

Psychosocial support to vulnerable children through child advocacy centres

ChildLink, Guyana

THE CONTEXT IN GUYANA

- Movement restrictions meant that the functioning of ChildLink's social service centres for children was significantly reduced.
- Schools are key in raising awareness of abuse and providing opportunities for children to report cases of abuse. The number of unreported child abuse cases increased during school closures as children lost contact with teachers who often recognise and report cases of domestic violence. The pandemic restricted children's opportunities to report abuse. The increase in cases can be inferred from a decrease in the number of reported cases during the period, suggesting that more cases were going unreported. This was particularly noticeable in 2020.
- Social norms view physical punishment as acceptable for controlling and disciplining a child. Corporal punishment is prevalent and some even argue that it is justified. These harmful practices have been passed on from generation to generation.
- Since the implementation of the Sexual Offence Act 2010, there has been an annual increase in reports of child sexual abuse. A 2018 ChildLink report¹⁵ stated that 26 per cent of cases reported to the Child Advocacy Centre were of children who were first abused at age 10 or younger, and 60.9 per cent of those who were first abused at 13 or younger. Many children reported abuse by more than one offender.
- COVID-19 restrictions prevented vulnerable children freely leaving their homes and continuing regular contact with child care workers.
- When COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, child abuse cases jumped from 2,761 in October 2020 to 3,129 at the end of December 2020, an increase of 368 in one quarter.¹⁶ These children faced all kinds of abuse – physical, sexual, verbal, neglect – sometimes at home, by people who are known to them.

¹⁵ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1a6dKjigazx3NoQDJBo5HS1uhzP2_kOo1/view

¹⁶ <https://guyanachronicle.com/2021/01/25/child-abuse-cases-exceed-3000-at-the-end-2020/>

THE PRACTICE: 'BUILDING FAMILY BONDS' WORKBOOKS

The pandemic meant that staff could no longer go to the communities to provide counselling and children could not come to the Child Advocacy Centres for face-to-face counselling. ChildLinK developed a new way of working to curb domestic violence against children in the short term and modify social norms in the long term.

ChildLinK developed two Building Family Bonds Workbooks to conduct online sessions with children and parents. The workbooks were developed by ChildLinK's team of social work professionals and a local consultant, recognising the disruption in children's lives caused by food shortages, loss of income, anxiety and school closures. The focus was on providing vital psychosocial counselling and support to children facing domestic violence or abuse during the pandemic. The online interactions were highly structured and all activities were child-friendly. Activities were also designed so that they could be done as homework by children and parents.¹⁷

Interaction with a counsellor is an absolute requirement for a child who has been deeply traumatised as a result of violence. Online contact meant that emotional support could be provided. The structure defined in the workbook helped the counsellor to set a clear process at the outset to work with each child on a regular basis.

HOW THE PRACTICE WAS IMPLEMENTED

The workbook comprises five modules to engage families through rapport building exercises; ongoing reflection on thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behaviours; stress management and relaxation

techniques; building emotional intelligence and self-acceptance; activities facilitating family bonding; and learning about problem solving techniques and child safety measures.

The activity is conducted step by step with the child through the guidance given in the workbook. Parents are present and the session is conducted either on the phone or a WhatsApp call. Some of the children have a history of child abuse or neglect. Some live with their biological parents and some with foster parents or relatives.

During the first call, the whole process is explained in detail and the expectations are set clearly for a three-to-six-month period. A non-judgemental, empathetic environment is created in which confidentiality is explained. Children are asked to reach out to the counsellor via telephone calls or messaging in case of any emergency.

In subsequent sessions, the counsellor goes deep into understanding the child's emotions and feelings and what she or he needs, and explores how family dynamics affect the child. A comfortable environment is created so that the child feels safe to share their past, and whatever is bothering or upsetting them. A self-acceptance assessment is part of the workbook and this informs the counsellor how the child feels about themselves. The counsellor's interaction with the child is guided by a thoughts-feelings-action approach to find out how the child is feeling and what is working and what is not working; the counsellor then moves forward with techniques for problem solving and further recommendations. The counsellor goes into the root cause of the problem and works towards solutions.

The facilitator's guide to 'Building Family Bonds' comprises practical activities based on cognitive behavioural therapy. Activities focus on strengthening family bonds, for example through goal setting exercises.

17 Both the workbook and the facilitator's guide are available online.

Building Family Bonds Children's Workbook: https://a7a4295c-3398-440f-8c6a-992effcdbfd4.filesusr.com/ugd/969956_53cd4fab6c574d3294572befde5f4710.pdf

Building Family Bonds Facilitator's Guide: https://a7a4295c-3398-440f-8c6a-992effcdbfd4.filesusr.com/ugd/969956_0b05fa9d613143a98bbb35f5d37e8e92.pdf

Tried and tested tools have been included in the workbook for facilitators and have been adapted for online use.

Using these tools, training sessions are facilitated with parents and caregivers to help them cope with disruptions in their lives, improve their emotional intelligence and learn effective coping strategies. The aim is that learnings and support from sessions for parents/caregivers extend to children.

Regular sessions are also held with children to assess the level of trauma being experienced by the child and its impact on their sense of self and relationships with others.

HOW THE PRACTICE WAS CONDUCTED IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The workbooks addressed the difficulties in reaching out to vulnerable children facing a hidden pandemic of domestic abuse and violence. The workbooks complement each other and activities have been designed to provide online support through counsellors to children and their parents. WhatsApp calls and telephone calls are used for these sessions.

With the easing of restrictions and increased vaccination, some face-to-face counselling sessions have also been conducted at ChildLink's Child Advocacy Centres.

IMPACT

- The use of the workbooks is in its initial stages. Even then, it is proving to be a helpful intervention tool. It has so far supported 37 children, 35 girls and 2 boys, during the COVID-19 period.
- Incorporating play therapy and talk therapy in one book works very well.
- The workbooks allow counselling to be carried out in a simplified way and families are sharing honest, real feelings and thoughts. This is proving to be beneficial.

WHY THE PRACTICE WAS EFFECTIVE

- Activities are diverse and applicable to families of any ethnicity or age group.
- Activities have a practical aspect that makes sessions fun and steers the process in a positive direction. Counsellors let every child and family progress at their own pace. The activities delve deep into family history, environment, and school.
- The programme provides **structured sessions** using cognitive behavioural therapy. An important aspect is working not only with the child but involving the whole family, with at least one parent present. Families were engaged in a relaxing, non-threatening and non-judgemental way with the underlying purpose of safeguarding the child throughout the process.
- **Counsellors are well-trained.** They explained the process and clearly shared the expectations and ground rules. Confidentiality is maintained and clearly explained. Any additional help required is provided through referrals to other services needed.

- **Child-centred and child-friendly activities** keep children engaged and interested through homework and discussions. The child can share about their home life and articulate their feelings. The counsellors use the responses to help calm the child and provide them with guidance on coping with the feelings that they identified. The child's emotional state is noted carefully and only then the sharing of information is encouraged. These methods have proved highly effective in even a short time.
- The workbook includes a component on **improving the capacity of parents for better parenting** through reflection and self-awareness. Parents are encouraged to use a supportive rather than a punitive parenting style. Family bonding activities form the basis for improved communication. This has prevented violence in the short term and laid the foundation of changing social norms in the medium to long term.

- Adapting to the emergency situation by using technology to support children online meant that violence against children could be prevented and vulnerable children could be supported.

VOICES OF CHILDREN

“Deep breathing activity is quite refreshing and new to me. It created an opportunity to observe my body’s movement and breath.”

Child taking part in ChildLinK’s programme



Case study: a counsellor’s experience

“The workbook is a great rapport-building tool and has proven effective in helping children feel comfortable. This is a very important stage in the counselling process and an activity such as ‘I am somebody who’ or ‘getting to know me’ is a great warm-up. I find that it is also helpful to share about yourself and your work as this will help children learn more about what counselling is and that it’s really a safe space for them to share and get the support they need. The aim of the activities is to create a non-judgemental space.”