



Family for Every Child's Conversations on Care podcast

“Supporting mental health in emergency settings through art therapy”
- featuring Taller de Vida, Colombia
November 2022

English transcription of the podcast conversation in Spanish

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IVÁN ZAMORA: Well, welcome to this new conversation. This time it is about care, an initiative driven by Family for Every Child. My name is Iván Zamora. I'm the CEO of NGO Paicabí, a Chilean organization that works for the promotion, protection and defence of children's rights. We have also been part of the Family alliance since the year 2016. Let me tell you that Family is a growing network that has over 42 civil society organisations in 37 countries to date. These organisations...

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have vast experience and knowledge of working directly with children and communities, with the goal of searching for solutions that can improve the care of children. There are ongoing programmes in Africa, Asia, Latin America, North America, India, Egypt, and so on. We are present in several places. We are in different places around the world with the objective of taking care of and protecting children. Today's podcast is the second episode related to providing support in emergency situations connected to what is happening in Ukraine.

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Unfortunately, the victims of armed conflicts and the victims of the war are also children. The death of children, their parents, friends and communities, but also because of the impact on their mental health. The trauma of war. And, in this opportunity, we are with Estela Duque Cuesta. Sometimes it's hard to talk to Estela. She's the CEO of Taller de Vida, an incredible organization in Colombia that is totally committed and is working very hard with the so called

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“armed conflict” in Colombia, with the children and families who are historical victims of the conflict, as is Colombian society in general. Isn't that right, Estela? The direct victims are one thing, but society is also a victim when there are violent situations. So, Taller de Vida does an incredible job. Estela, to start off, and to welcome you once again, could you tell us a little bit about the context in which Taller de Vida works in Colombia? I mean, with respect to the armed conflict.

ESTELA DUQUE: Yes. Thank you very much for this conversation, this dialogue as an organisation and member of Family for Every Child, Iván. It's a pleasure to be here. My name is Estela Duque Cuesta. I'm a psychologist.

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I have a Masters in systemic family therapy, I'm a clinical psychologist and art therapist, and an expert in psychosocial processes in contexts of socio-political violence. We are an organisation that was born in the year 1994, and it was created by a group of professional women and community leaders who faced socio-political violence in different areas of the country, in different areas of Colombia. And we decided to make an impact on the lives of children, women, families and communities who faced forced displacement, missing people and the association of children to the armed conflict. Since then, our work has been orientated towards achieving human dignity from an equal rights perspective, resilience and expressive arts.

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And as you said, we are a country that has experienced over 60 years of continuous armed conflict, and is moving forward towards peace agreements. We've been committed to reaching peace agreements since 2016. So, what context are we in in Colombia? We are in a context under which the country has experienced violence. There are people who have experienced that impact directly but, above all, children and young people have grown up in a context of political violence. We are talking about over 60 years of conflict and violence, which means that many people haven't had the opportunity of living in a country that doesn't speak of war. They haven't had the chance of not seeing on the news stories of kidnapping, disappearances, massacres, and children involved in conflicts.

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This is everyday language, but there are also some areas of the country where indigenous and afro-descendant communities in particular face massacres, displacement, and sexual violence towards children and women in the context of the armed conflict on a daily basis. We have lived through a humanitarian crisis, but we have also lived through a severe social and political crisis that has had serious repercussions in our country.

IVÁN ZAMORA: Estela, from what you are saying, what is the specific role that Taller de Vida plays?

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ESTELA DUQUE: Yes. Our job is to provide psychosocial support to children, teenagers and young people. To them and to their families and communities. What does it mean to give psychosocial support? It means providing support from two dimensions. One is the subjective dimension, which means the emotional impact on the person. In other words, how that person faces a situation when they lose a family member, when the person loses someone, for example, a parent, brothers or sisters, family members. It's also related to people losing their geographical references, and facing unknown contexts. So, we have to give support in that sense, discovering the emotional impact it has had on them. And also, discovering the emotional impact on that human being, how they perceive it, and how they're facing up to it.

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And the other part is social inclusion. In other words, how that person rebuilds bonds and relationships, and how that person enters into a new context. That's what has happened to nearly nine million people in Colombia. They had to leave their homes, move to an unknown place and rebuild their lives in a strange place, establishing new relationships. They had to build new possibilities for organizing their most important tasks, like the possibility of having an income. The possibility of being part of a community where their children could live safely, and they have had to face the vulnerability that socio-political violence has left in their lives.

IVÁN ZAMORA: Estela, you...?

ESTELA DUQUE: [INDISCERNIBLE 00:08:52]

IVÁN ZAMORA: Yes, I'm sorry. You mentioned something very important, which is interesting.

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This not only affects children, but also adults. Particularly in this case, it is well known that Taller de Vida does a very important job when it comes to therapy. And also therapy based on art and music, which is known as art therapy. Could you tell us about these therapies, and how they benefit children?

ESTELA DUQUE: Yes. I'd like to start by saying that socio-political violence is a social and public experience. Its impact on people through war and armed conflicts is manifested in public. This is not a private process. It happens publicly. So, it's necessary to transform the social context...

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...it happens in, and the relationships going on within it. It's not only individual people; entire social groups are affected. There is also a transformation to the social order in which they used to identify themselves through their own interactions, language, cultural references, values, traditions and myths. So, in order to establish dialogue and provide support, we need to find creative ways to facilitate the dialogue from different experiences and stories. Art helps in that way. Art as an emotional way of expression, as a way to create a story, but also as a way to create a collective story. That's where art therapy steps in. For example, graphic expression, like drawings. We start by asking each child what happened to them.

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But when we're inside a group, working as a team, everybody can tell the same story, and find similar situations with each other. They may have faced the same sorrows and losses. They may have faced similar fears and tough situations. This collective construction allows us to build a common story, and to find ways to accompany each other in solidarity, and rebuild bonds to remain close. And also to build psychosocial support processes where they have to face this tough situations as a group, learning that that they'll be able to find that common support to keep on going. That's what Taller de Vida does. [INDISCERNIBLE 00:11:51]

IVÁN ZAMORA: [INDISCERNIBLE 00:11:51]

ESTELA DUQUE: Yes. [INDISCERNIBLE 00:11:53]

IVÁN ZAMORA: Go on. Yes.

ESTELA DUQUE: But also, to build it up collectively, alongside the families, with each family.

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We don't keep the child away from their family. Instead, we bring together the different families to create a caring, collaborative community that gives support throughout this emergency transition.

IVÁN ZAMORA: What you're saying is very interesting because... how do you manage trauma from violence? In this case, in the sense that you mentioned, right? Very often, traditional therapies such as psychological consultations, are not necessarily the best or the right way to go when there's so much suffering. So, in that sense, art and its various dimensions allow people to express trauma in a less invasive way, I'd say. Is that right?

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And I think it's powerful because you do both individual and group work. So, groups are being built around trauma and common problems. Now, Estela. Could you tell us about some of the concrete results or impacts that the use of these therapies has allowed?

ESTELA DUQUE: Yes. We can talk about the results that stem from the use of this kind of therapy. First of all, it allows us to face post-traumatic stress. And it is often carried around because there's no opportunity to talk about it. So, the first impact is to providing an intervention scenario where people can go and be listened to. And not only be listened to as you mentioned,

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by a professional who might be unrelated to the situation, but be listened to by other people who have gone through the same. Those people would be able to offer a shoulder, support and the accompaniment needed when a new person arrives. We're talking about a syndrome. We're talking about a complex situation of facing fears, hopelessness or horror caused by different events. The other part is to express what I went through in words, images, or musical notes. And the third one is being able to express that in public, and ask for my rights to be respected. I mean, this is not only related to the private dimension, or to the theoretical sense, but also to realizing that I have an influential voice. When children and young people use songs to tell us what they have lived through during a war,

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that song is listened to by other people, and I'm mending myself in that process. I'm able to be someone who deserves their rights to be respected. Someone who has a voice and is able to speak. I'd like to remember the words of a great author like Hannah Arendt, who said that violence tries to take your speech and freedom away from you. You have to recover your speech. These art therapies allow people to recover that speech. It allows people to recover their voices and their freedom of action, and to be able to express publicly that they went through a war, through violence, by putting their story into a song. I invite you to listen to it, because this didn't only happen to me. It happened to many people waiting to be listened to, just like me. There's a cause for truth. There's a cause for the restitution of rights.

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I need my rights to be restored because I'm a victim and a survivor of an armed conflict.

IVÁN ZAMORA: What you're saying is very interesting, Estela. What a tremendous job Taller de Vida does. Not only in Colombia, because we already know that this work, these methodologies are known around the world thanks to the different encounters that have taken place in the Family Network. You already know, Estela. We're facing all kinds of emergency situations in the world. In fact, we're just leaving a tremendous pandemic, which is the most complex scenario, right? And also, the emergence of new armed conflicts in Ukraine. The Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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But we're also witnessing violent events in the Middle East and Latin America, particularly related to drug dealing, and so on. That kind of situation. Even events related to climate change, which are also considered urgent emergencies. We've seen the effects of this on television. In what way do you think the therapies and the art that you work with in the context of armed conflict can be applied to these other situations and emergencies?

ESTELA DUQUE: Yes. I'd like to start by saying that art therapies were born in the context of World War two.

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And since that context, art therapies have continued to be used and perfected under different complex contexts. So, these therapies are designed from these complex situations and human realities that you mentioned. These are tools that allow us to name the pain, which is not easy to do. These are also ways to express and deal with emotions, feelings, and situations that we can't deny and that can lead to illnesses, which could be serious for a large number of people. I think it's fair to say that nowadays human beings are having to deal with really tough and complex situations in terms of mental health. Why is this therapy so expressive? Why do art therapies make sense? Because the creative process itself has a metaphorical language.

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It can express itself through images, and those images lead to something very special called resilience, which is the ability human beings have to face adversity. Let's say we go through fire, we go through suffering, or we go through a loss. We have the ability to gather resources that allow us to face that situation and empower ourselves, despite being in the middle of this situation, without losing the ability to create. The ability to fight and to transform. This is going to be in our physical body, emotions and thoughts. But we can individually deal with those sensations, postures and gestures that reflect the situation we lived through, and recognize it all on a public level.

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So, we'll be able to express who we are through this metaphorical language, and learn that we have the strength to coexist. We'll learn that we'll be able to bear these tough situations, and we won't lose the possibility of seeing ourselves as humans in another dimension. That is, we go through the war body, the violence body, the crisis body. For example, I see the images of people from Ukraine leaving the country, leaving their belongings behind. But they'll be able to rebuild. They'll be able to be with children who are still growing up. They'll continue to dream and express themselves to achieve dignity as a country.

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As people. As a community. Not giving up, but knowing that it's going to be a tough road. Just like the process Colombians have gone through, and we are now dreaming of peace and new possibilities for a government. Why did we succeed? We resisted. We resisted thanks to art. We resisted by making it possible to publicly do art. To express it through a photograph, videos, drawings, songs. You begin to heal when you do this. You start growing. And you know it's possible to transform and change, so hope lives on.

IVÁN ZAMORA: Yes. What you're saying is very exciting. You know? I was thinking about Anne Frank as you were speaking. Because...

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She... she and her book, her diary. Anne Frank's diary, right? In some way, you can imagine what she was going through from reading it. The emotional impacts through her writing, right? I think it's also a common element in most of the victims. We've experienced that in Chile with the victims of the dictatorship. The photography, the writing, and so on. There are many other elements that widen the art world and art therapy. Truly, all human manifestations, those human resources we all have, blossom in situations of emergency. Just like master Viktor Frankl said.

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In that... In that sense, could you tell us about the resources needed to carry out these therapies? I'm thinking about the professionals, technicians, and people from communities. Also, does it need a lot of resources?

ESTELA DUQUE: Yes. You've mentioned very important things, Iván. I'd like to start from there. We've worked with Anne Frank's text in our group many times. That diary allows them to talk about what they have gone through. It gives people the opportunity to tell their story. We're not only talking about art therapy, but narrative therapy, too.

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What does this therapy need? We do have a team of professionals, but we also have a group of youths and people from the community who join together to support and to work. So, what is needed? We have to spread the word, and the professional team has to work with youths and

people from the community who are willing to learn. This work model can be replicated, and it's not only a technical one. What is needed? You need resources to obtain materials, and a physical space. You need to have a space where everybody can meet peacefully. You need to ensure the minimum conditions where people can have a meal, peace and quiet, and where they can be heard. You need materials for painting and drawing.

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You need paper for writing. They need to have those things. Sometimes we don't even have musical instruments. The body itself writes the music, the rhythm, and you start growing by doing so. So, first, you need a working plan like the ones we had. You need a team with knowledge and experience, and also other groups willing to learn. And we also need a place to make it possible. You don't need unlimited resources. It's enough to have the materials, the resources needed to carry out the activities, and a safe and quiet place for people to express themselves. It's possible to multiply these types of processes.

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We'd really like to replicate this experience with teams of Family for Every Child in other countries. There are many ways to produce this experience. One of which is, like I mentioned, artistic expression. You can draw, paint, use clay to tell a story, you can use photography. We all have mobile phones now. You can take pictures that could talk about what you feel, and then write a text from that photograph. You can make a video and put it into words, too. The written narrative is very important. I mean it's not only... Everything has the possibility like the [INDISCERNIBLE 00:26:45] that we work with, and taking a photograph, but with text. Or video-transformation. You can talk about how I got to this city, what happened to my life that transformed it, and how I can put that in images.

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The most important thing in the art workshops and art therapy is not transmitting a technique. That's not the goal. What matters is to use those human resources that each human being has, and to recognize their strengths on a cognitive, emotional, relational and ethical level in order to allow those strengths to turn into resilience, which unites us, despite our challenges as humans, and it allows us to reflect and figure out how to keep on going. It allows us to figure out how to move forward, preserve and protect our life and the lives of those who are close to us, and communities with that commitment. I'd like to also say that, in some way...

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these teams are human rights defenders, because we don't work outside rights. We are defending children, family and community rights. We're talking about restoring, repairing and being defenders of life. To preserve life and rights. That's where art expression helps. The creation [INDISCERNIBLE 00:28:30] And I think...

IVÁN ZAMORA: Very...

ESTELA DUQUE: Anne Frank talked about this. She talked about her right to live, and not to give up. Remember when she said "I see..." "I don't see what my mother sees", she says in the diary. "I have a different sight". So, think about that map of rights. I'd recommend to anyone who intervenes in these types of processes to look at rights - what rights am I actually guaranteeing? What rights am I repairing? And how can I give people a voice so that they can be resilient, but also restore their rights?

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IVÁN ZAMORA: Speaking of Anne Frank, I'm thinking about silence, Estela. She also talks about that; in order to write, there was a time during the day when, since the first floor was occupied, the

entire second floor was silent. Silence is also one of the elements that has a double meaning, I'd say. Silence out of fear and for being a victim. Right? There's silence because there's fear. But silence is also a therapeutic element. When there's a... You have those two dimensions.

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I was just remembering something from what you said. Silence can be therapeutic, but it also has a double meaning like everything else. How does Taller de Vida support their therapists? I mean, working with the pain human beings feel, but particularly the pain of children and teenagers is a complex situation. I myself had to live through a situation like that, and you always end up hurt at the end of the sessions. How does Taller de Vida support their professionals and technicians?

ESTELA DUQUE: Yes. You're right. I'd like to start by talking about silence. I think it's a very necessary cognitive aspect. You need silence in order to create something, to create your expression.

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In order to communicate, you need a space of your own to reach that emotion or feeling. Silence plays a very important part in that. And you asked about taking care of the professional team, which is very important, because we have to take care of those who take care of us, those people who are committed to these processes. We create working scenarios together with teams, and we create supervision processes whereby we're also heard by someone else. These are places where we can also draw, create and remove the emotions from our body that [INDISCERNIBLE 00:31:42]. For example, we do movement therapy, which is where we express ourselves by moving; we try to communicate the emotions we have inside us through our movement in order to prevent trauma. We also write about particular cases of trauma.

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And also, whenever we have a difficult case or one that is hard to manage, we have a person we can talk to. And the other thing is that we create a community. A community where we listen to each other, and we sit around and talk. One thing we always do is write. Write or draw. For example, I'm always carrying a notebook with crayons. I write and draw. And the other thing I do is that I always express what I feel. I'm often surprised about that in Family for Every Child. I talk openly, and that's something we've learned as a team. To express our feelings, and to say what we're thinking and not to remain silent. If you keep silent and hide, you won't find another chance to express yourself. That's the right moment to do it, and that's also something we work on with people.

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It allows you to free yourself, to express an emotion, to talk about it, and not to keep it to yourself. So, that's the job we do. I'd like to invite teams from other countries to create this kind of community. We call it a support and help community. I mean, we need communities which are both caring and protective and are able to accompany people and provide psychological and psychosocial assistance. But we also need protective communities for ourselves. Our own... we call it... you know what we call it? "Onion Heart". We have a project called Onion Heart, which is where we meet as a team. We're like the different layers in an onion, each person getting to their heart with tranquillity, able to express ourselves...

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to cry, to talk about our feelings, and to feel that all the others love me, are by my side, and that I'm not alone in this process. And that I'll leave this process stronger or...

IVÁN ZAMORA: So... What an interesting analogy with the onion. I like to cook, so, you cry when you chop onion, right?

ESTELA DUQUE: Right.

IVÁN ZAMORA: You cry with the onion, but it's also very tasty because it gives flavour to food. So, when you talk about the onion... Right, because you have to flavour the teams, right? We have to flavour the teams. But teams also cry when they share their struggles. So, just like silence, the onion has two sides.

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And I agree with you Estela, that you must express what's going on with you. That could be annoying sometimes. That's the curious thing about it. But it frees you, because as long as you don't offend anyone, everything will be fine. You have to get used to the idea that there are people who can express what they feel and express our differences, while others just remain silent, and you also have to respect that. And then, there are people who want to hide. It's like they don't want to make a fuss, and we also have to respect them. You see? That...

ESTELA DUQUE: Yes.

IVÁN ZAMORA: Very interesting. We're almost finished with this great show, this great conversation. We've gone through many emotional moments in a short period of time, but also...

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many dialogues that could be a programme in themselves. Silence could be a programme on its own. Estela, from your own experience and your experience with Taller de Vida, what do you think are the most urgent topics to tackle...? It says here in the future, but I'd say in the present, for organisations that work directly with armed conflicts.

ESTELA DUQUE: Yes. I think there are two, I'd say three. There are three urgent needs. One is to talk about the context where things are going on. And we need time to study what's going on, and we need to know what the thinkers say about it. I mean, I think the political situation is something that needs to be discussed.

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You can't simply intervene from what you know about therapy. You also need a political and social understanding of what's happening. And a cultural understanding, too. The other thing is to have... We have an intercultural approach in order to understand who we're working with. So, I think that's something organisations like ours should pay attention to, even those organisations which are part of Family for Every Child. The second thing is professional training. To be constantly updating our training, and to make sure we never fall prey to burn-out syndrome. That means checking on the team at all times, educating ourselves and seeing how are we doing.

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And the third thing is the tranquillity of knowing that we have resources to be able to do our job. That also can be distressing. It has happened to us once. The project is coming to an end, the money is running low, how are we going to continue? You keep receiving people who need to be heard. Some regions need attention. How am I supposed to help those people? So, counting on financial support is very, very important. This is not a minor thing. This is an important point.

IVÁN ZAMORA: Yes. Interesting. You know, the last thing you mentioned... Everything you have said is interesting, but the last thing you mentioned could also involve re-thinking the role that support agencies play, or national and international cooperation with organisations that work in human rights, like yours.

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Institutions that work with victim's pain stemming from armed conflicts, like Taller de Vida does. You can't be subject to the pressure of not having financial resources. Instead, it should almost be a human right for organisations that dedicate themselves to issues that not every organisation is able to work with. This is very important because lives are also at stake. When you're working in the context of an armed conflict or violence, your organisation and their professionals are exposed...

ESTELA DUQUE: Yes.

IVÁN ZAMORA: ...to potential violence. So, institutions like Taller de Vida shouldn't have to deal with financial pressure. On the contrary. It should have the confidence to know that it will have the financial stability to carry out such important projects today and in the past.

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Today, but certainly for the future. Certainly for the future, because there are many decades still to go before we achieve the peace on earth that we all seek. Estela, it's been...

ESTELA DUQUE: I imagine... I imagine that's also a challenge, for example, for countries that are receiving people from Ukraine. These organisations in the Middle East... I think it's a worldwide challenge to secure financial support. Thank you for your words of encouragement and support, Iván.

IVÁN ZAMORA: That's why I think the job we do as Family for Every Child is so important, right? Being in the world with so many different things going on...

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but with a common goal, which is how to guarantee the protection of children's rights, the right to family care, and how to guarantee that this organisation and its network has the necessary support to expand the important job we're doing. I'd like to thank you, dear Estela. Thank you for the job you do and for your commitment. I'd like to give you the floor to give us your final thoughts to end this great conversation.

ESTELA DUQUE: Yes, Iván. Thank you. Thank you to your organisation for being an ally and a friend, one that walks alongside us. And also...

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for always being present in Paicabí, especially you. I always feel supported there. I often call you or write to you, and I want to cry now. I feel a little emotional right now, but that's what makes us strong. That's what makes us stronger. I'd like that same strength to unite all the organisations which are part of Family for Every Child. Thank you very much. Let's hope we can beat violence.

IVÁN ZAMORA: Very good!

ESTELA DUQUE: I hope we succeed in defeating violence.

IVÁN ZAMORA: We will.

ESTELA DUQUE: Our aim should be a world without violence for children and their families. Let's hope we can succeed in that.

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