

Colombia

Treatment and prevention for child victims of domestic violence

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Despite ever-increasing awareness of children's rights, the fact that child victims of domestic violence still exist shows that the practices that violate these rights persist. In the case of Colombia, factors such as social exclusion, lack of healthcare, drug taking and internal political conflict aggravate family tensions, particularly in the urban population of over three million. Many urban dwellers are threatened by armed gangs and some have personally witnessed extreme violence or murder. When children are moved to a city, they are often affected badly by the change in their environment. They may become aggressive towards their siblings, fight with their parents and make demands for food that cannot be met. This behaviour exacerbates tension in a family that may be already struggling to make ends meet, and often results in the parents punishing their children aggressively, either through verbal or physical abuse.

A huge number of Colombian children are the victims of domestic violence. This may be due to migration or, more likely, to the fact that many families know no other way of bringing up their children. To initiate a programme of prevention and post-traumatic care, the University of North Barranquilla and the Bernard van Leer Foundation collaborated on a scientific study suitably adapted to the Colombian socio-cultural context.

The main question underpinning the project was "What is the best way to work with families who have a history of domestic violence – especially with the children?" The project attempted to answer the question, first by establishing the situation faced

by vulnerable children, then by developing and implementing a support system to meet their needs.

Establishing the situation

Child victims of domestic violence present a number of psycho-social characteristics that can be classified under four headings:

1. Deprivation. In addition to suffering physical and sexual abuse, child victims of domestic violence are often denied affection or emotional support. Their parents may provide inadequate food and clothing, exhibit a lack of interest in their needs and problems, and fail to talk to them. The pain of deprivation is long lasting. The more violent the situation, the more demanding of attention and affection the child becomes and feelings of sadness and loneliness can become unbearable. Typical statements made by children who are deprived of the affection and care of their families are "My mummy and daddy don't care for me" or "I play on my own because nobody wants to play with me". These children are often timid and withdrawn and their behaviour shows insecurity. In the case of permanent deprivation due to abuse, children survive by withdrawing into themselves, becoming isolated and exhibiting aggression towards their peers.

2. Hostility between peers. "Stupid idiot, that's not right, you're thick". Phrases like these are the result of systematic aggression directed towards children by their parents. The result is that children imitate their parents, often releasing their bottled-up anger in recurrent acts of violence towards their peers. Children who lack guidance in how to listen with

empathy and resolve problems through cooperation, instead witnessing aggression, belligerency or contempt, are more likely to show this negative behaviour in their relationships with others.

Abused children also experience feelings of loneliness and emptiness, which lead them to build a protective barrier against the world around them. This is exhibited in typical behaviour such as inappropriate vocabulary (swearing at their peers and teachers), violent games that are inappropriate for their age, intimidation of their peers and other expressions of aggression.

3. Fear. Valls (2003) states: "The experience of feeling terror is an antecedent experience that leads to violence. However, it would be a mistake to consider terror to be the only traumatic experience and to link all traumas to a single event".

While fear is necessary for the process of learning, the experience of fear takes on different meanings depending on the environment. For an abused child or one who witnesses violence in the family, fear is associated with the behaviour of another person. There is no doubt that children are affected when they witness fights between their parents. Their reactions include crying, becoming tense and rigid, blocking their ears, hiding and covering their eyes. They believe that in this way the stressful stimulus will cease to exist. The youngest children suffer physiological changes, including elevated heart rate and blood pressure. The stress of living with quarrelling parents can affect the development of the autonomic nervous system and reduce the child's ability to solve problems.

4. Trauma. Trauma in children is due not only to physical violence, but also to emotional or material deprivation and the breakdown of family and community ties. Often it is the conditions of daily life that affect them more than the abuse itself. Not all children who have been victims of extreme violence, either directly or indirectly, suffer from psychological trauma, but Valls (2003) argues that all of them experience some kind of suffering. He goes on to say that the impact of the traumatic event depends on the way in which it is assimilated into the personal history of the individual or the history of the group.

Practical therapy and support

The project's programme of practical therapy and support is based on these four psycho-social characteristics of child victims of domestic violence and addresses the children's problems primarily through art and play activities. These were chosen as the core part of the programme because both are essential for every child. Play is vital for the development of physical and motor skills, reasoning abilities, capacity for affection and social/cultural norms. It is the basis of learning and gives meaning to a child's life. Valls (2003) maintains:

"For a child, play is a privileged moment of new encounters with the world and of positive interactions with others. It doesn't take trauma away, but it is a new experience that one can depend on while inventing a new life for oneself for today and tomorrow. While playing, the child is in a 'potential space' between the internal and external realities, a protective bubble that filters out the aggressions of the external world and the equally destructive internal feelings of resentment, aggression and fear".

Similarly, Castillo (2003) suggests:

"Art as a strategy is a community intervention technique that has been validated in the educational, health and social spheres by numerous projects with children. The development of a child through artistic expression can be one of the ways to satisfy the needs of a creative and sensitive human being who has the ability to apply their knowledge, possesses psychological resources and who does not experience difficulties in their relations with other people or with their surroundings".

Following the suggestions of Valls (2003), the programme seeks to provide a focal point for children in crisis situations. This comprises three linked aspects: a) direct intervention with the children; b) training for local staff; and c) support for the families and wider community. A longer-term objective has also been added: that of helping the families and local communities to create binding social agreements that will prevent the abuse of children in the future and provide support systems that guarantee respect for human rights, especially those of children.

The programme works closely with child and family centres run by the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare). The activities are mainly workshops facilitated by a group of psychologists who have undertaken diagnostic work in the field of children and domestic violence. The workshops provide activities that address the specific needs of individual children, using playtime and drama to help them lose their fear of physical contact and start to form more normal relationships. The dramatic improvisation exercises use puppets and then real-life examples from both children's and parents' lives to uncover their histories. The children are encouraged to tell stories and to respond to the investigators' questions by acting out the roles of fathers, mothers, older siblings and peers. This helps clarify where they see themselves in the domestic and socio-cultural contexts. These workshops help the children to not only express and focus their emotions, but also to learn how to care for their physical health, to protect themselves from strangers and to present themselves well.

The workshops also encourage the parents to participate in activities with their children, helping them develop more peaceful and appropriate techniques of child rearing. Many parents appreciate the chance to exchange views on topics such as domestic violence and children's rights. Families who have taken part in the workshops appreciate the chance to think and reflect as individuals. They feel comfortable and value the opportunity to learn basic forms of theatrical and creative expression. Each person has taken charge of their own learning and addressed problems in their own way. This has helped them decide what to do next and where to go to seek help.

The programme also aims to create links among the main groups of people who influence the children, i.e., their parents, teachers and the wider community. Teachers play an important role and are a key component of the play therapy. In addition to helping parents see the need for change, they can mediate between the child victim and the abuser.

Conclusions

The techniques used in this project have proved very useful, both for the child victims of domestic



Activities such as playtime and drama help children lose their fear of physical contact and start to form more normal relationships

violence and their parents. Play and artistic expression allow them to become more open and grow in confidence. In addition, working in groups brings a feeling of community support into the home. The parents, especially the mothers, appreciate the chance to tell their stories, share their problems and have someone who listens to them. The children especially appear to open up when expressing themselves through play and drama.

Such programmes of psycho-social intervention for child abuse are therefore more than a social service. They can help people change and become masters of their own destiny, especially in the case of the victims. The methods used here introduce new ideas to both children and adults: not only the right to be protected, but also how to develop new skills to confront adversity.

References

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Jamaica Hope for Children

Richard Troupe, Founder and Executive Director, Hope for Children Development Company

It took children's groups, including Hope for Children, 10 years of determined advocacy to get the Child Care and Protection Act 2004 onto the statute books in Jamaica. This piece of legislation largely embodies the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and should be a major step forward in reducing, among other things, violence against children.

Having won that battle, though, now we're faced with an even bigger one – because getting a law on the statute books is not the same thing as achieving real change on the ground. Many of the provisions of the Act have not yet been implemented. We applaud the recent appointment of Mrs Mary Clarke, the Children's Advocate, but the much-anticipated National Register for child abuse has not yet been realised.

But the most important challenge we are facing is to make sure people know about the Act, what it says, and why it's important.

Hope for Children has especially been concentrating on raising awareness of one particularly important provision of the Act, which makes it mandatory to report incidence of child abuse. When there is suspicion or evidence that children are being abused, teachers are now mandated by law to report this.

We have partnered with the Jamaica Coalition on the Rights of the Child and 30 early childhood education institutions affiliated to the South West St Andrew Association of Basic Schools to support this mandatory reporting. We have involved a senior family court judge to talk to educators about what the law means. Our aim is to demystify the law, to explain to teachers and principals what are their obligations under the Act, and get them to support it.

Crisis

Tackling violence against children is a difficult issue in Jamaica because there are deep-seated

cultural causes underpinning it. Corporal punishment, or 'flogging', has traditionally been seen as an integral part of child-rearing. Since it has been banned in schools, its incidence has reduced, but teachers complain that they have not been given any alternative procedures for disciplining children. The ban has consequently created a sense of crisis.

Flogging is not the only kind of violence in schools. Child-on-child violence has become a major problem in some areas, with growing numbers of students bringing knives or cutlasses to school in their schoolbags. The problem is so bad the government has launched a campaign to try to get weapons out of schools, with designated police officers assigned to some schools.

Child-on-child violence is a spillover from the culture of gang violence that afflicts many of the communities in which we work, with groups of young men fighting over women, drugs, guns, or sometimes political issues.

This means children are exposed to violence from an early age. And they lack positive male role models. In some of the areas where we work, as many as 90% of children are growing up in female-headed households. To make matters worse there are high rates of unemployment and poverty among these single mothers, many of whom are themselves practically still children, having become pregnant as teenagers.

These are the fundamental issues that lie behind violence towards children. And some of those incidences of violence are very serious and shocking. For example, in April 2005, Shanika Anderson, a 6-year-old member of our organisation, was abducted from a local market. Her body was found the following day; she had been brutally raped and murdered.