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Supporting Children with Problematic and Harmful Sexual Behaviours

Paicabi, Chile

Introduction

Established in Chile in 1996, Paicabi is a non-governmental organisation that promotes and defends children's rights. Paicabi has developed models for working with children who have been abused and provides psycho-therapeutic support for families and legal support and social education to families and communities.

Its model is based on the principles of systemic theory and specifically from an ecological perspective, which considers three dimensions:

1. Children and adolescents
2. The family and community
3. The global environment – public policies, health and judicial systems, educational context – all aspects that have a direct influence on ensuring the rights of children who have been sexually abused.

Background

After almost 10 years of working with children who had experienced sexual abuse, Paicabi's team noticed that, in some cases, violence against children was being carried out by other children. This was a turning point for the organisation, which had previously only considered adults as perpetrators of abuse. Once Paicabi had identified this issue it created a pilot project, providing individual and group therapy to 10–12 children who were either siblings, cousins or friends of the children they had abused, in order to better understand the complexities of the issue and to help these children to move away from their harmful sexual behaviours. After several years of development the pilot project became an established model.

The model

Paicabi's model is called the **3D Intervention Model** as it works on three different dimensions to address the issue of children displaying problematic or harmful sexual behaviours. The responsibility for the behaviour is shared across the three dimensions.

The first dimension is that of the **individual**: Paicabi provides therapeutic services, including individual and group therapy, to the children who have demonstrated problematic or harmful sexual behaviours.

The second is the **collective** dimension: engaging the child's family, school and community as well as other agencies and institutions to ensure that the issue is understood and the child is supported throughout the therapeutic process.

The third and final dimension is the **macro** element: addressing the political and societal conditions to improve the response to these acts and ultimately change behaviours to reduce the number of children demonstrating harmful sexual behaviour.

Implementation

The individual dimension of the 3D Intervention Model is implemented over a 12–18 month period and involves weekly or fortnightly therapy sessions depending on the severity of the act committed. The sessions include individual therapy and sometimes also group therapy. Other themed workshops are also a part of this dimension, for example, exploring gender constructs with boys and discussing their perceived ideas on gender. This is important as it plays a key role in the power dynamics of the abuse. Just as with adults, power is also a tool used in abuse perpetrated by children, often in terms of both age and gender. A large majority of the children and teenagers who display this behaviour are boys, although around 4 per cent are girls.¹

The collective dimension involves working closely with families, schools and other institutions such as health centres. This work can take the form of family therapy, addressing underlying or present issues, and workshops to train teachers and health care professionals. These workshops help to make those working with children aware of the issue of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour, so that they are able to address it effectively, refer to other services and, importantly, avoid stigmatising the children involved. Schools are particularly key partners in this respect.

¹ Out of a total of 83 children and adolescents, 3 are girls. Source: ONG Paicabi.



Family
for every child

**How
we
care**

By practitioners,
for practitioners.

“Sometimes we only learn things by working with people, not from university curricula or in our training to be psychologists, lawyers or social workers; we must be open to the realities we are working in and open to learning from them.”

Ivan Zamora Zapata
Director, ONG Paicabi

In its workshops with adults, Paicabi aims to create an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality to help people open up. After three or four sessions participants often begin to share their experiences of sexuality from childhood to adulthood and to recognise it as an important aspect of their lives that benefits from being talked about openly. This is a vital step in changing the narrative on problematic and harmful sexual behaviour and normalising conversations about sexuality at a national level.

The macro dimension is an ongoing area of Paicabi's work. The organisation has written several publications and held workshops and conferences on this topic to ensure that there is a heightened awareness of the issue, and in acknowledgement of the fact that behaviours need to change across all levels of society in order for these practices to stop. Paicabi also strives to ensure that the topic is included in public policies and provisions are made for addressing the issue at a national level.

Most cases of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour that Paicabi deals with are one-offs or a phase that the child is going through, often during adolescence when they are experiencing their first sexual awakening and masturbating for the first time. But because it is a taboo topic they have never learned about it, nor had any sex education or heard their parents talk about it, they feel shame and don't know what to do with the feelings they are experiencing. For example, a teenage boy might be watching a film with his younger cousin and when he sees a sex scene in the film he thinks he can act out sexualised behaviour with his cousin. It doesn't mean that the boy is a sexual abuser. If a child doesn't know what's not appropriate, when something bad happens they don't know how to describe it. Paicabi believes that more information, more empowerment for children and more sex education would mean fewer occasions of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour.

Paicabi also sees cases of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour in children in state-run or private non-profit residential children's homes. Constant training of staff is required and other factors including security measures and the way the homes are organised according to age and family connection must be taken into serious consideration in order to reduce the likelihood of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour occurring.

There are a few cases where children who have perpetrated harmful sexual behaviour display extremely cold behaviour when recounting the abuse, in which cases special psychiatric attention and monitoring is required.

Outcomes

- Paicabi's model is now supported by the Chilean government with public funds and has been incorporated into a national policy. Programmes addressing problematic and harmful sexual behaviour now run in almost every region of the country.
- In 98 per cent of cases that are logged in the state-run Child Protection Services system, there is no repeat offence and the children do not come back into Paicabi's programme.
- Paicabi has delivered an extensive training programme for the NGO SOS Children's Villages in Latin America and Africa, enabling the inclusion of specific interventions and therapeutic approaches to addressing problematic and harmful sexual behaviours in its work with children.
- Paicabi has conducted training with three other Family for Every Child members and their networks of actors working with children in Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico (see the annex to this paper for more details) and has produced [manuals](#) providing guidance for practitioners on this work.

“This is prevention work. Every time we decide to work with children who display problematic or harmful sexual behaviours, we are protecting the lives of these children and other children. If we don't work properly, there is a chance that these children will replicate their behaviour as adults.”

Resources required

For therapeutic interventions:

- Professionals with at least three to five years' experience of working with children on the issue of sexual violence.
- Psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists and a network of psychiatrists to help in the most serious cases.
- Comfortable settings for therapeutic sessions, with good equipment, such as evaluation tools, work materials, appropriate technology.
- Ongoing specialist training and supervision for staff.

“The language we use in this work is very important. Initially we referred to these children as sexual aggressors, then sexual offenders. Through our practice we learned that all of these children were also victims of violence in one form or another (sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, family abandonment). Understanding this reality allowed us to reflect and rethink the adult-centric language we had been using, which we realised was stigmatising these children. So we started to talk about their behaviour instead, because behaviours can be changed.”

Ivan Zamora Zapata
Director, ONG Paicabi

Challenges faced

- Schools are often reluctant to work with Paicabi on this topic. Teachers can also be reluctant to engage in discussions around sexuality and sex education.
- The lack of sex education in the school curriculum and the fact that sexuality is not talked about openly in Chile.
- Public policies design short-term programmes. Such serious topics demand long-term programmes to enable follow-up with children and young people and ensure that these behaviours do not continue into adulthood.
- Lack of funding to increase the number of programmes addressing problematic and harmful sexual behaviour.
- Lack of specialised professionals to work on the highly complex issue of problematic and harmful sexual behaviours, including psychologists, social workers and psychiatrists.

Next steps

Paicabi is committed to sharing its model of supporting children with problematic and harmful sexual behaviours and continuing to raise awareness of this issue. It has identified the following steps for the development of its work in this area:

- Hold an international conference on problematic and harmful sexual behaviour and form an international network of specialists and organisations working on the issue.
- Carry out more research into problematic and harmful sexual behaviours and develop training programmes at an international level.
- Train all Family for Every Child member organisations and support the creation of professional care centres in member countries.
- Establish a partnership between SOS Children's Villages, Family for Every Child, and Paicabi to promote awareness of the importance of addressing preventive work and professional intervention in problematic and harmful sexual behaviours, worldwide.

Top tips

- 1 Beware of your blind spots. Often as professionals we are blind to certain topics, especially those related to children, even when they are right in front of us.
- 2 Don't minimise this issue. It is not just a one-off. Recognise it as a problem.
- 3 Create alliances of other experts working with children in order to provide the best possible services.
- 4 Make a decision. If it's important to you, you need to do everything possible to find help – contact us!

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