



Outsmarting COVID-19: Virtual connections transform child and youth care work in South Africa

Child and youth care workers embrace mobile phone technology to stay in touch with those in need

By Greer van Zyl and photography UNICEF South Africa/2020/Prinsloo

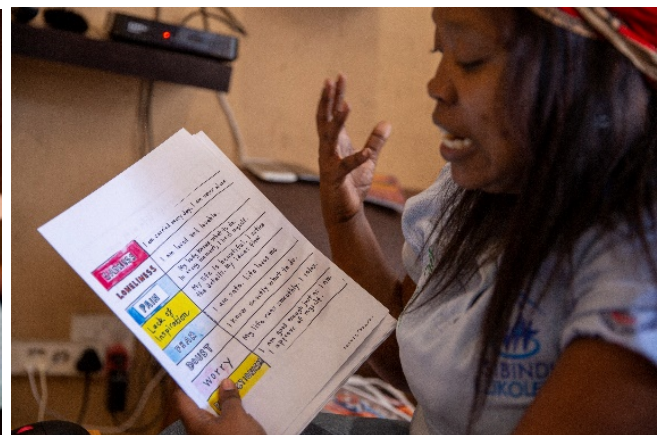
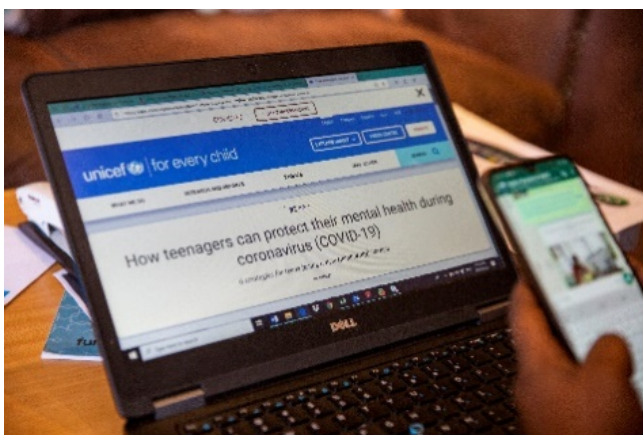
When the South African government enforced a national lockdown on 26 March to flatten the country's COVID-19 curve, the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) had already come up with a novel plan to continue supporting children as the curtains were drawn on social engagement.

The Isibindi Ezikoleni programme was adjusted for the lockdown into an online learning and support programme, providing psychosocial services and educational support to children and youth in what the NACCW calls their 'virtual lifespace'. Mentors facilitate virtual group activities through phone calls, texts and WhatsApp calls. UNICEF South Africa and others are supporting the programme by raising funds to purchase data for child and youth care workers and young people. This creative 'virtual lifespace' approach has transformed child and youth care work in South Africa in the era of COVID-19.

"Schools are a new setting for child and youth care workers. Just before the lockdown, we took phone numbers and grouped children into those who had access to smart phones with WhatsApp and those who didn't have smart phones. We support those without access through calls and encourage them to watch SABC's education programmes or listen to the educational programs on radio," explains Zeni Thumbadoo, Deputy Director of the NACCW.



With 27 mentors in five provinces, over 1500 both primary and high school learners are connecting remotely with their peers to undertake a range of activities every day. These include reading, revising examination papers and debating topics such as mental health during COVID-19 as well as gender-based violence. The learners spend about 6 hours in daily on the virtual programme and in self-study and reading through UNICEF's and other donors support in providing data and airtime.



“Many of the children feel the anxiety, pressure and frustration of staying at home all day. They really enjoy the programme because it keeps them busy; it gives them a routine,” says Jabulile Mazibuko (32), an NACCW senior mentor and national youth coordinator.

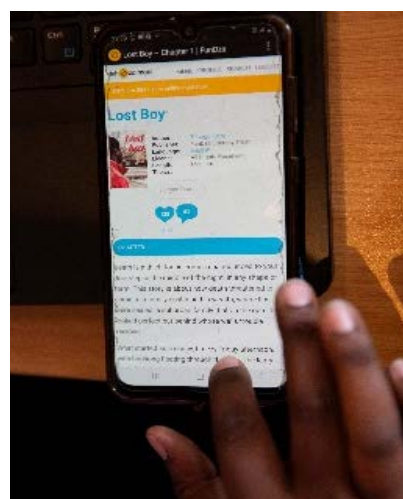
Jabulile explains that child and youth care work is fundamentally about building trusting relationships which helps to create a safe space for young people. As each session starts, she checks in on their emotional status, which includes watching out for unhappy emoji's or a WhatsApp status that alert her to follow up with a child privately.

The mentors received training through workshops and consultations on virtual connections to adapt to the new, innovative way of working remotely with young people. “A quote that really helped us to relate to this innovation is by Okakura Kakuzo: *‘The art of life is a constant readjustment to our surroundings,’*” says Jabulile.



“My biggest worry was that we were going to lose the relationships that we had built,” says Thembani Yende (39), a mentor and child and youth care worker from Diepkloof, Soweto. “But through this programme, I was able to tell the children: ‘Just because we can no longer see you or be with you physically, through this virtual connection, we are able to keep track on how you are doing at home. We can help you manage the anxiety and stress you might be going through during this lockdown.’”

“One of the learners was able to reach out to say she needed help with contacts. Immediately I understood when she asked that the contacts she wanted were the South African Police Services. I instantly contacted the mother, who related that she needed help because she was experiencing gender-based violence (GBV) at home. And right away, I had to consider the children that might be in the environment and how we could protect them from GBV happening in their home. So, by helping the mother, we help the children as well,” says Thembani.



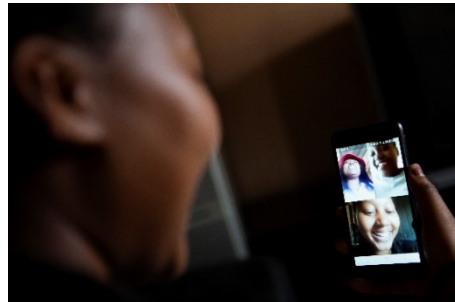
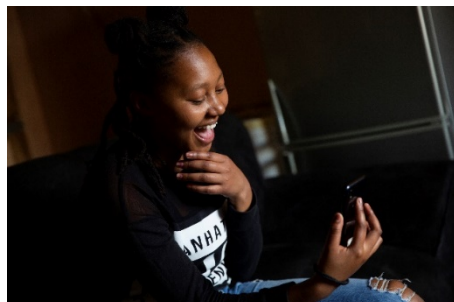
This virtual connection has become a new platform for the children, using cellphones to showcase their talent. “For some of them it helped to build confidence just talking on the phone, and someone on the other side listening and giving them a compliment. This has helped to build their self-confidence,” explains Thembani.

Many learners are hungry for information and knowledge and the FunDza reading activities give them an opportunity to read something beyond a textbook. FunDza is a programme targeted at adolescents and young adults to ignite a love for reading. The books deal with real issues and inspire them to read more. Through WhatsApp reading circles, the children select their own reading material, and a mentor guides them through a virtual discussion of the story.

“It wasn’t hard to adopt the virtual connection way of working and it became exciting for the children. Before, they would see us and wait a day before seeing us again. Now, with the virtual connection, they can talk to us at any time, they can relate any stories at any time of the day. And when they run out of air time, they are able to send a ‘please call back’ and I’m able to respond immediately, says Thembani.



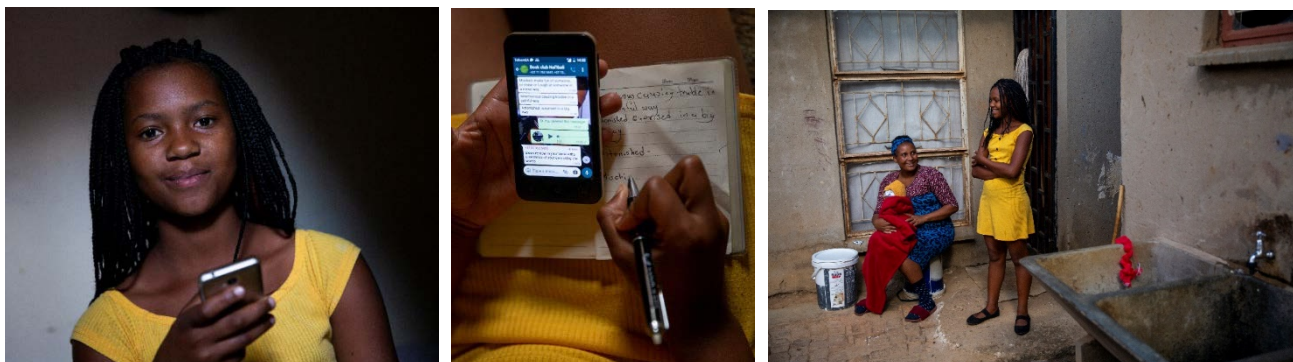
Matric learner Joyce Ndala (19) lives in a one-roomed house with her son, Lindokhule (2) and seven other family members. “The programme is helping me a lot because I get extra classes. I get more question papers that I can use to study and practice everything that I have to, and it is keeping me busy during this lockdown.”



Mbali Nkosi (15) is a confident, expressive teenager who loves reading: “I have apps about reading and we have a group chat with my English class where we have to read pages our teacher sends us. I think this programme is going to help other kids because as you read, you discover new words. It will help other children also to be able to speak and read fluently.”



Mbali prepares cue cards with whimsical hearts and pawprints, and practices in front of a mirror before taking part in a virtual debate on rehabilitation centres using Zoom and WhatsApp.



Trisha Zungu (12) is shy, but says the online chatting is giving her the energy to read. “It’s making me know new things about the stories that I didn’t know before. There are some words that I don’t understand, but Sis Happy (her mentor Thembani Yende) is helping me with that.”

The learners explain that they have enough time to do the virtual learning programme every day, with sufficient data to download what they need to keep doing the online classes.

UNICEF South Africa thanks Joyce Ndala, Mbali Nkosi, and Trisha Zungu for sharing their thoughts on the NACCW’s Isibindi Ezikoleni virtual connection programme. A special word of thanks to the NACCW team which facilitated this: Zeni Thumbadoo, Kuhle Ntintili, Jabulile Mazibuko and Thembani Yende.