

Supporting mental health needs during COVID-19

Butterflies, India

Background

Butterflies is a registered voluntary organisation in New Delhi, India, which has been working with the most vulnerable groups of children, especially street-connected children, since 1989. Through a rights-based, non-institutional approach, the organisation endeavours to educate and impart life skills to vulnerable children so that they become self-reliant and exit the generational cycle of illiteracy and poverty. Over the years, Butterflies has initiated a number of innovative interventions in the field and partnered with various government and non-government agencies to garner support for children. Butterflies also has a research, advocacy and training wing that supports mobilisation of civil society and influences policy. It is an active participant in national and international networks for advocating and promoting policies, programmes and actions to protect the rights of children. Butterflies integrates a cooperative model across all of its programmes. Following cooperative principles, programmes are inclusive and democratically run; participation is voluntary; and children share ownership of and responsibility for the design and development of the programmes' values, goals and rules.

Introduction: COVID-19 context

According to UNICEF India (October 2021)¹:

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in India led to a nation-wide lockdown starting from 25 March 2020. The pandemic and the lockdown involved restricted mobility of people as well as goods and services. This created severe challenges for vulnerable families due to the closure of shops, factories, and offices, and restricted access to public

services. One of the biggest impacts of the lockdown was the loss of livelihoods, especially in urban locations, as a result of which millions of workers across India moved back to their villages. The post-lockdown challenges encompassed practically all sectors, including not only livelihoods, but also food availability, health and nutrition, education, and access to public facilities for people. The children were also severely impacted in terms of food shortage, healthcare, disruption in education, and increase in risk of child marriage and child labour.

Programme adaptations

Supporting mental health is a cross-cutting intervention in all of Butterflies' programmes with children and young people. This focus has never been more important than it was during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Butterflies delivers a mental health and life skills education curriculum, through which it promotes holistic health. Since 1995, Butterflies has used the Child Health and Sports Cooperative (CHSC) to deliver this curriculum and bring about behavioural and attitudinal change among children, families, and communities.

The mission of the CHSC is to educate every child on the importance of safe and healthy living, including being emotionally well, which would help them to stay healthy and reduce their vulnerability to preventable illnesses. The cooperative has regular workshops where the children deliberate on health, nutrition and environmental issues and gain knowledge regarding prevention of diseases and the importance of nutrition and a clean environment. Initially established to focus on health, in 2018 the mandate was broadened to add mental health and a sports component to the health cooperative. Butterflies uses sport as a tool to improve the physical and emotional wellbeing of the child.

The CHSC is operational in eight countries across the world and in eight states of India. There were 6350 members (2935 boys and

¹ Source: <https://www.unicef.org/india/media/6761/file/Assessing%20impact%20of%20the%20COVID-19%20pandemic%20.pdf>, p.xxiii



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3415 girls) at the national level as of October 2021. These members are boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 21. Children elect a 'child health educator (CHE)' who is given training on first aid and is responsible for organising meetings of the cooperative. A 'child sports educator (CSE)', who oversees play and sport, is also elected. Additionally, an adult facilitator selects 'buddies' through a process of consultation with the children. There are two buddies in every cooperative – a girl and a boy – who are the focal points for children to reach out to when they have a problem or need support, which has been essential during the government-mandated lockdowns. The average age of the buddies is 14. The buddies are given regular training on basic communication skills, empathy and writing skills.

Implementation

When the lockdown began in March 2020, all in-person cooperative events had to stop. Despite that, the work Butterflies had done in establishing bonds between children and the CHSC buddies proved to be a great asset.

The buddies have been available to their peers, who can reach out to them over the phone at any time about mental health concerns. Buddies have a case notebook in which they can write down, with the child's permission, all the details of their conversations with the child, and which have been given to the Butterflies social caseworker. The buddy has always explained to the child the purpose of taking or sharing these notes. If serious issues arise, the buddies would encourage the child to meet the social caseworker to resolve the issue. The buddies would also accompany the child to meet the social caseworker, if the child so desires. Caseworkers would focus on building a child's capacity to cope with his or her current situations and responsibilities in society but also empower him or her to be self-reliant and independent. Their work involves engaging with families, community and local government in addressing issues experienced by children who need care and protection.

Additionally, caseworkers have been able to address children's mental health concerns through over-the-phone sessions. However, this format is not effective, as children generally do not have their own mobile phones and have to borrow them from parents, which inhibits their privacy. Children have been hesitant to share their problems over the phone. Therefore, in these cases, and with special permission from the government, the social caseworkers have been able to visit the children to conduct face-to-face sessions.

Buddies and child health educators have worked as a team whereby the CHEs have looked after COVID-19 prevention and have addressed symptoms while the buddies have ensured that the cooperative members have been emotionally well. The child sports educators have encouraged their members to play indoor games with their parents and siblings, and have provided them with carrom boards, ludo and other board games.

A CHSC buddy asked a child to draw a cup of chai (tea) to take their mind off COVID-19. The child decided to draw a 'Happiness Cup of Chai'. More and more children followed and drew their own happiness chai containing ingredients that make them happy. This activity helped to cheer up the children.

Challenges

- Lack of internet access in many households has made it difficult for buddies to reach out to the children who were affected.
- The mental health and life skills education curriculum, which prior to the pandemic was taught through in-person sports and games, had to be adapted for the home environment.
- Several children have worried about the loss of their household income and the financial crisis experienced by their families. They have felt extreme helplessness and despair. A few children started working to support their families. More intense follow up with these children has been necessary.

Outcomes

- CHSC has been proven to be a safe space for children to share, learn and take actions to promote their own health and emotional wellbeing.
- Butterflies' regular life skills sessions on mental health topics, such as managing emotions, have enabled children to recognise when they need help and reach out to buddies instead of keeping silent.
- The children of the CHSC have taken leadership during the pandemic by advising adults in their communities to wear masks and encouraging them to get vaccinated.
- CHSC has been a support system for children during the pandemic. Children and young people can reach out to the buddies at any time for help.
- Much of the stress and anxiety experienced by children and families has derived from a lack of food, cash, or schoolbooks and a fear of not going back to school. Buddies have been able to inform the CHSC adult facilitators about these crises within families, which in turn has enabled help to be provided in the form of cash transfers, food rations and learning materials.

Mental health is not a stand-alone programme, but it is woven into everything we do.

Rita Panicker
Director, Butterflies

Resources required

- Committed buddies and training for these children.
- Dedicated staff and funding for the development of workshop and training sessions.
- The adaptation or creation of alternative materials for remote engagement, such as games, comic books and more.

Top tips

- 1 Interventions to support mental health and emotional wellbeing cannot operate in a silo, but should be cross-cutting, and central to all of an organisation's engagement with children, families, communities and schools.
- 2 During the pandemic, challenges facing mental health have increased; this is an area of great importance and should be a core focus for public health services.

CONTACT DETAILS

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