



POLICY BRIEF

Free to Grow: benefitting businesses where it matters most

Thandi van Heyningen

Not only is it feasible to deliver programmes that prevent violence against women and children during work hours, it also benefits businesses. By focusing on improving interpersonal relationships, lessening parental stress and nurturing parent-child relationships, such programmes can prevent family violence, decrease workplace conflict and increase productivity.

Key findings

- ▶ Free to Grow, an intervention to prevent violence against women and children delivered at work during work hours, has a positive impact on participants both at home and in the workplace.
- ▶ Free to Grow is novel in that it addresses violence against women and children at the same time and is workplace-based.
- ▶ Workplace programmes offered during work hours expand the reach of interventions traditionally only offered in community settings.
- ▶ Participants reported improved relationships with their children and said they were able to manage stress and conflict better.
- ▶ The programme is feasible for delivery in a busy workplace. The business owner reported fewer incidents of conflict between employees and improved productivity.
- ▶ Quality facilitation is key. Facilitators must hold progressive views about gender and violence, be engaged in their own, personal growth, be socially aware and understand the nature of trauma.

Recommendations

- ▶ Programmes like Free to Grow are excellent value for businesses. At low cost, they create a platform for improving employees' emotional and social skills and have a positive impact on mental health and well-being. Rather than being response-orientated like most Employee Assistance Programmes, they are preventative.
- ▶ Businesses could integrate programmes like Free to Grow into wellness offerings that fit into the working day.
- ▶ NGOs delivering parenting or violence prevention programmes could equip, train and support their facilitators to deliver blended programmes that address the risk factors for violence against women and children simultaneously.
- ▶ Workplace-based programmes could generate income for NGOs.

Introduction

Violence against women and children in the home is an endemic problem in South Africa and has a profound impact on the workplace. It reduces productivity and is associated with higher rates of absenteeism, poor employee retention and fewer opportunities for career progression.¹ Conflict at home affects how individuals communicate and interact with their colleagues; they either withdraw or may bring the conflict to work.

The impact of family violence is long-lasting and transferred from one generation to the next.^{2,3}

This hampers the country's social and economic development. Not only does it decrease work productivity, it increases healthcare costs and worsens social issues by normalising violence and impairing healthy relationships.^{4,5}

This pervasive problem is entrenched by societal norms that condone or promote the use of violence within family relationships, either between intimate partners or between parents or caregivers and their children.⁶

Programmes that focus on improving family relationships, lessening parental stress and fostering nurturing parent-child relationships can reduce violence in families. An added benefit is that when they are offered in the workplace during work hours, they may enable working caregivers to receive support that would otherwise be challenging to access.

Children who see or experience violence are at greater risk of developing mental health disorders

Between 2020 and 2024, the ISS partnered with Tikketai, an agricultural food packaging business, and the Seven Passes Initiative (SPI), an NGO delivering positive parenting programmes, to develop Free to Grow: a programme that addresses the risk factors for violence against women and children. The partnership implemented the programme at Tikketai during work hours. Productivity improved and there was less conflict among employees at work. Employees who took part reported better family relationships, especially between parents and their children and an improved ability to

manage stress and conflict. This policy brief describes the process used to develop and implement Free to Grow.

Why preventing violence against women and children is important

Violence against women (VAW) and children (VAC) most often happens in the same household and is influenced by socio-economic, systemic and psychological risk factors.^{7,8}

Chart 1: VAW and VAC often co-occur and have similar risk factors

Socio-economic factors	Poverty, unemployment and lack of education are major risk factors as these conditions can lead to stress, which can result in violence within the household.
Harmful societal norms	Attitudes that condone violence and rigid gender roles contribute to VAW and VAC. Patriarchal structures that view women and children as property or subordinate make them more vulnerable to violence.
Psychological factors	Many perpetrators of violence against women have experienced or witnessed violence in their childhoods, which can perpetuate a cycle of abuse. ⁹

For children, the impact of seeing or experiencing violence is profound and can lead to long-lasting, negative outcomes. They are at greater risk of developing mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁰ Furthermore, they are more likely to become perpetrators or victims of violence as adults, setting up intergenerational cycles that are hard to break. Boys who experience violence in the home are more likely to use violence themselves as adults and girls who experience violence in the home are more likely to become victims of violence as adults.^{11,12}

Children who live in households where there is intimate partner violence (IPV) are at greater risk of experiencing harsh discipline, abuse and neglect because when a parent is in an abusive relationship, it has a negative

effect on their ability to parent.^{13, 14, 15} Interventions should, therefore, provide parenting support alongside strategies that address the risk factors for IPV, such as interpersonal conflict, stress and substance abuse.

Working parents need support

During the development of Free to Grow, the programme's developers interviewed working parents and caregivers. Every woman interviewed had been exposed to or experienced violence. They expressed a sense of powerlessness in the face of violence, finding it challenging to know how to speak out against abuse, whether it was directed at themselves or others. It was also difficult for them to recognise abuse when it was not physical or sexual, for example, emotional or verbal abuse.

In many households, the sole breadwinners, often women, work in unskilled or semi-skilled positions and spend long hours commuting or doing shift work

Parents, especially young mothers who were more likely to have young children, felt overwhelmed by their children's behaviour. They expressed concern over the restrictions on using corporal punishment. Grandmothers raising their grandchildren faced significant stress due to the responsibilities of caring for multiple generations and highlighted a disconnect in the relationships between grandparents and their teenage grandchildren. These stressors exacerbated negative interpersonal communication and conflict resolution, which was often compounded by the tension of balancing work and home demands. High levels of caregiver alcohol abuse acted as a catalyst for violence.

Working parents also feel overwhelmed trying to balance the demands of home and work. In many households, the sole breadwinners, often women, work in unskilled or semi-skilled positions and spend long hours commuting or doing shift work. These findings are not unique to our study setting, with a national study on income dynamics showing that single-parent, women-headed households experience the greatest stressors.¹⁶

Why we need workplace programmes

To date, most interventions to address violence against women and children in families have been offered in community settings. For South Africans who are employed, particularly those in low and semi-skilled occupations who work long shifts, it is difficult to attend these programmes, even if they are offered over weekends or in the evenings. Employees who work shifts or irregular hours or who commute long distances to work and arrive home late use the weekends to do chores.

If interventions can be designed or adapted for delivery during work hours at work, their reach can be increased. Workplace-based programmes



HIGH LEVELS OF CAREGIVER
ALCOHOL ABUSE ACTED AS
A CATALYST FOR VIOLENCE

can also create a safe space where employees experiencing violence at home can receive support and access to resources.

Developing Free to Grow

In 2020, the ISS partnered with SPI to develop a workplace-based intervention to address violence in the home. A local business owner had found this a pervasive problem for his employees, and it was affecting his business.

SPI is a member of the South African Parenting Programme Implementers Network. One of the project's aims was for NGOs doing this work to be able to generate income from delivering interventions to the private sector. A collaborative partnership was formed, the outcome of which was Free to Grow – a curriculum-based interactive intervention delivered to groups of employees during work hours in 12 weekly sessions of 90 minutes each.

Free to Grow began with a human-centred design process. The programme's developers explored the problems prospective participants experienced at home and what they needed to deal with them. They conducted 10 life history interviews to deepen their understanding of employees' experiences.

Free to Grow developers reviewed existing workplace-delivered interventions to prevent violence against women and children in the home. Scientific evidence from low-

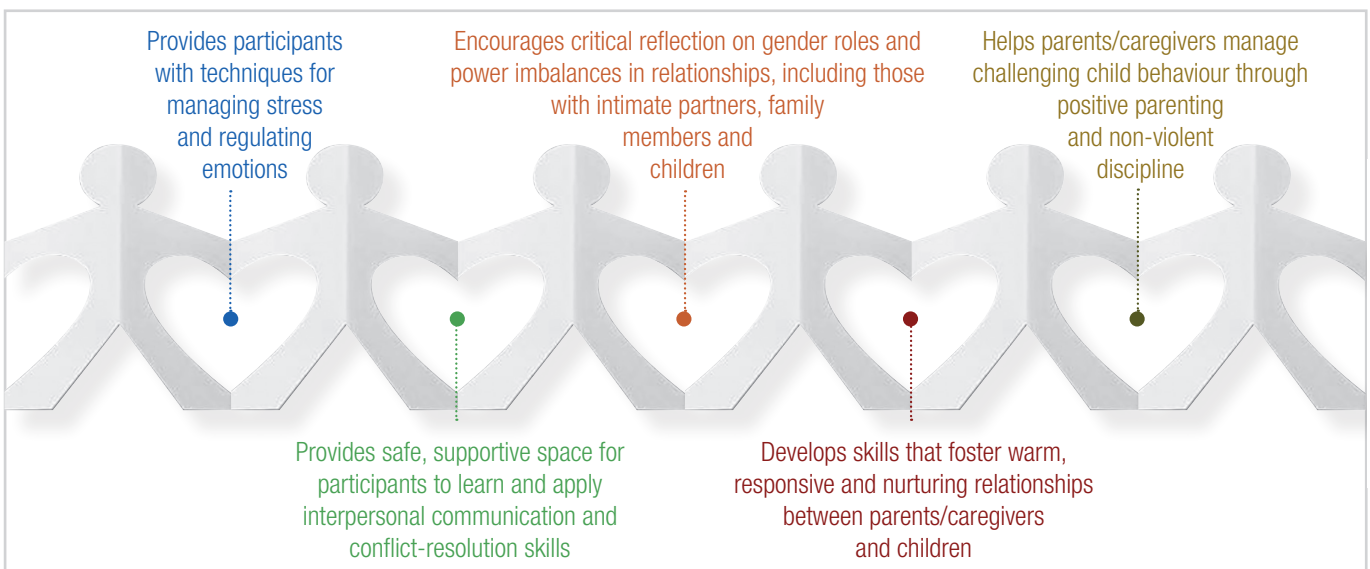
and middle-income countries (LMIC) is sparse, with most research coming from high-income countries. Only six LMIC studies could be found, revealing a gap in the literature. These studies revealed positive outcomes for workplaces and employees.^{17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22}

The evidence review named common elements of interventions that showed a positive impact. These elements were matched with employees' needs and experiences. The programme developers used this data to develop the first iteration of what became Free to Grow. SPI facilitators were trained to deliver the first version of the programme to a group of 12 employees at Tikketai.

After the first round of delivery, the participants and facilitators provided feedback as did the business owner and management team. The programme's developers used this feedback to refine the programme in a rapid, iterative process to match the needs of participants, the business and the facilitators. Free to Grow was delivered to later groups of employees using the same iterative process. By mid-2024, the programme was in its fifth iteration, having been delivered to 59 employees with improvements based on feedback incorporated after each delivery.

From the outset, the design included weekly support and supervision sessions, coaching and debriefing for facilitators. This was crucial because facilitators need

Chart 2: Free to Grow prevents family violence via five mechanisms



support when dealing with issues such as violence, gender and power that often trigger their own past trauma. Speaking about and sharing experiences of interpersonal violence and abuse elicited strong emotional reactions from participants that were sometimes difficult for facilitators to contain. Some of these situations also elicited distress from facilitators, who may have been exposed to the same kinds of violence. Being able to debrief and have access to psycho-social support was critical for the facilitators' well-being. Regular supervision offered constructive guidance to identify individual needs, work through challenges and learn the best way to address these should they arise again.

A unique approach to programme delivery

Free to Grow facilitators use a collaborative style. They encourage participants to share their experiences, opinions and ideas. The facilitators create a psychologically safe space where participants can engage in dialogue, interact with the content and each other, and learn and practise new skills. The goal is to engage, empower and motivate participants. This approach encourages participants and facilitators to contribute to the session by sharing their own experiences to illustrate what is being learnt increasing the relevance of the programme.

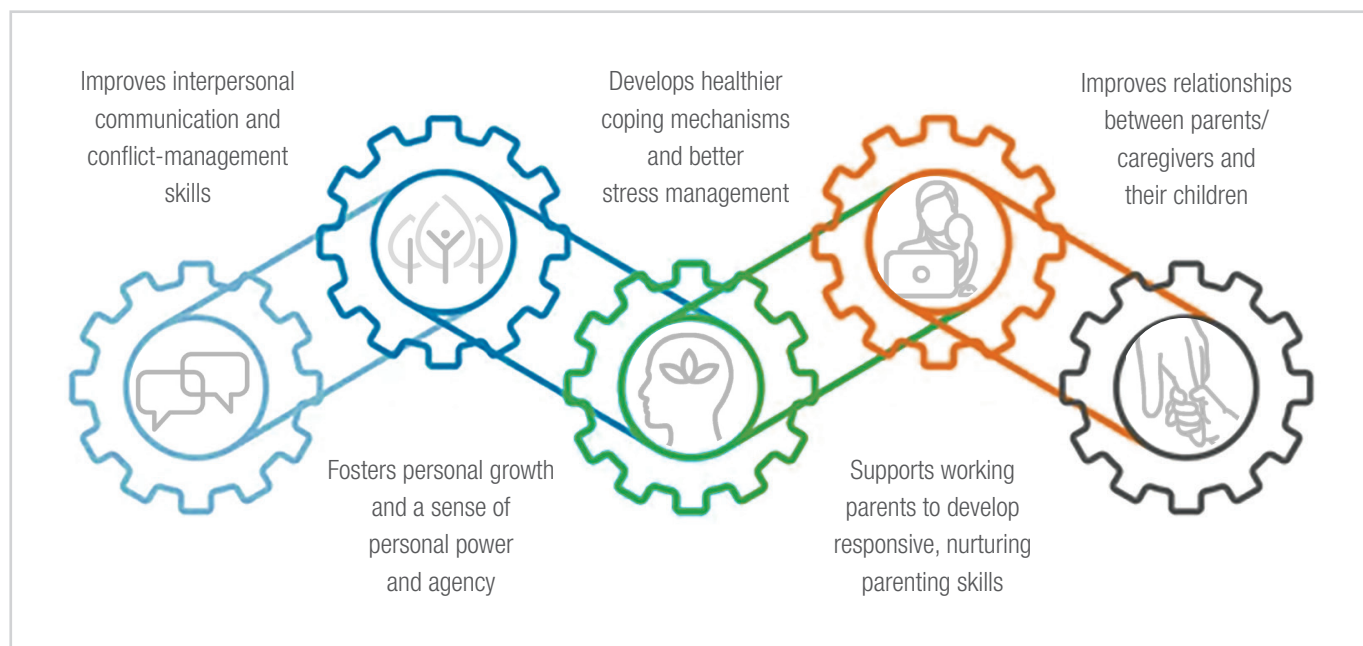
Facilitators model skills, which provides participants with the opportunity to learn by observing. The interactive, group-based approach allows participants to practise what they have learnt in a safe space, especially when their home may not be safe. Take-home exercises and materials can reinforce learning between weekly sessions and can be shared with other household members if it is safe to do so.

An important aspect of the programme's implementation is ensuring that participants have access to psychosocial support if they need it. This could take various forms including a clinic, a consultation with a private counsellor or an NGO, such as FAMSA, which offers mental health and social welfare services. For example, during the delivery of Free to Grow at Tikketai, we made referrals to a registered counsellor who could provide psychosocial support for employees at the workplace. Facilitators also had access to these referrals. For some participants, taking part in Free to Grow was the first time they realised they were experiencing abuse or someone in their family was and more support was needed in these situations.

Free to Grow has a positive impact on participants

The programme had a positive impact on participants' lives and led to changes in their behaviour, attitudes and relationships with their children and partners.

Chart 3: Free to Grow makes a positive impact on employees



Some participants noticed their communication skills improved. They were able to tell their partners what their needs were and approach arguments and problems without getting as angry or stressed as before. Others said they felt more confident about setting limits around their children's challenging behaviour without resorting to shouting or physical discipline. These findings suggest the changes participants experienced had a positive impact on the dynamics and atmosphere of their households leading to more peaceful and stable homes.

When parents started communicating and interacting in a positive way with their children, their children responded positively, which set up a mutually reinforcing pattern

Participants reported being able to express their feelings better during distressing situations. For example, putting into practice the skills they had learnt to calm down before reacting or using techniques for self-care to improve their emotional state. Parents said the calming techniques even worked with children's challenging behaviour when they felt tired after a long day at work. Here are some examples of what participants said:

- 'I have a very short temper, and now I learnt that I should think before I speak, because sometimes when we're angry then strange words and things come out.'
- 'I feel like in myself there's a change. I'm more calm too. In some situations, a calmness comes over my soul, and I don't want to shout about the things that are wrong.'
- 'I'm more calm. Like I said, I was a very confrontational person. I'm now much more calm. I would rather sit and chat with you than reprimand and force you.'
- 'Before the programme, my sister and I argued and fought. Literally fought, punched each other ... but now I'm cool and calm because I know ... earlier in the sessions, it was spoken about and right after, my sister and I got into an argument. I got up and left. I was just calm.'

Parents' interactions with their children shifted from confrontational or punitive to responsive and nurturing. Children mirrored the shift in their parents: when parents started communicating and interacting in a positive way with their children, their children responded positively, which set up a mutually reinforcing pattern. Participants said:

- 'Since I've been doing the sessions and chatted with [my daughter], I can see every day she is getting a bit better ... she's rising to meet her duties ... It's not 100%, but piece by piece, it's getting there.'
- 'My view has changed so much with how I see my children and how they do things and how I do things regarding them. It helped me



FINDINGS SUGGEST THE CHANGES PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED HAD A POSITIVE IMPACT, LEADING TO MORE PEACEFUL AND STABLE HOMES

change how I handle them ... Even when I come home now, I get told "Goodnight!" and never before was I wished goodnight when I came home. My son even says goodnight to me and calls me "Dad." So, it has changed completely.'

- 'She started walking around less. She is home earlier, and the most important part to me was the friends that she had. The friends she has started to leave alone. She started doing more things with me ... No, but she is coming right. I am proud of her.'
- 'He's [participant's son] started fighting less when there are other children. He's calming down nicely. Just now and then when he fights with the other children, then I say: "No, don't do that." Then he doesn't do it, but otherwise, he plays very nicely now ... because in the past, before I was here [at work], I had a problem ... but ever since I've applied these things that I never knew about, like spending time with him, it's started to calm down.'

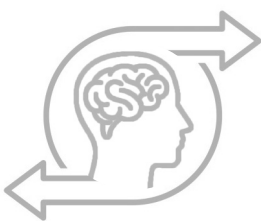
Management noticed a difference in the interactions between employees who had participated in Free to Grow and those who had not

Developing awareness of their thoughts and emotions helped participants understand their reactions better. Learning ways to regulate their emotions and care for themselves helped participants feel more in control and allowed them to shift how they saw their ability to make choices and changes. They shared the following:

- 'We learnt "self power" and "woman power" and that helped me a lot ... many times I felt hopeless and as if I am worthless. Then this now helps me to remember I am a mother. I am a woman. I have authority and power ... I could never speak what I felt, but now I know how to handle it. Especially if someone is using manipulation or avoidance with you.'
- 'It helps a lot because I see I am a different person every day.'

All but one participant reported sharing the content with their spouses, children, other family members and friends. They were excited about it. They wished more people could have the opportunity to take part in the programme and shared how it had changed things at home:

- 'We sit nicely in bed, or we sit over there, then I'd chat with [my girlfriend] about the things I learnt from here today and how it was and lots of things ... I think she also learnt because things became more calm her side.'
- 'I could share it with my husband and with his children and with my son. I could share with those I work with in the factory who aren't in the group ... we can chat nicely with them now and say what one has learnt from this.'



REAL, SUSTAINED CHANGE
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- ‘Yes, with my in-laws. With my son-in-law. The father and the daughter. They also have a little problem with a daughter of theirs who has a baby ... and it’s helping them.’
- ‘I also let my children review it, and they said: “Gee, mom, this is nice stuff. This is stuff we want to learn.”’

Free to Grow has a positive impact in the workplace

The business owner and management staff reported that employees who had taken part in Free to Grow were more productive after the programme. They noted positive shifts in attitude, a general improvement in interpersonal communication and better relationships between employees who had participated. Less conflict among employees was an unanticipated outcome that helped smooth operations and minimise disruptions.

Management noticed a difference in the interactions between employees who had participated in Free to Grow and those who had not. Free to Grow participants were more empathic, appearing ‘kinder’ and more ‘sensitive.’ The HR manager said: ‘It is as if their insight into the lives of their fellow employees through undergoing the programme has created more tolerance and greater empathy for each other.’

The business owner reported that employees resolved conflicts quickly; they did not escalate to the point where management had to intervene. There were fewer incidents of conflict on the production line which translated into smoother operations and increased output.

Delivering the programme during work hours was workable, but the sessions needed to coincide with the least busy times and be staggered to minimise the number of employees off the production line at one time.

Facilitated delivery is important to successful outcomes

How facilitators implement the programme is critical for good outcomes. They must set up an environment that is responsive to participants’ needs and a psychologically safe space for learning and practising new skills. Facilitators need to hold progressive views

and have a level of self-awareness to model the programme’s values. They must have the skills to support and guide survivors of family violence to receive further help. Compassionate facilitators can create a safe and empowering environment for participants.

Real, sustained change in attitudes, beliefs and behaviour can take time, and the programme cannot be seen as a once-off intervention. There is a need for follow-up, refresher sessions.

By integrating intervention programmes into the workplace, there is an opportunity to reach working parents and engage men

When participants take material home and share it with family members, there are small positive changes among those members who can also engage with the tools and information. Another opportunity to strengthen outcomes is to offer Free to Grow in the community surrounding the workplace to reach employees’ family members. This approach may reinforce learning and widen the programme’s reach.

Conclusion

By improving interpersonal skills, teaching stress reduction techniques and providing parenting support, programmes like Free to Grow can help protect women and children.

The feasibility of implementing such programmes within the workplace has been proven. Although it requires flexibility on the part of businesses, there is a benefit for businesses as well as families. By integrating intervention programmes into the workplace, there is an opportunity to reach working parents and engage men, who are often harder to reach through community-based programmes. This approach broadens the accessibility of programmes making them more inclusive.

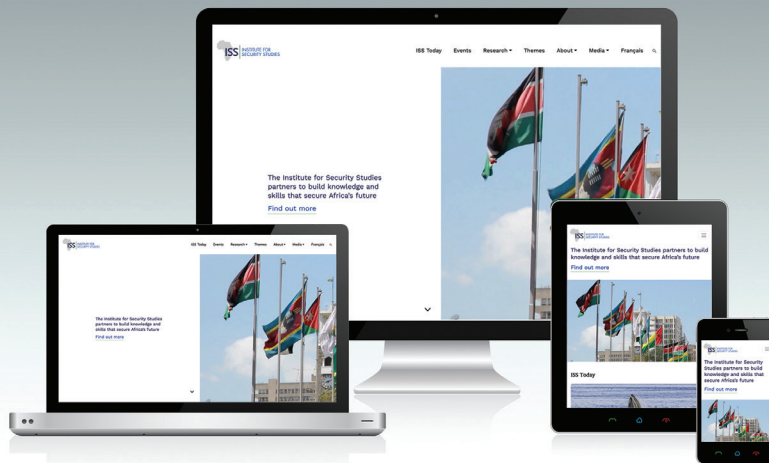
Positive outcomes are observable as participants can apply new skills at work and at home. Some changes may, however, evolve over time, underscoring the importance of refresher sessions. Following up ensures the programme’s benefits are sustainable and reinforces the skills learnt during the intervention.

Notes

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