Care and safeguarding in COVID-19 times: Challenges and opportunities

“Love would be nothing when relentless life falls upon us, for we are reduced to poor devils, crushed and disappointed. For then, without the tenderness of a heart to support us, we would not go very far... no, we would not go very far”.

This is a verse from a French song that has become an anthem of resistance and resilience during this period of lockdown. Tenderness is a serene expression of love for it is respect and affection expressed in small details and gestures. It is tenderness that allows loving relationships to strengthen the very roots of our bonds. Tenderness continues to be of tangible benefit to everyone and especially the most vulnerable in these difficult circumstances.

Thousands of examples

Children are obliged to keep their distance just like everyone else, but we have seen how they have insisted on continuing to communicate with their grandparents, the most vulnerable people at this time. Children have found ways to share their experiences and feelings with them by using the technological means at their disposal. Girls and boys teach us how creativity and tenderness can help us to cope with any situation, thus bringing us closer and helping us to be more understanding.

During this pandemic, we would argue, our spirit of care and encounter has been recovered. There are many examples. Thousands of volunteers have offered to help in organisations that support people in vulnerable situations. Healthcare workers have gone even beyond their professional requirements and, in spite of anguish and stress, they have cared for and accompanied people at every stage of life. Informal outreach networks have been watching over their neighbourhood by offering support and services. Families that found that their daily routine was disrupted have taken responsibility for the functioning and organisation of their home to allow for the holistic care of their children. Teachers have suddenly had to adapt classrooms, teaching materials and their own educational capacities to virtual reality. In sectors of the population with difficulty in accessing technology due to scarce resources or for geographical reasons, teachers manage to get the material to the students and follow through with the academic course.

The evidence, the risk, the damage

The pandemic has also put safeguarding to the test. This is because we are all vulnerably unequal. As many families are excluded socially and financially and may live in overcrowded conditions, they have to cope with loneliness and feeling of anxiety about taking care of their children. The limited or non-existent access to child and adolescent protection services has increased the psychosocial stress on caregivers and those in shelters. Other situations that we will describe below have left children at risk and unprotected, situations that are often overlooked.

1 https://ciudadesamigas.org/covid-19-cuarentena-violencia-infantil/
We must not forget the children who are being sexually abused. Statistics tell us that ninety percent of cases of sexual abuse occur in family settings or are perpetrated by acquaintances. While women have access to a helpline to report gender-based violence (reports say that calls have escalated during the lockdown) it is not so clear in every country that children can get help or that the resources are there for them to seek assistance.

During lockdown, home is not a safe place for these children. On the contrary, it is a terrifying place to be. The closure of schools and social distancing from friends has aggravated the situation because they feel that there is nowhere friendly to go.

In cases of domestic violence involving the parents, whether physical or verbal, the fact that the child is not directly abused does not mean that he or she does not suffer from it as a passive spectator. This can have repercussions on children’s psycho-emotional and psychosexual development because they may reproduce these learned behaviour patterns with their future partners, and so become victims or aggressors.

If children see their mother being abused, they suffer just as much as if they were being abused themselves. They feel as if the blows fell on themselves and feelings of helplessness traumatised them. The holistic development of children who witness abuse is especially affected because it will be difficult for them to know the meaning of love or what it is to have a sense of human dignity.

**Inequalities and neglect**

When people live in spaces of very few square meters without a balcony or garden, this increases stress factors, anxiety and depression in families. The result can be a greater risk of violent behaviour happening here than may happen in households with larger living spaces. We cannot forget immigrant families who have been left without work and without assistance because they do not have legally declared jobs and who may live in one room of a house shared with other families.

Lack of social contact plays an important role. Visits among families serve as social control and are a protective factor, so if no one enters the house, children have no one to turn to for help. Physical isolation becomes psychological and spiritual isolation. Children feel alone, abandoned by people, and even by God. No one listens to their call and no help comes.

New technologies are playing a very important role during lockdown. Many workers have had to take advanced courses in teleworking and difficulties have arisen in combining professional work time, domestic chores and childcare.

As far as children are concerned, there is great inequality in the possibilities of adequate access to technology. Without parental supervision and care, schoolwork is unlikely to be done properly. Not all parents have the academic background for this supervision, even if they would like to do it. The difficulty increases when there is only a limited number of mobile phones available in a household and there are several siblings.

It is not easy for parents to fulfil their duties as mother or father in supporting children in their schoolwork and to combine this with teleworking. Stress increases, feelings of incompetence
grow, and frustration can lead to mistreatment and abuse. The most serious outcome of this situation is that children may normalise ill-treatment and abuse in their own relationships.

**An added difficulty**

During this lockdown, parents have the responsibility to be aware of the social networks being accessed by their children. It is a recognised fact that the indiscriminate use of the Internet by minors can bring about potential hazards, especially in matters of cyber-bullying or cyber-sex. One of the most high-risk situations is the easy access (at a very young age according to statistics) to pages with pornographic content. Violence has been digitalised, and face to face contact is being replaced by screen to screen contact where images and contents circulate that are linked to violence. Children have a screen in their pockets seven days a week, 24 hours a day. The borderline between the real and the virtual is blurred and certain forms of violence are beginning to become commonplace. This gives rise to a high risk of negative repercussions on their psychosexual and emotional development.

Another situation of particular vulnerability is that of migrant families living in settlements or refugee camps. Social distancing is often not possible and the danger of contagion is high. Families feel powerless and do not want to attract attention because they know that they are not welcome. Many women and children are doubly abused, both during the journey and in the camps.

The difficulty of reporting cases of child abuse or maltreatment in a situation of lockdown is undeniable. Screening is usually done at school or by paediatric healthcare workers, but this is not currently feasible. It is also not certain that the child can seek help from a trusted person. It would therefore be important for the media to publicise child helpline telephone numbers in each community and support networks in order to make them more accessible.

**Positive parenting**

Confronted with these situations of risk and lack of protection, some testimonies from families and children are an expression of how these weeks at home have allowed them to rediscover themselves as a family. It has been a learning experience having to share small spaces and for all to take responsibility for household tasks. Boys and girls appreciated doing their school and home chores together, as well as spending time in recreation and conversation.

As we look at this new situation after lockdown, we continue to be deeply committed to Article 19.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, “States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child”.

It is the family that organises, for better or for worse, the psycho-emotional development of children and adolescents. Hence the importance of positive parenting and mutual care among all family members. Situations like the current lockdown have put the parent-child relationship of love and collaboration to the test, so it is important to insist on the need for positive parenting.
The best way to reduce mistreatment and abuse is to support families by providing parents with the appropriate tools and strategies to help them understand and identify violent forms of behaviour that their children may experience both within and outside the family setting. Help must be given by providing financial and material assistance to families faced with a decline in income generating opportunities to meet the basic and educational needs of their children.

Children also require certain skills that need to be developed and taught directly and systematically, both at home and at school. These cover the areas of the emotional, communication, assertiveness, the social sphere and interpersonal problem-solving. To the extent that children’s awareness of the existence of risks is enhanced, they are given the opportunity to formulate strategies to recognise and deal with them.

Child protection networks and support services play an important role in ensuring that children can report or denounce situations of abuse through accessible channels. This helps to prevent domestic and interpersonal mistreatment and violence.

**Timely responses**

A recent publication by the Spanish UNICEF Committee\(^2\) identifies opportunities for action by local authorities to respond to this health and social crisis and to ensure that children’s needs are met and their rights protected:

- **Train personnel in the sectors of health, education and child services regarding the risks in child protection associated with COVID-19, including the prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation and how to safely report their concerns.**
- **Train initial response teams to manage the disclosure of Gender-based violence (GBV) cases and work with health care services to assist victims of GBV.**
- **Provide more information about care and other support services available for children. This information should be written in a child-friendly way and distributed through channels that children can access.**
- **Encourage children and adolescents to reflect on how Covid-19 affects them differently in order to gather information for programmes and advocacy activities.**
- **Provide specific support to interim care centres and families, including child-headed households and foster families, to provide emotional assistance to children and adolescents and to teach them how to properly care for themselves.**

The resources and procedures suggested are numerous. They aim primarily to guarantee compliance with and full exercise of children’s rights, even during extraordinary times like these present circumstances being experienced by us all.

**The TA International Advisory Panel on Safeguarding Policies.**

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\(^2\) [https://ciudadesamigas.org/covid19-recomendaciones/](https://ciudadesamigas.org/covid19-recomendaciones/)