

Using a therapeutic approach to heal wounds of violence and child abuse

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THE CONTEXT IN MEXICO

- The prevalence of child domestic violence is high and this increased during the pandemic (UNICEF Country Office Annual Report 2020).²⁰
- The 911 hotline reported a 28 per cent increase in domestic violence calls in the first two months of the pandemic. These figures relate to women but organisations working with children also reported increased violence. In October 2020, calls reached half a million, indicating that violence was increasing at an alarming rate.²¹
- Social exclusion, lack of education, marginalisation, and alcohol and drug abuse all contribute to high levels of domestic violence. There are also patterns of intergenerational violence where adults who had adverse experiences in their childhood repeat the same behaviour with their children.

- The National System for the Protection of Girls, Boys and Adolescents²² (SIPINNA) observed a trend related to intrafamily violence, including sexual violence, in the COVID-19 context. Reporting and detection were hampered because of the isolation of children in the pandemic, not least because the usual places where violence could be detected, such as schools or other social spaces, were closed.

THE PRACTICE: A THERAPEUTIC APPROACH TO STOP INTERGENERATIONAL VIOLENCE

JUCONI's therapeutic approach includes a set of educational, psychological and recreational strategies specifically intended to support the family. Through a safe and trusting relationship with the family therapist, the family is supported to understand their life experiences and develop their self-esteem and emotional well-being. They are encouraged to build healthy relationships so that they can adjust their responses to stress and replace harmful coping strategies with more effective responses.

²⁰ <https://www.unicef.org/media/100946/file/UNICEF%20Annual%20Report%202020.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.gob.mx/sesnsp/articulos/informacion-sobre-violencia-contra-las-mujeres-incidencia-delictiva-y-llamadas-de-emergencia-9-1-1-febrero-2019>

²² <https://rm.coe.int/mexico-covid-19/1680a02666>

The methodology has three main stages:

- Establishing a safe and trusting relationship with the family.
- Working intensively with families to help them process adverse experiences while learning new forms of relationship.
- Monitoring the application of the new learnings by the families until they can manage without support.

HOW THE PRACTICE WAS IMPLEMENTED

JUCONI's therapeutic approach to stop intergenerational violence is implemented in the following way.

Setting collaborative goals – A JUCONI family therapist makes a visit to the family once a week for sessions in which family members talk about the things and situations that they would like to improve. This is done through deep reflection, self-assessment, setting collaborative goals and working on recovery processes to resolve the effects of the violence they experienced in their childhood.

Creating personal and family plans – Family members learn strategies and tools to avoid repeating violence with their children and for relating safely as a family. Personal and family plans are created that allow them to create a different future. The functional scale by Emma Espejel²³ is used to give feedback to the family and to set goals about the positive behaviours and strengths they have developed or increased.

Additional support – Educational services are provided so that children and adolescents continue studying and adults improve their employment situation and finances. Families are supported to get health and food services through government social programmes. JUCONI runs children's recreational and sports activities in its own day centre.

Follow-up and evaluation – A six-monthly follow-up is carried out by the family therapist to gauge the effectiveness of the intervention. This looks at issues such as children's quality of life, health and emotional well-being, and reinforces those areas of intervention where support is still needed.

Therapeutic support promotes changes in other areas, such as keeping the family home where sessions are held clean and tidy so that it is a positive environment for handling and talking about emotional situations.

JUCONI uses activities based on rituals, play therapy and art to help the family become aware of their situation and take control of their family life in a very concrete way.

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

Work with families was adapted to be done remotely through video or phone calls. Through support and donations, JUCONI was able to provide mobile devices to families who did not have a telephone. Weekly or even twice weekly calls were established at the beginning of lockdown, supporting families from a distance and avoiding interrupting the therapeutic process.

With the easing of restrictions JUCONI has been working in a hybrid mode, i.e. some activities are being conducted face-to-face and some remotely, following all the government guidelines.

IMPACT

- JUCONI has worked directly with more than 4,000 families. Although the success rate varies, it ranges from 85 to 90 per cent.
- The first changes in a family are emotional and cognitive, brought on by parents' reflection on the impact of violence on their lives and therefore on the lives of their sons and daughters. They come to understand that family relationships must and can change and learn new ways to relate to each other.
- Parents learn and use new methods for disciplining their children. These are modelled by the educators during the family sessions.

WHY THE PRACTICE WAS EFFECTIVE

- **Parents' self-assessment and reflection:** JUCONI aims to stop the intergenerational transfer of violence. Self-evaluation by the adults in the family is the cornerstone of the intervention. They actively examine their behaviour and specific actions related to the problems they face with relationships at home. It is a long and arduous process, but it is very important for adults to understand that they too experienced violence in their childhood and that they want to make changes. This is a significant discovery since they understand that the same behaviour can pass on through their sons and daughters. By becoming aware, they take control of their actions and stop the cycle of adverse experiences that they have carried from their own childhood.

- **Sustained and long-term support for significant change:** Family therapists work with each family to create the best environment for the child and the family. This is a lengthy process: the average time taken to bring about changes in behaviour and break the patterns of violence can vary from a minimum of three and a half years to a maximum of five years. Sometimes, changes in scores in surveys used to assess violence are recorded over a year and a half. Gradually, the family's progress can be seen in the improved quality of interactions between family members, and a shift towards non-violent relationships.
- The presence of therapists in the family space and continuous visits over a long period of time contributes to the reduction of violent episodes. A safe relationship is formed between the family and the therapist in the first weeks, paving the way for further, deeper work. This helps the whole family create sustainable change in their relationships and not merely in one individual.

Case study: a family

This family is in an intensive phase of the family process. It consists of a single mother with four children. The mother is working with the family therapist with the objectives of improving her relationship with her children, avoiding using violence to discipline them, and improving her family's financial situation.

These objectives are recorded at the starting point. Using a scale from 0 to 10, the mother identifies the level she is at with the objectives, at the outset. This is the starting point for the family therapist in supporting the family to achieve the objectives.

To improve the mother's relationship with her children, a VIG (Video Interaction Guidance) is used that includes video sessions of her interactions with her children at home. The family therapist uses this to identify those times when there are synchronised positive interactions and harmony between her and her children.

At the beginning, these moments are few and far between, but gradually these increase with practice and continued dialogue between the mother and the therapists.

