

Early Violence Prevention in Sri Lankan Preschools: Perceived Preschool Teacher Practices

Buddhiprabha D D Pathirana^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Early Violence Prevention (EVP) programs are a concept alien to policy makers of the Early Childhood Care and Education in Sri Lanka, even though Sri Lanka as a has country experienced violence for almost four decades. This study explores the perceived preschool teacher practices pertaining to EVP (preventing/minimizing aggressive behaviors and promoting prosocial behaviors) within Sri Lankan preschool teachers using a survey (n = 275) and a semi structured interviews (n = 23). The results conveyed that Sri Lankan preschool teacher recognize such practices as a necessity and seemed to be practicing a wide spectrum of behaviors. These could be categorized on several dimensions: telling/teaching vs. doing activities, individual focused vs. group/social, authoritative/instructive vs. democratic, child initiated good practices vs. bad practices. Practices could also be categorized into religious activities, activities with emphasis on silence, praise, techniques to prevent discrimination, techniques to divert attention, socially focused, direct conflict management, instructional emphasis, empowering the children, moral and teacher initiated action. These activities were carried out using stories, puppets and role-plays. The study also provides recommendations to policy developers in the context of culture sensitive early violence prevention practices for Sri Lankan preschool children.

Keywords: *Preschool teachers, Early Violence Prevention, Aggressive behaviors, Prosocial Behaviors, Sri Lanka*

Though Sri Lankan as a country has been plagued by many and varied types of conflict violence over the last four decades very few studies have looked into the psychosocial origins of violence. When analyzing the psychosocial precursors and, impact of exposure to violence during early years cannot be ignored. Moreover, conflict which prevailed in Sri Lanka (Das, 1990; Somasundaran, 1998; Gunarathna, 1990, Pathirana, 1999; Pererea, 1998; De Silva, 2001; Keairns, 2003; WHO, 2008; Fernando, 2010) urges its citizenry to initiate positive, proactive interventions to prevent it, especially during early years.

¹ Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

*[Responding Author](#)

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Early Violence Prevention (EVP)

Early Violence Prevention can be described as proactive interventions taken by teachers and parent to prevent/minimize aggressive behaviors and promote prosocial behaviors during early years (Pathirana, 2006). EVP is primarily based on three key principles: 1) Violence prevention can be learnt – starting from early life, (2) Adults shape the learning environment for young children, and (3) Therefore, adults can learn how to model and teach young children constructive ways to cope with anger, frustration and conflict (ACT - Adults and Children Together, an ongoing campaign against violence, 1998).

Hence, importance of EVP for Sri Lankan preschool children seems to be necessity, as important as basic mathematics, and language. Further, key to prevention lies in early, systematic, and continuous intervention that reduces those social experiences contributing to violence. EVP also builds those internal resources protecting children against involvement with violence (ACT, 2004; Yoshikawa, 1994). Studies also reveal that destructive teacher-child relationship may have a long and short-term negative effect on the formation of relations and may interfere with learning, behavioral and academic achievements (Raver & Knitzer, 2002; Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990; Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000; Brophy & Evertson, 1981; Birch & Ladd, 1997).

Importance of understanding teacher practices pertaining to EVP

Literature report that teacher practices vastly contribute to prevent EVP. Literature also convey that poor classroom management skills and low rates of teacher praise results in classrooms with higher levels of aggression (Webster-Stratton, Reid & Hammond, 2004; Hagekull & Hammarberg, 2004). Literature further conveys that Poor classroom management skills and low rates of teacher praise lead to classrooms with higher levels of aggression and rejection influencing the development of individual children's continued conduct problems (Kellam, Ling, Merisca, Brown, & Ialongo, 1998).

Studies also convey that teacher utterances directed at children with high aggressive behaviors contain lower affective quality in comparison to the ones directed to children displaying low aggressive behaviors (Steinkamp, 1990), and teachers respond to less than one tenth of the aggressive behaviors of the children. Out of those responses large proportion of teacher responses contained discipline and negative attention contained responses, in comparison to others (Goldstein et al, 2001)

Relationship between Teacher practices teacher perceptions and EVP within young children

Research reports that teachers with more effective skills in classroom management are more likely to prevent “chain reactions” of escalating emotional and behavioral difficulties in their classrooms (Goldstein et al., 2001). Further, teachers who proactively reinforce children's prosocial behaviors by maintaining well-managed, emotionally positive classrooms are also to provide children with support for the development of self-regulation (Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Rescorla, 1990; Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald, 2007; Webster-Stratton & Taylor, 2001).

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Moreover, human ecology stresses the importance of understanding the target population (preschool teachers) in context, as an essential component of an effective prevention/intervention program. Literature on this issue indicates that exploring and identifying the perceptions of the target population would enhance their commitment pertaining to the issue of designing a culturally appropriate prevention intervention program (Reese, Vera, Thompson, & Reyes, 2001). Therefore, the paper opines that EVP programs in Early Childhood Education (ECCD) institutions should pay considerable attention to the perceived activities of the preschool teachers, as perceptions and attitudes of teachers on the issue may inadvertently influence the outcome of the program.

In Sri Lanka, preschool teacher training is provided by a multiplicity of institutions (Pathirana, 2017). Duration of the courses vary widely ranging from one day to two years (Sarvodaya, 2000; Open University of Sri Lanka, 2001; 2002; Wijetunge & Wickramaratna, 2003; Children's Secretariat, 2010). However, till about a decade back training was not a mandatory requirement to teach in a Sri Lankan preschool (UNICEF, 2003) As a result, authorities to-date are struggling with the quality assured capacity building process of preschool teacher training even at present (Children's Secretariat, 2010; UNICEF, 2003).

However, preschool teacher training courses (Open University of Sri Lanka, Sarvodaya, 2012; Yoshida Preschool Teacher Training, 1987) in Sri Lanka do not adequately seem to address effective EVP interventions whereas they are included in standard preschool curricula in the global milieu (Tillman & Tsu, 2003; Committee for Children, 2002; ACT, 2003; Tillman, & Colomina, 2003). , and even though Sri Lankan preschool teachers have recognized peace education (National Institute of Education, 1995; Pathirana, 2005) and early violence prevention (Pathirana, 2006) as needs to be addressed in their preschool classes.

METHOD

Present study comprised of two phases.

Phase I - during the first phase of this study a **survey** questionnaire was given to 275 preschool teachers from 18 (out of 25) districts in Sri Lanka. Participants surveyed were preschool teachers, between the age group of 18 to 60 years. All teachers were females from varied preschool communities (i.e. Preschools managed by in private, public and not for profit organizations, preschools in the plantation/ street children and fishing communities, urban vs. rural preschools, and preschools managed by religious institutions such as temples or churches).

The preschool teachers were requested to list five strategies carried out by them to prevent and minimize aggressive behavior and five frequent strategies they do to promote prosocial behavior within the preschool children in their classes. The study solicited 1199 (87.2%) responses of preventing/ minimizing aggressive behaviors and 1050 (76.36%) responses of promoting prosocial behaviors out of 2750 responses.

Phase II - During the second phase of the study, twenty three preschool teachers again from diverse preschool communities (rural vs urban, preschools administered by religious/government and non-governmental organizations) were **interviewed** and requested to name prosocial behaviors which they observed within the children in their classrooms.

RESULTS

The aim of the present study was to explore the perceived Sri Lankan preschool teacher practices pertaining to EVP. The data were collected in two phases using a mixed method.

Phase I: Survey of Preschool teacher perceptions pertaining to early violence prevention

The analysis of preschool teacher responses in the teacher interventions to prevent/ minimize aggression convey that the majority of preschool teachers perceived themselves to be practicing general behaviors to maintain structure and discipline in the classroom (sing a song while clapping, encourage them to learn...) (544, 39.6%). They also seemed to focus on teaching children positive behaviors (teaching them to exchange toys, share objects...) (280, 20.4%), explicit teacher interventions to prevent aggression (prevent children from bringing toys from home, use drawing to explain to children why they should not fight with each other...) (150, 10.9%) and general interventions to prevent aggression (use religious rituals to promote moral values within the children, praising children...) (137, 10%). However, specific actions such as reinforcing children to use positive behaviors (60, 4.4%) and telling children to stop fighting (28, 2%) seemed to be hardly mentioned. Also, significant number of preschool teachers (176, 12.8%) did not document their practices to prevent/minimize aggressive behaviors.

Teachers also seemed to be practicing a wide spectrum of behaviors. These could be categorized on several dimensions: telling/teaching vs. doing activities, individual focused vs. group/social, authoritative/instructive vs. democratic/child initiated good practices vs. bad practices. Practices could also be categorized into religious activities, activities with emphasis on silence, praise, techniques to prevent discrimination, techniques to divert attention, socially focused, direct conflict management, instructional emphasis, empowering the children, moral and teacher initiated action.

The analysis also revealed that preschool teachers very often use stories, puppets and role-plays to prevent/minimize aggressive behavior in their young charges. Other frequently used techniques were telling children the advantages of helpful behavior such as being able to study well, it's positive outcome to self/others, and giving leadership/ responsibilities to children.

The analysis conveyed most frequent preschool teacher perceived practices to endorse prosocial behaviors were teacher initiated actions to promote specific prosocial behaviors (give gifts, star, stickers to children who help others, provide/create opportunities for children help their peers, encourage children to share...) (445, 32.4%). Significant number of

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preschool teachers perceived that they provide verbal reinforcement (350, 25.5%), take general actions also to promote prosocial behaviors (136, 9.9%).

However, physical reinforcement such as giving gifts to children (79, 5.7%), and specific teacher action to promote prosocial behaviors (10, .7%) were hardly mentioned. Thirty (2.2%) responses could not be specifically categorized while a very significant percentage of preschool teachers (325, 23.6%) opted not to respond

Phase II: Preschool Teacher Interviews

Preschool teacher interviews record that in order to promote prosocial behavior teachers tell stories, songs, sonnets (kavi). They also request, instruct children to share food, ask them to share blocks, initiate helpful acts, request a child to take a book to another child, and distribute books, etc. One teacher said children like to listen to stories that contain prosocial messages and there were days when she only told stories to the children.

Some of the practices listed by the preschool teachers were telling children lovingly to share things, giving things for children to share (e.g. giving a box of pastels for one desk to share rather than one box for each child, bottle of gum etc.), give group activities such as making a collage, tell stories containing prosocial messages, keep children who shout near the teacher, giving a badge to children who behave well, tell children in a loving manner not to fight with each other, ask them to apologize and make the hurt child feel better.

Analysis of the teachers interviews convey that listed perceived teacher practices to promote prosocial behavior were quite similar to listed perceived practices to prevent/ minimize aggressive behaviors.

Preschool teacher perceptions: Use of physical punishment to minimize aggressive behaviors - None of the preschool teachers interviewed seemed to have perceived that corporal punishment is an effective disciplinary strategy to discipline preschool children. When speaking about a preschool teacher who taught before her, a participant said that using a cane to hit and/or threaten to hit children had created a negative impact on children in that preschool class. When she was initially given the responsibility of teaching that class she found the children to be extremely aggressive and uncontrollable.

When asked whether they practice corporal punishment, participants denied doing so and reported that such practices are harmful and would create a negative impact within children. They were also critical towards their colleagues who were reported to use physical punishment to discipline children. For example, one teacher illustrated that the preschool teacher who taught the class before her had used very harsh methods to discipline children, at times even hitting children. Thus, when she first started working with that class it was very difficult for her to manage them by using positive verbal instructions.

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However, during the interview one teacher almost reluctantly admitted that she uses the cane on rare and extreme instances when she finds it difficult to discipline children, using positive disciplinary strategies. Three preschool teachers stated that they use a stick to '*frighten the children when they misbehave*'. However, informal discussions revealed that some preschool teachers believed physical punishment created positive changes within children on some occasions such as when children displayed severe aggression hitting/ harming other children. They also opined after administering physical punishment (i.e. hitting children) created positive behavioral changes within the concerned child.

The author observed a preschool teacher carrying a stick (not using it) to make children listen to her and behave (according to her) during the teacher interviews.

Another preschool teacher reported that parents removed the children from a nearby preschool because the teacher in that preschool used a cane to discipline children. However, several teachers said that at times they take 'a stick to scare the children' when children hit other children or destroy class projects. However, teachers also felt that children are repulsed by such strategies and cried, had run away from them or told the teacher that they will never come to the preschool. However, teachers also reported that when children go home, they cry and complain to tell their parents that they want to come the next day.

Once, when I took a stick one child in my class said that he is not going to stay in the preschool anymore and walked away from it. Then I asked his friends to bring him back. Children know how to calm another child in such instances. He listened to his friends and came back. (Preschool teacher from a village preschool)

Other such strategies employed by preschool teachers were to tell children that they do not love children if they indulge in undesirable behavior or use firm words. In both these instances teachers said that children did not like it and told parents that they do not want to come to preschool anymore, but changed their minds later.

Relationship between risk factors and perceived teacher practices

Teacher interviews conveyed that risk factors such as neglecting, abusive parenting impacted aggression within children. Few teachers (n = 02) felt that children whose families use extreme negative disciplinary practices such as hitting or using harsh words cannot be disciplined with loving, kind words or gentle commands.

Once we took (admitted) couple of children from the nearby slum (inner city) community, just across the road (This particular preschool only admits the children of the university staff of which it is attached to) as a special research project undertaken by our preschool. Once when I was doing an indoor activity with the children in my class, one child from this community, all of a sudden ran away from the class for no apparent reason, out to the ground and was about to cross the road. All the time I was calling his name and asking him urgently to return to the class, I too was running after him using good, kind words and addressing him son etc.,

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but the child kept on running, reached the gate which separated preschool from the main road. As I (the teacher) stood rooted to the ground with fear for the safety of the child, a three wheeler driver who knew the child used very harsh and bad words (meaning filth) ordered the child to go back to the preschool to which the child immediately obliged.

Preschool Teacher from a Model Preschool

Positive perceived practices

Analysis conveyed that the preschool teachers also used positive alternative strategies. A participant opined that preschool teachers are required to be creative when disciplining young children.

One day, in my classroom, except a few children who are inactive or 'extremely innocent' all the others were acting out and behaving aggressively. They used to jump from the windows and run to the play-ground, shout like mad and never ever listened to me (meaning teacher instructions). So I thought rather than teaching or screaming at them I should think of ways to discipline children in a positive way (she elaborated at a later instance by saying that she felt such methods like shouting would be ineffective because the preschool teacher who had been in charge of the class before her had used them and children had become immune to them). To make them listen to what I say... Initially children never went in a queue to wash hands etc. they used to run, at times trampling and hurting each other. So I told the children, let's make a train... this is the engine to the child who was first in the queue and these are the boxes to the children who are behind him... Next I said if the engine is separated from the boxes there will be an accident. Then I asked the children whether they could wash their hands without meeting with an accident and all of them said yes...then I made a separate train of boys and a separate train of girls. Washing hands has been a peaceful activity ever since.

Preschool teacher from a model preschool

Several teachers stated that they keep toys and other things at a height that children can reach. Thus, when they come to preschool in the morning children start playing with those things rather than fighting with each other; they felt this helps to reduce disruptive behaviors in preschool children as they do not need to run to the teacher requesting for toys.

I keep the preschool door open (preschool was next to the house) therefore, when children come early morning to the preschool they prefer to go inside the classroom and play with the toys rather than fighting outside (preschool teacher from a rural preschool).

Interviews also conveyed that preschool teachers use tried and tested methods indicated in the literature (McGinnis & Goldstein, 2003; Slaby, Roedell, Arezzo & Hendrix, 1995). Given below are several such excerpts provided by the phase II participants.

I discuss with other teachers. I try out new techniques. One such strategy I have learnt is that if a child does not stand straight during the circle time... say his name is Manil (pseudonym), I tell the others in the class, look at Manil...see how straight he is standing. Then Manil is

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forced to stand straight and be a positive role model to others and obliged to display to positive behaviors. My experiences in such instances are that children wanting the positive attention of others stand straight or behave in a manner that they are supposed to behave.

When all the children are shouting I say something softly and ask children whether they heard it? Then children stop shouting to listen to what I have to say.

When a children throw shoes I keep them aside and ask the child who threw the shoes first to be in the class without them. When the child sees that he is the only one without the shoes he cries and tells me that he will not throw shoes in the future.

There was a child in my class who used to hurt others. I gave him responsibilities and praised him when he did something right. Later he started helping me a lot such as in distributing papers, books etc. He also helps other children in the class. Now he is the most helpful child.

If a child is speaking and disturbing others while I am doing a craft activity I ask that child to come and sit or stand next to me. I tell him/her kindly that he/she will be able to see things better if he/she is next to me. I find such methods stop the child from talking and disturbing other children in the class.

If I tell children in my class silence! Silence! We are going to sing a song, I have found that this kind of behavior would not make them stop talking. Instead if I start singing I have found they too will stop talking and sing along with me.

Once I took the preschool children in my class to camp in Ratmalana. There we visited the museum. We could see guns hanging on the wall. When we came back to the preschool I told the children 'Did you see that none of the uncles in the building were carrying guns, were they?' and the children said 'no', then I asked 'where were the guns?' children said 'hanging on the walls'; I asked 'Then should children be playing with them (it seems children use sticks as guns and pretend to shoot each other often in that preschool)?' the children said 'no'. After that if I noticed children playing with the guns even if they pretend to use a stick as a gun, I only had to ask 'Where were the guns?' in response to which they would immediately drop the sticks.

The interviews also revealed that teachers use tokens to maintain discipline in the classroom such as giving a star, a smiling face to children who maintain silence while doing a quiet activity in the classroom or who complete an activity without shouting during the activity etc.

Explaining and advising appeared to be a frequent strategy used by preschool teachers to make children in these classes realize their mistakes or aggressive behaviors committed toward other children.

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When children push each other to be in the front while going in the queue I tell the child who pushed ‘ you should not do like that ...it is not good’. Others should also get to go in front. If the child really loves to go in the front of the queue I tell them today you go in the front...and the next day, allow another child to go in the front like that...

When analyzing practices pertaining to preventing and minimizing aggressive behaviors in preschool children it was observed that teachers were not aware of systematic practices or behavior modification strategies. However, they seemed to be using different methods randomly, which they had learnt from mentors or through trial and error.

Teacher perceived sources of EVP interventions

A majority of the preschool teachers interviewed thought that experience helps when it comes to using strategies to prevent aggressive behaviors within children. There were others who thought that observing preschool teachers who know and practice effective strategies helped. Minority who listed creative strategies reported that they learned those from their former head teacher or other teachers in the preschool who practices such techniques.

Other techniques used were: reading books about effectively disciplining young children, Inner reflection and questioning such as ‘if I want the class to behave in such and such a manner what should I do? How can I do it?, discussing with other teachers in the same preschool, discussing with the head teacher the strategies or practices to employ when and if a problem situation arises and thinking spontaneously and using intelligence to act in a particular situation when children behave aggressively

Teachers said children should be made to feel and experience kindness, compassion and other such values, not be preached about them. Some participants reported that they set an example by modeling prosocial acts to set an example to children in their preschool classes.

I give food and water to an old man who comes to the preschool. children observe me and ask questions. If I tell the children he is a beggar I don’t think they will understand. I tell them that he is without food or money to buy food. Sometimes I have seen that they take food and water and speak to him kindly, in the same way that I speak to him.

When a child in my preschool is not well I go and visit him/ her. This way we can also see the home environment of the child to see whether they face problems (domestic violence etc.) or not.

The Preschool teacher interviews also conveyed that teachers take children to visit children’s and elders’ homes. It seems that before visiting such places they discuss good practices with children such as the manner they should behave in such places.

We take our children to children’s homes or elders’ homes. This year we took the children in our preschool to the elders’ home (i.e. how should they behave when they visit elder’s home).

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Before going there we explained to the children what is to be expected, such as grandmothers are there...how to behave in such a place, such as that they should not break things etc.

The interviews also revealed that preschool teachers promote group activities and group plays during the New Year celebrations and concerts. In addition, religious activities are also arranged with the aim of promoting prosocial behaviors in children.

Recently we hosted an alms giving and invited monks who are also children. The preschool children washed their feet, served food...

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study conveyed that preschool teachers in the study have identified interventions which they use pertaining to EVP. While some are consistent with the effective practices listed in the EVP literature other have been categorized as practices which should not be used to manage aggressive behaviors of young children. However, though preschool teachers perceived that negative disciplinary practices such as hitting children are not appropriate, certain perceived practices used by the preschool teachers, even if these practice may not be harmful are certainly debatable. Moreover, some of the perceived practices were not consistent with the tried out best practices listed by the EVP literature (Slaby et al., 1995; McGinnis & Goldstein, 2003; Flannery, Liao, Powell, Vesterdal, Vazsonyi, Guo, Atha, & Embry, 2003, Goldstein et al., 2001). Preschool teachers also seem to be unaware of specific behaviors and behavioral modification strategies or best practices suggested in the prevention/ intervention literature (Committee for Children, 2002; Slaby et al., 1995).

Hence, considering the importance of children acquiring positive social emotional skills early in life to address violence and aggression the prevention/ intervention literature strongly recommends that preschool teacher training in this context should not be left to chance (Denham, Caverly, Schmidt, Blair, Demulder, Caal, Hamada, & Mason, 2002).

As this study has indicated, and research has made clear, comprehensive preschool teacher training program to address EVP seem to be crucial for young children to develop holistically, free of aggression and violence. Devoid of a happy and peaceful atmosphere, early childhood education activities in preschool cannot be carried out effectively and harmoniously (Farrer, 2000; Neill, 1973; Slaby et al, 1995). In order to achieve this, present research identifies knowledge based insightful training, for preschool teachers inclusive of practical skills, competency attainment, and the need for training manual.

Moreover, there are several benefits to preschool teachers if they are aware of effective EVP. If they treat preschool children harshly their preschool will be extremely unpopular since everyone, especially young children abhor such conduct and would refuse to attend such a preschool. Second, if the teacher does not know how to manage the class he/she would not be in a position to conduct other activities as much time would be deployed to silence the

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children. As a result, time reserved for other activities would be spent maintaining order in class.

The prevention/ intervention literature seems to agree on the possibility of teaching/ learning models to alter social cognition, behavioral modification and social learning in young children (Slaby et al., 1995; Raver et al., 2002, McGinnis et al., 2003).

Also studies carried out in Sri Lanka indeed convey that preschool teacher at times use corporal punishment to discipline the children (Wijetunge & Wickramathne, 2003; Pathirana, 2006), though implementation of corporal punishment is an illegal practice even in Sri Lankan schools (Ministry of Education, 2005; De Silva, De Soyza & kannangara, 2001; UNICEF, 2010).

Similarly, a significant percentage of preschool teachers in the sample have stated their need and eagerness for training in EVP. Also, teachers in the sample have indicated the helplessness they feel when they cannot handle situations in which children behave aggressively (e.g. hurting and distressing other children in the class). Others have expressed their willingness and desire to attend such training if offered. All these information were provided without being requested in the surveys and interviews conveying the urgent need for such programs; although the literature (Seidman, 1998) suggests that survey questionnaires do not produce detailed responses when not called for.

Based on the results of her study the author would like to suggest following recommendations to the policy makes if and when developing culturally appropriate early violence prevention programs in Sri Lanka

1. Clear, broad, culture/ context specific, mission and vision pertaining to EVP in early childhood education. Policies, philosophy and activities in each preschool should mirror this mission and vision.
2. High behavioral expectations of value based philosophy and strong commitment from the staff during the implementation of the program.
3. Necessity of creating a child friendly/ sensitive environment and environment of understanding personal goals, achievements and problems of the children.
4. A visible, supportive head teacher/ and a board of administration which recognizes the importance of and is knowledgeable about EVP.
5. Delegation of responsibilities to other preschool teachers; though the head teacher/ and the governing body should take the responsibility of dealing with major issues. Empower preschool teachers to handle classroom issues related to EVP.
6. Continuous knowledge, skills, and competencies provided to preschool teachers pertaining to EVP, through workshops, handbooks, leaflets, videos and workshops.
7. Effective networking with parents, other preschool in the area and members of the community on issues of EVP, child protection and effective parenting.

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Therefore, it could be said that early childhood educationists/ policy makers in Sri Lanka would find it a rewarding task to implement a preschool teacher-training program pertaining to EVP in this perfect climate. Moreover, adopting a whole school/universal prevention approach to address aggressive behaviors in children will be more cost effective and sustainable, relative to conducting a parental education program or behavior modification program for at-risk children in isolation. Compared to other target groups such as parents or children, Sri Lankan preschool teachers are more likely to remain/teach in the same preschool, or continue his/her profession as a preschool teacher and would be convenient to contact, if there is a need. Therefore, it could be assumed that developing and providing an extensive preschool teacher training program for Sri Lankan preschool teachers on EVP, would be economically feasible and psychosocially cost effective.

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