

## To ICDP International

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**Report 2024** by Elisabeth Gavilán , about the Project "Support Centre for Children of Abasto - ñande Rekoha"

The project is a daytime care service for children of low-income families in the Municipal Supply Market in Asunción, the capital of Paraguay. Its main objective is to offer to its child population a safe place with learning opportunities in various fields. In 2024, four educators have served nearly 100 children and adolescents between the ages of 3 and 18. We reached 45 families.



In addition, we had 4 foreign educators and volunteers who provided school support, accompanied their groups in free games in a small outdoor park (a place most appreciated by the children) and carried out other projects with them (crafts, cooking, cooperative games, ...).

Every year we notice that in public schools less is taught and the student is entrusted with more and more tasks and tasks that are often over-demanding, with the argument: "The family has to share the educational work." It is precisely in the public schools of this country that its population is rather the most disadvantaged sector, because parents who can, send their sons and daughters to private schools. The other parents send their children to public school because these families are of low academic and economic level.

One result of the stress of adults, but also of many adolescents who already work to help their families, is their limited time and little strength to make extra efforts outside their work. This has limited severely our ability to recruit to our ICDP courses parents of the children we attend to. However, the families seem to appreciate our centre as most have been sending their children to us for a couple of years. And already, some alumni send their children or nephews to us. For us, it is an indicator of the trust that people who know our work have in us. A mother's voice: "I don't know why... but my children don't want to miss a day in the "escuelita" (our centre)." And that's how it is – when it drizzles they no longer attend school, but they do go to the "little school" of the Vida Plena Foundation.

By the beginning of 2024, our educator and social worker Daily Domínguez resigned, because she had successfully sought a better-paid job, at SOS Children's Villages Paraguay, with better prospects for professional promotion. She works in one of the most vulnerable marginal neighborhoods of Asunción and her task is to link the project with the families in the area. She does this by making many home visits and she applies the ICDP principles. Daily says she learned a lot from her 16-year work with Vida Plena at the Support Centre.



Since the beginning of the Support Centre in 2008, our educational work has been based on ICDP. We observed positive changes in those children who previously engaged in aggressive behaviour or had been closed in on themselves. Constant and empathic attendance generates these changes, especially if the child enters from an early age. Some have attended throughout their years of schooling, some have returned in their high school years after a one- or two-year hiatus. They return because they value the atmosphere of respect and kindness, the result of the daily patient work of our educators. The children who attend come from different schools and grades and can "play more and find more friends" than in formal institutions. They say that "here we are listened to", "we are respected".

With only very few exceptions, the children and adolescents who attend our centre finish their primary school. This is what parents are most keen on, and why they send their sons and daughters to us. A few – an estimated third – continue studying in secondary schools and graduate with a high school diploma. Among the high school graduates, some are pursuing university degrees, others are looking for work and want to find their professional path. It is not easy as opportunities for young people in Paraguay are limited. Neighbouring Argentina is a destination for young



Paraguayan emigrants; Spain and the United States are other host countries. The young persons who find their dream profession and independence are very important pillar for their family. We know that at least a dozen of our alumni have reached that level.

My team of caregivers consists of four women younger than me (I am currently 75 years old); Myrian Justiniano (since 2008) and Carmela Vega (since April 2021); Viviana Ramírez, new educator since January 2024; and a young woman, Anita Ramírez, (since June 2023), a former student of the Support Centre. They are aware that they are important people in the lives of the children and adolescents who attend our centre. Each year we have volunteers who need an introduction to the practice of the 8 guidelines, in order to better understand what is expected of them and our objectives. From 2023 to the end of 2024, we had two German volunteers.

In 2024, the educators were able to summon some mothers and a father for an ICDP course for caregivers. A total of 17 people attended. In December 2024, they went on a trip to a spa, where the facilitators gave them their ICDP caregiver level certificates. One 12 years-old-girl told me that now her mother does not hit her, "she challenges me no more."

In 2024, I conducted a training workshop with my team to strengthen and deepen the practice of the eight guidelines and above all, of empathy and emotional attunement in their daily work with children and adolescents. I used to hold 4 workshops per year, but in June we sold our house in the city and a month later we moved to the countryside, 50 km from the capital. And, due to the distance, I only managed to do one workshop and to attend twice the meetings of the ICDP course for caregivers that Myrian and Carmela organized. I was pleased to see that they did a good job and they included activities capable of enhancing the skills and self-esteem of mothers.

Summoning adults for workshops was the greatest difficulty in 2024, as in previous years. Apart from that, we observe the same challenging situations as in previous years:

- The concept of the child as a being limited in his physical and cognitive capacities prevails and the child must be "educated first" – that is, "discipline, make him obedient, punish". For the child to be useful (productive) as soon as possible, this is a high value in low-income families. For middle-class families and above, the child is a small adult who does not need to take on other responsibilities except that he or she must function well in school, in sports or other areas, that the parents consider important.
- At all levels of society, it is considered normal to use some violent or humiliating method to educate children and even adolescents. The constant challenge is the low understanding of adults in general about the authentic affective needs of infants and toddlers and of any age. They are not aware that, as a result, if an adolescent does not have a stable bond with an adult interested in him and does not find support in his or her community, he or she will not know how to set goals or have enough discipline to achieve them. There are many challenges for adolescents:
  - Harassment through the Internet increased.
  - Drugs are a constant and very close danger in the surrounding neighborhood and almost anywhere in this country.
  - Other dangers lie in wait for adolescents: a) omnipresent messages in the media and in society, of resolving any conflict with some type of violence. b) omnipresent messages in the media and from their peers, of initiating sexual relations as soon as possible; they are presented as a game. c) Messages in the media and in society, that for any health complaint there is a "substance that combats the problem". From other "channels", drugs are offered as such a solution.

We have tried to awaken empathy for children and adolescents in the surrounding society, which proved to be a very slow and difficult task.

Another challenge has been our low profile as an organization with a different educational practice (in non-formal education). Few adults understand our objective of the affective shelter that we try to offer, to help children "take off" in their own life project. Nor are there many people in other organizations working in the field of Children's Rights who understand that our approach is fundamental.

Development of the team of educators:

In recent years I accompanied and observed more carefully the work of each member of the team, especially to evaluate how they get along with each other. The pedagogical team grew and knows how to communicate more consciously, and this process continued in 2024; benefiting the environment of care for children. This is an outstanding result of the practice of the wonderful peace instrument that we have with ICDP.

The dissemination of ICDP in Paraguay over the years depended on several factors. For example, it depended on whether experts focus their attention on psychosocial and sustainable prevention, something that until now has been little reflected in state and private organizations. A hopeful fact in this regard is that community mental health is being focused on by some experts in psychology, but their perspectives are being little disseminated.

Another hopeful fact is that Paraguay has had a Good Treatment Law since 2016 (whose regulation is on track but not finished), and Paraguay agreed to be a pioneer country for the eradication of all forms of violence against children, within the framework of the SDGs and the ChildFund Alliance. However, experts note the very low level of compliance with national laws and international commitments by the State. We ourselves as Fundación Vida Plena had several negative experiences with the judicial system and with the "Protection of Children and Adolescents against all forms of Violence".

The Vida Plena Foundation is a member of SDIA, a member of the Coordinator for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (CDIA), a Paraguayan pro-DDNN federation; a member of the Network of NGOs for Early Childhood Development (REDPI) in Paraguay.

Finally, I mention that I continued to support mothers on breastfeeding issues, as I am a certified leader – volunteer of the Unicef La Leche programme for more than 30 years. I continued with this task because over the years I understood that the first opportunity to build strong bonds based on love with children is through breastfeeding. If that opportunity has not been seized, then ICDP – empathize, listen, dialogue – is a great second chance!

At the end of 2024 we had to close the Support Centre because:

- One of the sponsoring organizations stopped sending its share of donations for the 2nd semester, a crisis that caused a lot of stress.
- Along with us, (the Gavilán family) the Vida Plena Foundation moved.
- The Paraguayan government, through legislation, is imposing more rules on non-profit organizations.
- We as a married couple already feel that at our age (81 and 75 years old) we have the right to reduce stress and contribute to the community in other ways.

With cordial greetings I say goodbye, with my best wishes for the entire ICDP team in 2025,

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