

INFORMATION BRIEF

KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE: MANAHEL'S COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT FOR SAFEGUARDING IN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Opposition controlled Northwest (NW) Syria is one of the most challenging contexts in which humanitarian actors work. Its people desperately need support, especially in the underfunded formal education system. The need for support is even greater for children in Syria that face grave psychological effects from the loss of family members due to conflict, shelling, fighting and forced displacement, as well as widespread corporal punishment against children. Verbal and physical abuses, including beating, are common both in the home and in schools.

This Information Brief describes the measures the UK aid-funded Manahel - Syria Education Programme has put in place to keep children safe from physical and psychological abuse in NW Syria's schools so they can learn and make progress. This Information Brief concludes that the successes in changing long-established practices in NW Syria have been achieved through a comprehensive approach to creating system change that addresses policy, resources, capacity, accountability, transparency, and behaviours.

The Manahel - Syria Education Programme is a five-year project funded by FCDO and implemented by Chemonics Group UK, with the goal of improving access and quality of lower primary education in the Idleb and Aleppo provinces in NW Syria. Manahel provides access to safe, inclusive, and quality learning opportunities for children in NW Syria while strengthening education actors to manage education effectively.

Overall,

64.6%
of teachers

**reported improved attitudes
towards children with disabilities
and a**

71%
improvement
**against the use of physical
punishment.**

A violation of children's rights

Many studies show that anxiety caused by corporal punishment is the principal reason children do not like to go to school and that this leads to school dropout, low school attendance, and poor academic performance. Yet, physical violence against children remains permissible under law in the Syrian Arab Republic. Corporal punishment is lawful in the home, alternative care settings, daycare, schools, and penal institutions. The legal defences for the use of corporal punishment are set out in the Penal Code (1949) and the Personal Status Act (1953).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that corporal punishment is a violation of children's rights. Article 19 states that parties shall take all suitable procedures to protect the child from all forms of physical and mental violence. Article 28 states that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's "human dignity."

A new commitment to safeguarding in Northwest Syria

In NW Syria, 2018 saw the introduction of a new Safeguarding Policy and a comprehensive programme of support to help implement safeguarding reforms. Developed with Manahel's support, the governorates of Idlib and Aleppo published Administrative Order No. 961 which proposes a set of regulations that govern education and school codes, safeguarding children's rights and obligating schools and other education entities, as well as teachers, to the Order's provisions.

Under the Order, teachers are prohibited from practising corporal punishment against students. The policy defines several levels of risk and the type of punishment for teachers who breach the policy. For Level-1 risks, teachers are provided with a verbal or written warning. For Level-2 risks, teachers are provided exclusively with a written warning. For Level-3 risks, teachers are subjected to disciplinary wage deductions. For Level-4 risks, involved teachers are transferred and dismissed. For level-5 risks, the teacher is brought before the court.

Signs of success in keeping children safe

In 2019, Manahel received 284 reports of violations of the Safeguarding Policy from the schools it directly supports. Year by year, due to the processes, training and support of the team and stakeholders, the number of violations reduced significantly. In 2022 Manahel received only 34 cases, an 88% decrease since 2019. The aim is to have zero cases in Manahel-supported schools and schools managed by the Education Directorates (EDs) of Idlib and Aleppo. This does not mean less reporting but involves changing the behaviour and actions of the entire education system towards child abuse to make education a "safe haven" for children.

Results from behaviour change research conducted in 2020/21 show significant shifts in teachers' attitudes towards corporal punishment, with a 71% improvement against the use of physical punishment by teachers. Furthermore, results showed improvements with 65% of male teachers in quality schools demonstrating improved positive attitudes towards children with disabilities, compared to 63.4% of female teachers.

Manahel's safeguarding approach

Manahel's support for the Safeguarding Policy seeks to implement best practice approaches that both ensure the safety of children in Manahel-supported schools and develop the capacity of the education system in Idlib and Aleppo more widely to prevent and manage violence against children. In Manahel-supported schools, the programme takes a zero-tolerance approach to corporal punishment and seeks to extend this to all schools.

The process applied in Manahel-supported schools ensures investigation and follow-up of reported incidents of physical and psychological abuse of children by school staff have been implemented in a consistent manner. This guarantees transparency for all parties and ensures that every case is given equal attention, regardless of the outcome.

The Manahel approach involved several innovations including the introduction of a Safeguarding (SG) Officer and an Investigation Committee.

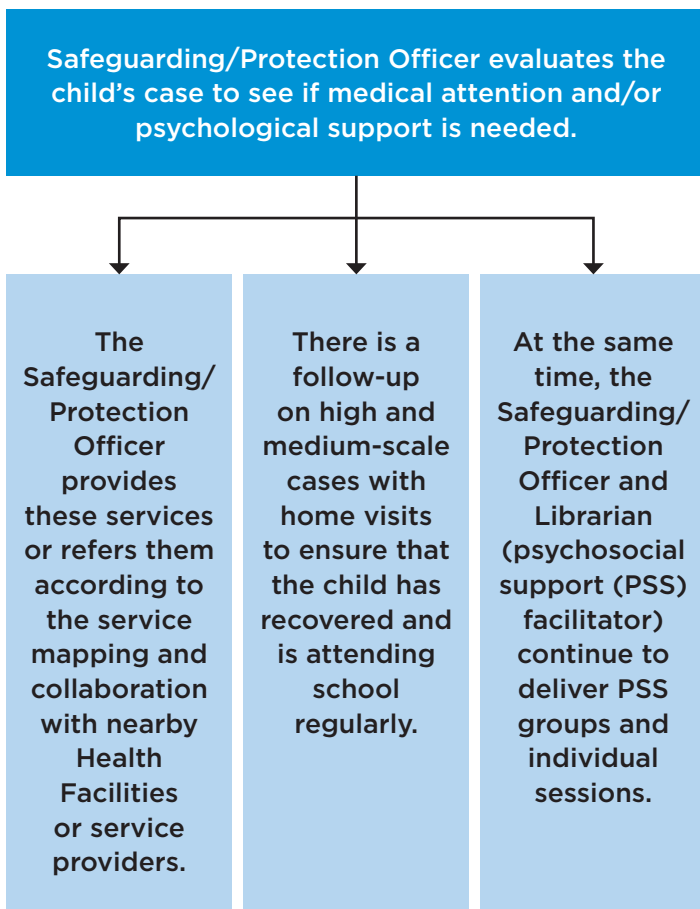
The SG Officer is the primary focal point for protection and safeguarding at the school level and pivotal in establishing a safe educational environment. The role involves ensuring secure spaces within schools, handling and reporting complaints, and training school staff on protection and safeguarding principles, including children's rights.

They are instrumental in fostering an atmosphere of safety, awareness, and responsiveness, addressing any concerns or violations promptly to maintain the well-being of the school community.

The Investigation Committee developed by Manahel is chaired by the SG Officer and members include the Protection Instructor and the Educational Instructor. It plays a pivotal role in maintaining the integrity of child protection investigations, with the chair serving as the liaison point between all concerned members, coordinating investigations and conducting individual interviews with the child involved in an environment that minimises pressure and fear. The members are crucial for preserving the legality and transparency of the process, participating in interviewing witnesses and the accused, and evaluating case risks, thus ensuring the overall reliability and thoroughness of the investigations.

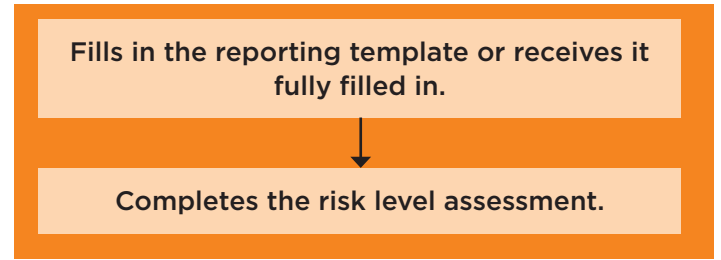
The following safeguarding steps followed in Manahel-supported schools illustrate how the two innovations are embedded in the safeguarding response:

Child Support

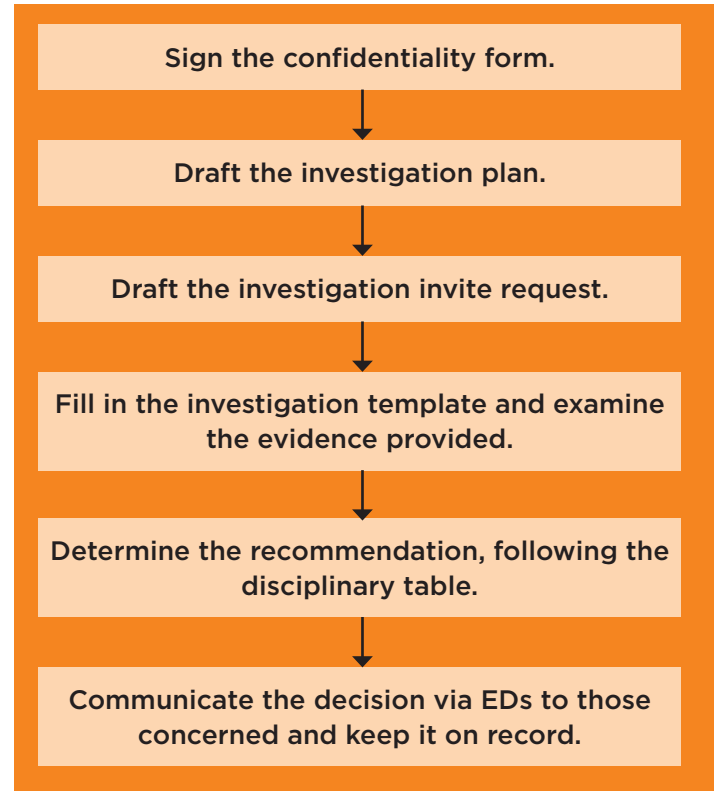


Reporting

Safeguarding/Protection Officer



Investigation Committee



Manahel does not consider the case closed until the receipt of the formal ED decision. Manahel also confirms and tracks warning letters that are sent to perpetrators. Furthermore, the Safeguarding/Protection officer continues to monitor the behaviour of the perpetrator for several months to ensure that he/she does not repeat the abusive behaviour.





Supporting safeguarding across Northwest Syria

Manahel has taken a series of steps to ensure that corporal punishment in both Manahel-supported schools and all schools across Northwest Syria is reduced. The steps are as stated below:

Worked with EDs to develop a Code of Conduct, which includes the Safeguarding Policy, for all teachers in NW Syria. The Code of Conduct must be signed by staff and new recruits and ensures the relationship between school staff and students is determined and clear, specifying the dos and don'ts and including a clear statement that any form of corporal punishment is unacceptable.

Developed and issued a Disciplinary Actions Table in collaboration with the EDs stating the disciplinary action if any of the Code of Conduct items, including Safeguarding, is violated.

Made a commitment to follow up on any report of violation of the Code of Conduct (including Safeguarding issues) by the Investigation Committee.

Appointed a Protection/Safeguarding Officer in each of the quality schools to ensure that the Safeguarding Policy is followed and implemented in the supported schools under the Manahel programme (see above).

Produced and distributed a regular safeguarding magazine promoting safeguarding within all schools in NW Syria. The topics selected and prioritised in the magazine are chosen based on community engagement and feedback.

Distributed brochures and flyers related to safeguarding, including recognising safeguarding issues, specifying the disciplinary levels, and alternative and positive discipline in dealing with children.

Highlighted safeguarding topics to be discussed during Learning Circles, where teachers meet to discuss and resolve problems, targeting school staff on a regular basis.

Established School Protection Committees, ensuring they have an effective role in relation to safeguarding messages and following up cases to reduce violations.

Worked with EDs to ensure School Protection Committees have full authority across NW Syria in their role to investigate any violations related to safeguarding and child protection issues.

Committed to following up on perpetrator behaviour for several months after any violation to ensure that the violation is not repetitive, the behaviour of the perpetrator is changed, and new alternative and positive mechanisms are being followed.

Ensured there are complaint boxes in each of Manahel-supported schools to enable anyone who has a concern to report it while having a no tolerance and no retaliation policy.

Provided specialised training for the Protection/Safeguarding Officers on key safeguarding topics.

Developed a special manual to set out safeguarding standards within schools.

Building ownership and continued commitment to safeguarding

Manahel continues to have discussions and dialogue to ensure that the safeguarding system established, in consultation with the community and local governing bodies, is mainstreamed, not only in Manahel-supported schools but also in the rest of the schools in NW Syria. This has involved:

- Improving the Code of Conduct to ensure that it further supports the Safeguarding Policy and is implemented across NW Syria.
- Developing the safeguarding system, tools and support mechanisms to ensure continual improvement and address changes or requirements of the EDs.
- Conducting ongoing awareness raising, producing further booklets and flyers related to safeguarding and distributing these among the teachers in the supported schools.
- Customising training under EDs' Human Resource and Professional Development, Classroom Management to mainstream the commitment to safe spaces for children and avoid negative acts and violations of the Safeguarding Policy.
- Working with the EDs to increase the number of Safeguarding/Protection Instructors to ensure enough human resources to implement and keep teacher practice updated.
- Ensuring there is an electronic complaint and feedback mechanism to receive high-risk and sensitive complaints, making sure that people feel safe to report incidents.
- Following up with the students during focus group discussions, PSS sessions and other means to promote children's awareness of their rights and make sure they have access to, and knowledge of, reporting mechanisms.

Conclusion

The success to date of Manahel's development and support of safeguarding in NW Syria's schools is based on taking a systems approach to change. The factors that hold problems in place are varied and interconnected, and involve shifting structures, interactions, and behaviours within the education system. In addition to finding points of leverage, such as the connection between safeguarding and the Code of Conduct, Manahel has also sought to build transformative connections between different components.

In this way, the relationship between Safeguarding/Protection Officers, school, the Investigation Committee and the EDs ensures that roles and accountabilities reinforce good practice. With appropriate tools, processes and awareness raising to support changed practices, Manahel has helped to facilitate the system to operate for the benefit of children both now and for the long term.

