

Surveys to assess the impact of COVID-19 on children and families

CONACMI - National Association Against Child Abuse, Guatemala

Introduction

CONACMI's work focuses on the prevention of violence against children and young people, in particular sexual abuse. It provides victims with practical help to overcome their trauma. Through direct support services, help to institutions to strengthen their responses, and research into cross-generational violence, CONACMI works to keep future generations protected from abuse.

In March 2020, the government of Guatemala declared a national emergency and implemented a strict lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19. While economic support was provided to large companies, people who work in the informal economy received no such support. Many of the families CONACMI supports are those who rely on the informal economy to earn a living, working as builders, tailors or market stall holders selling food or household items. With lockdown restrictions including physical distancing and the suspension of public transport, many people were unable to continue working and lost their income, with no option to apply for government help. As a result, COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on these families' livelihoods and their ability to survive. CONACMI was forced to stop its face-to-face therapeutic work with children, adolescents and parents in its Psychosocial Support Centre, which placed a further strain on the vulnerable families it supports.

The tool

CONACMI carried out surveys over the telephone in order to build an accurate picture of the way that COVID-19 was affecting children and their families, in both material and emotional ways. This enabled CONACMI to decide how best to adapt its work to the needs of the children and families it serves. While the initial focus was on keeping in contact with families and helping to meet their immediate needs, this soon evolved into providing therapeutic sessions virtually, once a week. This regular contact has enabled CONACMI to monitor how COVID-19 is impacting vulnerable children and families in Guatemala.

Implementation

CONACMI used WhatsApp for both messages and video calls for psychotherapeutic sessions and workshops for parents. While the majority of families that CONACMI works with do not have computers, most have smartphones. CONACMI supported some families by paying for phone data to enable them to take part in video calls. Through this initial contact, CONACMI was able to determine families' differing levels of need in order to prioritise its support provision and where necessary, adapted its normal activities by delivering food parcels, cleaning kits, medicines and other materials to families who needed them. These levels of need were categorised as:

- high need – insufficient or no income to cover basic needs;
- medium need – some income to cover some costs or debts, but cannot cover all;
- low need – have an income and can pay for food and medicines etc.

CONACMI also carried out a short survey with children. It asked questions about their experiences at home, how they were feeling and how much they knew about the COVID-19 situation. Staff initially found that children had many questions and worries; they knew that they had to stay at home, but didn't understand why. This prompted CONACMI to focus its work on supporting the emotional needs of children and parents. CONACMI works with children aged between 4 and 18 years old, so while the structure of the survey and questions was consistent across age groups, the way they were delivered varied depending on the child's age. CONACMI's child protection policy was updated during the pandemic to ensure that the criteria for conducting virtual sessions and the associated risks were added to the policy and adhered to by all staff.

Every week CONACMI staff input into monitoring forms and carry out a weekly case analysis in its team meetings. Teams share issues, challenges and good practices with each other from their experiences of working with families. Given the ever-changing context of the COVID-19 situation, they also analyse this on a weekly basis and make sure the results are factored into the work they plan for the following week.



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Outcomes

- The emotional work that CONACMI is doing with families is producing positive results; CONACMI now sees less anxiety and better relationships within families.
- Parents and children recognise that the video calls they have with CONACMI are safe spaces for them and they see the positive impact that this support is having on their lives.
- The continuous monitoring enables CONACMI to shape its ongoing work.
- While working remotely brings its own challenges, CONACMI believes it will continue to use virtual sessions with children and families, even when face-to-face sessions resume. This will make it possible to continue working with families who struggle to travel to the Psychological Support Centre.

Next steps

CONACMI has resumed some face-to-face sessions with the children and families that identified greater levels of difficulty in the virtual sessions. This work is carried out within the safety protocols that were created by the technical team, which are constantly being evaluated to ensure the safety of all the families that visit CONACMI. Although the number of COVID-19 cases at the national level continues to increase in Guatemala, there have been no cases of transmission amongst family members attending CONACMI's centre, which indicates that the protocols are working effectively and as such the team will continue to operate within these safety measures.

Challenges faced

- The CONACMI team as well as children and families took a while to adjust to therapeutic work being conducted virtually.
- The lack of privacy that children have at home (and many are unable to afford headphones) means they struggle to talk openly with CONACMI during the calls.
- It is hard to maintain the attention of younger children, especially on video calls. Staff use different approaches such as videos, stories and toys in order to keep their attention.

Top tips

- 1** Communication is key. Do whatever you can to maintain contact with the families and children you work with.
- 2** When challenging situations arise, try to identify existing activities and good practices you have that can be adapted to the new situation.
- 3** Working together as a team is hugely important in order to innovate and improve social work and care processes.

CONTACT DETAILS

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