

No painful blows or hurtful words...

María José Dufourq, Plan Guatemala

Over the years in Guatemala there have been an increasing number of reports on ill-treatment and sexual abuse of children. These reflect poor child-care practice, the weakening social fabric and increased violence in the country. However, these reports are based on official figures, which show just the tip of the iceberg. The problem is much more serious.

Analysis of the situation

Working alongside local non-governmental organisations, Plan Guatemala¹ carried out preliminary studies to investigate the extent of the problem. These revealed an urgent need for a protection programme to address not only family and community issues, but also to negotiate and make representations at national level to fill legislative gaps in child protection.

Two research projects were carried out, titled 'Let's break the culture of silence' (in 2004) and 'Social representations of sexual abuse with emphasis on incest' (in 2007). Two studies were also carried out at the local level, in the Jalapa and Escuintla districts. Results from these studies showed that many of the situations in which children are vulnerable are perceived by Guatemalan society as being acceptable and, in many cases, even normal occurrences. Rigid childcare models justify the use of violence towards children as an educational and disciplinary technique.

There are a number of deep-rooted cultural aspects directly affecting adults' relationships with children. Cussianovich (1995) refers to them as affection-inhibiting factors:

- There is a tendency to associate affection with women or mothers. Related to this, women are defined as sensitive and 'weak', whereas men do not display affection, because they don't want to

be seen as sensitive or 'weak'.

- Affection is also associated with children, which reinforces the idea of the child as inferior, immature, innocent and helpless.
- Affection is associated with private, intimate relations or encounters.
- The culture of violence as a way of life in the family, in the street, at school and in the workplace has led to a state of mistrust, where everyone may be viewed as a potential aggressor. This brings a violent element into everyday life.
- Children and youngsters are stereotyped, for example, as youth gangs, street children, etc. (PRONICE-Save the Children, 2001).

Solutions

Moving away from these destructive ideas towards positive and constructive care and education methods involves working with parents, teachers and carers to raise awareness and strengthen emotional maturity.

In 2005, in conjunction with the National Network for the Prevention and Assistance in the Mistreatment and Sexual Abuse of Children and Adolescents, Plan Guatemala started the Childcare with Affection programme. This programme aims to raise awareness and educate parents and teachers on the impact of violent behaviour on children, particularly during early childhood. 'No painful blows or hurtful words' is one of the programme's slogans.

Within this context, in February 2007, together with UNICEF and the International Child Development Programme (ICDP), we began to implement workshops under the title of 'I'm a person too'. These workshops have been held in other parts of the world and have proved to be extremely valuable for promoting children's balanced and



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positive growth. They are aimed at supporting good quality interaction between adults and children, contributing to the rounded emotional, cognitive and social development of the children.

The workshops are based around a series of eight guides, presented in 12 sessions designed to provide spaces where parents and carers can reflect and where children can be observed. The idea is to build on the positive aspects that already exist in the adult-child relationship. This builds confidence and encourages initiative, and also introduces routines and exercises that lead to finding new ways of interacting in everyday life. A great deal of emphasis is placed on building on what the target population knows and lives with, using participants' experiences as the raw materials for discussion and reflection.

The workshops promote three kinds of dialogue, depending on whether the child needs love,

stimulation or setting of limits.

The programme is taking place in five field offices in the east and the north of the country. Our fieldwork team has been trained in this methodology, and they in turn train groups of people in the communities so that they can pass on what they have learned to people directly involved in childcare (parents, grandparents, young people, etc.).

Otto Catalán, one of our promoters in charge of training people who work directly with carers, says: "You start with yourself, applying what you've learned with your own family. One thing I really like about the programme is that people's experience is valued, as well as their cultural and educational background. I've realised that my relationship with my son has improved now. I'm more affectionate, more patient and more tolerant."

Types of dialogue	The eight guides
Emotional dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • showing love • following and responding to initiatives • establishing personal communication – praising and confirming
Dialogue aimed at understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • getting their attention • naming and describing the world • broadening their knowledge of the world
Regulating dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • setting limits in a positive way • suggesting step-by-step actions

According to the programme’s terms of reference, “psychological research shows that the basic condition for children’s development is a stable, long-term relationship with at least one adult who is capable of showing love and bringing the child up with an enriched experience of the world”.

Zoila, one of the mothers taking part in the programme, commented that she found the workshops really useful because she got valuable information from them: “When you speak to a child you should look them in the eyes so that they feel you’re concentrating on them. I really think that if we treat our children with love and affection they’ll respond in the same way.”

This is a significant challenge for parents, teachers and carers, especially as they often feel that they are losing the power that they see as necessary for looking after a child. However, as the number of workshops increases, we hope to expand awareness and build a network of protection for children living in these communities.

Note

- 1 Plan International is a child-centred community development organisation. It is not affiliated to any religious, political or governmental organisation. Guatemala is one of 47 developing countries in which it implements its programmes. Its vision is of a world where children can realise their full potential in societies where human rights and people’s dignity are respected. Plan has been working in Guatemala since 1978 and currently works with 650 communities in the districts of Escuintla, Jalapa, Izabal, Baja and Alta Verapaz.

References

- Cussianovich, A. (1995). *Educar desde una pedagogía de la ternura. Jóvenes y niños trabajadores: Sujetos sociales; Protagonismo: estrategia y metodología*. IFEJANT, Lima, Perú
- PRONICE–Save the Children (2001). “La Ternura vale más que mil golpes”: Los patrones de crianza para la salud mental de los niños y las niñas (Affection is worth more than a thousand blows: Childcare models for children’s mental health).