

An open door to education

A method for play-and-learn based education for survivors of child sexual exploitation, abuse and trafficking



By Lotte Ladegaard, November 2008



Save the Children
Sweden - Denmark

Introduction

For children exposed to violence and abuse, learning does not come easy. Based on years of experience, Save the Children Sweden-Denmark's partner organisation, Bangladesh National Women's Lawyers' Association (BNWLA) has reached the conclusion that joyful education and a play-and-learn system are necessary if learners in shelter homes for abused children are to find education relevant and attractive.

Children who have been sexually exploited or abused generally have problems concentrating; they suffer from low self-esteem and lack of belief in the future.

Consequently, apart from being fun and easy-going, the education has to work extensively on re-building the children's confidence in themselves and their future.

BNWLA has also found that establishing a link between psychosocial rehabilitation and the ability to play and learn was necessary. As a result, a new methodology using games and playing as the means to catch the abused children's attention has been developed with the support of the Danish toy company LEGO. The method naturally connects BNWLA's psychosocial trauma treatment and the psychological and social benefits of play and education.

Through the project Play and Learn – A New Era for Joyful Education, BNWLA has worked out and tested the methodology with children in its own shelter home, Proshanti, in Dhaka.

The rationale of this documentation report is to describe the unique new method of practical application and testing done by BNWLA on paper for others to learn from and ultimately apply elsewhere in and outside Bangladesh. Therefore, the report targets professionals working with traumatised children affected by trafficking, sexual exploitation and other types of abuse.

Interviews with BNWLA staff members and management, children benefiting from the Play and Learn – A New Era for Joyful Education project, representatives from the Department of Social Services and Pubail Government Shelter Home's management combined with relevant background papers, e.g. project documents, annual report progress reports, screening of photo albums and teachers' reports, form the basis of this report.





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I. Trafficking, trauma and child rights violations

Sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking are amongst the most traumatic experiences that can happen to a child. While most developed countries have strict law enforcement and child protection systems for children who experience these types of violations, the majority of Bangladesh's children are struck by poverty, deprivation and lack of awareness and child rights protection. In addition, cyclones, floods and river erosion bring about a large number of orphaned, homeless and destitute children. Thus, hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi children, adolescents and women are pushed into the streets and a life of hunger, disease, violence, fear and exploitation.

Trafficked and sexually abused children face extreme psychological stress that often leads to trauma, depression, and in some cases suicide. A child engaged in the

sex industry also carries the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. Emotional stress is usually compounded by constant fear of arrest and police harassment, while public stigmatisation makes it almost impossible for many children to return home.

Sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking are closely linked, and they all stem from the same root problems - poverty, inadequate education, economic disparities, migration, traditional and religious practices, social beliefs, weak law enforcement, and lack of psychosocial protection combined with the impacts of globalisation, lack of employment opportunities, conflicts and environmental disasters as well as a growing demand from the sex industry.

2. Save the Children Sweden-Denmark's interventions

Save the Children Sweden-Denmark started its Child Sexual Abuse, Exploitation and Trafficking Thematic Programme (CSEAT) in 1997. Since then, Save the Children Sweden-Denmark and its local partner organisations have acted as pioneers combating taboos and prejudices, raising awareness to tackle the lack of capacity amongst government officials and organisations to handle the problem. They have also provided direct services to make up for a severe deficiency in opportunities for children who have experienced sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking.

Throughout the years, Save the Children Sweden-Denmark has provided its partner organisations with capacity building, and advocacy has been carried out at local and national levels. Save the Children Sweden-Denmark has also conducted research, studies and situation analyses which generate a thorough understanding of the situation, thereby ensuring the proper design and implementation of the programme.

CSEAT thematic partner organisations and Save the Children Sweden-Denmark take joint initiatives in order to strengthen capacity development, national level advocacy and the enhancement of knowledge through research, documentation, dissemination and increased sharing between Save the Children Sweden-Denmark and its partners. Supported by Save the Children Sweden-Denmark, partners also provide direct services in the shape of shelter homes, drop-in centres, psychosocial and medical care, counselling, legal support, education, vocational training and job placement to children directly affected by sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking. Because the children have their own clubs, they have the opportunity to influence all services provided to them. The children also participate in advocacy activities and networks with other children. Ultimately, this leads to a growing acceptance of the children in a country that denied the very existence of the problem up until a few years ago.



To address the root causes of child sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking, Save the Children Sweden-Denmark is working to mainstream safety education in the national curriculum text books. At community level it focuses on social integration by strengthening community based structures, resource mobilisation and capacity building of the community in order to ensure a minimum care standard.

Local Child Rights Watch Dog Committees established by partner organisations defend every child's rights, and simultaneously works to protect children against all kinds of violence, child marriage, trafficking, hazardous child labour etc. Special focus is put on the source areas from which children typically are trafficked – border districts, disaster hit regions and remote locations with few job opportunities – in order to stop unsafe migration.

Since knowledge about child sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking is still scarce, Save the Children

Sweden-Denmark also supports the establishment of national databases and knowledge centres.

Child rights programming is the key approach of all Save the Children Sweden-Denmark's programmes. All children are of course being heard and given space to influence the activities in the direction that is in their best interests.

All experiences gathered in the CSEAT thematic programme are used to develop best practices, and the major focus at the national level is the implementation of a minimum standard of care.

3. Bangladesh National Women's Lawyers' Association in brief

Bangladesh National Woman Lawyers' Association, BNWLA, is a non-profit, non-political organisation established in 1979 by a group of women lawyers in Bangladesh. Throughout the years, BNWLA has advocated women's and children's rights, conducted research and training on the legal rights of women and children and pushed for proper legal protection.

While BNWLA raises mass awareness against child trafficking and cross border trafficking, the organisation also assists in rescue actions and helps survivors recover, repatriate and reintegrate. Survivors are also sup-

ported with shelter and legal aid, hot line services and the investigation of cases.

BNWLA also carries out community based interventions to reduce child rights violations by identifying the root causes of family rejection, social stigma, and religious and traditional values that lead to the violation of child rights.

Through the shelter home Proshanti, BNWLA provides food, lodging, medical support, recreation, non-formal education, counselling, legal aid, awareness, life skills and job placement for young survivors of sexual exploitation, abuse and trafficking.



4. Catching the whiff of learning

A child learns basic social skills, cultural habits and practices adult roles through play. Play, in addition to allowing a child to use energy and relax, stimulates the child's motor coordination and its mastery of situations. At the same time, however, learning does not come easy for children exposed to violence and abuse. Children who have been sexually exploited or abused generally have problems concentrating; they suffer from low self-esteem and lack of belief in the future. Therefore, if learners in shelter homes for sexually abused, exploited and trafficked children are to find education relevant and attractive, it has to be fun and easy-going, as well as work extensively on re-building the children's confidence in themselves and their future.

Through the play-and-learn method, education and playing are combined and together act as a tool for psychosocial rehabilitation. The Play and Learn – A New Era for Joyful Education project and its diversified playing approach have therefore become the heart of all interventions in BNWLA's shelter home, Proshanti, in Dhaka.

BNWLA describes the overall method as a three-step model:

Step one: Three playing corners are the gateways to stimulate children's interest in and ability to learn. Even when children do enter the non-formal education system, they continue their activities in the playing corners for continued motivation as well as for building confidence. The playing corners are also an important contribution to trauma treatment.

Step two: Non-formal education based on the open-door principle.

Step three: Mainstreaming into the formal school system accompanied by close follow-up by BNWLA to avoid drop-outs.

While steps two and three almost always take place, the third step may at times not be reached. Some girls with pending cases cannot leave the shelter unattended for safety reasons. Other children stay in the shelter for a very short time and may never be able to join the formal school system. But the underlying idea is that any child should go as far as at all possible, and that each child should be aided throughout the process to achieve the best possible level of knowledge and confidence. This is done regardless of the child's social strata, intellectual capacity and physical and mental condition.

Therefore, any newcomers to Proshanti are immediately tagged to fellow survivors who all participate in

the play-and-learn project. When the new child is ready, she takes an aptitude test in keeping with her educational background and enters into the appropriate level of non-formal education.

The teacher and child develop a warm and accepting relationship where the teacher reflects the child's feelings so that the child gains insight to enable her to solve her own problems.

A daily attendance register is maintained by the teacher who notes each child's performance. This leads to a monthly review of every child. Generally, the children are aptitude tested again after six months, although this is flexible. Children are not sent to non-formal school until they feel ready.

To ensure that the play-and-learn method actually follows the children's own requirements and suggestions, each element of the project is based on requests from the children, while the adults considered their needs and facilitated the process.

The basis of the project is a child-to-child peer approach, where more confident or older children help less confident children or newcomers adapt to the activities and the shelter home. Apart from making it a whole lot easier for new children to fit into the shelter, it also helps in gradually grooming the children into responsible and disciplined adults who ultimately will have to manage jobs on their own.

Before the method was developed, children in the shelter obviously did play and go to non-formal school, but often games happened spontaneously and without any specific focus. At times, improvised events hampered regular activities and the discipline in the shelter. The drop-out rates from the non-formal school were also fairly high, and many children were neither really interested in learning nor knew how to learn.

4.1. Different corners – different purposes

A core component in the play-and-learn method is the Three Corners.

The Block & Puzzle Corner contains blocks, puzzles and different board games. Different age groups - 0-6, 6-10, 10-14, 14 and up - use the corner by rotation. The overall idea is that when the children are playing games and engage in creative activities, they forget their trauma and previous experiences for a while. Simultaneously, they catch up on their lost childhoods and subsequently learn to be children. They also develop their competency in terms of thinking and creating as well as the ability to sense pleasure and gain the knack and interest in learning.

While playing, the children also develop problem solving skills and endurance. When e.g. blocks keep tumbling down when building a house, the children are encouraged not to give up, and when they finally succeed it increases their feeling of confidence. If a child eventually gives up, she may see someone else manage, and this may encourage her to continue anyhow.

The Water & Sand Corner is included because nature is a part of life for most children in agrarian Bangladesh. Playing with natural elements simply feels homey and relaxing.

The Water & Sand Corner is mainly for the youngest pre-school children between 0 and six years of age. Here, they play with water, sand and soil while they learn about flora, fauna and fish. The children play with plastic toys normally used in bathtubs; they construct paper boats, build mud houses and construct channels. As a by-product of learning about nature and the development of creativity and innovative thinking, the children get to know about colours and basic counting.

Generally, the corner helps the children develop their personal will to do things, work their way through processes and see the results.

Then, there is the Creative Corner, which has three sub-corners: Nice Play, Reading and Free Play. In the Reading sub-corner the youngest children become acquainted with fruits, colours, rhymes, poems and films. These activities are all preparations for entering proper education.

Free Play only takes place once a week on Thursday evenings. Here, the children watch cartoons, films and drama. Every activity is followed up by a discussion and learning session. The overall aim is to help the children socialise and make them feel like they are part of a team. Therefore, all children, regardless of their age, background or educational levels, participate at the same time.

Most of the films, which have educational content, can consist of documentaries or cartoons produced by other development agencies. Via exposure to films, the children learn about hygiene, trafficking, child marriage and other relevant issues.

Sometimes, however, the films shown are also for pure entertainment to enable the children to relax and forget about the past.

Nice Play is for skipping, jumping and other physical activities. Here, the children get rid of accumulated frustrations and suppressed emotions. While jumping or skipping, there is the added value of the children learning to count. It is also possible to play Ludo, Chess and Carom, which again strengthen the children's ability to count and provide room for relaxation and subsequent stress reduction.

One day I may teach others

“When my father married a second time, and my mother started working in the garment industry, I decided to leave my village with a woman I knew. She locked me up and sold me to a brothel in Mymensingh. I spent two and a half years in the brothel. I was very young. I had not even had my first period, and they fed me sleeping pills so that I could not think or refuse.

Then, the police came and took me to jail. It was very dirty, and I slept on a blanket on the floor. I did not have a tooth brush, and the food was bad. Finally, I was rescued by BNWLA. I was very, very sad. I cried and cried. I spoke to a counsellor, and I

joined the vocational training unit, and I participated in trips to important places outside the shelter. I also participated in child rights activities with many other children. It has been very good. I really like it, and now I would like to learn more.

I have already left the shelter and live in a rented room, but I come to Proshanti every day to work in the tailoring unit. It is good to work – then I stop thinking. I want to buy my own sewing machine, and maybe I will get my own showroom one day. Then, I may teach others.”

N, 18 years





4.2. An open door to education

Generally, the children's academic level is very poor when they come to the Proshanti Shelter Home. Most children have hardly been to school before, and having lived through severely traumatising events and abuse, many do not feel like going to school at all. The children suffer severe problems with anger, damaged self-esteem and a subsequent lack of concentration. Thus, it takes a lot to make the children feel confident and motivated to learn.

In order to develop the non-formal education part of the new method, BNWLA allied with an education specialist. After a 'trial and error' testing process a curriculum for children with special needs was developed termed the school centred open door education system.

The school centred open door education system assesses each child individually. A girl may e.g. have been going to the village school up until third grade, but when upon being tested, the Proshanti teachers may find that she is lagging severely behind in math, but her Bangla is fine. Then, the girl may enter fourth grade, but also receive specialised teaching in math. Or, if she is a

complete beginner, she will be placed in a pre-school class while she is being familiarised with the Three Corners playing units. Every child is assessed monthly, and if any problems occur, or if a child is prone to drop-out, she will receive intensive need based support.

Most of the children are first generation learners, and they have no tutor at home. While some children go to school outside the shelter where they stay, others live in school hostels or are reintegrated with their families. Therefore, BNWLA's overall aim is for all children to complete their daily learning process before leaving the shelter. In other words, there is no homework.

In terms of teaching methods, the Play and Learn – A New Era for Joyful Education project uses cards and other visuals extensively, and the learning is not as teacher-centred as it is in a traditional Bangladeshi learning environment. Visualisation helps the children to gain knowledge more quickly, they develop their decision making skills and they learn to request support. At the same time, relevant life skills are taught so the children can increase awareness about practically every situation they may meet later in life.



Thanks to the play-and-learn method, BNWLA has registered a decrease in the drop-out rates and found that more children are eager to join formal school. Only three children out of 180 have dropped out from 2006 to 2007, and very few children now need counseling to understand the value of education.

More children are also mainstreamed into the formal school system as BNWLA has developed a thorough screening process that determines if a child is motivated and suited to go to a formal school. Those who do join the formal school system also do better and drop-out less as they have received focused education using the open door principle. There is a certain domino effect here – seeing some children go to the formal school and do well is infectious, causing the other children to become interested, too.

An important point is that no one has to achieve a certain level within a year. Instead, the method leaves room for each and every child to learn at his or her own speed. While many abused children never dare to dream about the future and have even less confidence that they are capable human beings, the children in-

involved in the play-and-learn method develop visions about the future. Some want to become lawyers, study languages, work as journalists, teachers, and social workers or become artists.

Even if many of their visions are not feasible in Bangladesh, where options are limited for even the most fortunate, at least it shows that the children have the will to live and accomplish as much as possible. For the few children with solvent parents, BNWLA encourages the parents to support further education. Other children are admitted to local institutions where BNWLA lobbies for free education.

BNWLA's most important achievement, however, may be the fact that the children's families and communities pay more respect to the children who have been rehabilitated from participating in the play-and-learn project. These children can help their illiterate families read documents, and they are quick learners with basic computer skills and a self confidence that enable them to find a comparatively better job than the average slum or village child.

4.3. Natural psychotherapy

As the activities in the playing corners contribute to the children's healing, natural psychotherapy has been included in the play-and-learn method. Developed by a mental health expert, the method is based on a trauma assessment of each child based on the child's own ideas and experiences. During therapeutic sessions, the children prepare, for example, drama activities and draw in order to share awareness and live out the stories of their past. The method helps develop the children's analytical capacity and ability to adapt to the outside world while reducing trauma.

The children also talk about their own experiences; they go to the playground, observe special days, and network with other children from other shelter homes.

Study tours and excursions to important monuments, museums and theme parks are a part of the children's exposure to normal everyday life in Bangladesh. This, along with self confidence and proper education will ease the children's re-integration into the world outside the shelter home.

4.4. Books and newspapers

The Play and Learn – A New Era for Joyful Education project provides access to a library. The children can borrow books for a week, or they can read in the library. The library contains children's books, novels, travel stories, books on religion and general knowledge. The library staff always report which books the children read to help the shelter home staff keeping general track of the children's development and interests.

The library also offers newspapers, and based on the news, the children maintain newspaper clippings and point out issues that BNWLA ought to deal with. Some children even outline important issues in letters to the executive director.

In order to encourage the children who do not read well to read, they meet for study circles where one child reads out aloud and the rest listening.

Reading books and newspapers is not only a matter of general knowledge and entertainment at the Proshanti Shelter Home. The children's actual knowledge is always applied directly, e.g. when they issue regular shelter home wall magazines.





4.5. IT and media

As IT has become an essential part of everyday life for most people, BNWLA is also giving the children in the Play and Learn – A New Era for Joyful Education project the option of learning how to operate computers. One survivor who has developed a keen passion for computers has initiated a computer lab where he provides computer training for other children.

Some children are also involved in Ichchey Media House, a youth-led media house initiated by Save the Children Sweden-Denmark. Ichchey Media House issues its own newspaper for and by children; the children take photos, shoot video and have initiated their own website.



I come every day to study

“I never went to school in the village. I did not like to go to school. When I was 15 years old, my mother got a job as a house maid, and I started working in a garment factory. I was living with my aunt in Dhaka.

Then, I met a man from Jessore. He told me he could find me a better job, and I agreed to go with him. I felt I could trust him, but when we got to Jessore other people were wondering who I was and someone called the police. They arrested me and told me that the man is a trafficker. BNWLA rescued me from jail and is running a case against the trafficker.

I spent two years at Proshanti. Now I stay outside the shelter with a family as a paying guest, but I come to the shelter every day to study and to learn embroidery. I really enjoy it. We have lots of games, and I like the library.

When I was young I never understood that it was important to go to school, but now I know that it is essential.”

S, 18 years



5. Working with the government

BNWLA has tested the Play and Learn – A New Era for Joyful Education project in three government-operated shelter homes and has formed a partnership with the Department of Social Services based on an assessment of the needs in the shelters. Apart from applying the method, BNWLA has also trained the representatives of the Department of Social Services in how to deal with traumatised children.

The participants in the government shelter home are all selected in keeping with three criteria:

All girls have to be below 18 years of age.

There has to be a re-integration plan for each girl,

which means that she must, at minimum, be able to say her home address.

She may not have been to school before, but she is very eager to study.

Selection is based on individual interviews.

The Play and Learn – A New Era for Joyful Education project has acted as a key to gaining recognition from the government, which has expressed interest in using the method. However, if the government really wants to implement the method, there is a need to allocate financial and staff resources, as well as extensive training for the staff.

6. Future possibilities and further development

In order for the play-and-learn method to have a long term impact, further initiatives, according to BNWLA, have to be established.

For example, the options are few for most girls to study beyond the basic education they receive in the shelters. Consequently, different ideas are sprouting in BNWLA. The development of a sponsorship programme or a fund for girls who want to embark on higher studies are being considered. These projects would mean that local resources have to be explored.

BNWLA also looks at how to ensure the girls access

to proper jobs by e.g. providing them with driving licenses and additional computer skills. In this case, computer and Internet based education could be an option.

There is also interest in expanding the play-and-learn method by learning from Indian shelter homes where more initiatives and new approaches take place. BNWLA is, for example, considering the inclusion of the Santosh approach, which builds, among other things, on meditation as a tool to reduce trauma.



7. Lessons learnt

- When children are educated and confident, they enjoy more respect from their families and communities upon reintegration.
- The play-and-learn method helps the children minimise their frustration and anger, which makes it easier for them to reintegrate.
- A child who has survived trauma and has gained confidence and awareness does not accept abuse easily. Children who have participated in the play-and-learn project are therefore better equipped to avoid exploitation and abuse in the future. They may act as protectors of other children, too.
- Recreational events, study tours and debates stimulate children's creativity and raise their self-esteem.
- Since the government generally does not provide psychosocial trauma treatment or education to the children in its care, a clear need exists for the method to be implemented in government shelter homes.
- Since the method builds on creating trust and confidence, all staff members should support the method and be trained in how to communicate and cooperate in a child friendly manner.
- There is a need to develop play-and-learn activities for teenage girls who have outgrown the Water & Sand Corner. Teenage girls could for example learn to read via Bengali youth, female and fashion magazines, which would simultaneously provide some knowledge on how girls live outside the shelters as well as grant inspiration for the vocational training, e.g. tailoring, taking place in the Proshanti Shelter Home. Songs and music can also be analysed and discussed for learning and for stimulating an eagerness to learn. However, all options should be discussed with the children before any new items are added to the method.
- Proper links to child clubs and vocational training are yet to be created.
- Parents, local communities and civil society members should be oriented and made aware of the necessity of child friendly, joyful learning mechanisms for the rehabilitation of traumatised children.
- BNWLA should take the responsibility to develop a training package and train its core staff to become trainers of trainers in the new method.
- The method ought to be developed further and adapted so it can be applied by clubs and other organisations who work with children not in school.

I never got a chance to teach my boy

"I lost my child when he was very young. I never got a chance to teach him anything. Now he is earning 3000 Taka every month because he gives computer lessons, and he plans to study further. I am a widow, and I could never have managed that on my own. Here, he is also learning good manners, and he knows how to behave with other people. That will definitely help him in the future. And when I tell him that I do not know what to tell others about his past, he suggests that I just say that I do not know the details, and that they will have to ask him instead. If my son did not get help at Proshanti, one of us would have become a thief or a rag picker to survive."

Mother to former camel jockey boy

Published by
Save the Children Sweden-Denmark in Bangladesh

First published November 2008

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Consequently, apart from being fun and easy-going, the education has to work extensively on re-building the children's confidence in themselves and their future.

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