

Supporting Children with Problematic and Harmful Sexual Behaviours

CPTCSA, The Philippines

Introduction

The Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Sexual Abuse (CPTCSA) has been working for more than 20 years in the Philippines to provide therapeutic support to children who have been sexually abused and children demonstrating problematic and harmful sexual behaviour.

Background

CPTCSA opened in 1995 and began working with children demonstrating problematic and harmful sexual behaviour almost immediately. The first referral, which came as a shock to CPTCSA at the time, was of a nine-year-old girl who had been abused by her 15-year-old cousin. Staff began researching the issue and connecting with other professionals on an international level. They attended conferences and participated in training in the US to build their knowledge. Upon returning to the Philippines, CPTCSA worked with a local psychiatrist to set up a programme and then started offering 1:1 counselling for children demonstrating problematic and harmful sexual behaviour.

Over several years CPTCSA has advocated with the Philippines government for its therapeutic work with children demonstrating harmful and problematic sexual behaviour to be included in national juvenile justice welfare programming. Most interventions in the Philippines for children in contact with the law are generic and not tailored to the specific needs of children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviours. Finally, in 2013 the Juvenile Justice Welfare Act was amended to include offence-specific interventions. As a result, there is now a [very specific law](#) that guides the implementation of CPTCSA's model, depending on the age of the child.

In the amended law children under the age of 15 do not have criminal responsibility and must therefore be enrolled in

a community or centre-based diversion programme if they commit an offence of any sort; legal action cannot be taken against them. Children aged 15 to 17 are transferred to a Bahay Pag-Asa (House of Hope) while waiting for the outcome of their court case. Bahay Pag-Asa are 24-hour child care institutions that are licensed and accredited by the government. If found guilty in court, the child is transferred to a Regional Rehabilitation Centre for Youth for intensive rehabilitation according to the terms of their suspended sentence.

The model

CPTCSA's model works with children under 15 and those aged over 15 during the mandated rehabilitation phase that follows a guilty verdict of harmful sexual behaviour. CPTCSA has so far only ever worked with boys as actors of harmful sexual behaviour.

The legal framework acts as an anchor to the programme and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is the framework for the therapeutic intervention. Many children experience a level of denial and do not accept responsibility for what they have done, or they try to minimise some of their actions. Through a mixture of 1:1 and group counselling tailored to each child, CPTCSA supports the child to understand their role and behaviour, accept accountability for their actions and develop empathy for the child they have abused. CPTCSA also draws on restorative justice approaches, which look at what is broken – the actor, the child who has been abused, their families and community – and aims to restore them to a complete state. These are the guiding principles in providing care and rehabilitation for these children.

Training of other professionals, including social workers, education service providers and staff working in the Bahay Pag-Asa centres, is also an integral part of the model, as is advocacy work. CPTCSA regularly organises conferences, round table discussions and produces and disseminates documentation in order to present a strong evidence base for discussion.



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Implementation

Children are usually referred to CPTCSA by other NGOs or government authorities. A group of professionals meets to discuss the case and understand the issues it presents. The next step is for CPTCSA to meet with the child in order to start developing a therapeutic relationship with them. An initial assessment helps the CPTCSA counsellor to better understand the child, their perception of the events and how they are feeling about it.

Following the assessment, CPTCSA presents a case study to the child and the referring agency and from that point on implementation of the programme begins. As part of a multi-agency group, CPTCSA has regular case conferences with other agencies to ensure everyone is informed of the child's progress.

CPTCSA's counselling programme consists of two sessions per month and generally lasts for one year. Occasionally the duration of cases will be longer or shorter than this period. Some children may be fearful to start with and others can be very resistant to engaging in counselling. CPTCSA explains that legally the child is required by the court to participate in this programme.

Cognition is the main focus of CBT and as such this form of therapy is only applicable for children aged 15 and over. The goal is to adapt irrational beliefs and thought patterns about external or internal events. CPTCSA supports children to address the denial they feel and to accept their behaviour. CPTCSA finds that some boys do not have the vocabulary to describe their actions verbally so instead they are encouraged to keep journals or write poetry and stories in order to express themselves.

Generally CPTCSA works only with the child who has demonstrated harmful sexual behaviour and their family. Other organisations work with the child who has been abused and the community so there is no conflict of interest, but CPTCSA will meet with them to plan for the safe reintegration of the child demonstrating harmful sexual behaviour back into the community.

This programme is implemented by CPTCSA's small but multidisciplinary in-house team of eight staff, which includes a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a lawyer and a spiritual counsellor (a role that is very important in Filipino culture). Where necessary CPTCSA also draws on a wider network of professionals to support its work.

“We need to intervene because we can't deny that these children exist and we can't criminalise them. The problem belongs to society. We shouldn't punish these children but we should accept that they have the capacity to hurt others.”

Zeny Rosales
Executive Director of CPTCSA

Outcomes

- CPTCSA's model has received recognition from the Philippines government and the organisation has been contracted to deliver nationwide training in all 88 Bahay Pag-Asa child rehabilitation centres in 2022.
- Parents and caregivers report to CPTCSA that when children return home their behaviour has improved and they have an increased ability to empathise with others.

Resources required

- As there are high numbers of children needing support, this work requires significant input in terms of both funding and human resources.
- Time and money for training and continuous professional development to ensure staff are highly qualified to work with children demonstrating harmful sexual behaviours.
- Having access to mentors, both within and outside of the team, is very useful for staff working directly with children, families and in the community.

Challenges faced

- **The bureaucratic workings of government:** there are so many child protection mandates that the government is unable to develop a specialist programme in this area. It is therefore down to CPTCSA to develop and mainstream its practice in order to reach all the children who need help.
- **Staff turnover:** for an organisation that focuses on a specialist area it is challenging when staff leave. To mitigate this, CPTCSA has created a strategy to enable staff to continue contributing to its work in order to retain their expertise, but with a different level of engagement. The upcoming nationwide training requires at least three teams to deliver 22 training sessions over three months, so former staff will be enlisted to provide support. CPTCSA also documents everything and creates programme manuals so that resources are available to support new staff.
- **Lack of awareness at a cultural level:** there is a general denial and stigma in society about children who demonstrate this behaviour. As a result of this, historically there have been no specific interventions for these children and children would instead be treated as adults in the criminal justice system.
- **Children are often nervous and wary when they first begin to work with CPTCSA:** it can take a while to build therapeutic relationships.
- **Geographic limitations:** as the Philippines is an archipelago and as CPTCSA is a small organisation it is difficult for staff to travel widely to deliver training. Therefore its goal is always to work with the government in order to increase the human resources and funding available.

Next steps

CPTCSA plans to offer more training to other organisations in order to replicate this work. It also intends to continue to document its practice and carry out research to gain new ideas of ways to develop the services it provides.

Top tips

- 1 Conduct research in your own local context to really understand the nature of the issue in your community and the need for this type of model.
- 2 The focus must be on the quality of services: invest in training your staff and develop high-quality standard operating procedures.
- 3 Take a multidisciplinary approach; this work is not the sole responsibility of social workers, but incorporates psychologists and lawyers, among others.

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