

Improving the quality of psychosocial support for children and adolescents in the Darfur refugee camps

Micha de Winter

In order to offer psychosocial support for children and adolescents in the Darfur refugee camps, UNICEF established a large number of so-called Child Friendly Spaces. This article describes a training for model animators, who later gave an on-the-job training to the animators in the facilities. This had a substantial effect on the quality of the support the animators offered to the children.

Keywords: Child Friendly Spaces, Darfur, corporal punishment, internally displaced persons (IDP) camp

Child Friendly Spaces

In order to offer psychosocial support for children and adolescents in the Darfur refugee camps, the United Nations Funds for Children (UNICEF) established a large number of so-called Child Friendly Spaces (CFSs).¹ The idea behind such spaces is that children and adolescents who have been part of severely traumatizing events (as is the case for almost every young person in Darfur) should be provided with 'normal' developmental, cultural, educational and recreational activities as soon as possible. Such meaningful and attractive activities, taking place in a trustworthy, caring and constructive environment, will help youngsters to recover and to come to grips with their life. Ideally, CFSs should be community centres that help to fulfil basic social needs such as a sense of connection, relationships with peers, developmental stimulation and

personal attention by caring adults. The majority of children and youth appear to have enough resilience to recover if such basic needs and support are adequately met. It is estimated, however, that about a quarter of all affected children need extra attention due to their experiences and/or an increased vulnerability. Psychosocial support should thus be aimed at both the collective and the personal needs of children and young people. Empowerment and participation is the key in this process. This means helping children and youth to become actively involved in the way they like to play, learn and live, as well as helping the communities to create a context in which the rights of the child can be secured.

In March 2005 I visited four internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in south Darfur. I observed that the CFSs were overcrowded and that there was a shortage of trained animators (see Box 1). Many animators were using unacceptable disciplinary techniques. The programmes offered in the CFSs were strictly teacher-oriented, extremely monotonous, and offered little developmental stimulation.

Possibilities for community participation and meaningful activities for adolescents were lacking. Hardly any youth animators were working with the adolescents. For girls particularly the situation was alarming; few were enrolled in education or other social activities, resulting in feelings of neglect,

Box 1: Observation in a Child Friendly Spaces in Darfur

In a small space about 100–150 children between 1 and 12 years are gathered. The group is led by an ‘animator’ who is one of the mothers in the camp. She has a stick and a rope, which she uses to discipline the children. The children are repeating songs. Later, papers and crayons are thrown into the room and the children jump forward and fight for the material. They start drawing, and as if they were told to do so, all of them draw helicopters and camels. After 10 minutes all the drawings are collected and put into a folder. No notice of the drawings is taken and there is no communication with any of the children about the drawings. The atmosphere is very impersonal. No one seems to enjoy themselves, neither the children nor the animator.

boredom and often, depression. As documented, many adolescent girls have suffered from sexual violence during the Darfur conflict, and many were (and are still) at risk, even in the IDP camps.

In order to improve both the quality and the quantity of the psychosocial activities in the CFSs in the Darfur IDP camps, the first priority was to improve the skills of the animators running these activities or centres. The most effective way to accomplish this was to develop a core-group of skilled and highly motivated ‘model animators’ in each of the Darfur regions. These model animators

would then be able to give animators in the field an on-the-job training in psychosocial support of children and adolescents, and to provide follow-up supervision and monitoring to the animators. The training and supervision should represent quality standards for psychosocial support such as those summed up in Box 2.

In addition, it was urgently recommended to develop meaningful activities for adolescent boys and girls in the camps, especially sporting activities. To develop such activities on a daily basis, it was necessary to train *youth and sports animators*. For adolescent girls

Box 2: Quality standards for Child Friendly Spaces

- *The parents and families of the children and the community are actively involved in the activities in the CFSs.*
- *The CFSs offer a variety of developmental, creative, cultural and physical activities for children.*
- *The children are given the possibility to participate in organized activities, but there is also time and support for ‘free play’, individually, or with their peers.*
- *The structure of the centres creates possibilities for many different activities and choices within a safe, monitored context.*
- *Child participation in the centres is obvious and normal. For example, children can help maintain the spaces and the materials, and to design or improve the programme. Older children can also assist the younger ones.*
- *The CFSs are staffed by qualified animators. These animators are able to stimulate children’s active participation in the centre, to engage children in connecting group activities, to interact with individual children showing personal interest, and to recognize possible psychosocial problems in children. They only use acceptable disciplinary techniques to draw children’s attention, or to correct their behaviour, if necessary and know how to involve parents and the community in their work.*

without access to school, special activities should be arranged. The girls themselves expressed an urgent need for social activities such as: literacy classes, vocational training and sports. Finally, it was recommended to promote the development of youth participation in order to help adolescents to regain a sense of control over their lives and living conditions.

Training model animators

In July 2005, three Training Of Trainers (T.O.T.) seminars were held in Nyale (south Darfur), El Fashr (north Darfur) and Geneina (west Darfur).² The child-protection teams of the three UNICEF-Darfur offices were each able to select a core group of about 20 experienced and highly motivated model animators. These model animators were

working as staff members and supervisors of local or international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the field of child protection and psychosocial support. Among the participants were teachers, social workers, artists, and community workers, but also experienced animators without specific education.³

Each seminar took 3 days and the main topics and educational techniques are summed up in Box 3.

One of the subjects that came up during the training was beating children as a disciplinary method. All participants openly acknowledged that beating is a common phenomenon and that it occurs in schools, in the family and in the community. By 'beating' in this context, they are referring to not just a 'gentle tap or slap', but really hitting children hard,

Box 3: Subject matter and educational methods of the T.O.T. for model animators

Main topics:

- * Child and adolescent development
- * Determinants of development
- * Risk factors and protective factors for development
- * Influence of traumatic experiences such as violence, war, deportation on development
- * The importance of individual contact with children and adolescents
- * How to meet the needs of affected children and adolescents
- * The role of child and adolescent participation and how to organize it
- * The role of community participation and how to organize it
- * How to organize and perform training for animators

Main educational methods:

- * Lectures and discussions (about theoretical and practical subjects)
- * Brainstorming sessions (about topics such as violence against children, children's and adolescent's rights, the role of cultural and religious values)
- * Group-work (in which the participants were challenged to find solutions for problems concerning the content, organization and training of psychosocial support, child, youth and community participation, etc.)
- * Experiential (group work aimed at the development of creative and expressive skills)

with or without a stick. An extensive discussion was held about the hazards of corporal punishment for the health, wellbeing and the development of children and adolescents, and about the legitimacy from the perspective of the International Convention for the Rights of the Child.⁴

To promote both the empowerment of the trainees and the cultural sensitivity of the training content, the participants in the T.O.T. workshops were asked to actively develop answers themselves for a number of problems, such as:

- How can we organize a CFS in such a way that contact with individual children and with small groups of children becomes possible?
- How can we stimulate child and adolescent participation?
- How can we improve community participation with regard to psychosocial support?
- What should be the main content for the training of animators?
- What are the main criteria for monitoring the quality of a CFS?

After the seminars, the groups were strongly motivated to use the acquired knowledge and techniques to help improve the quality of psychosocial support for children and adolescents in their regions. One of the groups decided to have monthly meetings, in order to keep up their spirits and to exchange experiences. The author advised each of the child protection units of Darfur and the management of the sub-offices to follow-up and support the core groups. The support of the child protection teams was thought to be necessary in terms of content, organization and technical facilities. The support of the sub-office management was thought to be necessary to organize and secure the cooperation with the NGOs that employ the model animators.

Eight months later

In February 2006, the T.O.T. was followed up by a field evaluation during which five IDP camps were visited. In these camps, the author visited almost all CFSs and observed youth activities and/or youth clubs. Furthermore, a number of focus group discussions were held with model animators.

More than 1000 animators working in psychosocial support for children and adolescents were trained by model animators. In many CFSs and youth facilities substantial effects of the programme were observed.⁵

A personal approach. Many centres have been reorganized to facilitate individual contact with children and to work in small groups. While overcrowding remains a fundamental quality risk for psychosocial support, numerous centres have been able to involve community members (among them often adolescent girls) in the process of lessening the impact of overcrowding. Although the culture of Darfur can be considered to be mainly collectivistic, there seemed to be very broad support in the field for the view that psychosocial support is only possible when the child or adolescent is known as a person, related to his or her family, and community. The training of animators and staff is a fundamental prerequisite in this process. However, in a number of instances the capacity and the number of centres were absolutely insufficient to reach any acceptable standard of psychosocial support. Therefore, it is an urgent priority to build more centres, and to recruit and train more animators.

Violence. Providing psychosocial support for children and youngsters severely affected by the Darfur crisis is incompatible with the use of *violence* against them. Fortunately the violence used towards children in CFSs has significantly decreased, as it was an important part of the T.O.T. programme. However, in many situations children

were still threatened with corporal punishment. We were told by national staff that this method has nothing to do with Sudanese or Darfuri culture or religion. The massiveness of centres, combined with a shortage of well-trained and well-motivated staff produces an atmosphere where the use of corporal punishment seems the only solution. The use of violence is also a habit of people that have never had any other model of child-rearing available. What they themselves have experienced in their families, schools or communities is their only example. This means: training in nonviolent strategies of interaction with children and youngsters is the only way out.

Some NGOs have successfully implemented a 'zero-tolerance' policy against violence in their centres. As violence against young people is common in families, schools and the community, our model animators argue for strong investment in parent, teacher and community education.

Participation. Child, youth and community participation during this project has proved to be a very successful approach for improving the quality of psychosocial support. The participation of adolescents and others from the community helps to alleviate the task of overburdened animators. Support of community leaders and members is also necessary to disseminate the importance of child protection, children's rights and psychosocial support. In terms of the daily work in CFSs and youth work, promoting participation strongly improves the social climate and the pedagogical atmosphere. It was reported that both aggression and depression amongst children decreased if they were actively involved in decision-making regarding the programme.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that the T.O.T. strategy that was chosen in this project has been some-

what effective. At least, within the context of when we look at the number of animators that could be trained in a relatively short period in very difficult circumstances. At the same time, the field evaluation has shown that this should not be a one-time event. Every day more children and youth in Darfur need psychosocial support. Many centres are still largely overcrowded and severely understaffed. This means that Darfur needs an infrastructure of model animators that – like flying brigades – can go where training is urgently needed.

We have learned from the current project that this requires agreements between UNICEF and NGOs, as well as logistical support and facilitation. One of the disadvantages occurring in this project was that model animators that were trained by UNICEF only trained animators belonging to their own NGOs. Sustainable psychosocial support needs cooperation and exchange between the different partners. UNICEF could stimulate this by mainly facilitating and supporting organizations that are willing to do so.

As most international, and perhaps also a number of national NGOs, will finally leave Darfur or decrease their activities, it is extremely urgent to develop sustainable strategies for improving and maintaining the quality of psychosocial child and youth support. Maintaining a well-facilitated stable infrastructure of model animators is important, but not enough, once the phase of emergency has turned into a more stable situation. Psychosocial support for affected children should then be connected to existing community facilities for health and education.

¹ This was done in close cooperation with numerous national and international NGOs. In February 2005 about 140 CFSs were established.

² In addition to the three seminars described above, a training seminar was held near Finna in the Jabal Marra Mountains, an area currently controlled by the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA). The participants were about 60 animators, teachers and students working in schools and centres for psychosocial support. Many of the participants had walked for two or three days to reach the village where the seminar was conducted. This was only one of the many signs that showed the great motivation and high spirit of the people that live or that have taken refuge in this area, to improve psychosocial care for their children. Content and methods were comparable to those of the T.O.T. seminars.

³ The seminars were led by the author of this report and a Sudanese trainer, Mr Mahmoud Babikir. During the seminars Mr Babikir, functioned both as a translator (English–Arabic, vice versa), and as a facilitator of creative and expressive techniques.

⁴ During this discussion, the Sultan of the area, the Shataya (who attended every minute of the training for 3 full days!) stood up and asked the consultant how this deeply rooted cultural habit could be stopped? We responded that probably the only way was for the Shataya himself to outlaw

it/forbid it. The Shataya then made an official declaration: ‘I, the Sultan of the great Dar Um area, hereby declare that from this day on (14 July 2005) there shall be no more beating of children allowed. . . .’ Of course it will be of great interest to follow up the impact of this declaration during the coming period.

⁵ During the field observations the author hardly saw any physically or intellectually disabled children in the centres. The estimated guess is that 1–2% of all children are disabled. This would mean that there should be thousands of disabled children in the IDP camps. No satisfying answers were found to questions about what happened to this group of children (whether they never survive due to poverty and a lack of medical facilities, or whether they did not survive the flight from the villages to the IDP camps, or whether they are hidden in the homes). It is therefore urgently recommended to have this situation studied and evaluated.

*Micha de Winter is Professor of Childhood and Youth Studies at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands and consultant to UNICEF Sudan.
E-mail: m.dewinter@fss.uu.nl*