

Supporting mental health needs during COVID-19

ENFOQUE Niñez, Paraguay

Background

ENFOQUE Niñez (EN) is a non-profit organisation that was created in 2005 with the mission of promoting the rights of children and adolescents in Paraguay to live and grow in a family and community environment that protects them. EN has a human rights focus, viewing children and adolescents' rights from a holistic perspective.

EN provides direct care for children and adolescents who have been separated from their families due to situations of violence or neglect, and also provides technical assistance to institutions and individuals involved in the National System for the Integral Protection and Promotion of Children and Adolescents.

Introduction: COVID-19 context

Dr Mirtha Rodríguez, director of Mental Health at the Paraguayan Ministry of Public Health, affirms that mental health problems have always existed, but confinement, due to COVID-19, brought out certain symptoms and increased anxiety disorders and depression in the general population. She indicates that mental health in children and adolescents was also greatly impacted, both in the socio-affective and the education aspects.¹

Additionally, the Paraguayan Ministry of Women² mentions that: "One of the health measures that the government implemented to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic has been social isolation (mandatory quarantine), which [has given] good results in terms of controlling the transmission of

the virus. However, this measure has been the trigger for a considerable increase in reports of violence against women, girls, boys and adolescents."

The government, together with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), launched the project "Paraguay protects women, girls, boys and adolescents against violence, in the context of the COVID-19 emergency" in 2020.²

The project

The well-being of caregivers directly impacts the children and adolescents they care for. Throughout their development, the emotional regulation of children and adolescents depends considerably on the adults in charge of them, which justifies the crucial need for spaces for reflection and support for people in charge of the care and protection of children and teenagers.

Mandatory quarantines imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic have forced many sectors to adapt their ways of working. The uncertainty surrounding the scale of the effects of the pandemic has been felt by both young people and adults. Caregivers have been forced to face these changes without clear guidance on how to comfort children and adolescents, and, on many occasions, with limited support.

With this in mind, in 2020, EN proposed the "Caring for Caregivers" project, with the collaboration of the Alternative Care Directorate (DICUIDA), a department of the Ministry of Children and Adolescents (MINNA), and financed by Family for Every Child through its COVID-19 grant fund. This project sought to create spaces for individual and group therapy for caregivers working in shelters in order to better understand how they handled the changes generated by the pandemic and to generate a support network.

¹ Source: <https://www.mspbs.gov.py/portal/24584/salud-mental-en-tiempos-de-covid-19-en-nintildeos-adolescentes-y-adultos.html>

² Source: <http://www.mujer.gov.py/index.php/noticias/paraguay-protege-de-la-violencia-mujeres-ninasninos-y-adolescentes>



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Implementation

The “Caring for Caregivers” project ran for five months in 2020, working with eight female caregivers and one male caregiver, a shelter staff psychologist and three directors of three shelters. A team of three psychotherapists led the process. Two of these shelters are located in the department of Alto Paraná in Eastern Paraguay and one is located in the Capital District, Asunción. The age of the caregivers ranged between 20 and 55 years, with the average age of the group being 33 years. Eleven virtual group meetings were held via Zoom with a total of 28 hours of group support. In addition, 54.5 hours of one to one online support took place.

These spaces were designed to be flexible and to meet the needs of the caregivers as they emerged. Priority was given to creating an experience which was supportive, rather than an additional burdensome task for caregivers to undertake. It was clear that the role caregivers play is extremely complex. They indicated that there are times when they do not know if they are doing the right thing and wonder how they should act when relationship difficulties arise amongst children and adolescents, especially during situations such as the pandemic.

The initial intention was for the project to be therapeutic rather than a space for training. However, throughout the process the caregivers raised the need to have better support systems, strategies and information provision for those working with children and adolescents. They requested training sessions and a technical team to support them with spaces to reflect on their emotions and on how to respond to the emotional difficulties of children and adolescents. They requested information and strategies around how to approach children and adolescents when they arrive for the first time at shelters, how to manage violent behaviour and how to create safe environments. They expressed that they did not have the support required to adequately address the needs of children and adolescents with disabilities or victims of sexual abuse. As such, a clear need for more training and support was identified.

Findings

- There is a need for participatory and collaborative work with caregivers of children and adolescents.
- Caregivers feel that on the one hand their work is not valued, whilst also feeling that they are under public scrutiny due to them working in shelters.
- Caregivers in shelters work long hours, often without rest or replacements, especially when there are sick children, adolescents or caregivers; this brings high amounts of pressure.
- Working conditions for caregivers are precarious due to the position and reputation of care work within the social system. Care work needs to be valued, strengthened and professionalised, through training and education for caregivers. Caregivers express that the value they gain from their work goes far beyond the monetary aspect; however, salaries should reflect the vital role caregivers play in society.
- The caring relationship between a caregiver and the children and adolescents they support is interdependent – all parties have the right to be cared for. Children and adolescents need available adults to support their development, and the emotional availability of adults does not depend only on the will or desire to do the job as well as possible; it also depends on the human limits of people, which can be affected by fatigue, stress due to overwork and lack of support and accompaniment.

PHOTO — Training and reflection meeting on the care provided to children and adolescents in shelter entities, within the framework of the new law for the promotion and protection of the right to live in a family which regulates alternative care and adoption.

Challenges

- Conducting individual and group support sessions and dealing with complex and difficult topics via Zoom presented several challenges including managing the Zoom platform, user accessibility, and internet connection limitations. In the group meetings, the caregivers connected through a single device from each shelter and many times there were difficulties maintaining a strong signal.
- Taking time out of their working hours to participate in the sessions and dedicate time for reflection was not easy for caregivers due to limited numbers of staff to cover their responsibilities.

Top tips

- 1** Care work in shelters should be given greater recognition with improved working conditions, to reflect the importance of the role, which sustains the lives of children and adolescents and nurtures their development.
- 2** Specific conditions must be met for caregivers to carry out their work effectively and safely, such as having a technical team from the shelter to support them, being in charge of a manageable number of children and adolescents, and being able to access individualised support sessions.
- 3** Specific trainings around the theory and practice of positive upbringing are beneficial. It is important that the trainings be linked to caregivers' contexts.
- 4** The implementation of a care programme for caregivers to provide sustained emotional support is recommended. This should be established within the work environment with the intention of offering a space for caregivers to express the difficulties and challenges that arise in the care of children and adolescents and how the work affects the caregivers themselves.

I felt identified. We realised that we are not alone: the other shelters have the same experiences. By coming together and talking to others about their experiences, you feel that your needs are heard, that they understand us more and we do not feel so alone.

One of the female caregivers of a shelter

What situations were these women experiencing? They do not have minimum working conditions. Care work sustains nothing more and nothing less than life itself.

Livia González

One of the lead psychotherapists in the project

CONTACT DETAILS

Find out more about ENFOQUE Niñez at

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