

Psychological First Aid

A review of Save the Children's PFA initiatives in China

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Introduction

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a practical method for providing initial support to people in crisis situations that aims to reduce their distress. In recent years, Save the Children has helped to extend this approach specifically to children, with the aim of supporting their recovery in the aftermath of humanitarian emergencies and other crisis situations.

Save the Children has developed a number of materials and guidance to promote PFA for children within its emergency response programmes, including a recently revised training manual for staff – the *'Psychological First Aid Training Manual for Child Practitioners,'* (2013). This introduces practical steps for Save the Children staff or partners working with children to identify and respond to their immediate distress in the aftermath of conflicts, natural disasters, violence and other traumatic events.

Roll out of PFA within Save the Children's programmes is still at an early stage. To date, there have been limited reviews regarding its uptake within emergency responses and its effectiveness as a tool to reduce the distress of children in humanitarian situations.

Save the Children China and PFA: Lessons learned

The aim of this review is to document lessons learned from Save the Children's introduction of PFA within emergency response in China. Save the Children China has emerged as an early proponent of PFA, integrating it within four earthquake responses in Yunnan, Sichuan and Gansu provinces between 2012-2014. This has involved applying PFA within child protection and education emergency initiatives, as well as the development of a mobile PFA intervention.



As an early adopter of PFA, Save the Children China's experience can provide valuable insight into what works and doesn't work in efforts to reduce children's immediate distress in the aftermath of humanitarian crisis, and the challenges and opportunities for integrating PFA into emergency response.

Methodology: This report was developed on the basis of a review of Save the Children China documents including emergency situation reports, project proposals, evaluations and training reviews. Structured interviews were also held with Save the Children China staff (including PFA focal points), partners and volunteers in Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, and with Save the Children Sweden and Denmark staff.

Limitations: This review predominantly focused on the perspectives of Save the Children staff and 'implementers' of PFA such as teachers, Child Friendly Space volunteers and PFA Mobile Team members, and did not involve wider consultation with 'beneficiaries' of PFA such as children and caregivers. It was also difficult to effectively measure the *impact* of PFA initiatives, and it was only possible to visit one emergency project site - as three out of the four earthquake responses have now ended. Nonetheless, it was possible to develop a general picture of Save the Children's PFA initiatives over the past few years, and to identify key strengths and challenges.

Overview of PFA within Save the Children China

Save the Children has been supporting children in China since the 1980s. With a dual mandate as a development and humanitarian agency, it is one of the biggest international NGOs in China, and operates out of six programme offices across the country.

PFA was first introduced to Save the Children China in September 2012, when a member of the Yunnan office's Child Protection team attended a regional PFA training in Thailand. Around almost the same time, twin earthquakes shook Yunnan and Guizhou provinces, providing an immediate opportunity for Save the Children China to launch PFA within emergency response. In the subsequent weeks and months, the team worked closely with education authorities in Yunnan to develop the first PFA initiative in Save the Children China, equipping teachers with methods to reduce students' distress in earthquake-affected communities.

Since then, Save the Children China has introduced PFA within emergency responses to three subsequent earthquakes in Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, (one of which is ongoing in Ludian, Yunnan).¹ Building on their initial experience in Yunnan, this has involved further initiatives with teachers and students, integration of PFA within child protection emergency programming (chiefly Child Friendly Spaces) and the development of a 'PFA Mobile Team' intervention. PFA has also been incorporated within an ongoing and longer-term child protection project in Yunnan, aimed at providing support to children living on the streets, and affected by trafficking and violence.

Introducing PFA within Save the Children's programmes has involved adapting the approach and materials to each emergency response, as well as to the humanitarian context in China.² In most (but not all) cases this has meant training government or Civil Society Organisation (CSO) partners to conduct PFA activities, rather than direct implementation by Save

Earthquakes in China

Between 2012-2014 four earthquakes struck the western provinces of China causing huge destruction to communities. Operating out of their Sichuan and Yunnan offices, Save the Children responded through the distribution of critical supplies and support for health, education and child protection initiatives.

07 September 2012 (Yunnan): 5.7 and 5.6 earthquakes hit the border of Yunnan and Guizhou provinces. 81 deaths, 821 injured and 200,000 people relocated.

20 April 2013 (Ya'an): 7.0 earthquake hits Sichuan province with an epicentre in Lushan county, Ya'an Prefecture. 196 deaths, 14,785 injured and more than 608,000 relocated.

22 July 2013 (Gansu): 6.6 earthquake hits Gansu province at the junction of Min and Zhangxian counties. 95 deaths, 1,366 injured and more than 268,400 relocated.

03 August 2014 (Ludian): 6.5 earthquake hits Yunnan province affecting Ludian and Qiajia counties. 617 deaths, 3,143 injured and nearly 230,000 relocated. (The biggest earthquake in Yunnan province in 18 years).

¹ Sources for the textbox statistics: *China Yunnan Earthquake Response: Final Report SIDA (2012)*; *Lushan (Ya'an) Earthquake Response: Humanitarian Response Situation Report No. 17. (30 June 2014)*; *Final Report for Gansu Earthquake Response 2013 (18 December 2013)*; *Ludian Earthquake Response: Humanitarian Response Situation Report No. 21. (12 January 2014)*

² In China the government (or government partners) usually takes the primary role in providing aid in humanitarian disasters, particularly through relief distributions and reconstruction, and there generally isn't any co-ordination mechanism to bring humanitarian response actors together. While CSOs are becoming more active in humanitarian response, many lack experience of working with children in emergencies, presenting a clear need that Save the Children China can address through technical support.

the Children staff. This partnerships approach makes sense in light of the absence of a stable emergency team within Save the Children China that can consistently deploy to responses. It has also enabled Save the Children to provide much needed technical support to CSOs and government workers with limited experience of supporting children in disasters. In particular, a new partnership with One Foundation, an independent fundraising foundation that has emerged as a key player in humanitarian work in China, has helped Save the Children to access a wide network of disaster response CSOs to work with in emergencies – and to train on PFA.

Save the Children China’s PFA initiatives have largely been reactive, with activities evolving in response to each emergency. In recognition of the need for wider-scale psychosocial support for girls and boys after emergencies, work on PFA has generally gone beyond a ‘First Aid’ approach (e.g. providing people with simple steps to reduce the *immediate* distress of children after a crisis), and has been integrated within wider child protection/education/resilience initiatives. Save the Children China’s two PFA focal points based in the Sichuan and Yunnan offices, have been instrumental in developing these PFA initiatives, and leading on training for partners.

Save the Children China has recently produced a Chinese translation of the latest *Save the Children PFA Manual for Child Practitioners*, however have not had an opportunity to use it for training yet. To date, PFA Focal Points have designed their training sessions using Save the Children’s earlier manual - *PFA for Children: A Training Manual (2012)*, and added content regarding basic psychosocial support, resilience, child participation, child safeguarding and child protection using materials from other sources such as the Chinese Red Cross and the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC). In particular, PFA training has often included guidance and materials for participants on how to run ‘psychosocial activities’ with children, including games, relaxation exercises and role-plays.

Psychosocial support for children is seen as a good fit for Save the Children China in emergencies, as few actors (including the Chinese Government) are believed to have the interest or capacity to do this kind of work. While PFA is still new and has been challenging to implement, it is generally perceived as a useful approach that can contribute to these psychosocial support initiatives – and help Save the Children China to play an important role in supporting girls and boys in emergencies in China.

Children’s distress

Children faced a number of distressing experiences due to the earthquakes in China, including death or injury of loved ones, dislocation from their homes, physical harm and destruction of their schools. Reactions of fear, anxiety and grief, were witnessed in some children, accompanied by demonstrations of aggressive, withdrawn, or clingy behaviour and excessive crying. Some children reported problems sleeping, difficulty concentrating and anxiety around remaining indoors.

Lessons learned from Save the Children’s PFA initiatives in China

Save the Children China integrated PFA within four separate emergency earthquake responses in Yunnan, Gansu and Sichuan provinces between 2012-2014. These can be broadly categorised as:

1. PFA through schools
2. PFA through Child Friendly Spaces
3. PFA through mobile teams

Examination of each of these approaches can provide insight into what works and doesn’t work in the application of PFA within emergency responses.

Earthquake	PFA Response
2012 Yunnan	PFA through schools
2013 Ya’an (Sichuan)	PFA through schools PFA through Child Friendly Spaces
2013 Gansu	PFA Mobile Team
2014 Ludian (Yunnan)	PFA Mobile Team PFA through Child Friendly Spaces

1. PFA through schools

Save the Children first introduced PFA into emergency responses in China by working through schools and teachers in the aftermath of the September 2012 earthquake in Yunnan. Seven months later, when the bigger Ya’an earthquake took place in Sichuan province, Save the Children was able to build on this experience to develop a similar initiative.

Why PFA through schools? In the aftermath of both earthquakes in Yunnan and Sichuan, initial assessments by Save the Children China indicated that children were distressed and frightened, with some living in precarious conditions and dealing with displacement and loss. As schools reopened, equipping teachers with the skills and resources to help students to cope with their distress was identified as a useful entry point for Save the Children to introduce PFA, and (in Sichuan in particular), a way to build longer-term capacity of teachers to respond to children’s psychosocial needs.³

The model: Save the Children’s PFA education initiatives in the earthquake responses in Yunnan and Sichuan followed a similar model. This involved partnership with education authorities, a package of PFA training for primary and middle school teachers (some who functioned as student counsellors), and support for the development of teacher action plans to provide psychosocial support activities in schools. Through Training of the Trainer (ToT) sessions, (some) teachers were trained as a psychosocial ‘resource group’ that could be called upon within future disasters.

PFA Training:⁴ In both Yunnan and Sichuan, training for teachers went beyond a pure focus on PFA, and was tailored to a school environment. Teachers were trained on the eight steps of PFA⁵, ‘psychosocial activities’ to run with students (drawing, play, storytelling etc), techniques for communicating with girls and boys, guidance on helping parents to support distressed children, and ways to manage their own stress. It was emphasized that PFA was not only an approach that could be used after a major disaster, but could be used to respond to smaller crises with children. Teachers were encouraged to develop action plans for

³It was also seen as a more viable option than working through Child Friendly Spaces: Save the Children did not establish Child Friendly Spaces in either earthquake response, although they did provide some technical support to CSO-managed Child Friendly Spaces in Ya’an.

⁴Sources for the textbox statistics include: *China Yunnan Earthquake Response: Final Report SIDA (2012)*; *Improving the Quality of Basic Education in Rural China: Interim reporting for the BASF Foundation (November 2013 – 31 Oct 2014)*

⁵As laid out in Save the Children’s original PFA training manual: *Psychological First Aid for Children: A training manual (2012)*

bringing these methods back to their schools, through activities such as training other teachers/students on PFA, setting up student counselling rooms and running psychosocial activities in the classroom.

Impact: Monitoring and evaluation of teachers' use of PFA, and more importantly, its impact on reducing children's distress, proved challenging. In both Sichuan and Yunnan, reviews of the initiatives focused primarily on outputs – numbers of teachers trained, numbers of children involved in psychosocial activities and numbers of activities organized. As PFA was integrated within a wider package of psychosocial and emergency preparedness training moreover, it was difficult to distinguish the impact of PFA methods specifically.

While PFA was not specifically reviewed, a monitoring training workshop in Yunnan and a survey of 400 students and 100 teachers indicated that psychosocial activities were *'helping to divert children's attention from their distress and anxiety,'* and that the majority of children involved in psychosocial activities had reported positive change.⁶ In Sichuan, an evaluation of the project indicated that teachers had successfully implemented their action plans and improved their participatory training methods.⁷ Informal feedback from a small number of teachers and children also indicated that students had responded positively to psychosocial support activities, and that teachers had improved their ability to respond to children with problems.

Strengths:

- **An easy-to-use approach:** Feedback from teachers regarding PFA was generally positive. Teachers felt that it was a practical method for working with children in distress- whether due to the earthquake, smaller crises or day-to-day student stress, that could be easily integrated into their daily work in the classroom. In Sichuan, teachers were particularly appreciative of the teaching aids and materials Save the Children provided to help them design psychosocial activities for children.

PFA training through schools

Yunnan: PFA training was provided through three, three-day workshops that also included a focus on child protection in emergencies, disaster risk reduction, school safety and emergency preparedness. Training took place over a three-month period, starting approximately two months after the earthquake.

- 65 primary/middle school teachers directly trained on PFA
- 590 teachers introduced to PFA via secondary training
- 18,959 students provided with psychosocial activities

Sichuan: A three-day session on PFA was mixed in with a much wider package of psychosocial training that included DRR, child rights, child protection, resilience, child participation, classroom management and positive discipline. This came under the a one year project: *'DRR and Psychosocial support Capacity Building in Primary Schools'* initiated almost six months after the Ya'an earthquake.

- 44 teachers and headmasters from 23 primary schools in Ya'an trained on PFA
- 21,271 students benefited from PFA/psychosocial/DRR activities

⁶ Yunnan Earthquake Response: Humanitarian Response Situation Report No. 10 (05 March 2013)

⁷ Final Evaluation of Psychosocial Support and Disaster Risk Reduction in Primary School Project (2014)

- **Improving students' environment:** Teachers, particularly those who also worked as student counsellors, indicated that they were able to use their psychosocial/PFA training to improve children's 'psychosocial environment' at school. This included setting up student counselling rooms,⁸ improving their response to children with problems, guiding parents about ways to communicate with children and training other teachers on PFA.
- **Capacity building of teachers:** Teachers indicated that they felt more confident working with students with problems, and that they would be better able to cope with children's distress in the event of another disaster. They noted that the majority of problems they had observed in children since their PFA training were *not* earthquake related, but that they were still able to use the methods they had learned to help (for example with 'left-behind' children).⁹ In Sichuan, a core resource group of teachers trained under the PFA initiative, were also able to build the capacity of teachers in other schools, by training them on how to conduct psychosocial activities and to use PFA techniques to cope with students in distress.
- **Positive impact on children:** Despite the absence of comprehensive evaluations, feedback from Save the Children staff and teachers indicates that students benefited from the PFA initiatives and that there was a positive change in their behaviour. *"There was an obvious change in children before and after the earthquake, and before and after the intervention,* notes one teacher in Sichuan.

Challenges

- **PFA or longer-term psychosocial support?** In general, the education initiatives in Sichuan and Yunnan were more focused on training teachers on general psychosocial support methods, alongside school-based DRR and emergency preparedness – than just the First Aid approach of PFA (that ideally should be applied immediately after disasters). Save the Children's PFA focal point says, *"We were not really doing PFA in Ya'an. We were more focused on longer-term capacity building of teachers on psychosocial support and DRR. However teachers have learned the basics of PFA and hopefully can apply it if there is another disaster."*
- **Timeliness:** PFA training in Sichuan took place over almost six months after the Ya'an earthquake – in September 2013.¹⁰ While some of the teachers involved felt the timing was appropriate (as they would have been too busy with reconstruction immediately after the earthquake), it does raise questions regarding how effective the training could have been for reducing children's *immediate* distress due to the earthquake. To a lesser extent, the same concern could apply to Yunnan, although training was closer to the earthquake - around two months. In fact, in both Sichuan and Yunnan teachers reported that the predominant concerns they dealt with in students were *not* earthquake related (however it is likely that the ongoing issues of poverty, family struggles and hardship that emerged were aggravated by the disasters).
- **Monitoring, support and referral:** Support and follow-up of teachers once they had completed their training was a gap. Teachers did not appear to have anyone to turn to if they encountered difficult issues with students (beyond contact details for the Save the Children PFA focal points), and there was inconsistent follow-up of teachers' action plans. While training did include a session on mapping referral services within schools (not just

⁸ Rooms that were set aside for teachers who were working as student counsellors so that they could have some space and time to work with children in private.

⁹ Children left at home while their parents or primary caregivers migrated to urban areas for employment.

¹⁰ Efforts by Save the Children China to introduce PFA sooner after the earthquake were delayed by local government.

for psychological support but also for child protection, medical and safety issues), teachers did not appear to deal with many 'difficult cases', and the extent to which these children may have been supported or referred to more specialist psychological services was not clear.

- **Action plans:** Teachers did not always have the authority (or confidence) to implement their action plans once they returned to their schools, and were dependent on the support of their headmasters and colleagues. In some cases teachers faced resistance when they tried to pass on their training (PFA, DRR, child participatory methods etc) to colleagues, particularly older ones who believed in more 'traditional' teaching methods. For many of the teachers, psychosocial ideas were also very new, and challenging to implement.

2. PFA through Child Friendly Spaces

Save the Children first introduced PFA as part of their emergency child protection response after the Ya'an earthquake in Sichuan in April 2013. This model, which involved training volunteers in Child Friendly Spaces on PFA, was subsequently replicated over a year later when the Ludian earthquake struck Yunnan province in August 2014.

Why PFA through Child Friendly Spaces? Initial assessments after both the Ya'an and Ludian earthquakes indicated the need for psychosocial and child protection support for children.¹¹ The establishment of Child Friendly Spaces both by partner CSOs in Sichuan and directly by Save the Children in Yunnan provided a clear opportunity to train volunteers working directly with children on ways to reduce the initial distress caused by the earthquakes.

The model: Save the Children provided guidance on PFA to volunteers and staff as part of a wider package of technical training on establishing and operating Child Friendly Spaces. In Sichuan, this involved a brief half-day PFA session about a month after the earthquake for volunteers from a network of 45 CSOs (identified through its partnership with One Foundation), who were later involved in managing and establishing 50 Child Friendly Spaces. In Yunnan, the team provided a three-day workshop on PFA and Child Friendly Space management, approximately three weeks after the earthquake to 38 volunteers, 13 of who went on to work in four Child Friendly Spaces operated directly by Save the Children.

PFA training and support: In both Sichuan and Yunnan PFA was included within wider training on managing Child Friendly Spaces including key concepts of child rights, child protection, resilience and psychosocial support. The idea was to equip volunteers in Child Friendly Spaces with practical skills for working with children, including how to observe them

Snapshot of PFA training

Ya'an earthquake (Sichuan):

½ day PFA training provided for 45 CSO volunteers about 1 month after the earthquake as part of several rounds of Child Friendly Space management, child protection and child rights training.

Ludian earthquake (Yunnan):

3 day training provided on PFA and Child Friendly Space management for 38 CSO volunteers, approximately 3 weeks after the earthquake, as part of several rounds of Child Friendly Space, child protection and child rights training.

¹¹ In Yunnan, staff noted a number of factors that contributed to risks for children and resulted in a decision to set up Child Friendly Spaces: 1) The unsafe physical environment for children created by the earthquake's destruction 2) The gap in services for children - particularly with regards to early childcare and development (ECCD) 3) The prevalence of 'left-behind' children.

for signs of distress and to communicate with them appropriately. In Sichuan, monitoring of the 50 Child Friendly Spaces operated by CSO volunteers was conducted by a small management team within One Foundation, while in Yunnan, two project staff are currently assigned to monitor and support volunteers working in the four Child Friendly Spaces. (Volunteers and Save the Children staff also connect with each other through an online Weibo chat group).¹²

Impact: As with Save the Children’s education initiatives, monitoring volunteers’ use of PFA methods – and measuring their impact on reducing children’s distress, was challenging.¹³ While an evaluation of the Child Friendly Space initiatives was conducted in Sichuan, it does not refer specifically to PFA, and in both emergencies, documentation primarily mentions outputs such as number of volunteers trained on PFA, number of children attending Child Friendly Spaces and type of activities conducted.

Feedback suggests that the Child Friendly Spaces have been helpful in promoting normalcy and recovery for children affected by the earthquake, and have helped children to become more optimistic and interactive.¹⁴ In both provinces, volunteers maintained that children’s behaviour had changed as result of their work in the Child Friendly Spaces, citing examples of girls and boys who had initially been withdrawn, anxious or shy, who later participated in activities and seemed happier (although whether or not that was due to PFA specifically is difficult to say). In Yunnan, volunteers in Child Friendly Spaces who had received training on PFA indicated that it had helped them to identify and respond to children experiencing problems, and that their awareness regarding children’s needs and rights had increased.

Strengths:

- **Working through partners:** Save the Children China’s approach of partnering with One Foundation to work through a network of 45 CSOs after the Ya’an earthquake in Sichuan had several advantages. With an extremely small emergency team and limited capacity to directly implement programmes, it enabled Save the Children to respond to children’s psychosocial and child protection needs across a much wider area, and to gain better access to disaster-affected communities. As the majority of CSOs had very little experience working with children in emergencies, it also allowed them to meet an important capacity gap and to introduce PFA to a range of different actors.
- **Involvement of parents and families:** Volunteers in both Sichuan and Yunnan seemed to successfully involve parents and families in their approach to working with children in Child Friendly Spaces. This took the form of household visits to talk to parents/caregivers regarding any concerns they had about children, inviting parents to attend activities at the Child Friendly Spaces and taking opportunities to pass on information about positive discipline and managing children’s distress.
- **Improved capacity and confidence of Child Friendly Space volunteers:** Child Friendly Space volunteers in Yunnan said that their PFA training (and other training on Child Friendly Space work and child participation) had helped them to work better with children. Volunteers said that they felt confident they could cope with children in distress, and felt prepared to support girls and boys if there was another earthquake. *“The training*

¹² China’s version of Facebook/Twitter

¹³ This challenge is not unique to PFA or Save the Children China - psychosocial initiatives are notoriously difficult to measure in all emergencies

¹⁴ See: *Technical Assistance Trip Report: David Brickey Bloomer / Sichuan, China/ CPIE Response Sichuan Earthquake/ July 22-26, 2013*, and *Lushan (Ya’an) Emergency Response Programme: Final Report (draft), (30 June 2014)*.

was useful. We learned that spending time with children with problems is important, and we were given advice on how to distract them from their distress through activities like painting and singing,” said one volunteer.

- **Positive impact on children:** Child Friendly Space volunteers maintained that they had witnessed a positive change in children’s behaviour as a result of Child Friendly Space activities, and cited examples of distressed girls and boys who had improved and ‘recovered’ with some special attention and support.¹⁵ In general volunteers did not appear to come across many ‘serious’ cases in their work with children and seemed to deal more with issues linked to ongoing poverty and difficult family situations – which were most likely exacerbated by the earthquake.
- **Close enough to PFA?** While Save the Children staff debated the extent to which Child Friendly Space volunteers actually understood and applied the concept of PFA, they felt volunteers were successfully supporting children in distress. In Yunnan, one staff member noted, *“Child Friendly Space volunteers don’t really know what PFA is... and not all of them have been trained on it. However they are doing it in their own way! They listen to the children, observe them when they play and spend valuable time with them. They know what to do when children seem distressed and how to respond.”* In Sichuan, a former member of One Foundation echoed a similar sentiment, noting that Save the Children had provided Child Friendly Space volunteers in the Ya’an response with useful ways to communicate with children in distress and to help them to cope.

Challenges

- **Low capacity of Child Friendly Space volunteers:** While many were ‘passionate and committed’, the majority of volunteers trained by Save the Children to work in Child Friendly Spaces and provide PFA had little or no experience working in emergencies or with children. In some cases it took time for volunteers to envisage Child Friendly Spaces as more than just day-care centres or learning camps, and to understand their psychosocial and child protection functions.
- **Ongoing monitoring and support:** While Save the Children was able to provide an initial package of training to provide volunteers with the basics on child rights, child protection and PFA, they had very little capacity to provide ongoing monitoring and support.¹⁶ Moreover Save the Children staff themselves did not always feel confident advising on PFA/psychosocial related issues.
- **High turnover of Child Friendly Space volunteers.** In Sichuan, volunteers working in the 50 Child Friendly Spaces operated by CSOs were often only deployed for short periods (a few weeks to a few months), resulting in high turnover - and making it difficult to maintain capacity on PFA, child protection and other Child Friendly Space -related skills. This is less of an issue in Yunnan, where Save the Children continues to directly operate four CSOs, and has made efforts to recruit volunteers locally.

¹⁵ In general, it appears that when Child Friendly Space volunteers observed children having problems (acting aggressively, clinging to them, acting withdrawn), their approach was to pay extra attention to them, spend time with them and try to find out more about their situation through visits to their families.

¹⁶ In Sichuan, monitoring of the 50 Child Friendly Spaces operated by CSO volunteers was technically the role of Save the Children’s partner, One Foundation, however their focus was not specifically on roll out of PFA and they lacked capacity regarding psychosocial issues.

- **Referral:** Initial training on PFA does not seem to have involved a focus on referral or mapping of services. In some cases Child Friendly Space volunteers were able to refer children to, (or at least consult with), social workers or psychologists who were working temporarily in the area after the earthquakes, however this seems to have been on a somewhat ad hoc basis. In both responses the number of children referred to specialised mental health/psychological services appears to have been very limited – just one case out of 50 Child Friendly Spaces in Sichuan over the period of six months¹⁷ and to date none at all since Child Friendly Spaces were initiated between three to five months ago in Yunnan. In Sichuan, it wasn't clear whether this was because there was an absence of specialised psychological services available, or whether serious issues simply rarely occurred (or were identified).¹⁸ In Yunnan, Child Friendly Space volunteers and Save the Children staff noted that (although fairly rare occurrences), it was hard to 'find anyone to turn to' when faced with tougher issues - such as children displaying very aggressive behaviour. Worrying, Child Friendly Space volunteers also cited child protection issues including neglect and physical abuse of children that they were struggling to cope with.
- **Understanding of PFA/training:** Child Friendly Space volunteers and Save the Children project staff currently working in the Yunnan response, were not always clear what the term 'PFA' actually referred to, sometimes equating it with general psychosocial support or alternatively viewing it as a 'serious psychological intervention.' (In fact some volunteers/staff had not actually participated in any PFA training). It was suggested that any future PFA training be more practical and less theory focused, and include hands-on ways of working with children to reduce their distress – including guidelines on how to cope with more 'difficult' cases.¹⁹

3. PFA Mobile Teams

One of Save the Children China's most innovative approaches to PFA in emergencies was the development of '*PFA Mobile Teams*' after a small earthquake struck Gansu province in July 2013.²⁰ This approach, which involved sending out small teams of CSO volunteers to work with children in earthquake-affected communities, was reproduced on a smaller scale when the much bigger Ludian earthquake took place just over a year later in Yunnan.

Why mobile teams? Initial assessments after earthquakes in both provinces indicated that children were significantly distressed due to witnessing the destruction of their communities, with many fearful of follow-up earthquakes. The idea behind the PFA Mobile Teams was to get people out to earthquake-affected communities as soon as possible to assess and respond to children's psychosocial needs - without waiting for infrastructure and funding for Child Friendly Spaces to be set up. In both the Gansu and Ludian responses, PFA Mobile Teams were also seen as a more feasible (and cost-effective) approach to accessing communities that Child Friendly Spaces couldn't reach.

¹⁷ This figure came from by a former member of One Foundation's Child Friendly Space management team, however wasn't verified.

¹⁸ In many cases, Child Friendly Space volunteers seemed to rely on services of aid organizations or psychologists sometimes operating in the same area who could provide specialised support to children.

¹⁹ This could be contextualised to the China context.

²⁰ As Save the Children China doesn't have an office in Gansu province, the Sichuan team managed this response.

The model: Save the Children provided PFA training for volunteers and staff from local CSOs, who then formed small teams of 3-5 people who worked in the worst earthquake-affected communities for approximately two weeks.²¹

Each team conducted activities for children – e.g. games, singing, arts and crafts, on a daily basis, while observing them for signs of distress, and providing extra attention to girls and boys who needed it. (Volunteers were provided with ‘PFA Kits,’ which included materials such as paper, crayons, toys, balloons etc). Where possible, volunteers conducted home visits to meet with children’s families to discuss any concerns and provide practical advice on coping with children’s distress. In Gansu, three teams conducted activities in six villages, while in Yunnan one small team composed of two CSO volunteers and one Save the Children staff member worked in two villages.²²

Training and support: In Gansu, Save the Children delivered a two day PFA training to over 40 staff and volunteers from the Gansu Relief Network (an association of local NGOs) 10 days after the earthquake. In Ludian, PFA training took place for 38 CSO volunteers three weeks after the earthquake and was integrated within a 3-day workshop on managing Child Friendly Spaces. Training focused on identifying common distress reactions in different age groups, communicating with girls and boys, ideas of games/activities to run with children and strategies for volunteers to manage their own stress. Volunteers for the PFA Mobile Teams were then selected from the training participants.

Once in the field, the three PFA Mobile Teams in the Gansu response met each day to debrief on their activities. Through a daily report to Save the Children they sent any queries and concerns about their work to the Sichuan PFA focal point (including requests for guidance on supporting particular cases of distressed children), who worked in consultation with a consultant psychologist to respond. An online chat group was also set up to support volunteers, and a monitoring meeting was conducted towards the end of the two weeks to review activities (with support from the same consultant psychologist and a psychologist from a local university). In Yunnan, monitoring was less extensive, with the small PFA Mobile Team primarily relying on the PFA focal point and other Save the Children staff for support where necessary.

Impact: There has been no formal evaluation of the PFA Mobile Team interventions. However, members of PFA Mobile Teams in both responses felt they were able to provide girls and boys with a safe space to play, and provided a useful service to parents and families by minding their children in the aftermath of the earthquakes. In Gansu, volunteers also cited

Snapshot of PFA Mobile Teams

Gansu earthquake:

- Two day PFA training provided for over 40 staff/volunteers from the Gansu Relief Network, ten days after the earthquake
- Three PFA Mobile Teams composed of 3-5 members conducted activities in six villages over two weeks - reaching 428 children in total

Ludian earthquake:

- Three day training provided on PFA and Child Friendly Space management for 38 CSO volunteers, approximately three weeks after the earthquake.
- One PFA Mobile Team composed of 3 members conducted activities in two villages over two weeks – reaching 67 children in total.

²¹ Sources for the textbox statistics include: *Ludian Earthquake, Yunnan Province: Humanitarian Response Situation Report No. 20. (11 December 2014); Final Report for Gansu Earthquake Response 2013 (18 December 2013*

²² This role was rotated between two Save the Children staff members, who each accompanied the two CSO volunteers for one week to provide support and ensure ‘quality control.’ However, neither of the staff received the initial PFA training.

examples of distressed children (for example who cried constantly, had sleeping problems or seemed withdrawn), who 'got better' with some attention and support, and noted that they were also able to advise some parents on constructive ways of responding to their children's distress.²³ *"Overall the PFA Mobile Team is a good model,"* notes the leader of the Gansu CSO Network, *"It's a good approach to consider in another emergency, but we would need to be better prepared, and to improve our skills and knowledge."*

Overall volunteers felt that children benefited from their activities, noting that the number of participants increased each day, and that many girls and boys become more active and lively over the course of the intervention. *"We saw a real change,"* says one volunteer from Gansu, *"At first the children held off a bit but by the end they were really attached to us."* The extent to which the teams could provide individual support to children however and follow-up with parents, was sometimes limited. *"Our time was so short with the children. We were just trying to keep them safe and give them some time to relax and have fun,"* says a member of the PFA team in Yunnan. Other volunteers also questioned the short duration of the interventions, and some seemed to feel that longer-term Child Friendly Space initiatives were a better model for supporting children and communities.

Strengths:

- **Fast, flexible and cost effective:** One of the major strengths of the PFA Mobile Team model was that it got volunteers trained and out into the field fast (particularly in Gansu), within only a few weeks of the earthquakes. By working outside the infrastructure of Child Friendly Spaces or schools, it took PFA 'one step further,' and represented a relatively cost-effective and flexible approach to working with children
- **Paving the way for Child Friendly Spaces:** In some (but not all) cases PFA Mobile Teams helped to pave the way for the establishment of Child Friendly Spaces in the communities they worked in, serving as a kind of interim intervention in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes. PFA Mobile Teams were able to set the foundation for Child Friendly Spaces by building initial relationships with communities and providing a 'mini-psychosocial assessment' of children's needs— i.e. in some cases identifying girls and boys who could benefit from follow up support and activities in a Child Friendly Space setting.
- **Working through local partners:** In Gansu, the quick roll-out of PFA Mobile Teams was primarily due to the strong network of local CSOs that were able to manage the intervention after Save the Children provided initial PFA training. *"We were lucky,"* says the Sichuan PFA focal point, *"the Gansu CSOs were well managed, familiar with the local context and had a strong leader. They were able to mobilize quickly and get teams out to the field almost immediately after training."*²⁴ The Save the Children team in Sichuan also demonstrated their own expertise and initiative, by getting this partnership up and running so quickly.
- **A community-based approach:** The PFA Mobile Teams were able to get volunteers into communities where children were not served by Child Friendly Spaces or other support services, and ultimately allowed Save the Children to reach more girls and boys with psychosocial support.

²³ According to the leader of the Gansu CSO network, volunteers were able to help some parents to understand that children's distress was normal and that they would need a bit of time to recover - and that they shouldn't be given medicine to get better or to be disciplined for 'causing problems.'

²⁴ The fact that it was a small emergency also helped – with less involvement of the media, government and other aid actors it was relatively easy for Save the Children to identify the Gansu Relief Network as a partner to work with, and to get volunteers trained and out to the field quickly. In contrast the earthquake response in Ludian was much bigger and more chaotic.

- **Impact on children:** Members of the PFA Mobile Teams generally felt that girls and boys benefited from their activities, and that they were able to provide some respite to children affected both by the earthquakes, and (perhaps more pertinent) by the ongoing hardship of poverty. Although some volunteers felt they provided little more than a ‘day-care’ to communities, others felt they were able to provide some practical support to distressed children and follow-up with parents.

Challenges:

- **Unclear mission:** Lack of clarity (particularly in Yunnan) regarding the purpose of their work within PFA Mobile Teams posed a problem for some volunteers – and communities. *“We were confused and they were confused,”* says one volunteer, *“We weren’t sure what we were supposed to achieve and how to know if we’d been successful.”* Communities in turn, didn’t always understand why interventions were so short and what ‘services’ the volunteers were aiming to provide.
- **Referral:** When faced with children who appeared to have more serious problems, volunteers did not appear to have any professional specialists or services to turn to for support. In Gansu, referral was not covered during PFA training, and services weren’t mapped in advance – as there weren’t believed to be any available.²⁵ According to the CSO leader in Gansu, the teams did identify cases of children with ‘severe issues’ during the two-week intervention - some earthquake related and others linked to ongoing situations such as parental neglect (e.g. ‘left-behind children’). While Save the Children was able to provide them with guidance on responding to the more obvious disaster-related issues, they struggled to find constructive suggestions for more entrenched problems such as neglect and domestic violence. In general, the volunteers’ strategy was to share their concerns with parents, and to encourage them to take some kind of positive action.
- **Quality control:** After the Ludian earthquake, concerns about selecting and supervising reliable volunteers led Save the Children to establish a much smaller PFA intervention than originally envisaged - just one small PFA Mobile Team, composed of two volunteers and a staff member. *“There was a debate on the team as to whether the PFA Mobile Team was a good idea. It was a good model but it wasn’t practical to send out lots of teams with inexperienced volunteers that we couldn’t supervise properly – it was too risky,”* says one Save the Children staff. Volunteers and staff themselves were nervous about going into the field, lacking confidence and experience.
- **Challenging field conditions:** Members of the PFA Mobile Teams worked in extremely challenging conditions, in some cases walking several hours to reach communities, conducting activities with large numbers of children in punishing heat and living in areas with no running water or electricity. While daily debriefs among the volunteers (in Gansu) helped with stress management, it was the children’s obvious enjoyment of activities that seemed to keep volunteers motivated.
- **Children’s safety:** Keeping children safe was one of the biggest challenges cited by PFA Mobile Team members. Without a designated space to conduct activities, and in the presence of rubble and damage caused by the earthquakes, volunteers had to be extremely vigilant when managing groups of children – which could include anywhere between ten to sixty girls and boys at a given time.

²⁵ It’s not entirely clear what the referral process was in Yunnan, but members of the PFA Mobile Team noted that they had very limited time/space to do any kind of individual follow-up with more distressed children (beyond an occasional home visit), in the short duration of the intervention.

- **Inexperienced (and overwhelmed) volunteers:** Many of the PFA Mobile Team members had no experience of working in emergencies or with children, and struggled to respond to some of the situations they faced. *“We felt bad when we met children with problems we couldn’t solve, even though we knew we weren’t supposed to be professionals,”* says one volunteer in Gansu. While volunteers acknowledged that the PFA training and remote technical support from Save the Children had been useful, they felt that it would have been more helpful to include a psychosocial/PFA specialist within the team - at least for their first week in the field - to provide guidance and feedback on some of the challenges they encountered, including child protection issues.²⁶
- **Lack of a withdrawal strategy:** Withdrawing from communities - once they had completed their activities- proved difficult and upsetting for both PFA Mobile Team members and children. *“We did a goodbye ceremony but children were confused, says one volunteer, “they didn’t know why we were leaving and many of them cried.”* In general, volunteers appeared to struggle with maintaining ‘professional distance’ from the girls and boys they worked with, with some actually staying in touch with children by phone after they left.²⁷ One PFA Mobile Team Member questioned whether they were doing more harm than good with their work, by staying such a short time and raising children’s hopes for support.

Moving Forward

PFA is still new to Save the Children China. In a short time however, the team has introduced PFA in a number of different ways, working across education and child protection initiatives in four different emergency responses. While measuring the impact of these different approaches to PFA is challenging, **key achievements** cited by staff and partners include:

Diverse and flexible approaches: Save the Children China has managed to adapt PA across a diverse range of emergencies and environments relatively quickly, adjusting their training and approach to try to reduce children’s distress through schools, Child Friendly Spaces and PFA Mobile Teams. This has been driven by the PFA Focal Points in Yunnan and Sichuan, who have build on each other’s experience with each emergency, and helped to keep momentum for PFA going.

Building partner capacity on PFA: Save the Children China has introduced PFA to a variety of actors including teachers, CSO volunteers and community members. This has not only helped it to increase its reach in the community and to access more children, but seems to have improved the capacity (or at least confidence), of some partners to respond to both disaster and non-disaster-related distress in children. In some cases partners have also been able to apply elements of PFA, such as active listening and communication skills, to enhance their ongoing work with children - lending sustainability to the approach.

Positive benefits for children: Feedback indicates that children have benefited from Save the Children China’s initiatives – at the very least simply through enjoyment of ‘psychosocial activities’ in the classroom, Child Friendly Spaces and communities covered by mobile teams. Save the Children partners have also cited examples of individual girls and boys distressed by the earthquake (or more often by longer-term problems due to poverty and difficult family

²⁶ Save the Children’s Sichuan team struggled to provide this in-the-field support for the PFA Mobile Teams as staff were already taken up with the emergency response in Ya’an along with their regular work loads. Similarly the technical support people they enlisted (consultant and university psychologists) were unable to actually accompany teams on the ground.

²⁷ One PFA Mobile Team member recounted the story of a little boy she suspected was being beaten by his parents who continued to call her months after the intervention – leaving her *‘very confused about what to do.’*

situations) that they have been able to comfort using PFA approaches, and their improved ability to communicate and understand the effects of crisis on children.

Developing the PFA Mobile Team model: Despite its limitations, the establishment of a PFA initiative that wasn't dependent on infrastructure such as Child Friendly Spaces or schools, and enabled practitioners to be out in the field within just a few weeks of the earthquakes, was seen as an achievement – and an innovative model that could potentially be replicated in future disaster responses.

Challenges:

Introducing PFA has not been easy however. Save the Children China has struggled with a number of challenges including the absence of a clear plan for rolling out PFA, limited numbers of staff with PFA expertise, low capacity of partners, and difficulty monitoring or measuring the impact of initiatives. Timeliness has also varied; with some PFA initiatives introduced a few weeks after the earthquake, and others several months.

In particular, there appears to be confusion among staff and partners regarding exactly what PFA is – with many simply equating it with general psychosocial support, thinking of it only in terms of the PFA Mobile Team model or mixing it up with initiatives such as HEART.²⁸ Others seem to see it as a 'serious psychological intervention', that requires strong technical expertise. *"If you ask three different staff what PFA is you will get three different responses,"* says the PFA focal point in Sichuan, *"everyone is confused."* The concept of PFA as a simple approach that any staff member or partner can use to reduce children's distress immediately after a disaster, does not seem to be widely shared.

Some staff even question whether they have been implementing 'real PFA' in China, noting that training for partners has often focused more on running psychosocial activities with children on a day-to-day basis and working to develop their resilience - than on responding to initial distress caused by earthquakes. (Arguably moreover, the very concept of a PFA *intervention* such as the PFA Mobile Team, isn't really consistent with the approach advocated within Save the Children's PFA manual.) While any approach that enables people to reach appropriately to children's distress is useful, in reality much of the work on PFA in Save the Children China appears to have gone beyond 'First Aid', and might be better described as general psychosocial support for children.

Part of the issue is that there is a need for Save the Children China to provide *both* general psychosocial support to children in emergencies *as well as* to introduce PFA as a simple approach that staff or partners can use to reduce children's immediate distress in disasters or crises. This may have contributed to a conflagration of the two concepts in Save the Children China's emergency responses. One PFA focal point says, *"We need both! But we need to distinguish between them. One option would be to train all staff on 'real PFA,' while supporting our Child Friendly Space volunteers and teachers to provide more comprehensive and ongoing psychosocial support to children."*

Contributing to all of this, is the fact that Save the Children's PFA initiatives have largely been reactive, evolving in response to each of the emergencies in Sichuan and Yunnan without a

²⁸ HEART (Healing and Education through the Arts) is an education approach promoted by Save the Children that aims to use artistic expression such as drawing, music, dance and drama to help young children in hardship situations to heal emotionally and learn. To date, Save the Children China has introduced it within emergency response through training kindergarten teachers after the Ya'an earthquake, and volunteers in Child Friendly Spaces in the Gansu response.

clear plan. Moving forward, there is a sense that more needs to be done to define exactly what PFA is, and how it should be rolled out within different sectors. *“It’s good that we introduced PFA, however, we are still finding our way. We need to review what we’ve learned so far, and to develop a plan or model for rolling PFA out in future emergencies,”* notes one staff member. This extends to decisions about mainstreaming PFA across humanitarian sectors (beyond child protection and education) and integrating it within organizational measures for emergency preparedness.

Next Steps

While Save the Children staff have different ideas for how to move forward with PFA, some common priorities emerged regarding possible next steps.

1. Develop a shared understanding of PFA

Save the Children China has interpreted PFA widely and generally gone beyond the purely ‘First Aid’ approach advocated in the *PFA Manual for Child Practitioners*. In some ways this has been positive— Save the Children China has been good at adapting PFA to different environments such as schools, Child Friendly Spaces and mobile teams, and integrating it within a wider package of psychosocial and child protection support for children. While their work has undoubtedly brought benefits to children however, it might be more accurately described as psychosocial support (with some PFA mixed in), than PFA.

Moving forward, it would be helpful for Save the Children China to be clear about what PFA does and doesn’t entail, and to distinguish it - as a concept - from general psychosocial support. (Relabeling some of their work could be a start, for example PFA Mobile Teams might be better named as ‘Psychosocial Mobile Teams.’).²⁹ This could help to develop a shared understanding of PFA as a simple approach to responding to children in distress immediately after a crisis that *all* staff and partners can use - and that can be applied across any sector of emergency response as well as within wider psychosocial initiatives.

2. Develop a PFA plan and guidelines

After four earthquakes in two years, now is a good time for Save the Children to take stock of their PFA work and to decide on a plan for moving forward. As part of this, the team hopes to review lessons learned from their PFA responses in Sichuan and Yunnan, and to obtain global guidance from Save the Children’s technical PFA and psychosocial specialists. *“It would be useful to look globally at PFA initiatives and to get advice from the core technical people who really understand PFA and psychosocial support,”* says Save the Children China’s former Emergency Lead.

This could help the team to develop a plan for proceeding with PFA –and to agree on some practical guidelines for deciding if, when and how to use PFA in future emergencies. *“PFA is a good approach,”* says one PFA Focal Point, *“but we need more planning and preparation so that we are ready to use it in the next emergency.”*

Suggested areas for guidance include:

²⁹ In general, the use of the word ‘psychological’ within PFA has been somewhat problematic in China’s initiatives, and may have been a factor in some of the misinterpretations of the approach as a serious clinical intervention. For this reason the term ‘Psychosocial First Aid’ was sometimes substituted, (and may possibly have contributed further to confusion around the PFA label).

- The pros and cons of integrating PFA within different approaches – e.g. via schools, Child Friendly Spaces and mobile teams.
- Ways to clearly define PFA so that staff and partners distinguish it as concept from general psychosocial support or initiatives such as HEART.
- Steps for deciding when to initiate a PFA Mobile Team intervention (and when not to) depending on the context.
- Ways to improve systematic referral.
- Strategies for providing better ongoing monitoring, support and follow-up to PFA practitioners.
- Tools to better capture the benefits and impact of PFA work

Strategic thinking on these kinds of issues, it was noted, would need to be conducted before there were any significant moves towards mainstreaming or scaling up of PFA.

3. Adapt PFA training and materials.

Save the Children China's PFA Focal Points have used a mixture of materials to design training on PFA, including Save the Children's *PFA for Children: A Training Manual* (2012) and content from other sources on basic psychosocial support, resilience, child protection and child safeguarding. Both now intend to adapt their training materials to incorporate content from Save the Children's newer *PFA Manual for Child Practitioners*.³⁰

In general, the PFA Focal points feel that Save the Children's PFA manuals provide a useful framework for training, but that they lack practical methods and tools that PFA practitioners (particularly teachers and CSO volunteers) can use to reduce children's distress. Their suggestions for adapting training and materials include:

- Develop tailored, 'easy' versions of PFA training manuals for different actors (Save The Children staff, teachers, Child Friendly Space volunteers, PFA Mobile Team members) that are short, simple and easy to use.
- Include case studies with examples of how PFA has been used successfully by Save the Children staff or partners in other emergencies to support children in distress.
- Include a bigger focus on working with adolescents
- Provide guidelines and methods for responding to more 'difficult cases' and to specific issues such as children behaving aggressively, or feeling fearful, guilty or distrustful.
- Develop methods and tools for working with parents on PFA
- Provide PFA practitioners with short, user-friendly PFA handbooks to refer to.
- Develop IEC materials aimed at parents that outline the kind of distress the children may experience after a disaster and practical ways to support them.

4. Expand the PFA Resource Pool

Save the Children China currently only has two PFA Focal Points who can be called upon to support PFA initiatives in emergencies. Their primary role has been to design and provide training on PFA to teachers, Child Friendly Space volunteers and PFA Mobile Team members after each of the earthquakes, and where possible to give them some on-going support.

Both Focal Points struggle however, with supporting PFA initiatives on top of their ongoing roles as child protection and education officers in the Yunnan and Sichuan offices

³⁰ Both focal points seem to feel that the content of the newer *Save the Children PFA Manual for Child Practitioners* is largely similar to the earlier version of the manual. One noted that the new 'Look, Listen, Link' approach seemed to be more practical than the eight steps model, however noted that information on supporting distressed adults was a gap. Both mentioned parts of the previous version they planned to keep, such as the Pyramid.

respectively. (In some cases, they have also been faced with responding to two emergencies at once - i.e. in the case of the Ya'an and Gansu earthquakes.) They recommend expanding the 'PFA resource pool' by either assigning a member of staff to work on PFA exclusively, or training at least two more PFA Focal Points. One option would be to identify a PFA Focal Point in each programme office. Alternatively, Save the Children China could establish *Psychosocial Support* Focal Points, who would be responsible for introducing psychosocial support initiatives in emergencies – including PFA.

Key PFA functions could include:

- Training partners (teachers, Child Friendly Space volunteers, PFA Mobile Team members) on PFA and providing them with ongoing technical support and oversight
- Setting up and managing PFA Mobile Team interventions after emergencies - and potentially accompanying teams in the field to provide guidance and support.
- Training Save the Children staff, and supporting them to mainstream PFA within their emergency response and DRR initiatives

5. Train more Save the Children staff on PFA

Very few Save the Children China staff have actually been trained on PFA, primarily as the emergency model has been to train partners (e.g. CSO volunteers and teachers) to conduct PFA and other initiatives. This approach makes sense. Save the Children China lacks a stable emergency team, and generally relies on a roster of staff from across their programme offices who can only deploy for short periods (often a few weeks or less), and have limited capacity to directly implement programmes. The upshot however, is that understanding of PFA among staff members is limited, including among those who do deploy (however briefly) to the field.

PFA Focal Points see training of Save the Children emergency roster staff as a priority. Ideally staff could be trained in advance of emergencies, they note, and then provided with mini-refresher training immediately after a disaster. In particular, it would be useful to train staff involved in the initial emergency assessment teams and in the planning of responses for each all sector. *“There is a lot of confusion about PFA. Most staff think that it is some kind of professional psychological intervention and don't realise that it is a simple approach that they could integrate into their emergency work.”* Training, it's hoped, could go a long way to clearing up this confusion, increasing staff's confidence in using PFA and helping to mainstream it into other humanitarian sectors beyond child protection and education.

Moving forward, Save the Children plans to include PFA within an upcoming Emergency Preparedness Planning (EPP) training for staff on the emergency roster. While there is likely to only be time for a general orientation on PFA (e.g. a half day session), it is a start.³¹

6. Train partners on PFA in advance of emergencies

Save the Children has also considered the option of providing advance PFA training to their partners in emergency response- namely CSOs linked to One Foundation. One of the ideas behind this would be to develop a 'cadre of PFA practitioners' who could deploy within PFA Mobile Teams in the next emergency. In practice however, this could be complicated. Not

³¹ PFA is included in Save the Children China's EPP plan, which states that *'Psychosocial support (Psychosocial First Aid and HEART) should be provided as early as possible in the response and most possibly through schools, kindergartens and Child Friendly Spaces.'*

only is the turnover of CSO volunteers high, but it is also difficult to know who would be assigned to respond in the event of a disaster and it is often challenging to obtain funding for these kind of preparatory initiatives. Moreover, as Save the Children's China's current Emergency Lead notes, they would need to explore how they could get CSO volunteers and staff to commit in advance to deploying on behalf of Save the Children – as they are already committed to donors who would fund their emergency responses.

There are other options however. It might be possible to train a core group of CSO leaders (particularly ones involved in organisations with a focus on children or emergency response), or full-time staff at One Foundation. This could be a useful way to communicate the importance of PFA, and make it easier to get them on board with involving volunteers in a PFA Mobile Team type intervention in the event of an emergency. More importantly, it might encourage CSO leaders to introduce PFA to their staff and volunteers, so that they could apply it in their work with children.³² As part of this, one idea that Save the Children China is considering is the inclusion of PFA within an upcoming training initiative for CSOs, that aims to provide them with the basics of humanitarian response. This is worth exploring – especially in the light of Save the Children China's challenges in deploying their own staff to emergencies on a longer-term basis.

7. Consider mainstreaming PFA?

There is some hesitation around the idea of mainstreaming PFA into humanitarian sectors beyond education and child protection. *"I'm not sure if mainstreaming PFA is really a priority at the moment. We need more clarity about where we are going with PFA first,"* says one senior staff member. There is a sense that Save the Children China needs to decide on a plan for PFA first (and decide if it is an organizational priority), before making any moves to expand it further. There is also some confusion about what is actually meant by mainstreaming *"Are we talking about mainstreaming the basic PFA approach – so that staff in every sector know how to respond to children's immediate distress after a crisis? Or are we talking about introducing a wider psychosocial component into our health, malnutrition or other emergency sectors – the way we did with teachers and Child Friendly Spaces?"* says one of the PFA focal points. Either way, providing PFA training for Save the Children Emergency Roster staff, (who could then identify how to integrate PFA within their emergency initiatives and in the initial planning of emergency responses), could be a practical way of trying to encourage mainstreaming in different sectors.

Save the Children China has already made some moves to integrate PFA within longer-term development projects. This has primarily been through an anti-trafficking initiative in Yunnan where PFA has been included within service delivery guidelines for staff that work with children affected by violence and abuse in government-run Relief Management Stations. In Sichuan, there are also plans to include PFA within DRR initiatives, as part of an upcoming education project and (hopefully) within a DRR project that involves training teachers, students, CSOs and local authorities.

8. Prepare better for a PFA Mobile Team intervention

There are mixed feelings about the PFA Mobile Team model. While it is seen as an innovative new approach that has enabled Save the Children China to reach children quickly after

³² One idea proposed by the Regional Child Protection Technical Advisor, is to identify a focal person from this core CSO group who could take responsibility for PFA training and refreshers – with technical support from Save the Children.

disasters, there are also concerns about quality control, limited referral options and the capacity of volunteers. Most staff agree that it worked better in the (much smaller) Gansu earthquake response than after the Ludian earthquake, due to the well-coordinated network of local CSOs that were able to manage the intervention.

Suggestions for improving future PFA Mobile Team interventions in the future include:

- Establish clear guidelines on when (and when not) to initiate a PFA Mobile Team intervention including the risks/opportunities.
- Develop a clear project plan for interventions that includes guidelines, objectives and a time line, so that volunteers (and communities) understand their purpose and role.
- Consider developing pre-set criteria for PFA Mobile Team members.
- Conduct a better initial assessment of communities' needs before interventions and work more with communities in advance to explain the PFA Mobile Team's purpose.
- Clarify the link between PFA Mobile Teams and Child Friendly Spaces (e.g. are they an interim response before a Child Friendly Space or do they operate separately? Both?)
- Identify strategies for improving children's safety during activities
- Identify a withdrawal strategy from the start, to minimize the disruption of ending activities on children, communities and volunteers.
- Focus more on providing guidance to parents/families regarding identifying and responding to children's distress - which could help with withdrawal from the community and bring PFA to children on a longer-term basis.
- Identify ways to provide ongoing, in-the-field technical support to volunteers – e.g. ideally involve a psychosocial/PFA specialist to provide oversight of teams and to support them in responding to more difficult issues.
- Include more focus on 'maintaining professional distance' within training for volunteers to help them to avoid becoming too attached to children and their problems.
- Find ways to refer children with more urgent psychosocial or protection needs to specialist support.

9. Improve referral

Referral was identified as a challenge across all of Save the Children's PFA initiatives. Volunteers working in Child Friendly Spaces and the PFA Mobile Teams in particular, seemed to struggle when faced with children who displayed more serious signs of distress, and were unsure who to turn to for support. Referral to specialised mental health/psychological services appeared to be extremely limited, although in some cases volunteers were able to consult with social workers or psychologists who were operating temporarily in the area after the earthquakes. In general, the steps taken by volunteers with 'more difficult cases' seemed to involve consulting children's families and encouraging them to follow-up - for example by bringing their children to the doctor or visiting the hospital. Volunteers in Child Friendly Spaces and mobile teams also cited some examples of suspected child protection issues – mainly neglect and physical abuse that they appeared unsure how to respond to.

Identifying clear referral procedures for any future PFA initiative is critical. While the majority of children should be able to recover from the immediate distress of disasters without specialised support, volunteers need to have clear guidelines on how to identify and respond to girls and boys who may need extra help. More efforts are needed to identify local

government, CSO, community, or other actors who children could potentially be referred to for support (and what volunteers can do if services are *not* available).³³

Volunteers themselves need support to deal with more difficult issues, and at the very minimum should have a focal point that they can contact when faced with challenging situations. In some cases in the volunteers in the Child Friendly Spaces and the Mobile Teams seemed to feel somewhat overwhelmed by their work with children, due both to the limited referral options as well as their own inexperience.³⁴

10. Bring experts on board

Save the Children's involvement of psychosocial specialists as trainers within some of the PFA workshops for teachers and volunteers, is viewed as a good practice. This included the participation of the Regional Child Protection Technical Advisor, psychologists (and psychology students) from Beijing and local universities, and outsourced consultants originally from organizations such as the Chinese Red Cross. In particular, Save the Children seems to have benefited from working with external specialists to provide technical support for PFA Mobile Teams in the field in Gansu.

Continuing this practice of involving experts within PFA initiatives, (to provide training, monitoring and other support), is recommended. *"It's useful to have someone on the team who has that understanding of psychosocial issues,"* says one senior staff member, *"We don't really have that capacity."*³⁵ This also makes sense in light of the over-stretched PFA Focal Points who are aren't always able to cover all aspects of PFA initiatives – particularly ongoing monitoring and support of volunteers, and the limited referral options in place. It was also felt that developing some kind of partnership with a national institution with expertise in psychosocial work might be worth exploring.

11. Find ways to measure impact

Measuring the impact of Save the Children's PFA work in China has been challenging. In most cases specific evaluations of PFA initiatives haven't been conducted, with emergency response documents (such as emergency situation reports) focusing on outputs such as the number of children attending Child Friendly Spaces, teachers or CSO volunteers provided with PFA training or girls and boys participating in PFA Mobile Team activities – rather than outcomes. Save the Children China has relied on occasional monitoring visits, anecdotal evidence and informal feedback from PFA practitioners (and some children and caregivers) to get a sense of the effectiveness of initiatives.

The impact of psychosocial initiatives in emergencies is notoriously hard to measure. This is partially due to the difficulty of establishing a baseline in crisis situations - while trying at the same time to respond promptly to children's needs. However, most Save the Children China staff agree that more could be done to try to measure the impact of their PFA work in the future.

³³ The Regional Child Protection Technical Advisor notes that one idea would be to include a mapping of referral services within state-level EPPs.

³⁴ One suggestion from the Emergency Coordinator in Yunnan was to enlist a psychologist in PFA training, who could then also serve as a sort of on-call support service for Child Friendly Space volunteers – who could provide advice on how to respond to more difficult situations with children, as well as how to manage volunteers' own stress.

³⁵ Arguably this speaks to an understanding of PFA as a wider psychosocial initiative – rather than an easy approach to working with children in distress that anyone can use. However as some of Save the Children's PFA initiatives have gone beyond a purely First Aid approach to include a more extensive focus on psychosocial and child protection support, the interest in bringing more expertise on board makes sense.

Suggestions include:

- Develop some simple, easy to use tools for teachers and Child Friendly Space volunteers to track changes in children’s behaviour and attitudes (while maintaining confidentiality)
- Conduct more qualitative research to evaluate initiatives including focus groups and key informant interviews with caretakers or children who receive PFA support.
- Include more *outcome*-focused indicators in plans and reviews of PFA initiatives.³⁶
- Focus on measuring the ability of staff/volunteers to identify and respond to children’s distress using PFA techniques such as active listening and non-intrusive communication.

Conclusion

Save the Children China has made a good start with PFA. Through initiatives across four earthquake responses, the team has gained valuable experience of adapting PFA to different environments and working across schools, Child Friendly Spaces and mobile teams to try to reduce children’s distress. This has helped Save the Children to move closer to developing a niche in emergency response in China, as a provider of psychosocial support to children – working primarily through partners at the community level.

Promising practices that have emerged from Save the Children China’s work on PFA include:

- **Adapting PFA to different emergency contexts:** Save the Children China managed to adapt their training and initiatives to each emergency, targeting the people - teachers, Child Friendly Space volunteers, mobile team members, parents - who seemed best placed to support children in distress and integrating PFA into education, psychosocial and child protection responses.
- **Working through partners:** Working through partner enabled Save the Children to introduce PFA across schools, Child Friendly Spaces and communities – increasing its reach in the community and building longer-term capacity of teachers and CSO volunteers to respond appropriately to children’s distress.
- **Establishing committed PFA Focal points:** The PFA Focal Points in Sichuan and Yunnan were key drivers behind Save the Children’s PFA work in China, providing each other with technical support in order to build on each other’s PFA experience with each earthquake.
- **Involving experts:** The involvement of psychosocial specialists and psychologists within training and support for some PFA initiatives helped Save the Children China to develop and improve their work with children in distress – particularly in light of the overstretched emergency teams.
- **Engaging parents and families:** Save the Children China helped to engage parents and families within some of their PFA initiatives, primarily through volunteer household visits to discuss concerns about children and to provide guidance regarding practical ways to respond to their distress.
- **Taking the initiative:** A ‘can-do’ attitude and willingness to take the initiative, has enabled Save the Children China staff to get PFA up and running in four different

³⁶ For example: *percentage of children who report an increased sense of safety and well-being, or percentage of parents and caregivers given information on symptoms of psychosocial stress and how to deal with it in a non-violent way.*³⁶ Other examples of outcome indicators that could potentially be considered for PFA initiatives are included in: *Technical Assistance Trip Report: David Brickey Bloomer / Sichuan, China/ CPIE Response Sichuan Earthquake/ July 22-26.*

emergencies (including one outside of either Sichuan or Yunnan), and to develop innovative approaches such as the PFA Mobile Team model.

The challenge moving forward will be setting a clear direction for PFA. Now is a good time for Save the Children China to take stock of their PFA work to date and to develop a plan for taking it forward – so that initiatives are better planned and supported in future emergencies. In particular, it would be helpful for Save the Children China to develop a shared understanding of PFA as a simple approach that staff and partners can use to respond to children’s immediate distress in a disaster, and that can be applied across any sector of emergency response as well as within psychosocial support initiatives.

Getting PFA right matters. With the appropriate support, girls and boys can be helped to recover from distressing events and to move on with their lives. In China, Save the Children now has an opportunity to take PFA forward in a way that will make a difference to children in the next disaster.