



Children and Work Research Series: Session 11

Addressing the Psychosocial Aspects of Child Work:

The development of an instrument for the psychosocial assessment of child workers (IPAW)

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Abstract

The psychosocial aspects of child work is an area of which many experts would agree is important to further investigate and to develop interventions. However, despite some well-researched domains of the worst forms of child labour (such as children that are subjects of sexual exploitation or that are associated with armed forces and groups), the evidence to assess and intervene on psychosocial health related consequences of other forms of child work remains scarce and unsystematic.

To address this issue, a survey was developed by the presenters within the framework of an ILO project: the Instrument for the Psychosocial Assessment of Child Workers (IPAW). The survey was validated in a four-country study with groups of children working in brick factories in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Nepal ([Gunn, Pellenq and Lima, 2021](#)).

The aim of this webinar is to raise attention to this important dimension of child work and to explore ways in which we could further address it.

Speaker Bios

Susan Gunn, MPH, PhD, is a medical anthropologist. In addition to on-the-ground work largely in Africa and Asia, she has served in Geneva for 18 years as the Senior Technical Advisor on hazardous child labour with the International Labour Organization (ILO), a post which has involved research on the health impacts of early work, design and management of projects, and development of tools for countries to use in addressing their child labour problems. Her particular concern is the older child workers, who are above the legal age for work but who suffer high rates of injury and psychological damage. She is currently working to promote youth-adapted risk assessment (physical and psychological) and risk reduction into child labour and youth employment efforts.

Martijn R. Hofman is a psychologist with a strong affiliation with humanitarian work. He has worked for international organizations and NGOs with vulnerable groups of people in LMIC countries. For the ILO he has contributed to a research project on the psychosocial aspects of child work/labour, focusing in particular on the development and implementation of a psychosocial instrument to measure the impact of work/labour on children's psychosocial wellbeing and development. In the future he would like to combine his practice-based work as a psychologist with research and the implementation of (evidence-based) psychosocial interventions for vulnerable groups of children and young people.

Break-out Room Reports

Break-out Room 1

Members of the group expressed appreciation for the presentation and thanked the presenters for bringing out so clearly the importance of psychological factors in considerations of policies and programmes relating to children's work. The discussion focussed largely on two issues, methodology and the kinds of situation in which work had a positive impact on children.

Methodology

Susan Gunn, one of the presenters, stressed that the tool the results from using their tool on brickmaking work were not to be understood as universal. Rather the presentation was about the usefulness of the tool which could provide useful information for programmes in different situations.

It was noticed that some negative psychological traits could come from family circumstances, and affect adults in the community as much as children. It was agreed that it is very difficult to find controls to verify that psychological results came precisely from the impact of work. Nevertheless, some controls are possible (in their case, for example, working children could be compared with non-working children specifically among migrants, who tended to be particularly poor and disparate); their instrument can and show varied vulnerabilities among working children (in their case, particularly that girls suffered more than boys, and for most groups out-of-school children suffered more than those in school), and can therefore enable programmes to focus on those who most need support and indicate sometimes surprising areas for further investigation.

Situations conducive to positive psychological impacts

Members were asked for examples in which they have observed working children having psychological impacts.

Several in the group mentioned variations of peer support. This can come in the form clubs or organisation, particularly working children's organisations, or simply informal group support such as being with friends. It was suggested that one of the benefits of school for working children is perhaps to enable them to mix with peers outside the work situation.

Another relevant feature was a sense of empowerment, which is related to a sense of purpose or achievement. This can come, for example, by membership of working children's organisation. But it can take a variety of forms.

Related to empowerment is when children are made to feel their work is valued. In contrast, when children's work is denigrated in their communities, it is likely to increase its stressful impact. One member observed that one way to help children overcome crisis situations psychologically was to have opportunities for childhood activities (particularly play) that had previously part of their lives.

Break-out Room 2

1. Potential Long Term Effects and Including Children in Subsequent Interventions

The psycho social aspects of children's work are often overlooked and these should be considered not only when studying the effects of work on children but also when developing interventions that attempt to improve working children's well being. There are potential longterm negative consequences of work on the psycho social aspects of children's well being through effects such as the parentization of children where children take on adult levels of responsibilities in looking after themselves and / or family members. This type of effect would be separate from but in addition to any psychological abuse of children through their work. These types of negative effects could affect children later on as adults. While recognizing that there are negative psycho social aspects of children's work it remains important to discuss these issues with working children directly to develop appropriate interventions rather than attempting to remove children from work.

2. Lack of positive aspects of children's work and potential future connections with working children's movements / groups

In developing the survey design the researchers had expected to find some positive aspects of children's work (improved self esteem, learning of skills, other positive aspects) and included questions to show these types of effects but among the children surveyed there were no positive aspects identified.

Attendance in school allowed working children to interact with other children (non working children or children from other workplaces) and these interactions appeared to reduce some of the negative psycho social aspects of children's work.

Group members raised the question as to whether any of the children surveyed were part of working children's movements or groups. This possibility had not been considered during the survey design and it was agreed that membership in such outside-of-work groups might have significant effects on children's mental health and their attitudes towards their work. Should any future survey be carried out members of the Children and Work Network would be able to assist the researchers in connecting with working children's movements in South America (particularly Bolivia), West Africa, India and through the multi country Dialogue Works program. The researchers mentioned that some children seemed to benefit from the interview process itself in being able to discuss aspects of their work outside their workplaces but there was no opportunity for continuing these types of interactions and it was not expected that there would be any lasting impact.

3. Gender and other differences

The study showed that girls were almost always worse off than boys in terms of the psycho social aspects of their work but the negative psycho social aspects of work were differentiated not only by gender but by a variety of factors specific to each child's circumstances. Appropriate interventions / follow up would need to take into account gender as well as other differentiating factors. There won't be a "one size fits all" response that will be effective.

4. Importance of Properly Designed Survey's and Evidence

The researchers emphasized the importance of having properly designed surveys and reliable data (evidence) to not only assess the psycho social aspects of children's work but to develop, implement and monitor any subsequent interventions with working children. This type of evidence has not as yet been used in assessing the impact of interventions by the ILO (and many other agencies) with working children and this could be something to consider in future. Given the researchers connections with the ILO this would be something to explore further.

5. Potential Follow up Actions

Before pursuing the use of psycho social evidence in guiding ILO programming it would useful to demonstrate the effectiveness of using the survey methodology in other programs. This could include using the survey instrument that was developed as baseline and end line assessments in on-going programming. Members of the Children and Work Network could follow up with potential partner agencies to see if this might be of interest.

6. Psycho Social Reference Documentation

As part of the ILO study the researchers compiled a long list of references on the psycho social aspects of children's work. As participants in the discussion are interested in learning more about this topic it would be helpful to have a selection of 10 to 15 key documents as one of the curated lists on the Children and Work website. This could include the ILO study itself.