

Circumventing Pathology and Exclusion: Language and Cultural Considerations for Child Protection Policies and Programmes.

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Background: Scrutiny of the MDGs reveals that not a single goal can be achieved unless the protection of children is an integral part of national policies, strategies and plans. Research indicates that child protection violations are closely linked to negative outcomes for children's ability to achieve in educational settings and their long term employment potential. In addition, such violations have immediate and long-term health outcomes on children.

Most governments in the region are therefore working to develop and strengthen sustainable and comprehensive child protection systems that can effectively prevent and protect all children from harm, particularly those from ethnic minority groups and children with disabilities.

This presentation gave an overview of the existing evidence base on the interrelationship between child protection, education and health.

Long-term results of abuse:

Evidence has shown that regardless of the level of harm, the actual act of abuse has a long-term impact on the health of the child. 'Toxic' stress can severely damage the brain's response system and hinder higher brain functioning. Excessive and repeated stress causes the release of neuro-chemicals and hormones that impair cell growth and interfere with the formation of healthy neural circuits in the brain. Toxic stress also over stimulates the brain's stress response system and contributes to premature ageing of the body.

Abuse is also related to health problems; and WHO have undertaken a significant body of work in this area. One small scale independent study in Canada revealed that 49 per cent of women in a breast cancer ward had suffered abuse as children and there was assumed to be a link between the abuse and their medical condition, although further rigorous investigation is required to clearly verify such links.

Data: at a national level across the region, there is a persistent lack of comprehensive data on the scale and nature of child protection issues, i.e. child sexual abuse, commercial sexual exploitation, child trafficking, sex tourism, violence, neglect, abandonment, children in institutions and children in conflict with the law. However, secondary studies in the Asia-Pacific region, statistics indicate that a quarter of the population has experienced some form of child sexual abuse or violence. No similar studies are available for other forms of child abuse or exploitation.

What is the definition of child abuse? We need to understand how families perceive the protection of their children. While the UN CRC sets out some specific minimum standards, child protection is perceived differently in different cultures. For instance, in Sudan, children are taught to build sand wells to store water at an early age as a matter of survival. Western parents would be horrified to see young children involved in such a potentially dangerous endeavour. Whereas, children in the Western world are allowed certain liberties which in other countries would be inappropriate for children's protection, such as girls going to discos unaccompanied.

Consequences of child maltreatment:

Children who are abused are more likely to become involved in high risk behaviours such as the abuse of drugs and alcohol, early sexual engagement, or coming into conflict with the law and possible behavioural problems. They are also likely to suffer mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders and suicide. The impairment of brain functioning also causes a reduction in the ability to form functional relationships which can result in high divorce levels, early parenting and contribute to a cycle of poverty and a cycle of violence.

The link between language and child protection – case study – Victoria Climbié

As the majority of child protection investigations result from dialogue between various parties, e.g. the child who discloses abuse, investigation and interviews with the child and with the accused perpetrator of the abuse, and throughout the court processes and the follow up support to the abused child.

The murder of Victoria Climbié in London in the year 2000 highlighted the problems of a communication breakdown when eight-year-old Ivorian girl Victoria Adjo Climbié was abused, tortured and eventually murdered by her aunt and live-in boyfriend.

Victoria was burnt with cigarettes, tied up for periods of longer than 24 hours, and hit with bike chains, hammers and wires. Up to her death, the police, the social service department of four local authorities, the National Health Service, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and local churches all had contact with her and noticed her abuse, which required numerous hospital visits and several investigations by the different authorities into their concerns over an 18 month period prior to Victoria's death.

When health and child protection officials tried to question the girl's aunt, the woman claimed that she only spoke French and did not understand English. Officials brought in an interpreter who made an assessment of the child on behalf of the social worker and relayed the information to the social worker. It transpired that the aunt could actually speak English, but to hide her abuse of the child, she feigned ignorance of English in the presence of child protection officers. This case highlighted the complications of a lack of common language and how this may be utilized to avoid prosecution. The official inquiry criticized this lapse in procedure and recommended that an interpreter's interpretation of the case was not valid and that social workers should not take evidence if there is not an independent interpreter who was proficient in the necessary languages and understood the professional role in such situation.

Recommendations:

- Those involved in the field of child protection should utilize a 'cultural assets' approach that understands the risk and resilience factors of societies, families and communities. The approach should build an understanding of cultural diversity but one which does not erode the essential elements of the rights of the child.
- Training for professional staff including teachers who should understand discrimination and cultural competence, supported by a multi-agency framework for prevention and response;.
- Effective resourcing is imperative, e.g. multi-lingual staff as an asset. Interpreters should not work beyond their recognized professional role, have an appropriate cultural understanding and not be in a position of power or authority in the community in which the individuals in question reside. Cross-sectoral support is also critical;
- Child protection staff should carry out more frequent and shorter interviews when working across language barriers and ensure a plan to support the children in the task.
- Staff should incorporate innovative assessment tools which can respond to differing cultural systems, e.g. consider terminology; descriptive and substantive information collection ; group and individual assessment; dialogue and observation; access to appropriate tools.