A MESSAGE TO SCHOOLS ON IDENTIFYING AND SUPPORTING LEARNERS WHO ARE VULNERABLE

basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

20 YEARS OF FREEDOM

What is vulnerability?

The Department of Basic Education's Conceptual Framework for Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) defines a vulnerable child as a child whose survival, care, protection or development may be compromised due to a particular situation or circumstances such as exposure to violence and other adverse life conditions or physiological/psychological condition, which prevents the fulfilment of their rights. This demonstrates that vulnerability is not only related to poverty. The CSTL framework states that vulnerability is not constant; it will change as the child's circumstances change and no child is immune to potential vulnerability.

Children may be considered vulnerable when they:

- Have no surviving parent or alternate caregiver to care for him/her;

- Live in a child-headed household;

- Live in households with many children who are orphaned/ abandoned and often experience increased poverty as a result;

- Live with a parent or primary caregiver who is terminally ill, especially when the child may be the main caregiver for the terminally ill person;

- Live with adults and/ youth who are addicted to alcohol and/or drugs and affecting the children;

- Experience domestic violence and/ or bullying in school or the community;

- Experience treatment that is harmful to their emotional, physical or mental wellbeing (this includes punishment, violent behavior, and labour/heavy chores that are not appropriate for their age).;

- Are chronically and/or terminally ill and have no adult to support them with their treatment;

- Have a mental and/or physical disability;

- When their safety is threatened;

SADAG

Suicide Crisis Line 0800 567 567/ 0800 212 223 or SMS 31393

Substance Abuse Line 0800 12 13 14 or SMS 32312

Childline Hotline:

08000 55 555

LoveLife Free Plz Cal Me

083 323 1023

What role can the School Governing Body (SGB) play?

- The SBST may liaise with the SGB to engage parents in their children's education by conducting parents' meetings/ imbizo. This also means that parental issues should become an item in SGB meetings.
- Active SGB's can be instrumental to mobilise community leaders, businesses, other professionals, concerned members of communities, to plan how they can contribute time/ skills/ resources to ensure that vulnerable learners from their communities are supported.
- The SGB and parents may also fundraise to ensure that emergency situations can be covered in the school.
- Involve parents in social events that are fun and interesting so that they feel part of the school community. This may increase their interest and involvement in the school community.

Why is addressing vulnerability at school important?

Vulnerability is one of the key hindrances to development and learning. Identifying and addressing vulnerability is therefore a key component of creating a conducive learning environment.

The Department of Basic Education, in partnership with the Departments of Health and Social Development, is implementing the Integrated School Health Programme. The Programme provides for screening to identify and address important health, social and psychological barriers to learning. Identifying problems and addressing them early will improve learners' overall development and assist with their ability to learn at school.

Why is it important to identify learners who are vulnerable?

Vulnerable learners face an inter-related web of intrinsic, societal & systemic barriers. Amongst **intrinsic barriers** are disability, childhood illness as well as mental health problems. **Societal barriers** include household poverty, lack of basic services such as housing, water and safety, HIV and AIDS, alcohol and drug use, lack of parenting skills as well as violence against children including sexual abuse. **Systemic barriers** include the lack of enabling and safe school infrastructure, educator skills and capacity, leadership and support at all levels, and curriculum policy and application.

When learners who experience these barriers do not receive adequate support, their ability to perform in school is likely to be severely affected, as they are likely to have **poor concentration**, **forgetfulness**, low frustration tolerance and strained interpersonal relationships.

How can an educator identify a learner who may be vulnerable?

Some of the indicators that may assist with identifying vulnerable learners are:

Poor or deteriorating school performance;

Frequent lateness or absence from school (this may be due to chores or responsibilities in the morning before school);

Loss of interest or withdrawal from activities and interaction with other learners;

Difficulty in remembering or making decisions as they are often worried about their personal circumstances or situation at home;

Change in appetite resulting in weight loss or gain;

Lacking materials for schooling;

Noticeable neglect of personal hygiene and dress;

Not doing or completing their homework on time;

Lack of or no parental involvement in the child's schooling;

Changes in behaviour (such as aggression, anxiety, moodiness);

What role can the educator play?

For some children, an educator is the only stable adult in their lives. Educators can assist by undertaking the following actions/strategies:

Class Room management:

An educator can play a key role in creating a caring and supportive classroom environment which is not only conducive to learning but will make it easy for the vulnerable learners to approach the educator about their problems. It can be done through:

- Getting to know your learners and showing an interest in them. For example, asking them how they are doing can open up spaces for sharing;
- Being friendly, open and honest and treating learners with respect;
- Ensure all learners know how to report any form of abuse/violence;
- Build learners' sense of self, encourage them to acknowledge their abilities, unique talents, resources and helpful people in their lives. An example is encouraging them to complete the following sentences: I am…; I can…; I have…I am good at…;
- Discuss with learners what they can do to show support to one another. Make a class contract about "telling someone you trust when you have a problem";
- Each school should have a list of the organisations in the area including contact details;
- Every classroom should have a reporting mechanism that is easily accessible to the learners and it should be written in a child friendly language for easy use;

Providing support:

- When learners confide in you, keep any personal information disclosed in strict confidence. An exception is when the learners' health or survival is at risk and other professionals need to know in order to assist the learner. At every instance, seek the permission of the learner should you need to involve others;
- Discuss your plan of action with the learner if they are mature enough to understand;
- Show empathy and do not judge. Make every attempt to talk to the learner alone to maintain privacy;
- Teach all learners:
  - ◊ To report abuse or violence observed against other learners;
  - ◊ To support other learners who may be facing difficulty where possible;
  - ◊ Not to belittle, name call or bully other learners;

Identifying, Screening and Referral of vulnerable learners

- Pay attention to the indicators on identifying vulnerable learners, as outlined on page two of the document;
- Use the list of organisations and professionals to select relevant services to refer identified learners;
- Encourage the School Based Support Team (SBST) to build relationships with the referral resources such as the social workers, police, non-governmental organisations etc;

Follow up and continuous monitoring:

- Addressing vulnerability can take time, continuous support and checking in with the child and referral resources is encouraged;
- Enquire from the child whether assistance was received. Refer the matter to the SBST/District Based Support Team for follow up, should there be a delay;
- Educators need to take measures to address their personal stress as accumulated stress can lead to limited energy for providing support and care to learners;
- Do not belittle the child due to their circumstances (e.g. calling the child names; using their situation as an example when you talk to other learners/educators);
- Encourage learner participation in co-curricular programmes such as peer education, sports, etc;

What role can the School Based Support Team (SBST) play?

- Monitor the reporting systems regularly for effectiveness.
- The SBST needs to identify resources in the community where learners can be referred and put together a list of organisations to facilitate referrals to assist learners who have psychological, emotional and social problems. The organisations can be those close to the school premises or in neighboring communities, including a nearby full service school if it has a counselor and a learner support educator.
- Encourage a programme for story writing, book club, poetry, art, music, and dance in the school as well as sports to encourage child participation, increase connectedness and cohesion.
- The SBST should report serious child abuse or deliberate neglect of a child to the Department of Social Development, the police or the nearest child protection organisation such as Child Line, Child Welfare, Christelike Maatskaplike Raad (CMR) and Teddy Bear Clinic in line with the Children's Act 38 of 2005.