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POLICY BRIEF · UGANDA

Enforcing the Ban on Corporal Punishment and Changing Social Norms Can Improve Learning

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Key messages

- **Enforce Uganda's 2016 ban on corporal punishment through regular school inspections and clear accountability for head teachers.**

  Corporal punishment lowers proficiency by 6.7 percentage points in English and 7.7 points in Mathematics, with the largest losses among girls and in Mathematics.

- **Address the social norms that keep corporal punishment in use:** many communities still see it as an effective way to discipline children, and legal bans alone will not change behaviour unless that belief shifts too.
- **Scale up community-based anti-violence campaigns,** which have already been shown to reduce the use of corporal punishment in schools.
- **Build gender-responsive support into school programmes,** since girls experience disproportionately larger learning losses from corporal punishment than boys.

Corporal punishment persists in Ugandan schools despite the legal ban

Nearly two-thirds of schools in Uganda continue to use corporal punishment (CP) on children, despite its prohibition under the 2016 National Children's Act. This persistence reflects deeply entrenched social norms that view physical punishment as an effective way to enforce discipline and motivate academic performance. Yet research consistently shows that CP is counterproductive: it incites fear and delinquent behaviour among learners and damages the very cognitive engagement it seeks to improve.

Uganda's rate of teacher-administered CP is among the highest recorded, with nearly half of boys and over a third of girls aged 13–17 reporting exposure in the past year. Prevalence also varies sharply within the country: children in Northern Uganda, where conflict disrupted education systems and normalised violence, face the highest rates (71.5%). Community schools report far higher use (82.5%) than government schools (63.8%), suggesting the ban is better enforced in public institutions. Meanwhile, schools led by male head teachers are more likely to use CP, pointing to gendered differences in leadership approach.

Left unaddressed, Uganda's persistent use of CP will continue to undermine the country's learning outcomes and disproportionately harm the children the ban was designed to protect.

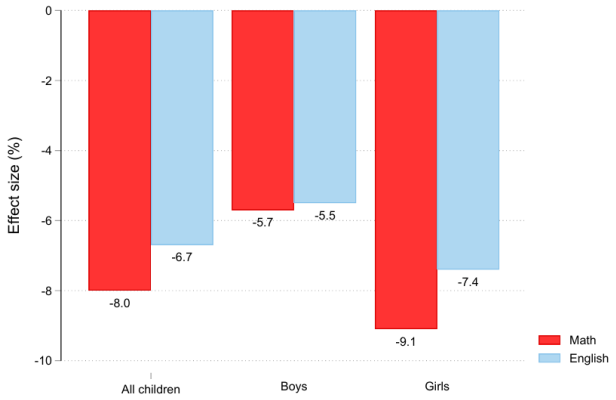
The research study

This brief draws on a study that examines the causal effects of corporal punishment on learning outcomes in Uganda and the role social norms play in shaping both its prevalence and its impact. The analysis uses nationally representative UWEZO survey data from 2016 and 2024, linking information on children, households, and schools. Learning outcomes are measured through standardised assessments of English literacy and Mathematics administered directly to children at the household level, allowing the author to isolate the effect of corporal punishment from other factors that influence achievement.

Key findings

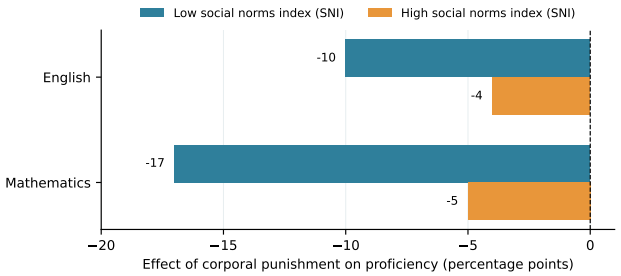
When primary school children in Uganda are threatened with corporal punishment, their education measurably and significantly suffers. On average, children in schools that

Figure 1: Impact of corporal punishment on English and Mathematics proficiency



Notes: Source: Authors' construct based on the UWEZO survey.

Figure 2: Learning effects of corporal punishment by community social norms



Notes: Source: Authors' construct based on the UWEZO survey (2016, 2024).

use CP are 6.7 percentage points less likely to be proficient in English and 7.7 percentage points less likely to be proficient in Mathematics (Figure 1).

Gender analysis reveals that although boys are more frequently subjected to CP, girls experience larger learning losses. CP reduces girls' likelihood of Mathematics proficiency by 9 percentage points, compared to 5.7 points for boys; in English, the gap is 7.4 points for girls versus 5.5 points for boys. This is consistent with evidence that girls internalise stress and anxiety more strongly, reducing their participation, confidence, and learning.

This is not directly tested in the data, but one interpretation the author offers is that Mathematics demands sustained concentration. Qualitative and survey evidence from Uganda also shows children are more often physically punished for poor performance in Mathematics than in reading, compounding anxiety toward the subject.

Social norms also shape the size of these effects: the adverse impact on learning is larger in communities where CP is socially unacceptable and smaller where it is widely tolerated. In low-tolerance communities, CP reduces English proficiency by 10 percentage points and Mathematics by 17 points; in high-tolerance communities, the reductions are only 4 and 5 points respectively (Figure 2).

This pattern does not mean CP is harmless where it is socially accepted. The data cannot confirm the mechanism, but one interpretation the author offers is that where CP is not tolerated, it is more likely to provoke fear, shame, and withdrawal, intensifying its disruptive effect on learning; where it is normalised, children may perceive it as expected, dulling but not eliminating the harm. Together, these results show that corporal punishment undermines learning through fear rather than through effective deterrence, in every community studied.

Conclusions and policy messages

Considering these findings, reducing corporal punishment and improving learning outcomes in Uganda **requires a coordinated response that combines enforcement, prevention, and social norm change**. Legal enforcement alone is unlikely to be sustainable unless it is paired with efforts to shift community beliefs away from viewing corporal punishment as an effective or acceptable disciplinary tool.

The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) **should reinforce the 2016 ban through regular school inspections, clear reporting and grievance mechanisms, and accountability for head teachers and school management committees**, working with the Uganda Police and Judiciary to strengthen enforcement.

Teacher training institutions **should embed non-violent classroom management into pre-service and in-service training**, while MoES should expand proven alternatives, such as the Good School Toolkit, within teacher professional development systems.

Government and civil society partners **should scale up community-based anti-violence campaigns already shown to reduce CP in schools**, helping realign parental expectations and reinforce non-violent discipline at home and at school.

Given girls' disproportionate learning losses, MoES and implementing partners should build psychosocial support and gender-responsive strategies into school programmes to protect girls' learning and wellbeing.

Implementation road map

Short term (1–2 years): Strengthen enforcement of the CP ban through regular school inspections, clear reporting mechanisms, and expanded community awareness cam-

paigns. Key actors: Ministry of Education and Sports, district education offices, Uganda Police, and local governments. Resources are needed for inspections, awareness activities, and monitoring.

Medium term (3–5 years): Scale up positive-discipline training for teachers, integrating non-violent classroom management into pre-service teacher-training colleges and in-service training. Institutionalise proven interventions such as the Good School Toolkit within professional development systems, backed by investment in training, curricula, and implementation support.

Long term (5 years and beyond): Sustain social norm change through community engagement, positive parenting programmes, and integration of child-protection messaging into education and social development initiatives. Strengthened data systems and inter-sectoral coordination will be needed to monitor progress and ensure accountability.

Key actors: Ministry of Education and Sports, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, District Local Governments, Uganda Police, Judiciary, teacher training institutions, schools, civil society organisations, development partners, parents, and community leaders.

References

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About this brief

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