

Abuse against Children and Youth with Disabilities

Most people with disabilities experience some form of emotional, verbal, or physical mistreatment from an early age. Incorrect spiritual and cultural beliefs about disability often pose greater challenges to people than their physical limitations. Although incorrect views of disability exist in wealthy countries, in low- and middle-income countries there are higher rates of people who believe disabilities are the result of witchcraft or a punishment from God. This often results in abuse, neglect, abandonment, or even murder.

A Hope for Healing Often Leads to Abuse

Community and religious leaders have a strong influence on norms and practices related to disability. Although some support and advocate for children with disabilities, many others conduct harmful “healing” practices and share inaccurate information that encourages families to pursue spiritual remedies instead of medical care. Many parents will also bring their children to traditional healers where they undergo painful exorcisms, live burials, and tongue or skin cutting. These procedures are thought to release demons believed to cause the disability. In some cases, mothers are even instructed to participate in sexual acts with the healer in order to protect the child from further demonic activity.

Lack of Awareness of What Constitutes Abuse

The stigma of disability is often so deeply entwined in religious and cultural norms that leaders and parents do not realize they are violating children’s rights. Since many community members fear that disabilities are contagious, they often refuse to help with care of children with disabilities. Additionally, many communities expect that children with disabilities will not attend school and will instead be forced to beg. If a child remains at home, some parents will lock their children in rooms or tie them to trees to keep them safe while they are at work or the market. In some cases, children have been kept in rooms for hours, or even days, without food or water. This isolation leaves them further susceptible to sexual predators.

Targeted due to Their Age and Disability

Since abuse is based in a desire for power and control, many abusers specifically target vulnerable populations. Therefore, age, mobility, and communication limitations make children with disabilities even more vulnerable to abuse. Children with disabilities may also feel that they are unable to report the abuse or they may be dependent on the abuser for their care. Like many who are abused, children with disabilities are usually abused by someone they know, such as a partner or family member.



A Kenyan boy with autism chained to a tree

Vulnerability to Human Trafficking

Children and youth with disabilities are also especially vulnerable to human trafficking. Children with disabilities have been targeted by traffickers for their high visibility and ability to draw sympathy and charity when begging. In societies where children with disabilities are not expected to attend school, communities may be less likely to question why a child with a disability is begging. All too often, youth with disabilities are regarded as undesirable and may even be subjected to sexual abuse or trafficking by their own families.

Lack of Legal Support

Law enforcement may be reluctant to believe the testimony of individuals with certain disabilities and therefore less likely to investigate or prosecute an allegation. Persons with limited communication abilities may also be unable to report being victimized altogether.

Abuse and Exploitation of Children with Disabilities

- Children with disabilities are almost 4 times more likely to experience violence than non-disabled children.
- In forced begging situations, a child with a disability earns 3 times more than a healthy child.
- 83% of women and girls with disabilities have experienced sexual assault
- 49% of people with intellectual disabilities will experience 10 or more sexually abusive incidents in their lifetime
- People who experience abuse are three times as likely to experience mental illness

Kupenda's Abuse Prevention Advocacy and Interventions

Kupenda empowers people with disabilities and the families and communities around them to prevent the violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation of people living with disabilities. We do so by providing tailored counseling sessions; facilitating participatory trainings; and developing related information, education, and communication materials.

Disability Trainings

Through our Disability Training program, we educate community leaders (i.e., pastors, traditional healers, government officials, women's groups, and teachers) about disability definitions, causes, and treatments. We also teach them about related local, national, and international legislation and guidance, such as the *UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. We then equip these leaders to ensure that children with disabilities have full sexual and reproductive rights, access to harm-reduction services, and are free from physical and sexual abuse.

Abuse Prevention Education

We partner with other organizations working in abuse prevention to develop trainings, materials, and a guidebook on abuse and trauma prevention for children with disabilities. We then facilitate these trainings for both children and adults.

- Our *Abuse Prevention Workshop for Youth* equips young people with disabilities to recognize unsafe situations, advocate for themselves, and respond with effective self-protective behaviors to prevent sexual violence, abduction, bullying, and harassment.
- Our *Abuse Prevention Workshop for Adults* equips parents, teachers, nonprofit staff, and community leaders to identify potential abuse, effectively report suspected abuse to proper authorities, and provide caring support and referrals for abuse survivors.

Family Counseling

During our family counseling sessions, we help parents and caregivers access the services they need to protect and care for their children with disabilities. This enables them to access the medical, legal and psychosocial support they need to keep their children safe and respond quickly and effectively to any suspected abuse or exploitation.

Parent Support Groups

We help local leaders and parents establish and join parent support groups where they learn how to nurture their child and meet their needs. These support groups also help families prevent and address abuse through service referrals and advocacy with local law enforcement and child protection agencies.

Results

The result of these efforts is that children with disabilities in our programs consistently demonstrate improved health outcomes, strengthened communication skills, and reduced incidences of abuse. Parents and local leaders also develop more compassion for children with disabilities, with many going on to become disability leaders and advocates in their communities.

Helping Kasere Recover from Abuse



Kasere has cerebral palsy and used to have to crawl to get around. This caused children and adults in her community to treat her poorly for many years.

“They used to mock me and abuse me. They were saying ‘You’re a cripple. You’re a person with a disability. Go away, we do not want to stay with you.’ They used to hit me. They were chasing me to go home. They did not want to play with me. They said, ‘You with a disability cannot go anywhere, you cannot move to any other place, so you shouldn’t come near to us.’ This made me feel bad.”

Fortunately, in 2011, Kasere was connected to Kupenda's Kenyan field team who helped her access a wheelchair and begin attending a special school. Today she has excelled academically, made many friends, and is no longer being abused.

Currently, Kupenda hosts Abuse Prevention and Care Trainings – one for youth and one for adults. These workshops help communities understand the true causes of disability and the value of people living with disabilities, like Kasere. As a result, communities and schools in Kenya are now becoming more loving and inclusive. Children with disabilities are also accessing services that help them recover from past abuse and avoid future abuse altogether.

For more information:

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