

Children's Agency in the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse



This brief highlights the critical role of children's knowledge and agency in preventing and responding to child sexual abuse (CSA). It draws on evidence from quasi-experimental studies conducted in Western Uganda and Zanzibar, Tanzania, by the International Center for Research on Women and its partners.

► Importance of children's knowledge and agency in preventing CSA

The World Health Organization (2016) suggests that increasing children's knowledge of sexual violence and how to protect themselves can be critical in preventing CSA. Children's knowledge of rights and self-protection prepares them to exercise self-efficacy by anticipating risky situations and taking actions to either confront or avoid them ².

Agency in children refers to their capacity and

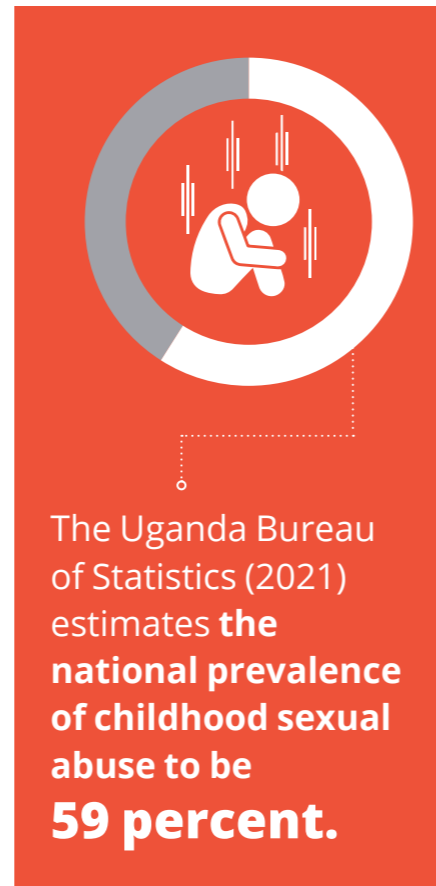
ability to make choices and decisions, act, and influence their everyday life activities ³⁻⁵. Among other things, agency empowers children to question, oppose, or move away from threats to safeguard their well-being ⁶. **Evidence shows that parent-child discussions on CSA risks and protection can strengthen familial relations and interactions, promoting children's capacity and ability to exercise agency as well as enabling caregivers to safeguard their children's well-being proactively ^{7,8}**, reducing risk for CSA. Conversely, a lack of agency in children, usually characterized by low social skills, is a significant risk factor for child sexual abuse ⁹.

► CSA in Uganda and Zanzibar

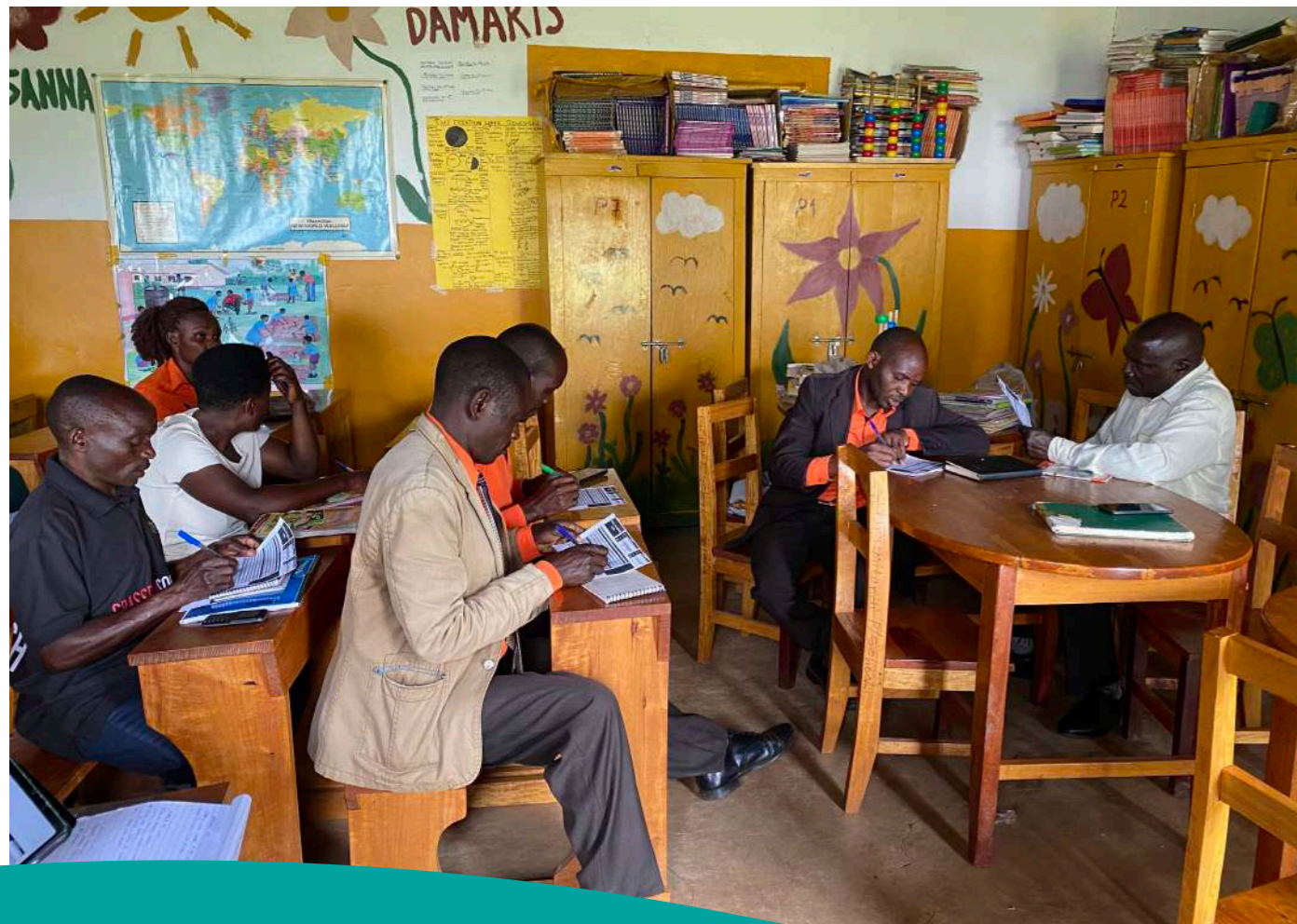
CSA is prevalent in Uganda and Zanzibar, Tanzania.

The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2021) estimates the national prevalence of childhood sexual abuse to be 59 percent ¹⁰. In 2023, research conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) in three Western Ugandan districts found that one in five children (ages 9–14) reported having experienced at least one form of sexual abuse within 12 months before the survey. Disclosure and reporting of CSA in the study communities were limited due to fear of retaliation, negotiations with perpetrators, and lack of faith in the police and justice system.

In Zanzibar, more than 1 in 20 females and about 1 in 10 males aged 13 to 24 years reported experiencing at least one incident of sexual violence before the age of 18 ¹¹. Among youth aged 13 to 17 years, 2.3 percent of females and 3.7 percent of males reported experiencing at least one form of sexual violence in the past year ¹¹. In 2019, an ICRW survey of adults and children in Unguja North (through phase II of the KUWAZA project) identified resistance to reporting the perpetrator or location the violence.



Caregiver Parenting Session 2. Photo @ Bantwana Initiative Uganda



► Interventions promoting agency in children in Uganda and Zanzibar

To combat CSA in Uganda, the Bantwana Initiative in Uganda and ICRW implemented a prevention initiative, the Safe in Our Hands (SAFE) CSA Prevention Curriculum, in western Uganda. The curriculum targets caregivers, teachers, and children between the ages of 9 and 14 and has three components:

- 1. Fresh Start Package:** This targets schools to support and facilitate the efforts of school leaders, teachers, and pupils in protecting children from all forms of abuse.
- 2. Nest Package:** This targets caregivers and children and promotes supportive, positive norms, economic strengthening, and parenting training.
- 3. Triple S Package:** This comprises a set of formal and informal “Safe Systems Strengthening” tools to strengthen and support national and local government structures to address CSA.

In Zanzibar, Pathfinder International Tanzania, Action Aid Tanzania, C-Sema, and ICRW piloted the KUWAZA III project. The initiative was a multi-component sexual violence against children (SVAC) prevention and response intervention, which includes a toolkit to prevent and respond to CSA, implemented in Unguja North. The project’s goal was to reduce SVAC through: i) development and delivery of a synchronized SVAC prevention training toolkit among a cohort of children aged 7–10 and 11–14, parents/teachers, religious leaders, and local leaders; ii) advocacy; and iii) implementation of a child abuse surveillance system, case management strategy, and child help hotline.

► The research

The studies (baseline in 2023, endline in 2024) were conducted to evaluate how well the two curricula (toolkits) mentioned above (Kuwaza SVAC toolkit and SAFE CSA prevention curriculum) strengthened children’s agency in preventing CSA.

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Children in the intervention groups demonstrated greater confidence in their ability to report abuse, resist peer pressure, and seek support services.



Children celebrating the graduation of the 12 SVAC prevention sessions at Mahonda Shehia. © Pathfinder Intl Tanzania

In Uganda, the study was implemented in three districts: Bunyangabu, Kyenjojo, and Kabarole. A systematic sampling procedure was used at baseline to recruit people into the control and intervention groups. Participants were children aged 9–14 from classes P4, P5, and P6, teachers from the children’s schools, and the children’s primary caregivers (shown in the table below).

In Zanzibar, Tanzania, the communities (intervention and control) were 39 shehias (administrative areas). At baseline, systematic sampling was used to select qualifying households (those with children ages 7–14). Study participants were children ages 7–14 and their parents/guardians. The distribution of the study participants is shown in the table below.

Study participants

	Baseline participants	Endline participants
Teachers	129	98
Caregivers	674	412
Children (9–14 years)	707	483

Study participants

	Baseline participants	Endline participants
Caregivers	701	421
Children (7–14 years)	1,221	739

In both countries, baseline and endline interviews were conducted with the same participants. In both studies, agency was measured in terms of children’s self-reported confidence/willingness to disclose/report sexual violence experiences, self-reported ability to resist peer pressure, and awareness of CSA risks, knowledge, and confidence in risk avoidance skills. Difference in differences analysis was used to compare outcomes over time for the study groups.

► Key findings

The study findings on the KUWAZA III SVAC toolkit and SAFE program CSA prevention curriculum indicate that enhancing children’s agency significantly increases their knowledge of rights and self-protection measures. Children in the intervention groups demonstrated greater confidence in their ability to report abuse, resist peer pressure, and seek support services.

Three key outcomes are discussed below.

1 Increase in knowledge of rights and protective measures against CSA

In Uganda, the SAFE prevention CSA curriculum enhanced children’s knowledge about their rights and protective measures. By endline, children in intervention schools were twice as likely to mention at least three rights they were entitled to (OR=2.199, p=.001). They were also 1.663 times more likely to state at least three ways of protecting themselves from CSA.

In Zanzibar, the endline results showed a significant increase in knowledge among children in the intervention group about harmful practices (P=.001). They also had a significant increase in knowledge of legal protections for children (P=.001), including knowing that rape is a crime, that sexual intercourse with a minor is a crime, and that 18 years and above is the legal age of marriage.

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2 Improvements in children’s agency and self-efficacy

In both countries, study findings indicate a significant improvement (p<.000) in the reported comfort levels of children in the intervention groups to discuss SVAC with their parents or guardians.

Most children who participated in the SAFE prevention CSA curriculum reported improved confidence in their ability to: **i) seek out support services in case of abuse, ii) resist pressure from teachers, relatives, or persons in authority to engage in sex, iii) seek medical attention in cases of abuse, iv) report perpetrators to authorities and disclose sexual abuse without fear of being coerced or lured into sex, and v) disclose the identity of the perpetrator.** Children in the intervention group were also four times more likely to have confidence in their ability to enact preferences over life choices.



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The KUWAZA III SVAC toolkit significantly enhanced children’s confidence in reporting SVAC. Children in the intervention group were three times more likely to express confidence in reporting SVAC (p=.000) compared to those in the control group. Additionally, the toolkit improved their self-efficacy in making choices about their lives (p=.045) as well as their preference for formal reporting channels for SVAC (p=.013).

3 Trusted adults' role in cultivating agency

The SAFE Prevention CSA curriculum facilitated the identification and training of teachers who can provide supportive school environment, enabling children to freely report incidents of CSA in the intervention schools. At the endline, children in the intervention schools were three times more likely to report having a teacher they could freely talk to (OR=3.156, p=.001).

Findings also indicated that caregivers in the intervention communities in Uganda were twice as likely to report talking to their children about healthy relationships between boys and girls (OR=2.008, p=.024) and twice as likely to report talking to their children about risks that exposed them to CSA (OR=2.894, p=.012) compared to their counterparts in the control communities.

In Zanzibar, findings showed an increase in the frequency of discussions between caregivers and their adolescent children on avoiding sexual risks and seeking help when feeling unsafe, including resisting peer pressure to engage in sex.

Caregiver Parenting Session 2. Photo @ Bantwana Initiative Uganda



► Implications of the interventions and recommendations

The KUWAZA III SVAC toolkit and the SAFE program Prevention CSA curriculum both cultivated agency in children, enhancing their knowledge of CSA and its risks and empowering them to protect themselves and seek help when needed. These findings add to the body of literature which affirms that CSA prevention programs encourage children to report abuse^{12,13}.

In particular, this study's findings underscore the critical role of agency in empowering children to protect themselves from sexual abuse. The success of these programs evaluated by ICRW, suggests that similar approaches that are contextualized could be effective in other regions with high rates of CSA. Moreover, the involvement of caregivers and community leaders is essential in reinforcing these protective measures.

Future programs should focus on engaging both male and female caregivers to ensure comprehensive support for children. Further research should explore the long-term impact of these interventions on children's well-being and their ability to prevent CSA.

Fostering children's agency is a powerful strategy in the prevention and response to child sexual abuse. By empowering children with knowledge and confidence and involving the community, we can create safer environments for children to thrive.

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