questionnaire.
Data collection methods

Cognitive interviews (n=24)
- Violence exposure, mental health, resilience, parenting and health measures of the questionnaire to ensure understanding and appropriateness.

Quantitative questionnaires (n=20)
- 30-minute questionnaire (questions on experiences of violence, relationships with caregivers, places where children felt safe and unsafe)
- Tested questionnaire and effectiveness of Houseplan method

Qualitative in-depth interviews (n=16)
- 30-minute interview, (experiences on violence, relationship with caregiver, Tested interview guide and effectiveness of the Kinetic Family Drawings

Focus group discussions with fieldwork staff (n=3)
- Conducted at end of pilot study
Data Collection Methods-Art-based activities

1. **Squiggle drawing**: help the participants relax, develop rapport with the interviewer and become comfortable with the drawing techniques.

2. **Facial expressions drawing game**: To verbalise, recognise and understand primary feelings (happy, sad, scared, angry).

3. **House plan drawing**: Use of play-doh figures to determine children’s living conditions and identify safe and unsafe people and spaces in their home.
Cognitive Interview Findings

- Children were able to answer most items from the questionnaire and able to repeat these questions back to the interviewer in their own words.
- Children aged 4-5 struggled explaining certain terms.
- Child abuse questions were well understood by all age groups.
- 4-year-olds found bullying and trauma questions difficult to understand.
- All age groups enjoyed the resilience questions.
Quantitative interviews findings

• Questionnaire worked well on tablets with visual image prompts to aid comprehension

• Tactile visual aids of plastic containers filled with completely filled, half-filled or without lentils to represent response options (always, sometimes and never) helped children to understand abstract concepts and enhance active participation

• Children enjoyed participation and were able to engage independent of age

• Younger children (4 year olds) got distracted more easily which meant interviewers were required to engage more playfully
Qualitative Interviews

Findings

- Kinetic Family Drawings helped participants feel more relaxed with the interviewer and was used to guide the questioning around experiences of violence, family relationships etc.
- Children were actively participating in story telling about their own experiences and offering more developmentally accessible means of data collection.
- Younger children can participate in qualitative research, but narratives were richer in children aged 6 and above.
Interviewer: ...people in the literature will say you can’t talk to little kids about violence because they don’t understand it and they can’t tell you honestly what’s going on in their lives when it comes to violence. Do you agree with that.

All: No!

Interviewer: How come?

P1: Children carry a lot of information regarding violence and the only way you can find out is how you ask them, how you engage them, through the drawings they help you get that violence out the child. I believe they give you first-hand, raw information
Fieldworker Reflections

• “Whilst we were at the training the skill that was taught to us that you have to go down to the level of the child I thought it’s from somewhere else and that it won’t work. But then remember that most of us we don’t want to communicate with our child at their level. When we talk to them we want to shout but when we come to their level and speak to them at their level they are able to speak everything. It becomes simple for them to speak.” (FGD, Interviewer 1)
Fieldworker reflections

I think it’s a good idea to ask children because as much as we also asking the adults but the more we ask children the more we are there to assist them because violence comes out and you are able to help the child when they need you. Rather than not asking them and let them stay there and endure violence over and over again.

I think children are like Vuvuzela’s always ready to blow. I think most of the children we interviewed were already there waiting for someone to listen. Like when a child is very fond of you they tell you everything you will know at the end of the day even things you did not ask.
Key takeaways

Drawing offers accessible and reliable means of storytelling about life experience and perspective on violence, regardless of drawing ability.

Drawings were an effective tool for interviewers to use as a prompt and for the participant to talk from, diminishing stress in the adult-child interaction.

The use of play is important in ensuring that children are attentive during the research process as well as to reduce stress and help the child to regulate.

Children aged 4 and 5 years can engage in violence research but it requires patience and the ability to refocus on the part of the interviewer.

Parents give consent freely after completing the adult questionnaire.
Key take Aways

• Teaching feeling identification when asking about feeling states (i.e. mental health) and violence is central to ensure reliable responses and understanding

• Interviewers need to be playful with participants to ensure engagement but also contain difficult emotion that is more likely displayed in ‘distracted’ or ‘oppositional’ behaviours in children

• This playful attitude needs to be carefully trained on and practiced

• Interviewers need to be trained on containment skills

• It is critical to have a full time study social worker on the study to assist with management of cases.
Thank you to our funders & team