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Child helplines during COVID-19

Butterflies, India

Introduction

Butterflies has been protecting and empowering street and working children in New Delhi since 1989. It runs programmes in eight areas with high concentrations of working/street-connected children, e.g. bus terminals, markets or railway stations. Since 1998 it has run a helpline for children as part of Childline 1098, a freephone telephone number set up by the government's Childline India Foundation. The helpline operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in 595 cities and districts across India in partnership with 1,060 NGOs. Butterflies is responsible for South and South-East Delhi and Nizamuddin Railway Station.

The programme

Childline India Foundation's call centres forward calls requiring child protection interventions to NGO-managed local helpline intervention units. Childline 1098 is integral to Butterflies' child protection programme and has 27 dedicated staff. Calls received include reports of child abuse, criminal offences against children, children in crisis who are missing or have run away from home, and children in exploitative child labour situations. Each case involves investigation, rescue and tailored support to reintegrate children back into their families where possible and appropriate. Butterflies coordinates with a strong network of other services and government bodies at each stage.

In March 2020 India entered lockdown. Because the government considers the national Childline an essential service, it continued to operate, with some of Butterflies helpline staff coming into the office and others having calls redirected to their mobile phones.





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Implementation

When a call is received reporting a child protection issue, Butterflies staff establish the details, then their child protection social work team visit the location, speaking to the child, neighbours or community members. If there is a case of abuse to report, the staff member does so at the local police station and accompanies the police officer in visiting the location. Butterflies staff speak with the child separately and support them to report the issue. The police register the case and apprehend the offender if required. Butterflies ensures that the police do not interview the child on their own; instead, social workers speak with the child and write a report, shared with and signed by the child. Children are also accompanied to the hospital where they are examined for signs of physical or sexual abuse, potentially important evidence in a criminal case. Butterflies works closely with the police to ensure the case is effective in court.

Within 24 hours of rescuing a child, Butterflies is required to present the child before the District Child Welfare Committee, a statutory structure in the child protection justice system. Staff begin tracing the child's family, working closely with the District Child Protection Unit and local Childline if the child is from outside South or South-East Delhi and if they do not know their full address. Once a child is reunited with their family, Butterflies continues follow up for six months, ensuring that the child is safe, happy and attending school.

Rescued children without family members or a guardian are looked after in Butterflies' temporary residential care centre while staff support them to trace their families, prepare a social investigation report in consultation with their parents, and finally escort them home to be reintegrated, or find a suitable long-term alternative care option.

Some cases involve slightly older children living in their workplace. Sometimes children leave home and come to the city without telling their family due to problems at home. These children don't always want to return home.

India has good legislative provision for children in crisis, supporting Childline 1098 to function well; this includes the Right to Education Act, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, the Prohibition and Regulation of Child Labour Act and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act. Butterflies use these legal instruments to back up its child protection work.

In an average month Butterflies receives 80–100 calls requiring intervention. During the three-month lockdown this dropped to 15–16 per month. The type of calls also varied, with many parents, especially those without smartphones or an internet connection, very concerned for their children's lack of education while schools were closed. Butterflies also received several calls from parents requesting their children be taken into institutional care, feeling they would receive a better quality of care and education. This was not something that Butterflies was expecting, as it advocates family-based care, not residential care. These requests were documented and forwarded to Child Welfare Committees, District Child Protection Units and also to the Delhi Commission for the Protection of Child Rights.

Childline 1098 is well-known in the districts where Butterflies works. The organisation carries out outreach work in schools and communities, in busy areas like bus and railway stations, and marketplaces, and distributes pamphlets promoting the helpline. Butterflies also organises skill and knowledge-building workshops in child protection for employees of district-level authorities.

Outcomes

- Through Childline, Butterflies has protected thousands of children over the past 22 years: there have been 48,166 cases that required intervention, where children were rescued and supported, many being reunited with their families; and 39,774 cases of support provided over the telephone.
- Butterflies delivers child protection training to police, hospital staff, teachers and child welfare committee members, resulting in increased awareness of child protection issues among key decision-makers.
- There is increased awareness among the local population about child protection issues thanks to Butterflies' promotion of Childline.
- Over the past two decades Butterflies has built strong relationships with key decision-makers in the districts it covers, ensuring good levels of collaboration between different sectors and stakeholders.
- Childline is a well-established and well-connected national service with a strong platform, meaning that Butterflies and other NGOs are invited to contribute to policy discussions at national government level.

Challenges faced

- Resourcing and training a professional team of social workers and psychologists is both time-intensive and a financial challenge.
- Butterflies would like to do more research and analysis into the cases received through Childline to better understand the factors that cause child protection issues in different areas and ways to prevent them.
- The decisions of duty bearers in the criminal justice system are often influenced by social norms and values that undermine the rights of the child. Sometimes this becomes problematic, causing conflict between Butterflies and decision-making authorities.

Resources required

- As a government-supported programme, Butterflies receives 40 per cent of the total costs of running the helpline.

Top tips

- 1 Talk to a range of children to understand what problems they face and what support they need, then build a child-friendly system that addresses their concerns.
- 2 Before launching a helpline, make sure you have a professional team in place and standard operating procedures so you are well prepared when you start receiving calls. Have good, robust data management systems to track calls and monitor outcomes.
- 3 Make sure you are very knowledgeable about the laws of the land – you will need to use them!
- 4 If you need to rescue children, you need a place for them to stay temporarily, or established partnerships with other organisations.

CONTACT DETAILS

Find out more about Butterflies at
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Protecting and empowering children since 1989