

RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF
INSTITUTIONS IN WHICH CHILDREN
AND ADOLESCENTS RESIDE
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PANDEMIC
CAUSED BY
COVID-19

The Inter-American Children's Institute, faithful to its institutional mission of strengthening the capacities of the States to promote and protect the rights of children and adolescents, and attending repeated consultations received from different States of the Inter-American System regarding the need to have protocols that guide the activity of residential centers in the context of a pandemic, has formulated and systematized a set of recommendations in order to ensure the rights of children and adolescents in the face of this health - social crisis without precedents.

They are based on various documents that international organizations concerned with the subject have produced in recent weeks, including the IACHR, the Committee on the Rights of the Child and civil society organizations. We have also consulted circulars and internal communications issued by protection agencies from different states.

Starting point

The CRC and a wide set of international legal instruments reaffirm the responsibility of states to promote and protect the rights of all children and adolescents without distinction. Within the diversity of situations and vulnerability factors to which children in the region are exposed, the child and adolescent population residing in institutions appears to be especially vulnerable and dependent in relation to the realization of their rights.

As the IACHR points out: “Strengthen the protection of children and adolescents, including especially those who do not have family care and who are in care institutions - and prevent the spread of COVID-19, implementing measures that consider their particularities - as people in the development stage and who attend to their best interests as widely as possible”.

This document brings together a set of guidelines aimed to collaborate with States in the task of promoting and protecting the rights of children and adolescents in situations of institutionalization.

The COVID-19 pandemic is presented as a circumstantial crisis that puts the medical-sanitary aspects in the foreground, giving little visibility to mental health. Most of the protocols or contingency plans known worldwide refer to the prevention of contagion, but not including the psychological consequences that can be caused by the stress caused by uncertainty, the loss of significant ties due to isolation and the difficulty of thinking about life after the pandemic.

Identifying these crisis situations is essential as a preventive strategy and as a way of channeling negative emotions in institutionalized children and adolescents.

Every effort will be made to ensure that the adoption of health protection measures and the limitations imposed by the situation do not become an impediment to the realization of rights as a whole. To the necessary hygienic and sanitary measures it is suggested to add measures and recommendations that minimize the psychological and social consequences of isolation and alteration of daily routines.

Scope of application

These guidelines are especially aimed at those institutions where children or adolescents live full time.

This includes:

- a. Residential protection devices.
- b. Institutions of deprivation of liberty of adolescents within the framework of Criminal Responsibility Systems.
- c. Prison establishments with a female population that live with boys and girls.

It may be partially applied to children and adolescents who have their parents or adult references deprived of liberty.

These are general guidelines that must be adapted to the characteristics of the establishments, the population they attend and the daily routines prior to this situation.



General attitude and behavior of the staff

The suspension of external activities and the permanence of internees throughout the day within the institution can generate situations of tension that overload the task of officials and educators. Added to this are the fears and concerns about the exposure to possible infections. It is important to be aware of this situation and promote dialogue instances with the team, manage clear information and define work criteria that, beyond the exceptional, should be properly organized.

If there is anxiety and disorganization on the part of adults this will be transferred to children and adolescents and increase their own anxieties.

It is important that adults remain calm, take care of their relationships with each other and avoid manifestations of anxiety, fear or confusion in the face of new situations.

Daily remind all staff working at the Center, as well as residents and visitors, of all the needed preventive measures to take in the face of possible contact with affected people.

It is important that the oral transmission of the information is accompanied by official graphic material placed in visible places (posters and explanatory posters) and that it includes the mandatory preventive measures.

Raise awareness among all the staff working at the Center, as well as residents, about the importance of continuing with the preventive measures taken in each Center and handling information responsibly, so that the measures are correct. and effective.

We must be clear that the effects that a stress situation can have in the medium and long term on children or adolescents will depend on the personal stories, the strengths of each one, but also on the security transmitted by the referring adults.



Prevention of contagion and information management

It is essential that every residential institution adopt the preventive and hygienic measures indicated by the health authorities.

In this sense, they must have all the elements and supplies necessary for hygiene and prevention together with a health surveillance system that allows identifying possible infections and taking the corresponding measures in a timely manner.

For its correct use, personnel should receive information and guidance about the necessary measures and how they will be more effective.

In order to take care of both the health of the staff and the possibility of contagion, it is important to carry out the COVID19 test on all people who work with and near children and adolescents.

It is important not to alter the periodic medical examinations or the attention of pathologies or health situations not related to COVID19. This must have continuity.

Children and adolescents also have the right to receive clear, timely and appropriate information for their ages and characteristics. It should be sought that children understand the meaning, why and what are the measures that alter their routines and involve the suspension of activities that are pleasurable to them (school closures, visits, postponement of collective activities).

It is not just about dumping information but creating the conditions for boys and girls to appropriate and incorporate it. Generating a space for dialogue in which they can express their experiences, feelings and questions gives the possibility of contributing information taking into account their own concerns and questions.

It should be borne in mind that children and adolescents will need to express their emotions, fears or doubts in various ways. It is therefore recommended to give place to the word or to alternative forms of communication according to the ages that allow comprehensive accompaniment.

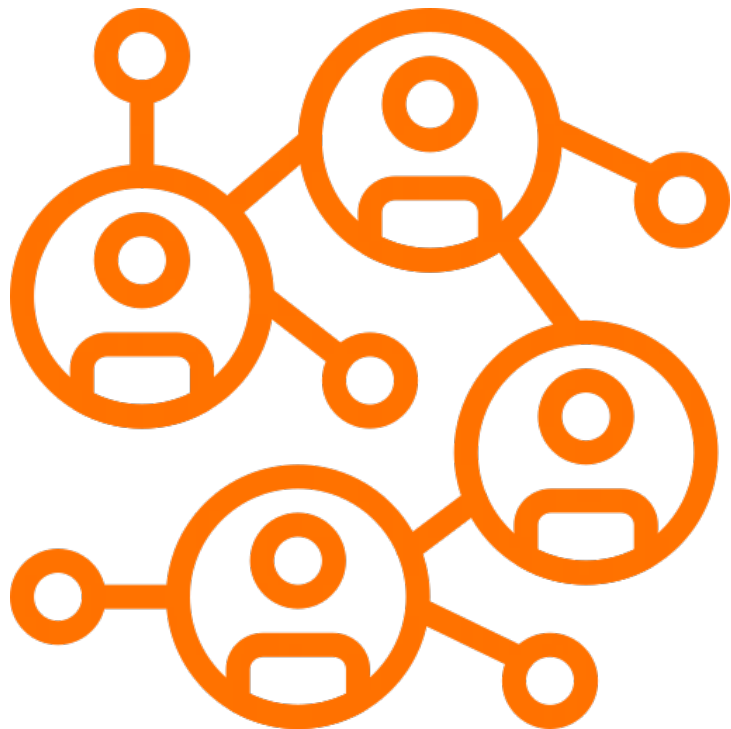
They must feel part of the search for solutions to the problems facing us in this situation. It is advisable to involve them in hygiene tasks without displacing adult staff from their usual responsibilities.

If the isolation of a child or adolescent is necessary, the information must be especially taken into account. Dispel fears but at the same time call to responsibility. It should be clear that isolation is not a punishment but a measure to avoid contagion that protects everything and everyone.

Contact with families and relatives

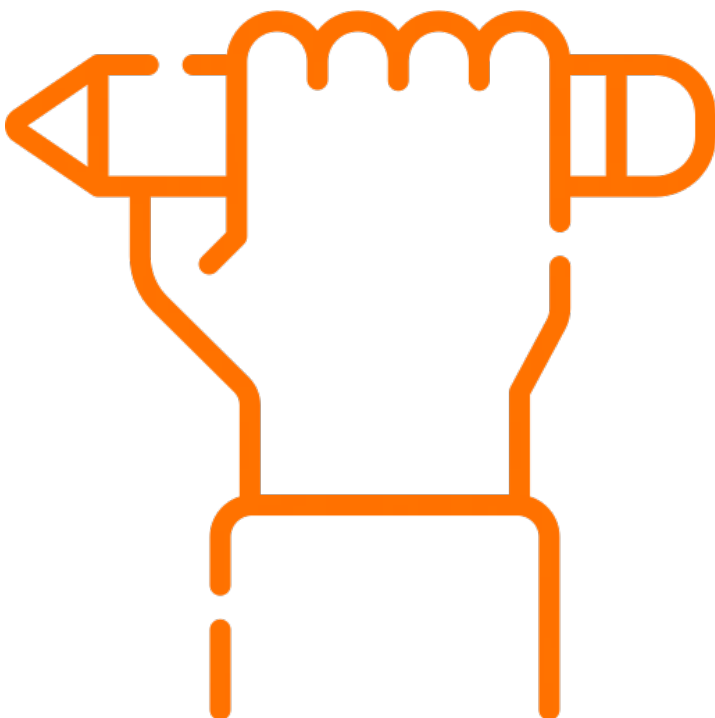
The alteration of the visits in this type of institutions generates anxiety, fears and mistrust that generate suffering and alter the relationship between the different actors. Suspension of visits is usually associated with punishment, abandonment or unwanted events in the family. The idea that bad information is being hid from the inside of the Centers (internees) and from whom they are out (families). It is important to create a climate of dialogue and trust between internees, officials and families to understand the meaning of this measure.

Efforts must be made so that communication with families and adult referents is maintained despite physical distance. Technological means are fundamental instruments to achieve this continuity of relations: internet, phone calls, video exchange. Families do not always have access to these technologies, but everything possible must be done from the Centers to resolve this situation. In some establishments, a cabin has been installed outside the building from which family members can communicate with the internees.



Right to education

The States must guarantee children and adolescents the continuity of the education processes. In this sense, distance education methods have been used. These require access to technology and management skills. From the institutions it is essential to provide the support and accompaniment necessary to sustain the learning processes. In this sense, officials with greater training and accompaniment skills can be organized. It is important to promote in all those who live together (internees and staff) attitudes of valorization, support and respect for the educational task beyond its specific content. This is specified in the definition of times and spaces to carry out the tasks without interference. Promoting exchange and joint work between peers also results.



Recreation leisure and cultural activities

Recreation and access to culture rights of children and adolescents. The Committee on the Rights of the Child in this situation recommends “Explore alternative and creative solutions so that children enjoy their rights of rest, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities. Such solutions should include supervised outdoor activities at least once a day that adhere to physical distance protocols and other hygiene standards, and cultural and artistic activities for children on television, radio and online.”

Various experiences of psychosocial support in crisis situations show the importance of facilitating the expression of experiences, the preparation of stories and dialogue about “what is lived” to minimize the effects in the medium and long term.

In this sense, it is advisable to carry out collective games, dialogue circles, expressive activities (elaboration of stories, graphic or plastic expression), promoting group interaction and voluntary participation at all times.

For the good management of the information of what “happens outside” it is advisable to organize yourself to watch news programs, listen to radio programs or read newspaper articles in groups, with the accompaniment of adult staff and in dosed form (one time a day). This allows information to be processed and better management of the impacts generated by news that can be filtered from different sources.

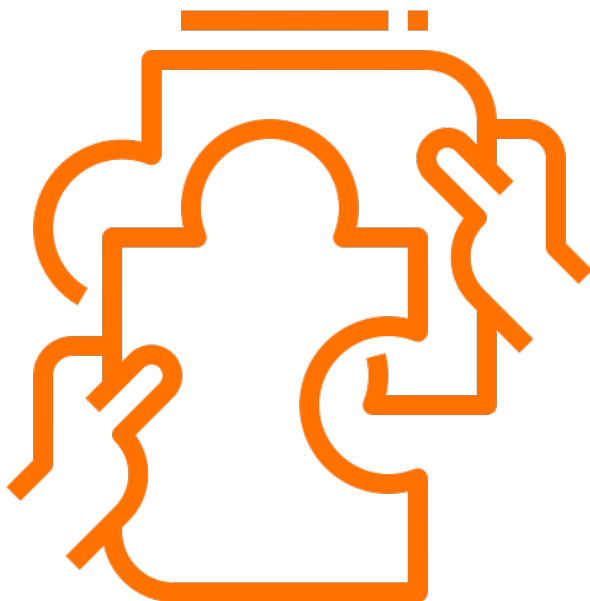


A new daily life: continuity, changes and participation

It is known how important it is for full-time institutions to have an organization of daily activities in which it is defined that it is done on each day of the week, assigning managers, physical spaces and everything necessary so that they can be carried out according to plan. Daily planning is a basic instrument to organize coexistence and at the same time for each intern to organize their time. The current situation means that many of the planned activities must be suspended.

In this sense, it is important to avoid the planning gap and define a new daily life with the necessary adjustments and changes. The new transitional routine must contemplate a schedule of recreational and sports activities appropriate to the suggested protection and safety standards.

In this task of unsubscribing activities and incorporating others, it is essential to give participation to children or adolescents, listen to their opinions, probe their interests so that the final definition resolved by those responsible takes their contributions into account. This allows them to be involved in the proper management of this coexistence and to join them in the search for alternatives to the critical situation.



Documents consulted

- Resolution No. 1/2020 Pandemic and Human Rights in the Americas IACHR on April 10, 2020.
- Declaration of the Committee on the Rights of the Child at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CRC_STA_9095_S.pdf
- Coronavirus - COVID-19 Recommendations Guide for the prevention of transmission in Closed Regime Centers of the Juvenile Penal System National Secretariat for Childhood, Adolescence and Family Undersecretariat of Rights for Children, Adolescents and Family National Directorate for Adolescents Violating the Criminal Law (Argentina).
- INAU Communiqué N 8 Guidelines for the promotion of socio-educational processes against the appearance of cases of COVID 19 in Uruguay March 16, 2020.
- Policy Brief on Impact of Covid19 on Children. Office of the United Nations Special Representative on Violence against Children. April 16, 2020.
- Guidance Note on Programming Approaches and Priorities to Prevent, Mitigate and Address Immediate Health and Socio-economic Impacts of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic on Children. UNICEF. April 12, 2020.

