Managing Children at the Bahay PAG-ASA: Experiences of the Personnel Handling Varied In-House Personalities

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ABSTRACT

The Philippine laws exempt children from criminal liability and subjects them to an intervention program where the facility personnel must guide and care for them as parents. However, the juvenile delinquents housed in these facilities may vary in character and attitudes, and most of them are in the stage of adolescence which can have a salient impact on the relationship between the house parents and the children. This study explores the experiences of house parents who work with Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) and Children at Risk (CAR) in Bahay Pag-asa, a youth rehabilitation center in the Philippines. Using an interview guide and recording devices, the researchers gathered data from 8 personnel from the only Pag-asa Youth Home in Ozamiz City. This study applied the qualitative research method using a phenomenological methodology to interpret data from research participants to obtain meaningful themes. The findings reveal five themes: Varied Emotions, Building Positive Relationships with the Children, CICL being more Challenging to Handle Compared to CAR, Children Escaping, and Communicating in a Calm and Understanding Manner. Despite the challenges, the participants are still committed to their work and desire to make a positive impact on the lives of the children they serve. The study concludes that building strong relationships with children based on trust, respect, communication, and empathy is critical to the children's development and progress as well as to their relationship between the house parents. Furthermore, special approaches may be necessary in handling these children given their trauma and mental health issues. In other words, insufficient resources make it challenging to provide adequate care and assistance. The researchers recommend that house parents at Bahay Pag-asa receive basic trainings on handling juvenile delinquents, strategies for managing challenging behaviors, and techniques for promoting positive behavior. They also suggest providing stress-relieving activities for the house parents, such as counseling sessions, mindfulness practices, and self-care opportunities, to prevent burnout and promote their ability to care for the children in a safe and nurturing environment.

Keywords: bahay pag-asa, children at risk, children in conflict with the law, communication, emotional challenges, empathy, house parents, juvenile delinquency, parenting, youth

INTRODUCTION

While adult offenders are punished with incarceration, youth offenders, on the other hand, are generally treated with leniency as they focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment (Miladinovic, 2019). In the Philippines, a youth offender shall be automatically catered to by the Republic Act No. 9344, otherwise known as "The Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act of 2006?. According to this law, if a child aged over fifteen years old commits a crime before the child's eighteenth birthday unless the child has acted with discernment, the child shall be exempted from criminal liability and shall be subjected to an intervention program. Rather than housing the children in jails apart from older inmates, the children will instead be sent to youth rehabilitation centers where they will be provided with education and counseling services, and in

some cases, they may also be provided with vocational trainings (Abot, 2018). Accordingly, youth facilities, otherwise known as "Bahay Pag-Asa" have been built to house, protect, and help both children in conflict with the law and children at risk by setting up funding and managing it through the Local Government Unit (Luna, 2021).

According to the United Nations (1989), parenting, nurturing, and educating children is a humanitarian obligation that must be carried out starting from the family, society, and even the state. Because of immaturity, both in physical, mental, and intellectual aspects, children must be protected, cared for, and guided by adults (Suryaningsi et al., 2022). Thus, the facility personnel also must act as parents who will faithfully guide these children in their daily lives in the facility (Cortel, 2020). In addition to this, they are also responsible for the overall well-being of the children and are bound to diligently perform their duties as parents to maintain a positive and happy environment for the children (Drobac & Najman, 2021).

However, various factors may affect the character and attitudes of juvenile delinquents. In the study of Alcantara (2019), poverty, lack of parental supervision, peer pressure, and exposure to violence are some of the key factors that contribute to juvenile delinquency which may lead to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. These issues can hurt the child's quality of life and character. Furthermore, in the study of Liu et al. (2020), the stage of adolescence can also have a direct impact on juvenile delinquency because it is in this very stage that the children begin to explore their emerging identities in ways that foster autonomy and connectedness. Since most of the children housed in the BahayPag-asa are juveniles undergoing adolescence, in some ways, the house parents and their relationship with the children inside the facility may also be affected (Branje, 2018).

This study aims to determine the experiences of the personnel/house parents in handling and managing varied in-house personalities inside the BahayPag-asa legally known as the Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) and Children at Risk (CAR). The findings of this study will help inform the public about the experiences and the predicaments of the house parents so that they will be given more attention and will be provided with more support in the future. The researchers observed that most past literature has only focused on the status of children inside the facilities such as the social and welfare services rendered to them or the condition of the facility itself. However, little is known from the viewpoint of the Bahay Pag-asa personnel/house parents. Moreover, there is little existing literature that presents the experiences of personnel/house parents in handling varied in-house personalities of the BahayPag-asa.

METHODS

The study was conducted using a qualitative research method and a phenomenological methodology. The study aimed to explore the experiences encountered by the Bahay Pag-asa personnel. Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology was used in the process of interpreting data from research participants to obtain meaningful themes. The study was conducted in the only Bahay Pag-asa facility in the city of Ozamiz, located in Barangay Catadman, Ozamiz City, Misamis Occidental.

Before the actual data collection, the researchers obtained permission from the university's Dean of the College of Criminology to pursue the study and conduct the interview via a formal letter. Once the dean's approval was obtained, through the office of the City Welfare & Development Office (CSWDO), the researchers then acquired permission from the mayor of Ozamiz City to conduct the study within the city. Upon obtaining the necessary permissions, the researchers made an appointment with the identified participants and proposed an interview schedule.

Furthermore, the researchers informed the participants that the conversation would be recorded and assured them that all of their responses would be kept strictly confidential.

The participants of the study were 8 house parents from the only Bahay Pag-asa in Ozamiz City. They were identified through the Ozamiz City Social Welfare & Development Office (CSWDO), based on the following criteria: (1) personnel of Ozamiz City Pag-asa Youth Home; (2) has direct contact with handling children inside the facility; (3) have at least 1 year of experience on their job; and (4) willing to participate in the study. An interview guide was developed by the researchers to gather the required data from the participants. The interview guide included questions about their age, gender, services they render to the children, and length of service. The participants were also asked core questions that solicited their experiences in handling children inside the facility. Recording devices were used to record their responses.

Ethical standards were always observed by the researchers. The researchers observed Data Privacy in the entire process of the study and adhered to the guidelines set by the Republic Act No. 10173, known as the "Data Privacy Act of 2012." The participants' names and other non-essential information were always kept private and confidential throughout the entire process. The researchers also strictly observed the voluntary participation of all the participants involved in the study. The interview was not carried out without their consent, which was obtained by having them sign a consent form prepared by the researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Profile of the Participants

A total of 8 Bahay Pag-asahouse parents participated in the study through a face-to-face interview. The participants' ages range from 25-56 years old. All of them have worked in the youth home for at least 2 years. All of the participants have direct contact in handling Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) and Children at Risk (CAR).

Table 1. Profile of the Participants

Code Name	Age	Length of Service
P1	26	8 years
P2	25	4 years
P3	56	6 years
P4	30	2 years
P5	56	7 years
P6	31	4 years
P7	43	19 years
P8	26	8 years

Experiences of the House Parents in Handling CICL and CAR

This part presents the different themes that were derived from the different responses of the participants of the study during the conduct of the interview. The study explored the houseparents' experiences in overseeing the children in the Bahay Pag-asa. Themes were derived from the responses of the participants of the study after conducting an interview. The study identified five (5) appropriate themes which are: (1) Varied Emotions, (2) Building Positive Relationships with the Children, (3) CICL Being More Challenging to Handle Compared to CAR, (4) Children Escaping, and (5) Communicating in a Calm and Understanding Manner.

Varied Emotions

One of the emotional challenges is the feeling of being overwhelmed by the responsibilities that come with taking care of the children (Miranda et al., 2019). Most of the participants expressed mixed emotions about handling children which presents various challenges that can potentially lead to a state of stress. However, despite the potential challenges and stress that come with parenting, many house parents still report a deep sense of love and connection to the children and believe that the rewards are worth the effort. The majority of the participants also mentioned that handling these children is similar to handling their own.

These were revealed in the answers of the participants:

"Handling them is like handling your own children, I feel happy but sometimes it's also irritating because some of them are so stubborn." (P-3, 44-45)

"I enjoy being with these children. Since I am still young, I actually see and treat them like my own siblings. However, when their stubbornness gets in the way."(P4, 60-61)

"Sometimes I feel joy and there are also times I feel furious due to children's stubbornness." (P-5, 86-87)

"Sometimes I enjoy being with them. Sometimes I also get angry and stressed."(P-7, 128-129)

The results implied that working with these children can be both rewarding and challenging. House parents perform their work with a sense of personal investment, seeing the children as individuals with whom they have a personal connection. While it is not uncommon for staff members working in this type of facility to develop strong bonds with the children in their care, and to see them as a kind of surrogate family, this can still be a positive thing, as it allows house parents to build trust and rapport with the children, and to provide them with the emotional support and guidance they need to succeed. However, it can also be challenging, as house parents may feel a sense of personal responsibility for the children's well-being, and may find it difficult to maintain a professional distance when dealing with difficult behavior.

Building Positive Relationships with the Children

Positive relationships are based on trust, respect, communication, and empathy (Drollinger, 2018). Spending quality time with children is an important part of developing strong relationships with them. Building strong relationships with the children is not only a component of the houseparents' job, but it also helps the children feel at home and understood, which is critical for their development and growth. The children respond positively to their houseparents' positive relationships, and they feel safe enough to confide in them and seek their assistance when needed. Parents who listen to their children's thoughts and feelings without judgment or criticism might foster an environment in which the youngster feels appreciated and understood. When adults listen to their children's thoughts and feelings without judgment or criticism, they send a strong message to the children that their perspectives and experiences are cherished and respected.

These were revealed in the answers of the participants:

"I can totally say that they respect and look up to me because I can see that they feel at ease around me and even confide their problems to me." (P-2, 29-30)

"They actually open up to me, they usually respect and listen to the things that I say to them most of the time."(P-3, 47-48)

"These children will respect us as long as we do not treat them negatively and we do not show bad behavior towards all of them." (P-4, 63-64)

"I do not keep any hatred against the children because I know what kind of lives they have outside this facility. That's why we always establish a good relationship with these children in order for them to feel what it's like to have a pleasant home." (P-6, 109-110)

"We are like their parents because sometimes they go to us and tell us some things that they usually feel."(P-8, 158-160)

The results implied that the home parents are seen as positive role models and figures of authority by the children in the facility. The participants are respected by the children, and the children feel comfortable opening up to them and confiding in their problems. This suggests that the staff members are successful in building positive relationships with the children and creating a safe and supportive environment for them. The parents also seem to recognize the importance of treating the children with respect and kindness, and they strive to establish a positive and nurturing relationship with them. This highlights the importance of positive role models and supportive relationships in the lives of at-risk children.

CICL Being More Challenging to Handle Compared to CAR

Problematic attitudes can be especially difficult to notice and alter since they are typically deeply ingrained and habitual, making them difficult to recognize and modify (Armstrong, 2019). Deviance is frequently displayed by juvenile delinquents to defend themselves from additional harm or to assert their independence and control over their lives. This attitude can be influenced by a person's upbringing, cultural background, or life experiences, as well as societal norms, media messages, and other external influences. The majority of the participants expressed that handling Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) is very challenging in comparison with handling Children at Risk (CAR), because of their character and attitudes.

These were revealed in the answers of the participants:

"Children at Risk are easier to deal with because they are willing to listen, but usually, Children in Conflict with the Law are rebellious and don't listen to what I say." (P-2, 32-33)

"Their personalities are different from any normal child. They are rebellious and don't want to be instructed on what to do." (P-3, 49-50)

"CICL are the worst because they usually have more unruly experiences outside and as a result, they would not listen nor respect people around them since they think that they're superior." (P-6, 114-115)

"Sometimes no matter how hard you try to talk to them into obeying instructions, they would only stare back at you. It's like they have their own law to themselves."(P-7, 139-141)

The results implied that it may be important to address the underlying causes of the children's challenging behavior to promote positive outcomes for them. Most of the CICL may have been subjected to family trauma or other challenging situations which led to their delinquent behavior, and looking after them may necessitate specialized training and abilities, such as trauma-informed care and behavior management tactic. This could involve providing access to mental health services or other types of support that can help the children develop more adaptive coping strategies.

Children Escaping

The reasons for the children's escape may vary, including missing their families or the outside world, wanting to be with their circle of friends, or simply not wanting to be controlled or confined (Mbazzi, 2022; Thakur & Yadav, 2019). Additionally, children escaping from the facility is a major problem because it

poses risks to the safety and well-being not just to the children themselves, but as well as to others (Windle, 2020). When children escape, the house parents are usually the ones to be held liable for their safety and well-being. This can be particularly concerning if the children engage in illegal activities while they are outside, such as committing theft or physically harming others. The majority of the parents have experienced and were dismayed by this situation in the facility.

These were revealed in the answers of the participants:

"Some of the children try to flee because they don't want to be in this environment and they don't want to be controlled, but some children also claim that they miss the outside world and their families." (P-2, 34-36)

"Escaping is the most common issue that we encounter here in the facility. Their common reason for escaping is they miss going outside and they want to be their circle of friends, or they miss their families."(P-3, 52-54)

"We had this child who was so stubborn to the fact that when he wants something he must have it immediately. He commands his fellow members to buy him some cigarettes and those who refuse to obey him will end up getting beat-up. That is also the main reason why some of these children at risk want to escape, to avoid being physically harmed." (P-4, 71-75)

"Some of these committed running away from the facility by reason of not being used to their environment." (P-5, 95-96)

"The worst challenge is when they escape, commit theft, and then go back inside the facility. That's the worst because we would be the ones to be blamed."(P-6, 118-119)

"Another problem is children escaping from the facility, especially those who are newly confined."(P-7, 145-146)

The children in the facility are struggling with various issues, such as missing their families and the outside world, being controlled, and encountering violence from other members. The results implied that the house parents may need to focus on providing a safe and nurturing environment for the children. This may involve providing opportunities for the children to engage in activities that they enjoy and allowing them some degree of autonomy and control over their daily routines. Additionally, the results also implied that the facility may need to address issues of violence and bullying among the children and ensure that appropriate measures are in place to prevent and respond to these incidents.

Communicating in a Calm and Understanding Manner

A patient and empathetic approach, which involves actively listening to and engaging with children, is often the most effective way to handle problematic behavior in a caregiving context (McKinnon, 2018). Whether it is through repeatedly addressing the problem, counseling, listening, or giving advice, by fostering a dialogue with the children, it is possible to help them develop positive habits and behaviors over time. The use of calm and gentle language to make the children understand the consequences of their actions helps them positively change their attitude. Taking a patient and sympathetic approach over time necessitates consistency and perseverance. The majority of the participants have experienced this kind of situation.

These were revealed in the answers of the participants:

"We would ask them what their difficulties are and offer counsel that would ideally help them resolve the

burdens that they carry."(P-2, 39-40)

"There are some children who have a very bad attitude and the only way to handle them is by talking to them calmly and slowly to understand why they have to act or do things that are not good." (P-3, 54-56)

"For us house parents since we are obliged to handle these children through calmly talking to them about the issue." (P-4, 75-76)

"We always talk to them. We tell them that if they want to go out quickly, they should improve their attitude."(P-5, 99-101)

"Sometimes we would scare them by telling them about the consequences they'd face if they'd continue their bad behaviors, such as handing them over to the police and such."(P-6, 122-124)

The results implied that communication and counseling play an important role in managing the behavior of children in the facility. It is evident that the house parents, as part of their job, focus on understanding the challenges that the children are facing and offering them guidance and support to address these issues. To promote positive behavior and personal growth of the children, house parents have worked collaboratively with the children to create a supportive and nurturing environment in which the children may feel safe and comfortable in sharing their thoughts and feelings.

To sum up, being a houseparent for Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) and Children at Risk (CAR) may be both gratifying and difficult. House parents have developed strong bonds with the children and are seen as positive role models, but may struggle to maintain a professional distance. Furthermore, in being a houseparent, it is important to address the underlying causes of the children's behavior and provide a safe and nurturing environment, while also addressing issues of violence and bullying. Communication and counseling are crucial in managing behavior and promoting personal growth. The importance of positive role models and supportive relationships for at-risk children must also be considered. Lastly, specialized training and abilities may also be necessary for dealing with delinquent children, and trauma-informed care and behavior management tactics may be needed.

CONCLUSIONS

The researchers conclude that working with children in the BahayPag-asa can be both rewarding and challenging for house parents. While house parents can develop strong bonds with the children in their care, this can also be challenging as it may be difficult to maintain a professional distance when dealing with difficult behavior. It is also important to establish positive relationships with the children to provide emotional support and guidance. Furthermore, house parents are seen as positive role models and figures of authority by the children, which highlights the importance of positive role models and supportive relationships in the lives of children. It is also important to address the underlying causes of the children's challenging behavior, which may necessitate specialized training and abilities such as trauma-informed care and behavior management tactics. Providing access to mental health services or other types of support can help the children develop more adaptive coping strategies. Furthermore, it is important to provide a safe and nurturing environment for the children by allowing them some degree of autonomy and control over their daily routines and addressing issues of violence and bullying among the children because effective communication and counseling play an important role in managing the behavior of children in the facility, and house parents work collaboratively with the children to create a supportive and nurturing environment in which the children feel safe and comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the house parents taking care of the children inside the BahayPag-asa must be given basic trainings on handling juvenile delinquents, especially those children with severe behavior and traumatic backgrounds. The responsibility for the implementation of this recommendation should be assigned to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) within the Local Authority. The DSWD should collaborate with relevant stakeholders, such as educational institutions and professional organizations, to develop comprehensive training programs for the house parents. These training programs should include strategies for managing challenging behaviors, techniques for promoting positive behavior, and knowledge about the specific needs and challenges faced by juvenile delinquents. Moreover, the Local Authority should enact legislation to establish minimum educational qualifications, competences, skills, and other attributes required for individuals to become house parents. This will ensure the legitimacy and enforcement of the qualifications needed for this important role. Furthermore, the Local Authority should establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the performance of house parents to ensure adherence to the recommended training and qualifications. Regular assessments should be conducted to assess their effectiveness in providing a safe and nurturing environment for the children, as well as their ability to address the underlying issues and work towards rehabilitation.

To support the well-being of house parents and prevent burnout, the Local Authority should also provide them with stress-relieving activities such as regular counseling sessions, mindfulness practices, and opportunities for self-care such as exercise or personal hobbies. The responsibility for organizing and facilitating these activities should be assigned to the DSWD or another designated department within the Local Authority. Assigning responsibility for the implementation of these recommendations to specific departments and enacting legislation on educational qualifications and competences will ensure a more structured and accountable approach to the care and rehabilitation of children in Bahay Pag-asa. It will also help in creating a sustainable and effective system that prioritizes the well-being of both the children and the house parents.

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