

USING ONLINE TOOLS TO BRIDGE CHILDREN WITH CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES

Children innovating, creating and expressing

Asia and the Pacific: Singapore

"Singapore Children's Society operates a national toll-free helpline and online chat for children to contact us. From the calls and chats to Tinkle Friend, children let us know about their worries and concerns during the COVID-19 period, which include: not understanding the pandemic (including terminology and restrictions); uncertainty and disruptions to their routines; anxiety about school; loneliness and lack of social interactions (increased psychological distance despite the physical proximity at home); health and safety of their family members; overcrowding at home, among others.

This information led to the development of COVID-19 resources targeted at children and their caregivers / families to support children emotionally and keep them safe at home during this period. One of the resources aimed at helping children to recognise their body's warning signs was also turned into a video format, titled Safe Simon, to reach out to children who do not read as well.

Children's Society also has four children and youth drop-in centres that promote positive development and aim to reduce and prevent children and youth from engaging in risky behaviours. During the lockdown (locally known as the Circuit Breaker period), we had to cease operation of the physical spaces but instead had to adapt working methods to engage with the youth. They include:

Social Media engagement via Instagram livestreams: Weekly livestreams conducted by social workers from different centres cover various topics to reach out to the youths: self care, mental health, recreational activities, online safety.

Use of WhatsApp messages, phone calls, Instagram messages and zoom meeting to engage youths who require further intervention such as casework and counselling.

Set up a Virtual Youth Drop-in Centre.

Engage youth beneficiaries to show appreciation to healthcare workers and/or stakeholders (sending cookies, gifts, appreciation notes from youth to health professionals.)

▪Reflections

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of also assessing the social impact on children and families, and embedding them in policy responses. For example, support systems which relied on face-to-face processes run into problems in a crisis or lockdown. These include safety plans which designate safe adults outside of the household to physically and consistently sight a child.

It is critical to ensure that social services are recognised as essential services and ensuring accessibility, e.g. crisis shelters to remain open, new working methods e.g. how to communicate distress situations with hand signals when social workers are checking in, etc. among other examples.

Another reflection/observation was that there is a general barrier about speaking up about mental health. While the chats and calls to Tinkle Friend have logged an uptick in mental health concerns, children still do not feel comfortable in speaking up. Some of the reasons include: they have tried but had gotten a negative reaction; the family generally does not engage in such talk or support; their parents & carers are also struggling. We are in the process of analysing the chats to the Tinkle Friend hotline and online chat."

Singapore Children's Society