SPECIAL FEATURE:
REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19

A FREE, GLOBAL, ONLINE LEARNING RESOURCE - COVID-19: ADAPTING CHILD PROTECTION CASE MANAGEMENT

BY DR CHRISSIE GALE

Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care

SJRCC Special Feature: Reflections on COVID-19

A free, global, online learning resource - COVID-19: Adapting child protection case management

Chrissie Gale

Abstract

At the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, concerns were emerging from around the world as to how measures such as social distancing and lockdown were impacting the ability of those working to protect children. In particular, these challenges were affecting the timely and effective child protection case management for individual children at risk. In response, a taskforce of international child protection and child rights agencies highlighted the importance of a collective response to these concerns whilst also seeking a way to rapidly reach thousands of front-line practitioners with information on adapting the process of child protection case management in response to the changing situation. To this end, the taskforce commissioned a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) – an interactive, online learning resource - to be made available free of charge on the FutureLearn platform to thousands of practitioners and policy makers across the world.

Keywords

COVID-19, Massive Open Online Course, MOOC, child protection, child protection case management

Corresponding author

Dr Chrissie Gale, Executive Director of Child Consulting Ltd

Background

In March of 2020, at the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, it was evident there would be evolving challenges for child protection practitioners across the world. In particular, initial evidence collated by international child rights agencies revealed the struggle being faced by front line workers in reaching children and providing protection services due to such measures as social distancing and lock down taken by governments to prevent the spread of the virus. This prompted UNHCR and International Social Service (ISS) to call for the development of an Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) that could quickly reach thousands of front line workers and disseminate and illustrate guidance on adapting child protection case management. UNHCR and ISS brought together representatives from a number of international child protection agencies to form a MOOC taskforce. I was approached by the taskforce to lead the development of this MOOC in partnership with CELCIS at the University of Strathclyde.

This article will introduce the content of the MOOC in the knowledge we may all be facing the challenges posed by this pandemic for a while to come and, therefore, respond to an ongoing interest in sharing ideas and resources such as those in the MOOC, 'COVID-19: Adapting Child Protection Case Management'. The MOOC was first made available on the FutureLearn platform at https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/covid-19-adapting-child-protection-case-management between June and August 2020, and it will be available again from 12 October.

To create the MOOC, I began with some questions. Who needed information? What obstacles were being faced by front line workers? What questions did they needed answered? What new international technical guidance on child protection could help workers overcome some of the challenges they were most concerned about? I then worked closely with colleagues Sarah Hume-Anthony, the Learning Enhancement Advisor (Online Learning) at CELCIS, and Clifford Speck of UNHCR who provided advice during the writing of the MOOC.

Who is the MOOC aimed at?

By listening to practitioners in different parts of the world, it was decided to develop a MOOC that would be relevant for professionals and volunteers working in government bodies, UN agencies, and national and international non-governmental child protection and humanitarian organisations. Adopting a multi-sectoral approach to child protection, it was important the MOOC considered information that would be helpful for those such as social workers, para-social workers, community volunteers, child protection professionals, teachers, medical workers, psychologists, and care workers - including those in family based and residential settings – and others playing a role in the lives of children.

In order to facilitate the inclusion of course participants around the world, the MOOC was developed in four languages: English, Spanish, French and Arabic. In recognition of the very busy work schedules of those responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the course needed to provide a significant amount of information in a short time. It can be completed in approximately four hours, while links to additional reading are provided for those who wish to explore topics in more detail.

Objectives of the MOOC

1. Help for practitioners in understanding the child protection risks, vulnerabilities and additional challenges that are arising as a result of COVID-19.

2. Highlighting the importance of front-line practitioners working together across sectors, and with community-based child protection bodies, to respond to the protection needs of children through a shared child protection case management approach.

3. Providing case studies from different regions of the world that illustrate promising practice in adapting child protection case management for COVID-19.

4. Stressing the importance of maintaining the safety and well-being of all those involved in the protection and care of children.

5. Stimulating the exchange of ideas and experience between course participants around the world.

The course also identifies the protection risks children are facing and concerns of heightened risks due to the COVID-19 pandemic at a time when many cannot reach out to usual support mechanisms. For example, there is evidence of rising domestic violence, isolation of children, children being locked away in large residential institutions or returned to families en masse without any assessment process. There are concerns regarding the lack of support for street connected children and children in detention centres, as well as unaccompanied and separated refugee and migrant children being left stranded due to border closures.

Adapting child protection case management mechanisms and protocols

The principal aim of the MOOC is to take learners through each step of a child protection case management process and explore different ways to adapt this process during the pandemic. So, for example, ideas are shared on reviewing roles and responsibilities and adapting inter-agency child protection protocols and mechanisms involving practitioners from different sectors and community volunteers - particularly those still able to reach children for whom there are concerns – to ensure they are still referred to, and assessed by, an authorised child protection body.

We were delighted that a number of child protection professionals were able to record short videos telling us about the work being done to adapt practices during the pandemic in Uganda, Rwanda, Lebanon and Ecuador. In one video, Sophie Etzold, a Child Protection Officer with UNHCR in Uganda, explains an inter-agency process to adapt child protection case management in response to the challenges faced posed by COVID-19. She tells how, even prior to the pandemic, there were many child protection issues in Uganda, including exposure to violence, abuse, neglect, abandonment, sexual and gender-based violence, forced marriage and child labour. We hear of UNHCR's work with children in large refugee camps in Uganda, including support for unaccompanied

and separated refugee and migrant children, and the additional challenges caused by national lock down and the necessity to communicate with co-workers, children and carers through remote means such as telephone and internet. Maintaining contact is a massive challenge in Uganda, since a large proportion of the population, and especially children, do not have access to such channels of communication.

The inter-agency approach in Uganda has facilitated a collective urgent response to providing and maintaining services for children of concern through a shared plan to adapt protocols, guidance and processes of child protection case management. These include determining risk levels for children, levels of response, and mapping of available services. The plan can be found at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/76471.

Sophie explains:

> [A]critical area of response was also the development of an emergency inter-agency referral pathway. This included a very rapid exercise amongst all actors in all locations in Uganda where we listed those critical activities: case management for cases of children at heightened risk; alternative care support; community-based support; as well as psychosocial support for children at heightened risk. Those areas were mapped in all the different locations and really the core focal points were placed in these inter-agency referral pathways and were widely shared amongst the humanitarian community and government partners…

[and]

> immediate actions were basically to reprioritise the case load that we had so we looked very quickly into the current high-risk cases, including children, for example, of families that could be affected by COVID-19 and what services they would need with regard to separation from parents. But also, on the existing case load, for children that were previously identified as being at risk

of violence or abuse within the family we asked: where have priorities changed? At an inter-agency level amongst the partners we have kind of re-drafted our prioritisation criteria and vulnerability criteria - but also at the agency level that was done to review the overall existing case load and a potential new, coming case load.

Working with community groups and focal points

Sophie emphasises the importance of working in partnership with community groups and focal points. She acknowledges their valuable local knowledge and the support they can offer during a time when the engagement and outreach of child protection agencies is severely limited. Sophie describes how a mapping of existing community child protection structures was carried out and, in order to promote community outreach work, they developed:

> …a community-based child protection referral pathway which is a bit different than the inter-agency one….We developed a community-based referral pathway outlining the referral pathways that the community members - children, adolescents, families, vulnerable families, community members, anyone who identifies from the community a critical case - could also approach. This had information on case management services, but instead of individual case management [telephone] numbers we would rather use, for example, hotlines to be shared with the community. But it included also national hotlines, for example, Uganda Child Helpline was listed there as well as community resources. So, let's say a child in Zone X in a certain settlement would face a challenge and is able to reach out to those referral pathways and resources, and is able to read, they can approach a community member that is listed for his or her zone.

However, Sophie also highlights the importance of providing community actors with information, training, material resources, and capacity building

opportunities. She explains the importance of clearly defining of roles and responsibilities and discussions with community members:

> …to see where does their work come into place, and where is their work really valuable, and where also there are limitations to community engagement. So for critical cases, let's say sexual and gender based violence that are very sensitive within the community, as well case management, actors really have to critically review whether the involvement of child protection community members is the right tool and is a safe tool and is safe for the child and the family members that are maybe also at risk. I think it's very important to outline what are the tasks and responsibilities that are additional that now came with the COVID crisis and what are those that remain with actors, and we have to be very clear with the child, the family caregivers, and with the community members that we are supporting.

Safe communication with children and adapting the child protection assessment process

The MOOC explores the importance of conducting rigorous child protection assessments as a component of case management. In order to do this, it is important to reach out and communicate with children themselves - a common challenge for practitioners across the world during the pandemic. Sara Mabger, a Child Protection Coordinator for the International Rescue Committee in Lebanon, provided a video in which she explains the guidance recently developed by a national inter-agency child protection working group on safely communicating with children remotely, including conducting protection assessments, via phone calls.

> Our concerns were in this specific context children will be under confinement, many, many children will be living in houses or in a form of tented settlements with the perpetrator of abuse and in many cases they would have very little access to other services

and most concerningly very little access to the physical presence of a child protection case worker.

Sara says that a major concern was providing remote case management in a way that upheld the 'do no harm' principle, in other words, it does not place a child at further risk. She describes the different steps of the guidance which includes explaining to children why they cannot be visited in person. She speaks about actions to take during a phone call such as clearly explaining to the child what the call is about, how long it will last, and most importantly, clarifying if the child feels safe speaking on the phone. Sara outlines the safety and security considerations including finding out if the child has access to an adult they trust and can reach out to if they are at risk. She also explains the importance of agreeing a code with a child that would alert the worker to a problem during the call.

> So, for example, you might agree with a child to say something related to the weather or the sun or to how they're feeling or something that will not cause concern if they say it over the phone in case someone is listening. This way this could be an indication for you that the child is at risk and you can agree on the meaning of the code with the child so that should they be in a situation where they cannot speak freely and they feel at risk they can say the code.

Many of the course participants noted in the comments box at the bottom of each course page, how they had found this information on using a code to be particularly helpful.

Sara also speaks about access to services:

> The third step is really making sure that you're supporting the child to access all the services that they need during that time and making sure that you're also thinking through COVID 19 specific plans so what will happen if someone in the family falls in

ill from COVID what are the specific care arrangements. Also considering a protection safety plan with the child.

The Lebanese inter-agency guidance on 'Child Protection Case Management Guidance for Remote Phone Follow-up1 in Covid-19' can be accessed at: http://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/system/files/resource/files/CP-Case-Management-Remote-Phone-Followup-COVID19.pdf

The MOOC continues with further topics related to full and meaningful participation of children in all steps of case management, informed consent, confidentiality, and safe information sharing.

Child protection case planning and access to service

Two further video contributions in the MOOC have been provided by Richard Munyaneza, a psychologist working for Hope and Homes for Children in Rwanda and Sofia Baccichetto, a Senior Child Protection Assistant for UNHCR in Ecuador. Richard speaks about the current challenges in Rwanda and how they are ensuring children with child protection plans receive the necessary support by forging new partnerships with local health workers and community groups still able physically to reach children. Sofia explains the importance of working through adapted protocols and extended partnership arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic. She provides the example of how UNHCR has mapped those services still operating and modified partnership agreements with local NGO providers so that young people who are now moving into independent living arrangements still receive the support outlined in their leaving care plans.

Staying Safe

Another key message in the MOOC is the importance of staying safe. This includes provision of family and child friendly information developed in different countries about the risk of COVID-19. The important topic of the safety and well-being of the workforce is also explored. For example, we included numerous

additional course materials such as those developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the British Federation of Social Workers and the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance which can be downloaded and adapted for use.

Course participants and new developments

In this first run of the MOOC, 7,033 participants from 168 countries signed up. These included child protection professionals, health workers, teachers, lawyers, foster carers, and those working and volunteering in many other sectors. What is particularly interesting is how this MOOC is unlike the two previous international MOOCs I have developed. In this one, 32% of those who signed up came from the UK, which is a much higher percentage than usual. Each page of content in the MOOC included a discussion board to encourage interaction by participants. In total, participants posted 5,085 comments posing further questions or responding to what they had read or heard. The content of these comments and the distribution of participants from across the world, indicates the manner in which this global pandemic has, perhaps for the first time, brought about shared challenges for practitioners regardless of whether they are working in a high income, middle income or low income country. One of the most common challenges is how social distancing and lock down measures have demanded new and innovative ways of reaching children at risk. It is therefore, planned to add additional reference materials to the next run of the MOOC in October so that new guidance and examples of practice developed since the course was first written, can now be incorporated. This will include for example, materials on 'child hubs' and other developments in Scotland.

Conclusion

To conclude, two further issues caught my attention. One is the anticipated rise in the number of children at risk as a result of the pandemic. For example, some course participants drew attention to increases in incidences of children being sent out to work, forced child marriage, and domestic violence and subsequent impact on children. For me, this poses the question: how soon should we start

planning for a heightened response that may be needed once we can fully reach children again? A second issue relates to the warnings that this pandemic is not over, and indeed, will most probably continue to increase in intensity in different parts of the world. However, although we face an unknown future, we are able to go forward drawing on the helpful guidance and resources already carefully developed by colleagues and protection agencies as seen in the MOOC.

Anyone who would like to participate in the second run of the MOOC, '*COVID-19: Adapting Child Protection Case Management*', starting October 12th 2020, can sign up on the Futurelearn platform at https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/covid-19-adapting-child-protection-case-management.

About the author

Dr Chrissie Gale is Executive Director of Child Consulting Ltd. She has a career spanning more than 30 years in which she continues to promote child rights with specific reference to child protection and alternative care in an international context. Until recently, Chrissie was the Lead for the international work at CELCIS in the University of Strathclyde during which she managed a global portfolio of child protection and alternative care programmes, research projects and knowledge exchange opportunities. Her work has been complemented by teaching Masters students on child rights, social policy, and child protection as well as an advisory role influencing and helping direct international policy and legislation.