



Safe, Inclusive
Participative Pedagogy:
Improving Early
Childhood Education

Safety in Early Childhood Education

The Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy (SIPP): Improving Early Childhood Education research project identifies and develops safe, inclusive and participative pedagogy, which is implementable and sustainable for communities where children experience particular stress and trauma. SIPP is a partnership project, working with research teams in each of the fieldwork countries (Brazil, Eswatini, Palestine and South Africa) and led by the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

This briefing paper focuses on findings about safety, exploring how intersecting inequalities impact on young children's safety and the different experiences of safe spaces that impact early childhood learning.

Key messages:

- Safety is important to children, their families and community members, who were all able to engage with conversations about safety and lack of safety in their communities and in Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings.
- ECE settings were generally perceived by children and parents as safe spaces for children. However, in all communities there were factors that compromised children's safety on the way to and from ECE settings.
- Safety is intertwined with other social, economic and political factors. Being safe can protect children from the negative effects of inequalities.
- Policies should prioritise the safety of children in their own communities.

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Safe, Inclusive, Participatory Pedagogies of Early Years Education (2020–2024)

Early childhood experiences significantly influence children's later educational and health outcomes. Ultimately, if children flourish in the present and in their futures, this benefits children and their families, communities, and societies.

One of the biggest challenges is to 'reach the poorest, most remote and marginalised children' (United Nations, 2015) and to ensure high quality, inclusive early childhood provision even in the most challenging settings. Young children face deep inequalities and are often deprived of their rights, especially in challenging contexts where there are risks to their safety. Early intervention and prevention have become key international drivers for shaping early childhood policies and practices to address inequalities.

In particular, high quality early childhood education (ECE) can be a protective factor for children against the negative effects of poverty and other inequalities and can improve long-term developmental and employment outcomes. However, significant implementation questions arise, including:

- quality of learning experiences and professional support.
- culturally meaningful and appropriate learning opportunities.
- affordability, inclusivity, accessibility, and sustainability of ECE provision.
- pressures of, and responses to, the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy (SIPP): Improving Early Childhood Education research project aims to identify and develop safe, inclusive and participative pedagogy, which is implementable and sustainable for communities where children experience particular stress and trauma. SIPP is a partnership project, working with research teams in each of the fieldwork countries (Brazil, Eswatini, Palestine and South Africa) and led by the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. The project focuses on children and their families under the age of 5 because children below compulsory school age are the least likely to be provided with education and learning opportunities.

SIPP is a mixed-methods research project. Early years education policy analysis and international systematic literature reviews exploring prevalence and burden of early childhood violence are complemented by in-depth community case studies in the four fieldwork countries.

This briefing paper focuses on findings about safety, exploring how intersecting inequalities impact on young children's safety and the different experiences of safe spaces that impact early childhood learning. We present local experiences from our four community case studies and identify cross-cutting actions that would enhance children's safety in early learning spaces, whether at home, communities

or early childhood settings and programmes. The perception of safety is inherently subjective. This leads to significant variations in how it is defined.

The early years of a child's development present a valuable opportunity to establish a strong foundation for their future. It is crucial to ensure the protection of young children during this phase, as it will greatly contribute to their overall development. Prioritising the safety of children and granting them the independence to engage in play, exploration, and learning within their everyday surroundings should be a policy priority. Further, establishing nurturing, considerate, and suitable relationships is vital to ensuring the safety and overall wellbeing of both children and adolescents (Powell et al., 2020).

Despite the progress made, a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic affects the safety and security of children globally. In times of crisis or disaster, children can be especially vulnerable due to their particular stage of physiological and social development and disruptions in support and provision from their families and communities (UNICEF, 2011).

More on the global challenge of violence against children can be found at [**www.sipp.education.ed.ac.uk/the-cost-of-violence**](http://www.sipp.education.ed.ac.uk/the-cost-of-violence)

Safety in local contexts

Each of the four countries explored safety within their own local context in order to understand safety within their local environments and how differing aspects around safety were perceived.

Palestine

Safety in the Palestinian context refers to all types of intervention plans, policies and programs that protect children from being exposed to situations that limit their opportunities to develop their emotional, intellectual, psychological and social capacities.

The Israeli military occupation and political oppression in Palestine has deprived Palestinian children from practicing their human rights, as 'safety' became a privilege and not a right. Although the scope of this project is limited to the West Bank, the recent aggressive military attacks on Gaza have increased the physiological, economic and social pressures on children and their families in the West Bank.

The daily military invasion on neighbourhoods, cities and refugee camps have created a situation where children lost their sense of safety even within their homes. A study conducted by Save the Children (2021) showed that among the

273 families that lost their homes as a result of military operations, more than 70% of children stated that they felt isolated and left behind. Furthermore, the military detention of Palestinian children had badly influenced children's self-esteem and created critical psychological difficulties (Save the Children, 2022). UNICEF (2024) reported that the increased number of children being killed or injured by the Israeli army led children to live with feelings of fear and discomfort even within their homes.

Interviews as part of the SIPP Project with stakeholders, parents, children and community activists revealed issues about safety and protection, which were focused on the political context. This context was associated with other forms of violence against children “when a parent is insulted by the Israeli army, or when he cannot get a permission to work and feels unable to provide his children with basic needs, he will not perceive parenthood as we expect. This oppression will be reflected in his relationship with his family and kids” (Teacher).

Parents and children engaged in the project expressed feelings of anger and fear as a result of witnessing the arrest of family members and the damage of their belongings:

“I am afraid ... because we were awake at night ... the soldiers arrested my uncle after beating him with their weapons. They imprisoned us in one room and did not allow us to leave ... When they left, everything was destroyed ... my toys too and our furniture ... I was afraid to be shot.” (Boy, 7 years old)

This reality led parents to use all opportunities to provide their children with a safe environment that cannot be easily achieved within their economic social context.

“I cannot let my kids go out especially when the Israeli army uses tear gas ... a few days ago my daughter was playing in front of the house and when she heard the army van she was in a panic. I do not want to keep my kids indoors, but when they play outside, even if they are a few meters from the house, I am always worried.” (Mother, living in a refugee camp)

“I did not sleep ... the soldiers were pushing the door ... I cried a little ... the gas in my eyes ... moma and dad took us to their bedroom and we were happy to stay with them.” (Boy, 6 years old)

Stakeholders and community activists argued that due to the lack of a safe environment in schools, neighbourhoods and homes, community centres became the place for children to practice their rights to learn in a safe environment. Children reported that their engagement in the activities of the community centres were joyful.

In summary, although safety is a wide concept that covers aspects that go beyond political factors, in practice such factors are highly relevant. When a society is struggling to obtain its human right to live, any other form of violence is marginalised.

Eswatini

Eswatini policy draws upon a definition of safety as measures put in place by staff, parents, learners, and other stakeholders to minimise or eliminate risk, conditions or threats that may cause accidents, bodily injury or emotional and psychological distress.

Teachers involved in the SIPP Project demonstrated some understanding of child safety issues ranging from the home, community, to classrooms. They spoke passionately about their role in ensuring that their learners are safe. Educators made reference to safety aspects within the classroom and school environment as “things they (the children) touch and put in their mouth” and the attention paid by the educator to “observing their play area and how they play with one another”.

Learners were perceived to be safer within the school than in their communities because of the presence of educators, security boundaries (in some schools), and the presence of other learners.

“They are safe when the teacher is there, when the school is fenced and when they know that when anyone comes to fetch them you are there watching them, so they are safe in that way.” (Teacher)

However, a small number of children talked about violence between children and about corporal punishment as a punishment for inflicting violence.

The safety of children when they are out of school was not felt to be guaranteed. Participants stated that the surrounding environment is notoriously dangerous and that safety could not be taken for granted. Some learners were felt to be safe in the community because they were dropped off and picked up from school by trusted guardians and parents and later taken to a safe home environment. Earlier research findings point out, however, that not all learners had that privilege (Mwoma et al., 2018), where 25.6% of the teachers interviewed confirmed that preschool children in their preschools come to school and go home unaccompanied. Safety and security challenges for young children in relation to being dropped off and picked up were therefore apparent. Equally, parents expressed mixed feelings regarding taking their child to school for the first time.

Regarding safety in the community, teachers decried the fact that, even within homes, children are not guaranteed safety due to the surrounding environment

and parents working away from the home. Socio-economic vulnerability and stress increase risks to children, particularly where parents are not able to spend time with their children who may end up spending time wandering around the community. Girls were seen as particularly at risk to dangers like rape and sexual assault.

A further range of safety issues were raised in the children's communities:

"They are not (safe). When we are talking about Mncitsini, Gobholo, those kids are not safe. During COVID time the kids were moving anyhow, I was in Mncitsini and kids were taking food from the bin and eating it. Food you could clearly see that it is not good. And they hadn't bathed and were moving up and down." (Participant)

"Not all of them (feel safe), more especially where we are at Msunduzi, there is so much that is going on, there is no safety. Msunduzi is one place where there is a lot of riots going on, so they do not feel safe at all." (Participant)

Brazil

A basic right to safety is reflected in Articles 226 and 227 of the 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution which state that: the family must enjoy special protection by the State; that it is the duty of the family, the society, and the government to protect children and adolescents; and that the law must severely punish abuse of, violence toward, and sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. A key statement pertaining to the rights of young children to protection is contained in the 2016 law on Early Childhood (BRASIL, 2016).

In relation to the Rio community of Rocinha involved in the SIPP Project, the key element affecting safety was seen to be the presence of drug trafficking gangs. Police and militias (vigilante gangs) frequently engaged in shoot-outs with residents being hurt or killed by stray bullets, with no regular peace-keeping policing within the community.

Safety on the way to and from school was reported as a major factor in accessing early learning settings (CIESPI/PUC-RIO, 2017). Rocinha is built on a steep hill, with 150,000 residents and only two main streets crowded with motor bikes weaving constantly among the cars. Walking to school was reported as dangerous even without the constant threat of shoot-outs.

"Ah, it is not safe. Because of the thugs. You don't know what could happen. And the news is so bad. Stray bullets which appear on T.V. which make people concerned." (Community member)

Respondents had little hope that things in the community would improve and felt that:

“For things to improve, you would have to start at the top with politicians, with corruption. And I sincerely do not have hope of this.” (Teacher)

A complete lack of safe spaces for children to play outside of their homes was reported. This was seen as due to: a basic lack of open space; a densely crowded community; public spaces which were in bad repair and dominated by gangs. Very good but sparse non-profit sports and cultural spaces did not generally cater for young children.

Safety within the home, as reported by parents, teachers, and community residents, was thought to be good and homes, in general, were seen as safe places for young children. Concerns were raised about unsafe structural issues and, in certain parts of the community, strong summer rains resulting in landslides that destroyed homes.

Respondents spoke of incidents of physical abuse and sexual abuse of older children (CIESPI/PUC-RIO, 2023). The community, as a whole, suffered from lack of potable water and adequate sanitation, which impacted safety. Significantly, children reported that their definition of safety within the home was to be close to their father or mother.

Both parents and teachers saw early childhood centres as safe places for young children. Municipal ECEs were inspected and repaired regularly. Non-profit ECEs were more likely to have structural deficits and lack of access for children with mobility issues. ECEs also provided for key needs such as food, sanitary conditions and had attentive staff.

“Yes, they are (safe). Because you can see all the things they offer the children ... All the staff are very attentive. Everyone there is very caring.” (Parent)

South Africa

South African Early Childhood Development (ECD) policy has a strong focus on safety as compliance, with highly regulated physical infrastructure. All staff have criminal record checks for child protection and policy focusses on positive discipline practices (Republic of South Africa, 2005).

The SIPP Case Study site of Vrygond in South Africa is a low-income area near to Cape Town, with a diverse population of about 42,000 people.

In relation to safety in the local environment, community respondents, parents and practitioners involved in the SIPP Project said that there was a general lack of physical and emotional safety for children, including in some early childhood centres (Biersteker et al., 2023).

Living conditions were overcrowded, often with several different families living in one yard. Some homes were not safe, with alcohol and drug abuse, economic hardship, domestic violence, child neglect and child abuse all problems. Many adults had tried to offer a safe space for children but very often the adults were traumatised and reacted towards children in the way they themselves had been raised. Children were often spoken to harshly at home and smacked. They were told to 'just be quiet'. A few ECD practitioners shouted and pinched children and spoke badly about parents in front of the children.

Children roamed the streets, at risk of car accidents and violence, gangs controlled the parks and there was no police station. Parents raised environmental concerns including: garbage dumping across the community; leaking drains; and exposure to violence due to the number of taverns and consequent fights erupting. Over the weekends when schools, NGOs and ECD Centres were closed, there were no recreational facilities or safe spaces.

"Our children are only safe when they are at school - after school they do not know what to do and they end up in the streets because there are no safe spaces for them in the community." (Parent, focus group)

Children who were interviewed were highly aware of potential dangers:

- the need to keep children at home or indoors due to limited safe places to play, especially outdoors.
- being stolen, hurt, or killed by strangers unless accompanied by a parent.
- being shot if you went out at night.
- being injured in road accidents or fires.

Children also had strategies for keeping safe: for example, they all knew and spontaneously chanted Emergency and Fire Services Numbers. They were aware of what to avoid and who to go to when things were unsafe.

"You must be safe the whole time, you can't just go alone to the shop, you must go with someone." (Child, 5 years old)

ECD Centres were perceived generally as safe spaces for children. Parents felt strongly that the only other safe space for their children was when the children were with them. Children were asked if they felt unsafe at their ECD centre; they replied that they liked their teachers, the food, and the activities and that they felt safe there. They reported that they did not, however, feel safe when home alone.

Staff and community organisations stressed the importance of emotional safety, recognising signs of trauma and paying attention to keeping children mentally and socially well. Training on trauma, raising awareness of what children were going through and creating safe spaces in some ECD centres have been organised. The aim was for children to be able to express themselves, to feel free to be children.

“Your safe space is not ... just the facility. It is also your staff being informed, knowing how to be empathetic, how to deal with discipline, how to deal with issues of concern within the social context of your community.” (ECD Centre Principal)

What needs to be done?

Key recommendations arise from learning across the SIPP Project. The recommendations are not in order of priority.

Children’s safety cannot be addressed in isolation.

Lack of community safety is indicative of wider social, economic, and political problems including poverty, addiction, adult trauma, and violence. Economic stability impacts positively on safety, with parental employment leading to less stressful households.

All children need to have access to safe ECE settings.

ECE centres must be recognised as emotionally and physically safe spaces for many children, where they can express themselves and be free to be children. This is not to suggest that all ECE settings are completely safe, but children are perceived to be much safer in these settings than outside of them.

Children need to be safe outdoors and to have more safe outdoor spaces where they are welcome and safe to play.

Children need to be safe moving between their home and ECE settings, including being accompanied between the two. In all communities, reasons were given why children are not safe whilst on the streets (gun violence, traffic accidents, sexual assault, theft). Parents want their children to play but it is not safe to play outside.

Practitioners and policy makers must listen to children, parents and communities and support them to develop and maximise their safety strategies.

Children and their parents often have their own strategies for managing their own safety.

Further richness on the findings and developments in each of the community case studies can be found in outputs gathered together on SIPP's website.

How can you find out more?

SIPP has produced a series of briefings, including one that details its methodology. For these and other information, visit: **www.sipp.education.ed.ac.uk**

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