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# Child helplines during COVID-19

## Praajak, India

## Introduction

Praajak supports vulnerable families in urban and rural areas across West Bengal, empowering children to achieve their full potential. Its work focuses on child protection issues such as unsafe migration, child trafficking, child sexual abuse, early and forced marriages and child labour. Praajak supports children who are living on the railways, by offering them a different environment in which to learn, play and build skills for their future. It also helps to reunite children with their families and prevent children from leaving home in the first place by working with local communities and linking vulnerable families with government support schemes.

Due to restrictions brought about by COVID-19, Praajak's group activities and workshops with children had to stop in mid-March 2020. Railways also closed so Praajak was unable to go to the stations to meet new children. With movements and gatherings limited, the only way staff could reach the children they normally worked with was by telephone, so they set up a tele-counselling service, which was in place by April 2020.

## The programme

The Praajak team of 35 staff made calls to 1,000 children during the first two weeks of lockdown and continued to speak to each child once a week. Most of the children are between 12 and 18 years old with some as young as eight. The focus of the calls was to maintain contact with the children and address any concerns or issues they were experiencing. Some children and families received further support and follow up as required. Field workers supported the project by delivering hygiene and activity kits to children to encourage them to play and learn and support their well-being while at home.





**Family**  
for every child

**How  
we  
care**

By practitioners,  
for practitioners.



## Implementation

Initially, staff listened to children's worries about the new situation and shared advice on how they could protect themselves from COVID-19. Very soon Praajak realised it needed more training for its social worker staff to build skills in telephone interaction and counselling and in knowing when to refer or escalate cases. This took place in July and enabled staff to feel more empowered in the service they were providing.

While initial calls were more focused on checking in on children's well-being, after the training, staff were able to gather more information from children. Many shared how they were struggling with the lack of personal space, as living conditions were cramped with other relatives staying, and the lack of interaction with friends was also hard. It also became clear that relations between parents and children were becoming strained due to all the time spent at home, as well as between parents, with several cases of domestic violence reported.

To try to address this from a distance, Praajak compiled activity packs for children, which were distributed by field workers in the different areas. Social workers then engaged children in the materials during the telephone calls, encouraging them to spend quality time with their parents and siblings doing arts and craft activities and playing indoor games to help to deal with and resolve conflict situations.

While only a very few children have access to a smartphone (and if there is one in the family it usually belongs to an older sibling or parent), for those who do, Praajak organised some drawing competitions where children can share their artwork with each other through photos and video.

## Outcomes

Having had a very strong reach and regular presence in communities, Praajak staff were not used to telecommunication so the sudden arrival of COVID-19 and its restrictions took some time to adapt to; however, there have been some unexpected benefits of this new way of working.

- Staff found that talking on the telephone actually enables more of a private conversation. Usually, during community visits, there are not many spaces to sit and talk privately with children. Speaking on the telephone allows more privacy.
- Telephone conversations enable staff to set time aside exclusively for that child, rather than being in a group. This shift from group work to a more individual focus, where staff can give children their full attention, has resulted in strong connections between staff and children and improved communication skills. This is something that Praajak will continue even when its group activities resume.
- Relationships with families have improved. Mothers especially are able to talk more with Praajak than during a visit when they might be working. With the telephone they can arrange evening calls at a time that suits them.
- Tele-counselling also supported children to create routines to follow, with specific times set for the counselling call, doing school work and craft activities, which helped them to cope with the lockdown situation.
- The games and activity kits that Praajak provided helped children to stay inside and also encouraged fathers to do the same, reducing the health risks to the family and also improving family relations and communication through playing and talking together.
- Having seen the positive impact of the tele-counselling service, Praajak are now considering ways that this could be integrated into the existing Childline service, a toll-free report and rescue number that operates nationwide, in order to revolutionise the support provided to vulnerable children.

## Challenges faced

- Although staff held telephone numbers for children already, they found that some children were difficult to reach for several reasons: numbers having changed; some children's families having no phone; network and connectivity issues in rural settings; or families having insufficient credit balance to receive incoming calls. Some children needed to be contacted via a neighbour or friend's phone.
- The digital divide presents significant challenges in India, and this has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. More needs to be done to ensure that all children can access services remotely with the necessary technology – perhaps in the form of digital hubs in the community.
- Sometimes children found it difficult to speak openly to Praajak staff due to a lack of privacy at home.
- Initially it was challenging for staff to learn how best to help children over the phone, but training and interactions have improved staff knowledge and capacity.

- Providing training refreshers for staff and creating space to exchange the learning gained from telephone interactions with children and families.
- Tracking and documenting all the cases involves a large amount of work.

## Resources required

- Sufficient numbers of social workers/counsellors need to be present to ensure good quality of support.

## Top tips

- 1 Accept this form of communication as a complement to field-level interventions.

## CONTACT DETAILS

Find out more about Praajak at  
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