

## HOW-TO ARTICLES

# The role of schools in detecting and responding to child maltreatment: A collaborative approach for evidence-based policy development in Switzerland and Vietnam

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Child abuse and neglect are serious issues in both low-to-middle and high-income countries. Victims face significant short-term and long-term developmental problems, and the economic impact on society is substantial due to productivity losses and high costs in health care and social services. In Switzerland, around one in six adolescents experienced some form of child abuse or neglect last year, while in Vietnam, this number is estimated to be about 50%. Despite these high rates, many victims, especially in Vietnam, do not receive professional help.

A significant challenge in addressing child maltreatment is that many victims do not disclose their experiences, often due to lack of trust in available support systems. School personnel, such as teachers and social workers, can play a crucial role in identifying and supporting these victims, though the factors influencing disclosure and the effectiveness of school responses vary widely.

**Objectives:** This study aims to improve understanding and responses to child maltreatment in Switzerland and Vietnam by combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with students, school professionals, and experts. The goal is to develop evidence-based policy guidelines to enhance prevention and response efforts in secondary schools, tailored to each country's context by applying a collaborative approach for evidence-based policy development in Switzerland and Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Child maltreatment, school, collaborative approach, Vietnam, Switzerland.

## INTRODUCTION

Child abuse and neglect, jointly referred to as child maltreatment, are among the leading causes for compromised health and decreased productivity in the lifespan of human-beings (1-5). International research indicates that the major forms of child maltreatment—i.e., physical, sexual and emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect—are common in all countries where these phenomena have been studied. In one international meta analysis review based on 224 publications from six continents,

Stoltenborgh and colleagues (2015) concluded that on average worldwide, roughly one in five children and adolescents experience physical abuse at some point during their childhood and youth, one in three emotional abuse, one in six physical neglect, one in six emotional neglect, and one in eight sexual abuse (6).

Physical abuse and physical neglect (the latter encompassing phenomena such as inadequate nutrition or inadequate protection from illnesses and accidents) may result in severe injury and other harm to the body. Just as importantly, all types of abuse and neglect



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can lead to emotional, cognitive, neurological, and behavioral impairment in those affected (6). In one meta-analysis, authors found that major types of maltreatment independently increased the risk for depression, drug use, and sexually transmitted infections in later life, controlling for many other adverse factors known to pose risks to a child's development (7). Research on adverse childhood experiences shows strong links between maltreatment and risk of chronic diseases such as cancer, heart disease, or diabetes, among other medical conditions (8). Biomedical research has begun to explore the neurobiological pathways that mediate the negative impact of maltreatment, finding evidence for substantial alterations in neurological, immune and endocrine systems of the developing brain (9, 10). Economically, the costs of maltreatment to society are enormous. The total financial burden per annum attributable to adverse childhood experiences was recently estimated at USD 581 billion for Europe and USD 748 billion for North America (11). For child maltreatment alone, an earlier analysis had estimated annual costs for the US to be at USD 128 billion (12). For non-fatal maltreatment, 68.7 % of these costs were attributed to productivity losses, 15.5 % to childhood health care, and the remaining share accumulated in adult health care, child welfare, criminal justice, and special education. According to a research brief by UNICEF (2015), child maltreatment was costing countries in East Asia and the Pacific US \$209 billion per year, equivalent to 2 percent of the region's GDP. This includes the impact of emotional abuse (USD 65.9 billion), physical abuse (USD 39.6 billion), sexual abuse (USD 39.9 billion), neglect (USD 32.4 billion), witnessing domestic violence (USD 31 billion), and death resulting from maltreatment (USD 500 million) (13). Apart from being in blatant violation of children's rights as promoted in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (14), child maltreatment is a very real burden to national economies both in low- to middle-income and high-income countries. Prevalence

rates do differ considerably between countries, however, empirical research confirms this for Vietnam and Switzerland. In a study with 1,851 students in Vietnam, results showed half of the students (49.9 %) from 12 to 17 years of age reported at least one event of child maltreatment in the past year (15). Emotional abuse was most frequently reported (31.8 %), followed by physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing parental conflict, while sexual abuse was the least prevalent (2.6 %). As a comparison between two studies shows, in the decade between the years 2004 and 2014, there was a slight decrease in physical abuse and emotional abuse, but a stable prevalence for emotional and physical neglect (16, 17). According to official institutional data on child maltreatment from 2015 to 2019 in Vietnam, some 6,432 children were recorded as sexually abused, 857 were recorded as physically abused, 106 children were known victims of human trafficking or kidnapping, and 1,314 children were recorded as having been abused by other means (18). The gap between prevalence rates found in surveys and case numbers showing up in institutional data is thus extreme, indicating that only a miniscule percentage of victims of child maltreatment in Vietnam receive services directly related to their maltreatment.

For Switzerland, a study based on adolescents' self-reports showed that approximately one in seven adolescents (13.4 % among 15- to 17-year-olds) reported having experienced at least one type of abuse or neglect by their caregivers during the past year, with physical abuse being the most frequently experienced type at 10.2 % and sexual abuse being the least prevalent at 0.7 % (19). In a study which was based on parents' reports, the authors found the highest prevalence for emotional abuse at 19.7 % (19). An analysis covering comprehensive institutional data found that the one-year incidence rate for any service response in the multi-sectoral field of child protection was at 27 in 1,000 adolescents (or 2.7 %). This testifies

to a gap between maltreatment prevalence and service response, which the authors attribute in part to insufficient strategies in identifying victims (20). The rates for Switzerland are similar to those in other western countries (21-23). However, they are considerably lower than those found in Vietnam, and the gap between maltreatment prevalence and the incidence of service responses appears to be much smaller (23-25). While there is evidently a need for further improvement in identifying and addressing child maltreatment in both countries, current evidence suggests that the necessity for improvement is particularly strong in Vietnam. Aspects of the Swiss system might serve as a model for consideration in Vietnam.

### **Disclosure, non-disclosure and delayed disclosure of child maltreatment**

An obvious requirement for disclosure environment for child maltreatment effectively is that past or ongoing maltreatment becomes known to someone who is in a position to help. Unfortunately, children and adolescents who endure abuse and neglect often do not talk about these experiences to anyone, or they may choose to talk about it only after many years of silence (25-30). While non-disclosure and delayed disclosure are a pervasive problem for all types of child maltreatment (31, 32), they have been studied most extensively regarding child sexual abuse. One study suggests that roughly one quarter of victims of sexual abuse will never disclose their experience to anyone at all, and another third will wait until adulthood, while only a small percentage of victims disclose their victimization in the days or weeks after the incidence (32). The tendency to disclose seems to grow stronger in older children and adolescents, although findings on such age effects are not fully consistent (33, 34). With regard to child sexual abuse, there is evidence that disclosure is especially hard for boys. In a study on the experience of sexual victimization by caregivers and/or other perpetrators in

Switzerland, adolescent boys had disclosed their victimization in 42 % of cases, while the rate for girls was considerably higher at 72 % (35). With victimization becoming more severe, disclosure becomes less likely. For example, the rate of disclosure for boys who had been raped was at roughly 5 % in the Swiss study, as compared to 45 % among girls (35). To the best of our knowledge, there have been no empirical studies on the disclosure of maltreatment in Vietnam.

There are many reasons why victims choose not to disclose or to considerably delay their disclosure. The relative importance of these reasons varies between different types of maltreatment, but there are several common themes. Victims of all types of abuse and neglect may consider the behavior of their caregivers as normal (in the sense of it being socially accepted) and may simply not recognize the ongoing maltreatment as something to speak of, even though they experience their parents' actions or inaction as aversive or harmful. They may keep their silence because they think they are not allowed to talk about their parents' behaviors to anyone outside the family. A further barrier are negative emotions experienced by the victim such as embarrassment, shame, and guilt, or a fear of stigma and blame, all of which becomes more likely in cultures or subcultures where the victimization of children is not openly acknowledged as a problem and/or victims are generally not encouraged to speak out. Victims may also remain silent because of a fear of retaliation by the perpetrators or their relatives or the anticipation of not being believed (36). For all types of maltreatment, but particularly for child neglect, victims often remain silent because they apprehend disrupting the family or because they fear causing negative consequences for a parent they care for despite the maltreatment.

Both non-disclosure and delayed disclosure of child maltreatment create obvious challenges for effective prevention and intervention. If victims do not disclose, this makes detection

less likely, and maltreatment that goes undetected will not be addressed in the social and professional networks that might bring remedy to the child and the family. This simple logic is confirmed in studies that compare prevalence rates for child maltreatment as documented in self-report studies to incidence rates derived from institutional data files, such as the ones referred to in the preceding section. International reviews confirm the gaps identified above for Switzerland and, to an especially large degree, for Vietnam. The rate of children reporting maltreatment in surveys turns out to be up to thirty times higher than the number of children actually being supported by any professional within the institutional system of child protection (23). Facilitating disclosure is therefore a central task in any system of child protection.

### **The role of schools in the prevention of child maltreatment**

Schools may take center stage in the effort to promote the disclosure of child maltreatment. Prior research illuminates the circumstances under which children and adolescents feel encouraged to disclose (37-40). One important factor is whether the child has at least one close friend or a trusted adult with whom he or she feels comfortable sharing the highly painful and often stigmatized experience of abuse or neglect. Disclosing to such a close person meets with obstacles, however, because the child may not want to put an emotional strain on the person, may not perceive this person as in a position to help or may experience conflicting emotions as the person may be acquainted with—or even a friend or relative of—the maltreating caregiver. Research has shown that, under such circumstances, many victims turn to professionals instead; among these professionals, school teachers and other staff at school appear to be particularly important (20, 41). Teachers and other professionals in classrooms have frequent contact with individual children and observe

them over longer periods of time and in different settings, thus being in a position to notice maltreatment-induced changes in children's academic performance, social behavior and/or emotional well-being (20). School professionals may build relationships of trust with children that facilitate the disclosure of emotionally charged experiences. Teachers also have the opportunity to raise awareness about child abuse and neglect among children and to encourage open discussion and confidential disclosure explicitly. Schools may refer children and families troubled by neglect or abuse to services within the broader system of child and family welfare or may report severe cases to the child protection authorities. In Switzerland, unlike in Vietnam, this function is facilitated by the fact that most schools have access to the services of school social workers and school psychologists, i.e., to professionals specifically trained to provide psychosocial support beyond the educational mandate. However, despite this considerable potential, a recent Swiss study found that only 8 % of all referrals received by child protective agencies came from schools (20).

This potential of schools in encouraging children to disclose and actively confront experiences of abuse and neglect is reflected in the development of child maltreatment prevention programs located in schools (42-44) or carried out with considerable participation of schools (45). As research indicates, the impact of such programs appears to be contingent on a number of factors: the time and resources allotted to the program, the degree of repetition of core messages throughout the program and in refresher sessions, and the individual attitudes of teachers and other school personnel towards the importance of the program, which may either reinforce or undermine its intended effects (42).

The channeling of prevention through specific programs has its downsides, however, programs require substantial funding and

investments of time. Not all countries currently have programs in place, and if they do, these are usually limited to a small percentage of schools in any given year. In Switzerland, a handful of initiatives (such as the project “Keine Daheimnisse” run by an organization called the “National Coalition Building Institute”) have been implemented in the past decade but so far have remained limited to only a small fraction of primary and secondary schools in the country. In Vietnam, the World Vision organization, an international NGO, is making an effort to teach school-children how to protect themselves from online violence via children’s groups and to design and implement child-led initiatives in target schools (46). In another project, the organization Plan International is using a computer game in schools to help girls become safer in their community (47). However, as important as these efforts are, they do not target maltreatment by caregivers specifically, and their reach has as yet been limited to a small numbers of schools.

Even in countries where programs are more widely disseminated, most children and adolescents will never encounter a child maltreatment prevention curriculum during their school-years. Evidently, there is a need for more *permanent* institutional solutions that tap into the educational setting as a positive force in the prevention of—and appropriate response to—maltreatment. However, as other authors before us have noticed (42), research in this area is scarce, and the steps that educational institutions have taken towards this goal vary substantially between and within countries. With the exception of one study that examined disclosure of child *sexual* abuse in Switzerland (35), there have been no studies on this topic for either Switzerland or Vietnam.

To the best of our knowledge, no empirical study has been conducted concerning the role

schools of schools in facilitating disclosure and responding to maltreatment across the whole range of child maltreatment. This creates a strong need for research and joint efforts in evidence-based practice development both within countries and across borders.

The study aims to measure **prevalence and risk factors** of child maltreatment among secondary school students in two countries, and to assess types of responses victims experienced from schools, school professionals, and classmates, and how do they evaluate these responses. The evidence of the study will be used for developing guideline for school policy in both countries.

## METHODS

**Study approach:** In order to answer these questions, a mixed-methods approach consisting of four distinct work packages is implemented. In detail, a mixed methods sequential explanatory design is used to explore the prevalence and associated factors in the phase 1, and in the phase 2, qualitative study is conducted to contribute to data interpretation, which will serve as a vital contribution to the intervention in the future.

### The baseline survey

The two surveys in Vietnam and Switzerland, respectively, share essential features while accommodating for country-specific adaptations. We characterized the Swiss survey before pointing to adjustments made in the Vietnamese study.

The target population of the Swiss survey limited to adolescents in grade 7 and 9 (or roughly ages 13 and 15 years) in the Swiss canton of Zurich. The reason of selecting 13 and 15 years old is to compare between Vietnam and Switzerland due to the grade 7<sup>th</sup> is the first grade in Swiss education and the 9<sup>th</sup> grade is the last grade in the both systems.

Limiting the quantitative survey to one canton (province) instead of striving for a nationally representative sample offers considerable practical advantages while doing justice to the particular research objectives of the project.

Maltreatment is assessed using the ICAST-C measure, a tool that was developed jointly by the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Secretary General’s study on violence against children, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and World Health Organization (WHO) (48). The ICAST-C also contains several items on the socio-demographics of children’s and their families; these will likely be complemented by a small number of self- developed items. Disclosure will be measured through a combination of the Disclosure of Trauma Questionnaire (DTQ) and items taken from the questionnaire developed

for the first Optimus study (35). Items pertaining to the evaluation of service responses will be compiled from existing questionnaires on psychosocial interventions, such as the Youth Satisfaction Questionnaire (49). Indicators of adolescents social and emotional well-being will be operationalized by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), and coping behavior will operationalized in The Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ; 50). All of these measures have been shown to have satisfying to good psychometric properties in the specific samples they were validated for.

Mirroring the survey in Switzerland, we decided to survey 13- and 15-year-olds (grades 7 and 9 in secondary school) in Vietnam. This allows for the reliance on self-reports and direct comparisons with the sample in Switzerland. The sampling procedure mirrors that in the Swiss survey as well, albeit with certain modifications.

**Table 1. Sample sizes and their composition for the two surveys**

	<b>Vietnam</b>	<b>Switzerland</b>
Target population	Adolescents aged 13 and 15 (maltreatment and disclosure surveyed past-year and life-time)	Adolescents aged 13 and 15
Province/canton	Bắc Giang	Zurich
School grades included	grade 7 and 9	grade 7 and 9
Optimal sample size (total)	1,866	1,360
Stratification principle	urban vs. rural	type of school (4 types)
Expected average class size	35	20
Number of schools contacted	8	39
Expected number of schools included	8	12
Expected number of classes included	64	72
Target sample (total)	2,240	1,440
Reality	2326	1402

Like in the Swiss survey, self-administered questionnaires will be used. The questionnaire will be the same as in Switzerland, with items being translated from English

(ICAST-C, CERQ, YSQ) or German (DTQ) into Vietnamese, applying a procedure of back-translation. The SDQ has already been translated into Vietnamese (see [sdqinfo](#)).

org). Country-specific additions may be made upon closer consideration. We piloted the questionnaire with three classes of each grade in an additional school before the main survey. This is expected to result in a sample size for the pilot of 6 (classes) \* 35 (students) \* 0.85 equals  $N \approx 178$ . The purpose of this stage is to check whether the procedures for survey implementation and data collection are appropriate and to identify any requirements for revising the questionnaire.

Questionnaires are presented electronically and accessed by the students via computers/tablet on a secure online survey platform such as Kobotoolbox [in Vietnam] and Unipark [in Switzerland]. In the main survey, students are invited to the computer room of the school to assure safety and privacy. The use of online platform is to ensure the skipping questions are jumped correctly due to the complexity of the questionnaire.

### Qualitative study

Qualitative is designed to conduct after quantitative phase. We are convinced that adolescents as the main target group of our project should also actively contribute to data interpretation, which will serve as a vital contribution to the application-oriented work. Adolescents will be recruited from those who participated in the surveys.

The length of the group discussions will range from approx. 45 to 75 minutes, depending on the degree of active participation. With the permission of participants, discussions will be audiotaped and transcribed. The transcription will remove names and other identifying information on individual students' contributions, thus anonymizing the transcripts completely. For reasons of data protection, audio tapes will be saved securely and irrevocably deleted once they have been transcribed. To account for the sensitive nature of the topic, interview guidelines is developed that ensure

appropriate framing of questions, and there is an ethics protocol in place that precisely defines what measures will be taken should a student become visibly distressed during the group interview or disclose maltreatment. Handout material with addresses of local support services will be handed out to all participants at the end of the sessions. Importantly, the group interviews aren't about the participants' individual experiences of maltreatment but about their opinions on the topic of how maltreatment is and should be discussed in the school setting and what schools, school staff, and other professionals might do to improve on the current state of practice.

**Theoretical framework:** We applied ecological framework. The ecological framework in child maltreatment views abuse and neglect as the result of interactions across multiple environmental levels: individual, family, community, and societal. At the individual level, factors like a child's health or parental stress may increase vulnerability. Family dynamics, such as domestic violence or substance abuse, also contribute to risk. On the community level, issues like poverty and social isolation further exacerbate the likelihood of maltreatment. Societal factors, including cultural norms and economic policies, create the broader context in which maltreatment occurs. By addressing these factors at each level, interventions can be more effective in preventing child maltreatment through family support services, stronger community resources, and policy changes aimed at reducing poverty and inequality.

**The research team:** The two teams consisted of rich experienced researchers from Vietnam and Switzerland. The two team will work together closely, which is an integral part of this project. the research team will collaborate in approaching data management, analysis, and interpretation throughout, even if some of the research to be published in peer-reviews will likely be country specific

**Processing and analyzing data:** Quantitative data will be extracted from the online platform and will be analyzed using SPSS and qualitative data will be analyzed using MaxQDA and Mindjet mindmanager software.

**Research ethics:** This study was approved by the IRB of Hanoi University of Public health 022-3211DD -YTCC dated 11 July 2022 and in Switzerland, the IRB of Zurich University was approved.

## DISCUSSION

This is the first protocol to conduct the study on child maltreatment in one developing country and one developed country. Vietnam and Switzerland are two countries with vast differences in cultural traditions, political structures and educational systems. However, as strikingly dissimilar as the two countries may appear in many regards, there are underlying commonalities in important ways as well, particularly a deeply rooted ethos of educational achievement and a strong sense of familial privacy that are widespread in both populations, marking potential barriers to the open discussion and disclosure of “hot topics” such as the experience of abuse and neglect in the school setting. Because there are similarities in these obstacles, there may be common ground in the solutions as well. In addition, and particularly with regard to the educational sector, both countries share the basic feature of having a largely decentralized school system that hands over the power to shape school policies to individual provinces/cantons. Said similarities help sustain the collaborative work envisioned in this project and the strong, evidence-based impetus for practice development that should result from it.

The project designed to use technology to assist collecting sensitive data on child maltreatment. Unipark and KoboToolbox are both convenient for reviewing, editing

questions, collecting, and organizing data. Unipark excels in data security with advanced testing tools, while KoboToolbox offers easy data migration and spatial context features. Unipark is ideal for secure data management, but KoboToolbox is more affordable and better suited for studies in Vietnam due to its offline capabilities and user-friendly interface. Both platforms support teamwork with features like real-time updates and translation, making them great for collaboration and handling multiple data sets. (51).

Additionally, the fact that the questionnaire is digital (as opposed to being on paper) means it is a lot faster and more feasible to deliver it to children all over the country, thereby making our data more inclusive, diverse, and representative of Vietnam’s population. In addition, our questionnaire, which has been used in Vietnam and Switzerland, these tools’ ability to switch between languages has made collaboration easier for both sides. As research in Vietnam becomes more advanced (in terms of funding, organizing, etc.), implementing these tools will become more accessible, if not necessary, to carry out more complex and wider-scale projects.

In our study, we design a sequential design using qualitative methods after quantitative methods, the initial quantitative phase identifies general trends in child maltreatment, such as prevalence or risk factors. The subsequent qualitative phase, through interviews or focus groups, provides deeper insights into these patterns, offering context and explanations behind the data. This approach combines statistical analysis with personal experiences, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and informing better interventions.

The project has some impacts.: i.) improving society’s response to child maltreatment through policies regarding the disclosure of and response to child maltreatment in

secondary school; and ii.) strengthening scientific know-how that will serve as a foundation for long-term development of the evidence-base. This common goal is supported by the fact that policymakers in each country are committed to the agenda of health equity and children protection.

The study data will expand the knowledge base in an area of research that has strong potential for application but has produced little empirical insight to support evidence-based practice. Internationally, the disclosure of child *sexual* abuse has received much attention, but empirical studies become more sparse with regard to *other* types of maltreatment. The role of schools in facilitating disclosure of maltreatment beyond that of sexual abuse has received even less attention, and most of this work relates to specific programs for prevention that remain limited to only a small number of schools in any given year. Thus, the study will not only provide country-specific findings for Vietnam and Switzerland, but it will contribute to the international literature and promote developments internationally as well.

## CONCLUSION

With regard to the broader impact on society, the importance of tackling child maltreatment effectively can hardly be overstated. A single study will not make child maltreatment disappear and will not solve all the problems that child abuse and neglect cause in the individual lives of people and the collective life of society. It may, however, move the field at least a little bit closer in the direction of that ultimate goal. Through our research design, which combines empirical investigations with several work packages devoted to practice development, we hope to provide concrete, applicable outputs based on evidence that will lead to real improvements in the ways secondary schools contribute

to the fight against child maltreatment and associated costs to children and society.

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