Violence Against Children
Recognition, Rights, Responses

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KEYWORDS

- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) • Violence against children (VAC)
- Child rights–based approach (CRBA) • Socioecological model and taxonomy

KEY POINTS

- Adoption of a new child rights–based approach to violence against children.
- Expansion of the sociologic model of child development to include a transsocietal sphere to address emerging global threats to child health and well-being.
- Confronting violence against children at the clinical, systems, and policy level.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against children (VAC) in all its forms is a violation of children's rights and an enormous child health issue. It has traditionally been framed in terms of abuse, neglect, maltreatment, and domestic violence—construed in the context of personal violence. However, over the past decade it has become clear that the historical construct of child abuse and neglect (CAN) is no longer fully applicable to the broad range of global assaults on children and childhood. Instead of CAN, VAC is a framework to better understand these issues and conceptualize our response—informed by the principles, standards, and norms of child rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

As awareness of the scope of VAC increases, so too has our knowledge of its impact on child health and well-being. Evidence over the past 30 years—from neuroscience, developmental psychology, social sciences, and epidemiology—shows that VAC contributes to social, emotional, and cognitive impairments and high-risk behaviors leading to disease, disability, social problems, and premature mortality—with short-, medium-, and long-term and intergenerational consequences.[1]

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DEFINITION: A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

The evolution of a rights-based approach to VAC is grounded in United Nations' documents and conventions.

- The World Health Organization in1996 defined violence as the "intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation."[2]
- The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child's Article 19 defines "violence" as "all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse."[3] The same terminology is used in the 2006 United Nations study on VAC.[4]
- The 2011 General Comment 13 to the CRC acknowledges that "the extent and intensity of violence exerted on children is alarming," and calls for "massively strengthened and expanded" efforts to "effectively put an end to these practices."
- The elimination of VAC is also called for in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, most explicitly in Target 16.2: "end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children."[5]

However, the definition of violence in these documents no longer adequately addresses the expanding scope of VAC. They fail to consider the root-cause determinants of VAC, including institutional racism, economic policies, discrimination based on sex and gender identity, poverty, globalization, climate change etc.—that so profoundly affect the survival of children and their life-course trajectory. A child rights–based definition of VAC is required to expand the perimeter of our approach to understanding and mitigating the impact of all forms of VAC. We propose, "Any intentional or unintentional action, system, or policy that violates a child's or population of children's right(s) to optimal survival and development," to begin the dialogue and discussion.

As stated in the CRC-General Comment 13, the evolution to a child rights–based approach (CRBA) to VAC "requires a shift toward respecting and promoting the human dignity and the physical and psychological integrity of children as rights-bearing individuals, rather than perceiving them primarily as victims."[6] Grounding a definition of VAC on the tenets of child rights allows for the translation of the principles and norms of human rights, social justice, and equity into practice[7]—in the domains of programs, systems, and public policies.

BACKGROUND: CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE

On November 20, 1989, the UN General Assembly adopted the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. The CRC establishes the responsibility of governments, institutions, citizens, and families, as duty-bearers, to ensure the rights of children are respected and all actions are taken to achieve the "best interest of the child" (CRC, Article 3). The CRC is the first legally binding international document to recognize the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of the child. No rights articulated in the CRC take precedence—they are interdependent and indivisible. Thus, to fulfill one right requires attention to all related rights. The CRC can be categorized into 3 domains of rights: protection, promotion, and participation (Fig. 1).

When considering VAC, protection rights ensure children are free from all forms of violence. However, as all rights are *indivisible* and *interdependent*, promotion and participation rights are also necessary to ensure children are free from VAC. Promotion rights relate to the basic rights to life, survival, and the development of a child's full
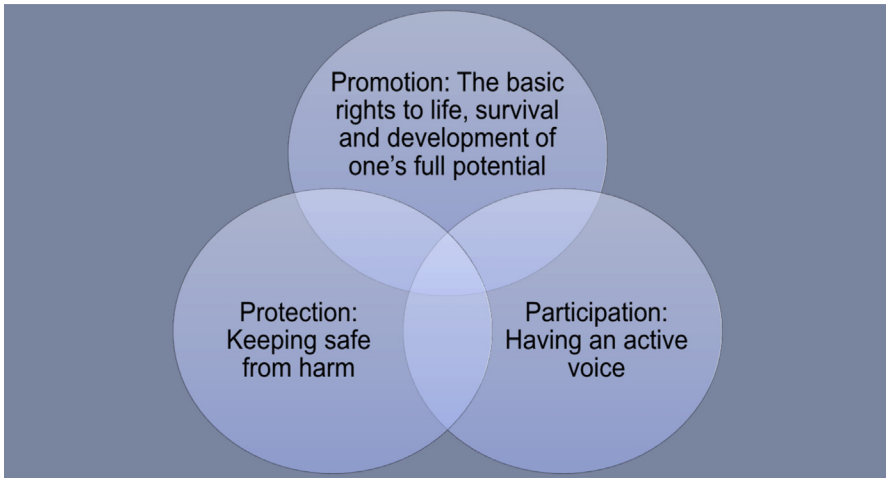
Fig. 1. Categories of children's rights.

potential. Participation rights ensure that all children have an active voice in matters that affect them. To advance a comprehensive CRBA to VAC, all rights articulated in the CRC must be fulfilled, and practices, systems, and polices must protect and promote children's rights and give voice to their stories.

DISCUSSION: CHILD RIGHTS AND VIOLENCE—A "REVISED" SOCIOECOLOGICAL TAXONOMY

The socioecological model is often used to illustrate how the lives of children and their environment interact to influence their growth and development. Children live and thrive in multiple environments, also known as ecological systems. Violence can permeate each ecological system in the form of interpersonal (child maltreatment [CM], domestic violence), community (corporal punishment, bullying, firearm injury), and societal violence (child labor, trafficking, institutionalization).[8] However, the model fails to adequately address global *transsocietal* forms of VAC that profoundly affect their optimal survival and development. Armed conflict, migration, globalization, and climate change are examples of rapidly evolving root-cause determinants of transsocietal forms of VAC that must also be addressed.[9]

Fig. 2 illustrates a revised socioecological model that provides a framework to better understand and mitigate VAC. (see Fig. 2).

Table 1 provides a taxonomy of VAC corresponding to children's rights with examples for each form of VAC presented.

Interpersonal Violence

Child maltreatment and domestic violence
CM, first described by Henry Kempe in the 1960s as the "Battered Child Syndrome," is the most recognized type of VAC worldwide.[10] The definition of CM includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and emotional abuse. CM often occurs in combinations[11] and is referred to as "re-victimization" when children are exposed to repeated multiple forms of maltreatment.[12] Children with disabilities are especially at-risk.[13]

The term "domestic violence" is used to refer to intimate partner violence (IPV) but can also encompass other forms of violence including elder abuse or abuse by any
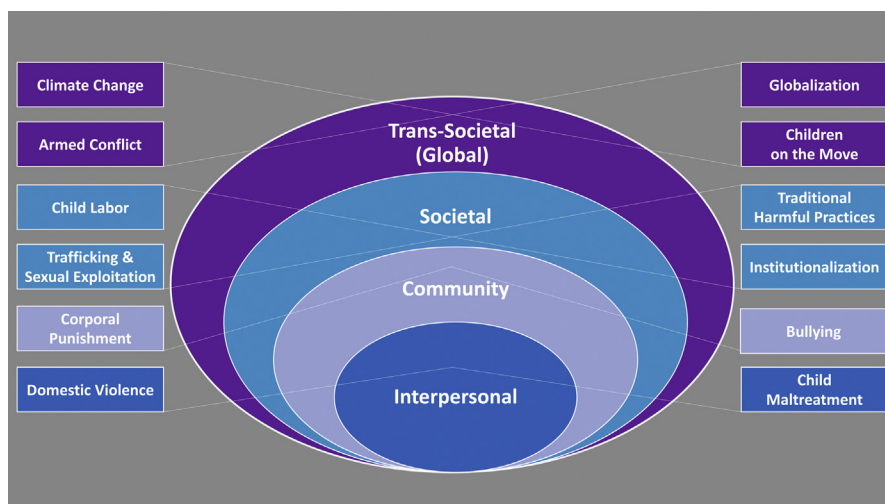
Fig. 2. Revised sociologic model for violence against children.

member of a household. Children's exposure to IPV is now recognized as a type of CM with adverse outcomes similar to other types of maltreatment.[14] Children can be both victims and witnesses to abuse.[15] In both situations, impacts are detrimental to the child's development and can affect their ability to form trusting bonds later in life.

Child rights
- CRC, Article 19, Part 1 protects children from all forms of CM using all appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures.
- CRC, Article 19, Part 2 requires measures be implemented to assure protection and includes programs to support the child and to identify, report, refer, investigate, treat, and follow-up all instances of VAC.

Community Violence

Corporal punishment
There has been significant progress toward universal prohibition of corporal punishment. Children exposed to corporal punishment experience detrimental effects, including poor academic performance, low class participation, school dropout, and declining psychosocial well-being.[16] More than 125 nations have prohibited corporal punishment in schools, and 50 countries now prohibit all corporal punishment of children.[17] Despite prohibition, corporal punishment remains highly prevalent. For example, greater than 50% of 8-year-old children in Peru and Vietnam, 75% in Ethiopia, and 90% in India reported teacher administered corporal punishment in the previous week.[18]

Child rights
- Article 43 of the CRC established The Committee on the Rights of the Child. In 2011, the Committee adopted General Comments No. 13 urged that violent and humiliating punishment of children needs to be taken seriously and addressed.[19]

Bullying
Children may face physical and emotional maltreatment from both fellow students and teachers. Bullying is repeated aggression via physical, verbal, relational, or cyber

Table 1
Taxonomy of children's rights and violence against children

Socioecological Sphere	Category of VAC	Child Rights Provisions
Interpersonal	Child maltreatment & domestic violence	CRC, Article 19—Protection from Abuse & Neglect
Community	Corporal punishment	Committee on Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 13
	Bullying	CRC, Article 29—Aims of Education
	Firearms	CRC, Article 19—Protection from Injury
Societal	Child labor	CRC, Article 32—Child Labor
	Trafficking and sexual exploitation	CRC, Article 34—Sexual Exploitation
		CRC, Article 35—Sale, Trafficking, & Abduction
		CRC Optional Protocol—Sale of Children
	Institutionalization	CRC, Article 20—Care of Children Deprived of Family Care
		CRC Article 37—Care in Juvenile Justice System
	Traditional harmful practices based on culture, religion, or superstition	UN General Assembly Resolution 1994/30
		UN Special Representative of Secretary-General 2006 VAC Study
Trans-Societal	Armed conflict	CRC, Article 38—Armed Conflict
		CRC Optional Protocol—Children in Armed Conflict
		Geneva Convention
	Children on the move	CRC, Article 22-Refugee Children Protection & Assistance
	Globalization	Proposed establishment of New UN Commission
	Climate change	CRC, Article 6—Right to Life
		CRC, Article 24—Right to a Safe Environment

forms in which the targets cannot defend themselves.[20] Globally, more than 1 in 3 teenagers are regularly bullied. In some countries such as Latvia and Romania, nearly 60% admit to bullying others.[21] Technology has given rise to "cyber-bullying," a limitless platform for abuse.

Child rights
- CRC, Article 29, on the aims of education, implies that we educate children to develop attitudes and behaviors to minimize the harassment and bullying of others.[22]

Firearm-related injury and death
Firearms account for greater than 100,000 injuries and nearly 40,000 deaths annually in the United States.[23] In the United States, middle and high school–aged children are more likely to die as a result of a firearm injury than from any other single cause of death.[24] Compared with other high-income countries, American children aged 5 to 14 years are 21 times more likely to be killed by guns, and American adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 24 years are 23 times more likely to be killed by guns.[25]

Children's rights
- CRC, Article 19, Part 1 protects children from all forms of violence and injury.

Societal Violence

Child labor
Child labor is ubiquitous globally and is underpinned by poverty and deprivation of education. More than 168 million children work, with more than half of them doing hazardous tasks. Almost 10% of children in Asia and the Pacific and 21% of children in Sub-Saharan Africa are engaged in child labor.[26]

Child rights
- CRC, Article 32, Part 1 outlines the child's right against inappropriate work. States must protect children from economic exploitation that interfere with their education and/or is harmful to their physical, spiritual, or moral well-being.
- Part 2 includes provisions that regulates the conditions of employment and sanctions to ensure effective enforcement.

Trafficking and sexual exploitation
Estimates suggest that 50% of trafficked victims worldwide are children. Exploitive practices involving children include labor, domestic work, sexual exploitation, military conscription, marriage, illicit adoption, begging, and organ harvesting.[27]

Child rights
- CRC, Article 34 advocates for the protection of children from sexual exploitation. In addition, the Optional Protocol forbidding the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography was added in 2000.[28]
- CRC, Article 35 encourages all nations to prevent abduction, sale, or trafficking in children.

Institutionalized children
Tens of millions of children in the world live in institutional care.[29] These children are more likely to experience violence than those living in family-based care.[30] Incarcerated youth are at even greater risk, in particular children exposed to solitary confinement,[31] and children with disabilities are at the greatest risk of abuse in institutional care.[32]

Child rights
- CRC, Article 20 provides for the special protection of a child deprived of a family environment.
- CRC, Article 23 addresses the right of "disabled" children to special care, education, and training to ensure a life lived with dignity, self-reliance, and social integration.
- CRC, Article 37 protects the rights of children detained in juvenile justice systems to be free from torture and the deprivation of liberty.

Culture and Religion

Violations of children's rights include those that are based on tradition, culture, religion, or superstition—termed "harmful traditional practices (HTP)."[33] These in particular affect the rights of women and girls, LGBTQ, and gender nonconforming individuals. The international NGO, Council on Violence against Children, recently released a report on HTP that includes examples of acid attacks, breast flattening, forced child marriage, dowry, female genital mutilation, and honor killing.[34] These

harmful practices are based on long upheld patriarchal social values that act as a root cause of discrimination and violence against girls.[35]

Child rights

- UN General Assembly passed resolution 1994/30 adopting the Plan for the Elimination of Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children.
- In 2009, UN Secretary General–appointed Special Representative on Violence Against Children identified legal prohibition of all violence against children including HTP.[36]

Transsocietal (Global) Violence

Emerging transsocietal changes present new existential threats to children. These evolving realities require new conceptual frameworks, approaches, and a willingness of professionals to confront the accelerating challenges the world's children are facing.

War and armed conflict

Millions of children live with armed conflict, and nearly 33% of them live outside their country of birth as refugees.[37] Children are caught in the crossfire or are directly targeted by combatants, resulting in injury, illness, disability, psychological trauma, and death.[38] Forced displacement, separation from family, and the destruction of health, education, and economic infrastructure leads to a broad range of adverse effects.[39] Children are recruited and forced into armed groups, with devastating consequences for their health and long-term functioning.[40]

Child rights

- CRC Article 38 requests all governments to respect international humanitarian law to protect children. This includes refraining from recruiting children younger than 15 years.
- The Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict was adopted in 2000 to strengthen the protection of children.[41]
- The Geneva Conventions also speak to the special need to protect children during conflict and war.[42]

Children on the move

The magnitude of international migration has grown at an unprecedented rate reaching a level of 258 million persons in 2017.[43] Since the turn of the twenty-first century, 50 million children worldwide have crossed international borders with another 17 million internally displaced.[44] In 2018 children younger than 18 years constitute more than half of the 26 million refugees worldwide.[45] Migration is associated with trauma and violence including physical and sexual abuse, abduction, trafficking, and other travails throughout their journeys.[46]

Child rights

- CRC, Article 22 requires governments to ensure that refugee children or those seeking asylum are protected and receive humanitarian assistance.

Globalization

The world's children are at great risk from the impact of globalization. Globalization is defined as, "the interconnection and interdependence among countries manifested through international economic, political, and social networks."[47] It can negatively affect child health through increased influence of high-income countries, privatization, and international trade agreements.[48]

Child rights

- The United Nations is considering the establishment of a commission of CRC signatories, World Bank, UNICEF, and the High Commissioner for Human Rights to formulate a plan addressing globalization's impact on children.[49]

Climate change

Children are disproportionately affected by climate change, particularly indigenous children, children living in poverty, those with developmental disabilities, and children displaced by conflict.[50] The impact is magnified because countries most susceptible to climate change have a higher proportion of children.[51] Climate change has increased the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. This negatively affects access to food, water, and health services. It is estimated that currently 160 million children live in areas at risk of drought and 500 million live in flood zones—both of which decrease accessibility to safe water and adequate food—these are also populations most likely to be displaced with attendant risks and consequences.

Child rights

- CRC, Article 6 recognizes that every child has the inherent right to life and optimal survival and development, which is now under threat due to climate change.
- CRC, Article 24 articulates the child's right to health care, water, nutritious food, and a safe and clean environment.

RESPONSES NEEDED TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Violence affects more than 1 billion children annually.[52] In 2017, the report on *Ending Violence in Childhood* detailed the causes and consequences of childhood violence and identified evidence-based strategies to prevent it.[53]

Clinical Response

Responses at the clinical level will require training and resource development, such that all agencies interacting with children are well poised to respond to all forms of VAC.

Attention should be focused on enhancing capacity in the following areas:

- All child and youth providers should be trained in a trauma-informed approach to care that recognizes and responds to trauma in a manner that is open, collaborative, and nonjudgmental.
- All professional and community health workers must be trained to recognize, report, and respond to VAC in accordance with their local jurisdictions and legislative frameworks.
- Mental and behavioral health services must be available.
- Rights respecting "safe zones" supported by trained caring adults should be established in conflict zones to mitigate the impact of VAC.
- Children and youth must be educated about their rights with activities developed to promote respect, self-confidence, and empowerment.

Systems-Based Response

A systems-based response is critical to ensure resources are available to mitigate the impact of VAC. Community engagement to identify, report, and respond to VAC involves collaboration among stakeholders.

- Agencies must educate themselves and promote awareness of the many forms of VAC and monitor their own systems for violations.

- Juvenile justice systems require oversight to ensure that youth are afforded adequate living conditions and are free of torture and deprivation. In addition, while being held in detention, rights must always be respected and all measures taken to optimize the growth and development of youth in custody.
- Individuals with disabilities require special protections to ensure their safety and well-being. Communities must implement programming to ensure this need is met.
- Resources should be allocated to social programming to prevent VAC and mitigate the harms of VAC through evidence-based practices.

Policy Response

From a policy perspective there is much work to be done in ensuring global implementation of international humanitarian laws, as well as ongoing collaboration across countries to ensure the protection of the world's most valuable asset—our children and youth.

- The Sustainable Development Goals provide a framework to end global poverty and optimize health and well-being across the globe. Implementing these goals will address many of the root causes for VAC.
- Promote the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children.
- Eliminate traditional practices that harm girls and women, including forced child marriage and female genital mutilation.
- Advocate to end child labor practices and promote of educational opportunity.
- Abolish all forms of child trafficking through national, bilateral, and multinational collaboratives.
- International awareness to address the causes of displaced children is growing. In 2018, the International Conference to Adopt the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration and the Compact on Refugees were finalized.[54,55] The Compacts provide a global human rights framework to support global efforts to address this crisis.

It is critically important that the impact of globalization and climate change be acknowledged with new policies to mitigate their ongoing impact on children.

SUMMARY

We must reconceptualize the concept of CAN as VAC, acknowledge the global scope of violence against children, and frame it in terms of child rights. The principle of interdependence demands all protection, promotion, and participation rights must be fulfilled for all children to prevent and mitigate the effects of VAC. The principle of accountability requires all pediatric health professionals be duty-bearers for fulfilling the rights of all children. To ensure optimal survival and development without discrimination, VAC in all its manifestations must be addressed using the parlance, principles, standards, and norms of child rights.

DISCLOSURE

The authors have nothing to disclose.

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