

CYC workers hold vital keys to global COVID-19 recovery

Jennifer Davidson

For something as small as a virus, the size of the impact it's had on all of our lives in the last couple of months is pretty extraordinary. And while children haven't been the primary focus of the public health measures in place around the world – given the disproportionate impact on older people – we can all see that children have nevertheless been massively impacted by the changes around us. In my view, Child and Youth Care workers have something essential to contribute to getting us through this pandemic well; in fact, the skills and wisdom of CYC will be essential to our global recovery.

Let me explain. We have seen the rapid spread of COVID-19 bringing complex challenges throughout the world, with children experiencing extended periods of 'containment' and isolation from other children, and sometimes even from parents, siblings and other family members. Children are also experiencing sudden and increased household poverty, they're missing out on education, they're struggling with both their physical and mental health, there are pressures on their families, and care leavers find themselves even more isolated than they were before.

It is a lot to get our heads and hearts around. Learning from past epidemics can help.

While it won't be true for every child, we know that overall, *our existing concerns about children's wellbeing are exacerbated in epidemics, with*



June 2020

ISSN 1605-7406

new ones emerging – this comes from the health impacts of the epidemic as well as from prevention and control measures.

And through past epidemics, children and communities that recovered well were those where *children and families' needs and wellbeing were genuinely taken into account in the policy and community responses*, and where these were sustained long after the health-aspects of the epidemic were over. Where children and families aren't supported up front, a community will have a much harder climb to post-epidemic recovery:

“When we finally turned to children and the vulnerability created [by the Ebola epidemic], we found we were really far behind.”

Humanitarian expert, Sierra Leone

But there's one particular lesson from past epidemics that I think best aligns with the core – the true North – of Child and Youth Care: *the responses that respected the importance of children's relationships were amongst the most effective for getting through the epidemic well.*

What does this look like? It means, for example, that child-oriented practitioners (CYC workers, teachers, social work, etc) continue to have regular, authentic contact with children during the 'containment' phase, as well as through the messy, non-linear phases that follow. Importantly, they're making sure that children's relationships with their friends, peers, and family members, are well supported.

Child and Youth Care workers know the importance of relationships better than anyone, because *relational care has always been at the heart of all we do.* It's not just theory, it's also our skill. It's inherent in the Child and Youth Care's instinctive 'head, heart and hands' holistic approach to others.

And now, it's not just important to those children we're caring for; this inherent skill and wisdom is going to be critical for our global recovery. What CYC workers do now matters more now than ever to our collective future.



June 2020

ISSN 1605-7406

If past epidemics are anything to go by, the next many months will look more like that well-known dance step of *two steps forward, one step back*. Children’s wellbeing needs to be not just one of many equal priorities—but at the forefront of – the range of decisions that are happening in response to COVID-19. So as we look to this messy set of phases ahead, for a proper recovery whole societies will, collectively, need to go right back to the basics, to a focus on children – yours, mine, theirs – and on supporting their relationships, and their families and wider caring networks.

Suddenly, the heart and wisdom of Child and Youth Care has become *more directly relevant, to more people*, than ever before. What Child and Youth Care has to say to the wider world has never been more important. While we grapple with efforts for a global recovery, finding a way through and out of this pandemic will ultimately not be solely driven by economic and health decisions—but by the care and priorities we place on children and families, and in particular those most likely to be left behind.

The Child and Youth Care workforce globally might be a comparatively small one, but its impact on global COVID recovery needs to be extraordinary.

Reference

Elsley, S and Davidson, J (2020). Protecting Children’s Wellbeing in Response to COVID-19: Learning from Past Epidemics. *Inspiring Children’s Futures Learning Report*. University of Strathclyde, UK. Available 5 June 2020: www.inspiringchildrensfutures.org

JENNIFER DAVIDSON is a Professor of Practice and Founding Director of CELCIS (the Centre of Children’s Care and Protection) at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland; she is currently on secondment from CELCIS to contribute to the global response for children in this pandemic. Her career began as a Child and Youth Care worker in Montreal and a member of the CYC-Net Board of Governors.

