

Reducing Teachers' Attitudes Toward Corporal Punishment. Experimental Evidence from a Tanzanian Refugee Camp

Alexandra De Filippo, Behavioral Insights Team
Michael Kaemingk, Behavioral Insights Team
Katherine Rodrigues, International Rescue Committee
Gerard Torrats-Espinosa, New York University

The use of physical punishment is a pervasive practice in schools across low- and middle-income countries and in crisis-affected contexts. Evidence from a number of studies has shown that the use of violence against children inside the classroom hinders children's learning and has long-lasting negative consequences in their developmental trajectories. While many programs have sought to address this problem, evidence on what works to change attitudes towards violence or to change teacher disciplinary behavior is scarce. To address this gap, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) partnered to design and implement an intervention to reduce the use of corporal punishment by teachers in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, a Tanzanian refugee camp home to 140,000 Congolese and Burundian refugees.

Drawing on the behavioral science literature, IRC and BIT designed two informational modules to shift attitudes towards corporal punishment among primary and secondary school teachers in Nyarugusu. The two modules described corporal punishment as harmful to children's ability to learn and an ineffective way to prepare children for a safe and prosperous future. The two modules relied on two different approaches to convey this information: one focused on building empathy for children, and the other focused on sharing clinical evidence of the negative impact of violence on their brain development. The empathy-building module attempted to catalyze empathy in teachers for students—specifically around the negative effects of corporal punishment on a child's emotions and experience of school. The clinical evidence module presented teachers with information, evidence, and images showing that corporal punishment is harmful to children's ability to learn. To promote teachers' openness to changing their views on corporal punishment, participating teachers were asked to do a values-affirmation exercise before listening to the two behaviorally-informed modules. Previous studies show that such values-affirmation exercises can boost people's self-efficacy and make them more willing to accept new information or change their views.

The study tested the effectiveness of the two behaviorally-informed modules through a randomized controlled trial (RCT). At the time of the intervention, IRC used a rules and rights-based approach (i.e., emphasizing school rules and the rights of children) to discuss corporal punishment with teachers and children alike. Teachers taking part in the two behaviorally-informed modules configured the treatment group, and teachers in the rights-based approach were the control group. All teachers overseen by IRC and Save the Children in Nyarugusu were invited to attend one of the three modules. The sample of study participants included 1,042 teachers (75% of all teachers in Nyarugusu). Teachers were randomly assigned to one of the three modules.

We used two proxy metrics to measure the effectiveness of all three modules: sign-up rates and attitudes towards corporal punishment. Sign-up rates measured whether teachers enrolled in a follow-up program to learn more about how to make their classrooms safer. To sign up, teachers had to drop off a form at the IRC Education Coordinator's office within three days of attending the session. We designed this measure to give us an indication of whether teachers were willing to make a tangible effort to signal their willingness to change their disciplinary practices. The attitudes towards corporal punishment metric was constructed from a brief survey that teachers filled out after taking part in one of the three modules. The survey included two instruments. The first instrument was adapted from the Attitudes Towards Spanking Scale and asked teachers if they agreed or disagreed with four value-statements about corporal punishment. The second instrument asked teachers if they thought it would be acceptable to hit a child in nine different classroom-based scenarios.

We found that, on average, none of the modules was comparably more effective at driving enrollment in the follow-up program. When we analyzed this by different groups, the rules and rights-based module was slightly more effective at driving enrollment among Burundians, women, and secondary-school teachers. We hypothesize that this may be because a more institutional or familiar message—focused on rights, laws, and expected conduct—may prompt more people to signal that they are in compliance with such rules. While the rules and rights-based approach successfully encouraged certain populations to enroll in a program or demonstrate compliance with the rules, it did not make teachers less accepting of corporal punishment. The two behaviorally-informed modules effectively reduced favorable views towards corporal punishment compared to the rules and rights-based module. Overall, building empathy was the most effective way to change teachers' attitudes—particularly among Burundians, men, and primary-school teachers. Lastly, reflecting on values and identity significantly increased teachers' sense of self-efficacy, which may yield a number of positive outcomes for children.