

# Growing Up Safe

SINT MAARTEN

After the hurricane:  
attention for children

Providing a  
sanctuary  
for children

Corporal punishment  
illegal on St Maarten



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version of this magazine on  
[growingupsafe-sxm.com](http://growingupsafe-sxm.com)

Inaugural issue - May 2020

# Let's be vigilant towards all risks factors threatening the safety of children

Maria was molested by her stepfather at the age of 13. She hid the truth from her mother until she was 18. When her mother reported the abuse to the police, she was told that her daughter would have to report it herself as she was now 18. Both Maria and her mother now live with guilt and shame.

Children who are emotionally or physically abused; who are neglected or are living with a parent with mental health or addiction issues, need help. On Sint Maarten, many professionals, family members and others try on a daily basis to prevent children from growing up under those circumstances. When these children do face those challenges, they try to find a solution to ensure that they have a safer alternative.

## Challenges

While working so diligently on this goal, professionals face considerable challenges. Their organizations often struggle with work overload, under staffing and the lack of child protection protocols and procedures. Additionally, the after effects of Hurricane Irma caused a number of problems with one such being the increased risk of child abuse. There are signals that the prevalence of domestic violence and child abuse cases has increased since the hurricanes, putting the child protection system under even more pressure.

It is also important to be aware of the interrelation of domestic violence and child abuse, as is being illustrated in the heart wrenching personal story of Abigail in this magazine. We call upon professionals working with parents to also take responsibility for child safety and dare to talk with parents about the risks of violence.

## Strong foundation

Luckily, there are some important strengths too. Sint Maarten is one of the countries that has a law that prohibits corporal punishment.

If we manage to improve the implementation of this law by increasing awareness campaigns, this could lead to a reduction in violence against children and lay a foundation for introducing new child protection policies like reporting codes.

This brings me to the other strength of Sint Maarten: people who take the initiative to improve the situation of both parents and children. One of these examples is beautifully illustrated in the feature story of Jessica Richardson's Rock Church, where children are encouraged to speak about their troubles and emotions. Another strength on Sint Maarten is the fact that schools are already trained in a trauma sensitive approach. This means that there is an awareness of the resilience of children and how to improve this.

## Distribute information

Together with UNICEF NL, the government of Sint Maarten wants to improve the protection of children, even within the limits of the many challenges we face. By producing this magazine with Augeo Foundation and UNICEF NL, the newly established Child Protection Working Group wants to provide a medium to distribute information regarding the changes, strengths and challenges identified by professionals working in the child protection system on Sint Maarten.

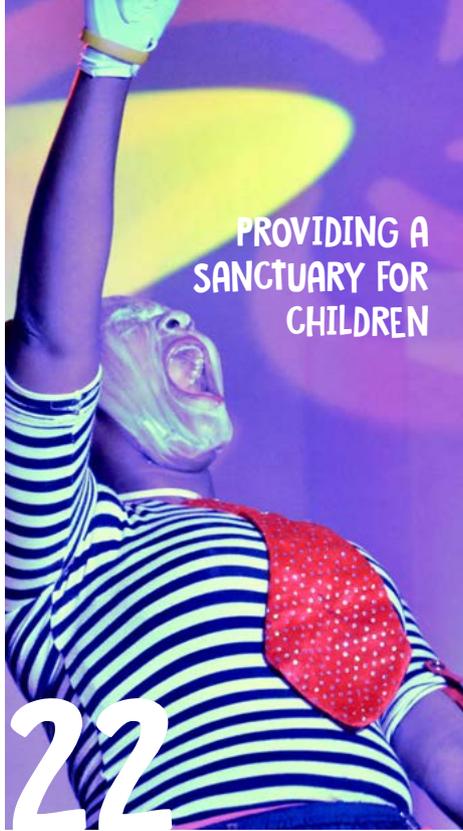
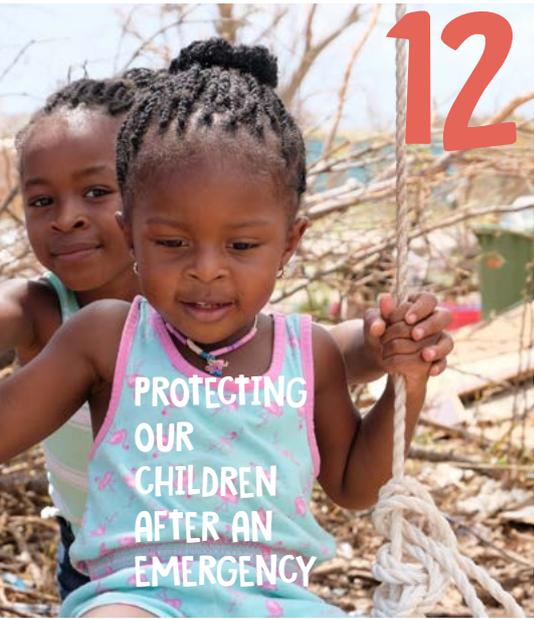
We hope to inspire you as professionals in your work, so that Maria and all the other children living in difficult circumstances at home have a better chance of living a good life.

*Shermina Powell-Richardson*

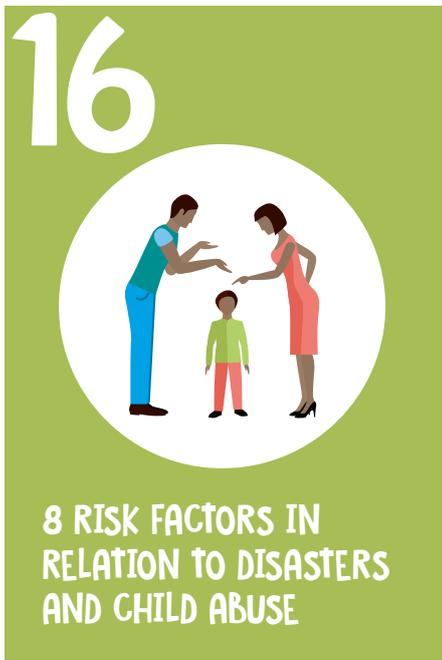
Secretary General a.i.,  
Ministry of Education,  
Culture, Youth and Sport



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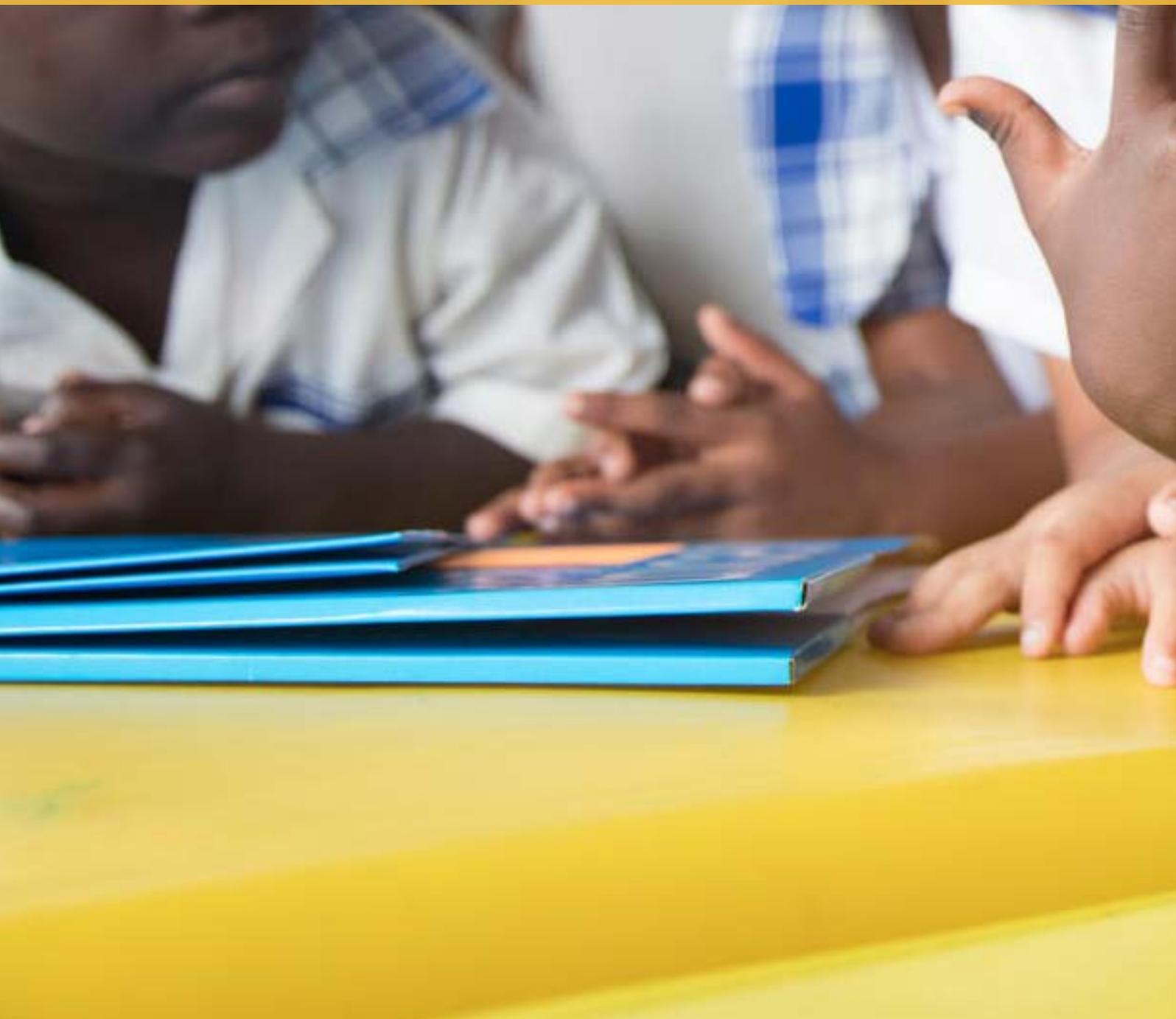


There are

# 10,849

## children

registered in Sint Maarten





...from a total population of  
40,614 inhabitants  
(more than 25 %).

.....



Reports of

# child abuse and neglect

in 2018:

# 158



This was the number of reports according to the Court of Guardianship. The prevalence of child abuse and domestic violence is severely underestimated in police statistics because cases are highly underreported. Over 85 percent of focus group interviewees in the *Situation Analysis* mentioned violence as a major issue facing children, adolescents or women in their community or household. And although 50 percent believe child sexual abuse to be a ‘common’ occurrence in their communities and families, it remains a taboo topic.

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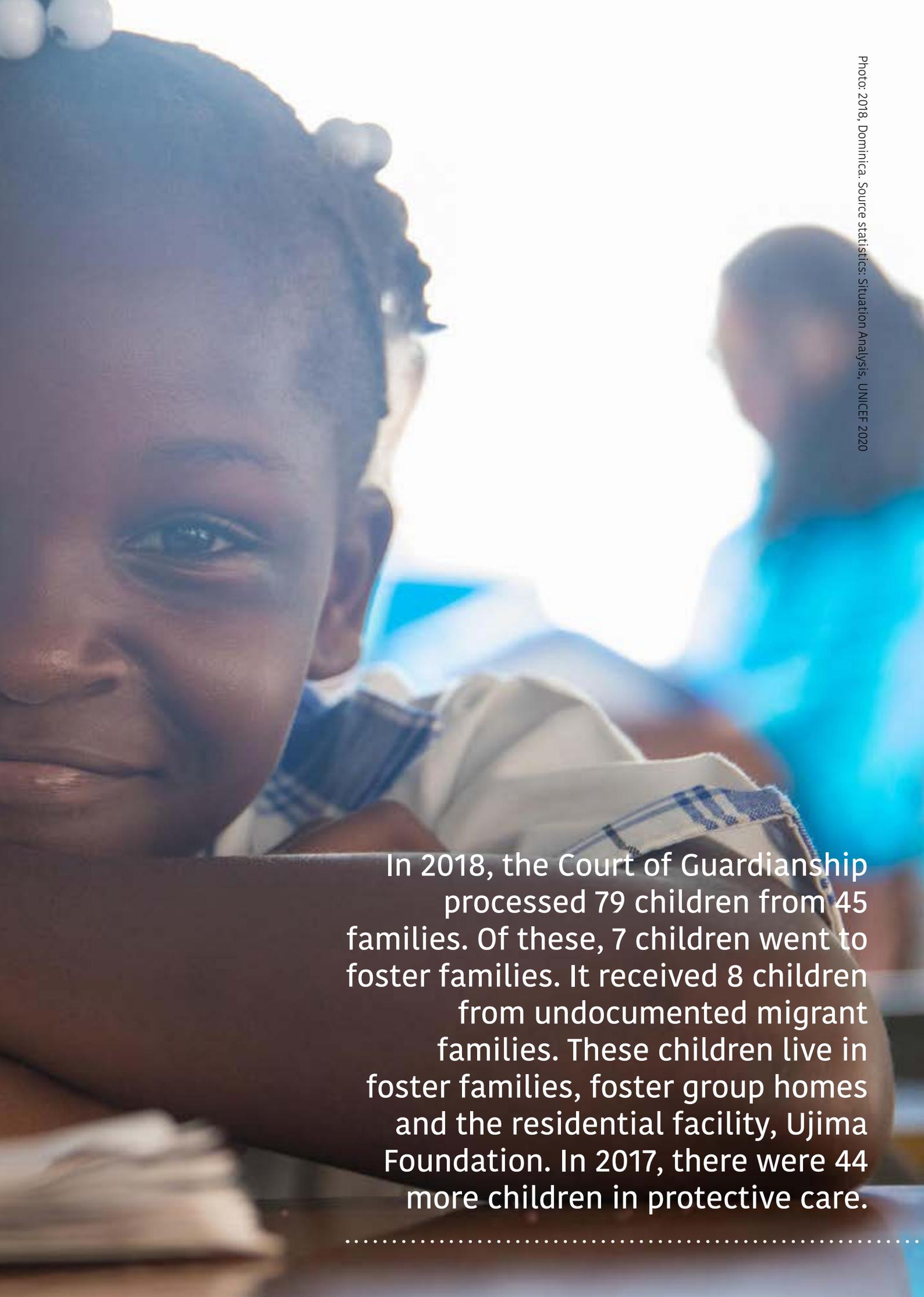


Total number of children in

protective care:

123





In 2018, the Court of Guardianship processed 79 children from 45 families. Of these, 7 children went to foster families. It received 8 children from undocumented migrant families. These children live in foster families, foster group homes and the residential facility, Ujima Foundation. In 2017, there were 44 more children in protective care.

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Number of

immigrant  
children:

**unknown**





Immigrant children experience vulnerabilities specific to their status. Undocumented migrants may not report abuse cases for fear of deportation, even though the children and women have a right to the same assistance as registered residents. The top ten emigration countries are: the Dominican Republic, the Netherlands, France, Jamaica, USA, Suriname, China, Guyana, Curaçao and Venezuela.

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# Protecting our children after an emergency

In the aftermath of a natural disaster or during a state emergency, children are at risk of facing a number of negative consequences. Not only are parents due to all stressors less capable of providing the attention needed by their children, but research also shows that the number of violent incidents increases. Is this also true for Sint Maarten after Hurricane Irma?



“We had an increase of 150 percent in calls to report domestic abuse cases after Irma,” confirms Cassandra Richardson, former Director of Safe Haven, a shelter for battered women on Sint Maarten. “It is unclear if the increase in reports is due to the fact that violence itself escalated or due to the fact that families find themselves in more severe situations”, she adds. “After the hurricane people are facing homelessness, unemployment and other stress-factors that put basic living needs at risk - which raises the urgency to seek help.”

This statement is not uncommon according to research done after natural disasters. For instance, the World Health Organization says in a report: “Disasters disrupt physical and social environments. The repercussions of this have an immediate and a long-term impact, including health problems that can lead to violence: increased stress and feelings of powerlessness due to bereavement, loss of property and loss of livelihood; mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder; the scarcity of basic provisions; destruction of social networks; breakdown of law enforcement; cessation of violence prevention and other social support programs and disruptions to the economy.”

### Recovery phase

The Netherlands Red Cross estimated that 90 percent of structures on Sint Maarten suffered damage. Two years after the hurricane, only 10 percent of it has been refurbished. Although there have been a number of restoration efforts, the economy, which is dependent on the tourism industry, has a long way to go toward full recovery.

The reconstruction has almost stopped. In a report en een bijbehorende film from October 2019, the Ombudsman of Sint Maarten mentioned a ‘social crisis’.

Many on Sint Maarten, due to a low minimum wage and high living costs, are unable to save ‘for a rainy day’ as they are living ‘day to day’. Although statistics are hard to find on the island, the latest Sint Maarten census survey results (2011) show that 75 percent of all households had less than ANG. 4000,00 (gross) income per month. Using the Nibud norm for St. Maarten (Transparency International, St. Maarten National Integrity Assessment (2015), Nibud survey 2014 Bonaire), this would mean that 75 percent of the households live under the poverty line, for which the minimum wage is used as a marker.

For those living under the poverty line, it has been a struggle to finance the repairs needed for their own homes, and due to the high number of damaged homes. For those who rent, affordable housing has been harder than ever to find.

### Social housing

The rise in difficulties that families face after Hurricane Irma has also been noticed by the Women’s Desk, which provides free counseling and other services to women in need. “Affordable housing has always been an issue on Sint Maarten, and now even more so,” states Elencia M. Baptiste-Boasman, coordinator of the Women’s Desk.

The St. Maarten Housing Development Foundation (SMHDF) is the only social housing entity on the island. Pre-Hurricane Irma, the organization had a waiting list of 1400 family units, post Irma this has increased to 2400 (± 6000 persons)

Elencia notes that this is even more problematic for the high percentage of single mothers on the island who work for minimum wage or less: “Minimum wage is around \$840 a month for a 40-hour workweek. You would be lucky to find a one-bedroom apartment for \$500 in a lower-income area. It is nearly impossible to properly care for yourself and children with whatever finances are left.”

### Survival mode

Clara Curriel, who is a teacher and director of an after-school program, sees these struggles that parents are facing firsthand: “Some of our parents became unemployed after Irma, and as a result they just can’t pay the fees anymore.”

According to the St. Maarten Department of Statistics, unemployment rose from 6.2 percent in 2017 before hurricane Irma to 9.9 percent in 2018. Clara, along with other educational facilitators, has done her best to continue providing care for her students. “We do not want to turn families away, especially when they need us most,” says Clara, whose staff often volunteers their time due to lack of funds for the payment of stipends or salaries.

Children, who are dependent on their caregivers and network, are often the first to suffer the consequences of a disaster, including the increase in violent or neglectful behavior. This has been corroborated by various research, for example: after Hurricane Floyd hit North Carolina, USA, according to research the rate of severe abuse cases such as traumatic brain injury in children under two, showed a fivefold increase in counties severely affected by the hurricane.

## Protective factors

Trauma due to Hurricane Irma and the stress of homelessness and unemployment can cause psychological complications, which lead to violence. Psychologist Alexandra van Luijken has treated a number of patients with mental health issues related to Hurricane Irma. “Extreme or extended periods of stress cause a person to go into survival mode. In this state of mind, you lose your ability to absorb and handle difficult situations. This causes people to feel powerless, which results in people hurting each other.”

The first thing to do in the aftermath of a natural disaster, is stop the violence against children by signaling child abuse and neglect. A keen eye for risk factors is needed here. At the same time, protective factors should be strengthened. We know from research that children are resilient. One of the evidence-based protective factors is offering psychosocial support.

That is why after Hurricane Irma, UNICEF Sint Maarten trained 150 professionals working with children on the Return to Happiness method for psychosocial support. Teachers were provided with the knowledge and skills to better support children in the difficult circumstances after Hurricane Irma. The programme can also be used after a possible disaster in the future, or difficult events such as the illness or loss of a child or parent.

**“Many of the issues we are dealing with now, are issues we have had for many years – Hurricane Irma intensified them.”**

“Many of the issues we are dealing with now are issues we have had for many years – Hurricane Irma just intensified them,” this view was expressed by various professionals interviewed. In their opinion, it is high time to tackle the roots of societal issues to prevent the dangerous situations many households and their children found themselves in after Hurricane Irma. “This way households will have a stronger foundation to soften the blows of the next natural disaster.”

## WHAT PROFESSIONALS SAY

### Clara Curiel, Founder Majestic Learning Center



“After-school programs, day care centres and other programs that provide child-care services, are in much need of structural financial support. We should be able to provide parents, especially those who are unemployed or those making minimum wage, with services to ensure that their children are safe and fed during working hours. We can absorb some of the costs, but it is unsustainable to expect schools to rely on volunteers and donations.”

### Alexandra van Luijken, Developmental Psychologist

“There is no budget for mental health allocated within our 2019 country budget. In my opinion, that already indicates that we do not take mental health seriously. I assume it’s for financial reasons, but ultimately the long-term damage to society will be much higher in cost. Especially after Hurricane Irma the demand for psychological care quadrupled. We also have growing numbers of persons who do not have access to health insurance. Lack of treatment will ultimately lead to possible permanent or long-term fall out of otherwise fully functional members of society, while timely treatment can prevent this. This is a health crisis, and you can see it has deeply manifested itself in various ways within our community – increase of aggression, abuse and violence being a few signs.”





**Elencia M. Baptiste-Boasman, Coordinator Women’s Desk**



“We have the laws and policies in place that should be protecting children against violence and other forms of abuse. However, in practice we need to take an in-depth look at our community and how to best approach the implementation of these laws. We often try to implement without considering the various layers and cultures of our society and simply expect people to understand and adhere to them. Once we have a better understanding of the communities we are trying to reach, we will need a long-term and sustainable educational plan. This should aim to bring about greater awareness regarding abuse, consequences thereof and empowerment for victims in terms of their rights, responsibilities and available options for help.”

**Kimberly Brown, Interim Head Court of Guardianship**

“Parents, and professionals who work with children such as teachers, should talk to children before a disaster hits to mentally prepare them and teach them safety procedures. It is important to make a ‘go-bag’ with emergency items your children might need during and after a disaster such as a hurricane, such as copies of documents, food, drink and comfort items such as a favorite toy. If you decide to evacuate your children, be very cautious about where and to whom you send your children. A parent or guardian should be with them at all times, or the proper paperwork should be done to transfer guardianship temporarily. Professionals should follow up with parents after a disaster about the status of their children and offer support when needed.”



# 8 risk factors in relation to disasters and child abuse

Natural disasters entail a number of additional risks for children, especially in the aftermath of the disaster. The eight most important risk factors.



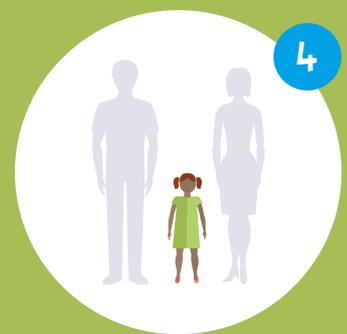
Increased prevalence of **domestic violence**.



Children may develop **PTSD** (Post-traumatic stress disorder) as a consequence of the disaster, which, when not properly treated, leads to an increased risk of child mistreatment.



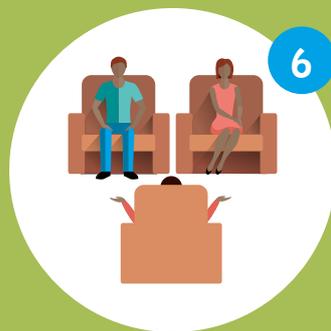
More use of **excessive discipline** by parents and caregivers, as a result of increased stress and survival mode.



**Emotional neglect**; parents dealing with consequences of the disaster have less time to spend engaging in positive interactions.



Increased **adult stress-related problems** like divorce, parent incarceration and parent substance abuse on the long-term.



Natural helpers and social **support systems are undermined**.



Social work might face an **overload of work**, lack of funding and staff.



Children living in shelters with non-familiar support systems or homes with multiple adults **lack social support** and can become victims of child abuse.





# Communication and consistency are vital for expressing love

**COLUMN** IRIS HAKKERT

Having volunteered to work with foster children since age 15, I've learned a lot. By far the most important lesson I've learned is this; foster children differ little from your 'average' child. They like to play, test boundaries, need love, and deserve the opportunity to learn. These are all things that apply to myself, my sister or any of my friends.

My role as a mentor and volunteer is to facilitate and supervise. I believe the numerous training programs I have taken to mentor and work with traumatized children have helped me work better with all children, not just those who have had traumatic experiences.

## Different parenting styles

How do I put these lessons into practice? In play: children will imitate the behavior they have witnessed, which may not be age appropriate. At this point it becomes necessary to communicate to them what is and isn't acceptable, and why. However, I don't assume the child is intentionally behaving 'badly'. Should he or she continue to push the boundaries, the child is warned about the potential consequences of his or her actions.

When it comes to testing boundaries, I will admit that foster children have given me a hard time! From a very young age these children are forced to adapt from one parenting style to another, with differing sets of rules. A reasonable response in one home may be deemed inappropriate in another. As all children do, when they come up against boundaries, they push at them to see what happens, warnings or not.

Children, all children, need to be communicated with clearly and consistently. The whys of negative consequences for inappropriate actions is vital, but equally important are the whys of the rewards for progress. Being consistent in both is extremely important.

**'Communicating your love and consistently showing it creates a level of comfort for them that changes their world, and makes it a better place to live in'**

There is no one-size-fits-all mold when it comes to loving a foster child, as there is no one-size-fits-all child. How you express your love and how a child feels love will differ, yet communication and consistency are just as (possibly even more so) vital for expressing love.

Children that have been put in the system have lost their guardian or been removed from an environment that was unsafe for them. These are traumatic experiences. Communicating your love for them and consistently showing it creates a level of comfort for them that changes their world, and makes it a better place to live in.

## Feeling comfortable

And lastly, foster children have the same rights to education and learning opportunities as all children do. The unfortunate reality is that they often do not have the same opportunities as other children. Mostly due to circumstances beyond their control.

The difference in the way I interact with foster children is that I take more time to answer questions and explain the "why" of things that we do and don't do. My goal in my role as 'Ms. Joe' or 'Icecream' as the kids call me, is to be the person they feel comfortable talking to about anything. They know we can play together, even though there are boundaries. They know I love them, even when there are consequences for inappropriate behavior. They know all this because I take the time to consistently communicate it.

## BIO

With more than five years' experience as a youth journalist and program manager for a non-profit, Iris Hakkens is a young St. Maartener developing projects related to youth and social issues.



INTERVIEW

**Kimberly  
Brown:**  
‘We are  
here to to  
protect  
children,  
not to  
punish  
parents’

### **BIOGRAPHY KIMBERLY BROWN**

Kimberly started working at the Court Of Guardianship in 2014 as a child protection social worker. Her main role was to investigate, advise and report on matters pertaining to the safety of minors, including child abuse. In January 2019, she became the interim head of the CoG. Together with a team of three child protection social workers she handles all the child abuse cases on Sint Maarten.

**“The community, namely professionals, are key to ensuring that the Court Of Guardianship (CoG) can do our job to protect children,” says Kimberly Brown, Head a.i. of the CoG. The CoG is divided in three sections: child protection, youth probation and collection and payment (alimony cases). The CoG is the official reporting center for child abuse on St. Maarten.**

Working at the CoG can be challenging, but Kimberly always tries to remember her main objective: “I want all children to have the experience of being loved, appreciated and cared for. In my current field it can, at times, be hard to remember why I became a social worker. Sometimes the negativity can be consuming and your good intentions are not always seen as such. Nevertheless, knowing at the end of the day that I did my best with integrity gives me the strength I need to go on.”

The safety of children is Kimberly’s and the CoG’s priority. This is why they encourage professionals in the social field to “be alert and always consider the safety of a child within the household, even if their client is initially an adult.”

The CoG works closely with the family guardian department of the SJIS, the foundation that assists families and minors when a protective measure is in place. Others include the St. Maarten Police Department, Prosecutors Office, Courthouse (Judges), St. Maarten Medical Center, Mental Health Foundation, Family Affairs (Women’s Desk), schools, community centers and other entities that deal with children or families on a regular basis. Kimberly: “I think we can all agree as a community that we want our children to be safe and healthy. Furthermore, as a professional dealing directly with children or families, you are in the position to help ensure this.”

### **How can you signal child abuse?**

“There are many different warning signs that can indicate abuse. Physical abuse or neglect is often easier to detect as you can see signs such as bruises or unhealthy hygiene. Psychological abuse might be a bit harder to take notice of; this can, for example, be signaled because the child is showing extreme behaviors such as acting out or exhibiting withdrawn behavior.

**“Our first goal is to assess if we can work with the family and network around the child”**

One should also be aware of certain characteristics of parents that can lead to abuse, such as mental illness and the use of alcohol and drugs. Parents that have a history of experiencing abuse in their youth are also more likely to become abusers themselves.

We also see the risk increase when a child is unwanted, as is the case at times with young single mothers who have a low education and no support system.

Usually persons who work closely with children would know the warning signs. For those who are less familiar with the signs, or new to a job working with children, we would advise to do some research by asking colleagues, reading books, searching online etc. You can always call the CoG for advice, and we also give presentations for entities that wish to gain more knowledge on child abuse and the role of the CoG.”

### **What can a professional report at the CoG?**

“The CoG is the ‘central reporting center on child abuse’ (CMK, centrale meldpunt kindermishandeling) on the island. This means that all reports of possible abuse, however minor, should be shared with the CoG so that this can be filed, assessed and, if needed, action taken. However, it is important to realize that the CoG should not be seen as the ‘first to have to take action’ in cases of possible child abuse. First the professionals themselves should take actions within their reach to resolve an unsafe situation.

This means that, for example, if a teacher suspects that a child is being neglected, this should first be discussed with the school’s social worker and/or handled by the ‘care team’. The social worker can then talk with the parents, find out what is taking place and work with the parents to make a plan of action. When all possibilities within the school system have been exhausted, the social worker (care team) can report to CoG. The CoG should be seen as the last resort to safeguard the minor.”

### **What are common misconceptions about reporting a possible child abuse case?**

“People think that the CoG will always “take the child out of their home”. This is often not the case. We are not here to punish parents, but to protect children. Our first goal is to assess if we can work with the family and network around the child to ensure the child’s safety and wellbeing. Only in extreme cases is a protective measure in combination with an out of the home placement inevitable. Whomever we advise - the child and their best interests are central, and in most cases these interests include keeping the parents involved.

Another misconception is that the CoG is solely responsible to ensure the safety of a child. As mentioned, if a professional suspects that a child’s wellbeing is in danger – he or she has to take action first. Taking action can mean: involving the social worker within their organization, talking to the parents, or informing the family of available services.”

### **Why do professionals hesitate to contact the CoG?**

“This could be due to the above-mentioned misconceptions; it can also be that the professional knows the people involved personally or is afraid of aggressive repercussions. The public, as well as professionals, can ask for information anonymously. However, only the public can report to CoG anonymously; professionals can’t. At the end of the day, the safety of a child should be your priority and you need to take action. We are just a phone call away.”

### **What is the best way for a professional to report a case?**

“The professional has already taken action and all resources within their reach have been exhausted to improve the situation of the child. The parents must be informed by the professional that they will be reporting the case to CoG, unless informing parents places the child at risk. Your report to the CoG should be detailed and in writing. It is also of great help when the professional is prepared to continue supporting the COG with more information or action if needed.”

### **Can you give an example of a case that was resolved by a professional?**

“A social worker at the Medical Center received a concern from the doctor that a newborn baby was showing signs of cocaine withdrawal. The social worker immediately informed CoG of this and was advised on the best plan of action.

A meeting was scheduled by the social worker with the parents, doctors and CoG to discuss the concerns. A plan of action was made by the social worker to assist and support the mother in dealing with her personal issues and caring for her child. The mother was referred to Turning Point (drug rehab facility). As a form of after-care the social worker conducted home visits and continued to counsel the mother. Eventually there was no need for a protective measure or out of home placement.

“With the proper support, fewer children will have to be placed out of their homes”

This is a great example of a professional keeping the CoG informed and involved, but taking action within her scope of work and responsibilities. This case also showcases that with the right steps a child and family can be helped out of a bad situation.”

### **How does the CoG deal with the many cultural differences?**

“On Sint Maarten there is a law against corporal punishment. Yet many cultures on our island use corporal punishment as a means of correcting their children. By speaking with parents we have learnt that in a lot of cases parents use corporal punishment due to a lack of knowledge of alternatives. They were raised that way and don’t know any better.

As professionals we have the responsibility not only to point out the law and unacceptable behavior, but also to educate parents on alternatives. There are various organizations, such as the SSSD, that provide counseling and positive parenting classes.”

### **What socio-economic factors play a role in child-abuse?**

“On Sint Maarten a lot of families live in poverty. Many earn less than minimum wage, while having to care for multiple children. We have single parent households etc. Certain parents have to work two or three jobs just to make ends meet and are therefore hardly ever at home to protect and guide their children. Lack of finances and stress within a household can lead to physical child abuse and neglect.”

In addition, children are left to raise themselves or older children have the responsibility to look after their younger siblings. This often creates an unsafe environment and room for predators as well. Abuse and the lack of structure and guidance can cause children to develop behavioral issues and puts them at risk for delinquency.”

**What can professionals do in spite of these difficult socio-economic factors?**

“A first and important step is to expand the child’s network; see if there are reliable family members, friends or neighbors and continue to motivate both parents to be involved in their life.”

**What does the COG hope to see improve on Sint Maarten?**

“Our biggest issue is that we do not have enough specialized placement facilities or professionals on the island to provide the proper assistance to children or families. For example: institutions for children with extreme behavioral issues in combination with a low IQ.

Preferably, we want to keep children at home by enhancing the safety within the household and providing parents with intensive support and tools. However, due to the lack of social workers that can assist in the homes this is not always possible.

On a positive note, we have seen more professionals, such as teachers and health care providers, taking action themselves to improve the wellbeing of children in abuse cases and or when there are concerns about the living situation. Eventually, with the proper support and guidance for families from the professional sector, fewer children will have to be placed out of their homes. We hope that these efforts continue to grow. As the saying goes: “it takes a village.”



# Providing a sanctuary for children

“The first step is believing that you can do better. The second is not listening to others when they say you can’t,” states Jessica Richardson-Lake. As a mother, pastor, teacher and the director of the Belvedere Community Center, Jessica is a mentor to over 100 children.

“A lot of the kids we work with have been pegged as ‘bad kids’ however, all they need is a listening ear, structure and guidance,” which is what Jessica aims to incorporate during both the afternoon-school and church activities at the Belvedere Community Center. Having been a single parent, trying to make ends meet herself, she understands many of the struggles parents and their children face on Sint Maarten: “While I had to work, I would leave my kids at home. I would always be worried, but I had no alternative. This is when I started dreaming about an affordable after-school program.”

Over 26 years ago, Jessica took the first step in realizing this dream by opening her doors to kids in the neighbourhood who needed a safe space. This grew to a two-container building manned by a team of volunteers, and today has transformed into the Belvedere Community Center.

### Family challenges

Belvedere and the surrounding communities are known as low-income areas. Many families are dealing with poverty, deepened by unemployment after hurricane Irma. Besides those who live in poverty, Jessica also notes that there are many single parents who need to work two jobs, and that two-parent households also often have to work full-time because living costs are so high on the island.

Jessica: “A lot of stress is attached to any of these situations – and I know from experience that taking care of your children, when you are working around the clock, can be very challenging.” Due to the time and financial constraints of ‘trying to make ends meet’ it is hard for people to spend quality time with their kids. The lack of funds also makes it difficult for many parents to sign up for after-school programs or other hired help to ensure that kids are not left home alone. For these reasons, on Sint Maarten the demand for affordable after-school programs is high, and the need for subsidies very apparent.

Raoul has 4 kids who attend both the after-school program and church activities: “My wife and I have unpredictable working hours. We try to balance our working hours with taking care of the kids – but the programs at the Belvedere Community Center help a lot.”

### Never enough

Raoul also shares that the Belvedere Community Center is, thus far, the most affordable program he has encountered: “Most other programs are at least \$100 a month per child.” With minimum wage on Sint Maarten being around \$840 a month, it is easy to calculate that more affordable programs are needed.

Jessica: “We only charge \$42 a month per child, however, even this at times proves to be too much for a household that is either unemployed or making minimum wage.” The Belvedere Community Center does not have guaranteed annual funding.

Every year Jessica and her team have to submit a budget-proposal to the government. This year the centre’s budget was decreased.

Although the centre can hold up to 250 children, their limit at the moment is 100. Kids who attend the program receive daily classes, a hot meal and counselling. A growing number of kids also attend, for whom the parents cannot pay. “Just last week a mother came to us with five children. She asked us to take her kids, explaining that she lost her job and was having trouble feeding them. How can I say no to children in need? At the same time, I need to pay my staff and be able to buy enough food and materials to run the program,” Jessica says with a heavy sigh.

### Dangerous alternative

The alternative is that parents leave their kids at home unsupervised. “The dangers that this brings are numerous,” Jessica states, adding: “A child of nine is not capable of looking after their four-year-old sibling. Yet this is what often happens.” Children who are left unsupervised can injure themselves or others, they are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, more likely to make bad decisions, and prone to developing behavioral issues.

Behavioral issues are something Jessica and her team often deal with. “However, in my opinion, most of the bad behavior stems from the lack of communication skills,” finds Jessica. Due to the stressful situations that many families are in, patience runs thin and conflict is more frequent. Yelling or physically punishing children to silence them is common, as many on Sint Maarten still believe: “children should be seen and not heard.” However, as Jessica notes: “This does not solve anything; it does not teach a child how to behave, nor will the child learn how to respectfully express their needs.

“Yesterday I had one of my teens come in with tears in his eyes and anger in his voice. He started yelling, and I told him that I wanted to listen to him, but first he had to wash his face and calm down. Ten minutes later we had a conversation.”



## Rock Church

“I think some parents are missing out on great conversations with their kids,” Jessica observes on a daily basis. Respectful expression is something the after-school program and Rock Church both put emphasis on. In celebration of this, every month an ‘Open Mic Night’ is hosted for youngsters where they can express their feelings through song, dance or other performance art.

“I am a lot more outspoken than I was before I joined Rock Church,” says 13-year-old Angeornee who likes to express herself through poems. Jamarly, who is 18, feels the same way: “I learned how to be more social... I like to be in the background but in this group, I don’t mind joining in.” Jamarly sings, dances and performs during a number of acts during the Open Mic Night.

Rock Church is a non-denominational church for the youth led by Jessica. Together with a group of youth-leaders the church hosts empowerment workshops, donation drives for the community, church services with family-friendly sermons in addition to the popular Open Mic Night.

Not only children are welcomed at the church’s activities; Jessica always encourages the whole family to participate. Anuska, who is Jamarly’s mother, can’t always make it due to work, however, is happy to when she can: “I know he is safe when he is at the community centre, and it’s great to see him joining in such positive activities.”

On Sundays, after the Churches weekly sermon, there is always lunch available for all guests. “We know that this is often the only moment during the week that certain families can sit together to have a meal. This is an important bonding moment.”

## Being involved

It isn’t always easy to get parents more involved in their children’s lives. But that does not mean Jessica does not try: “Getting to know the parents of the children we care for is important because it makes it easier to encourage them to be more involved or address certain concerns.” The concerns raised can be anything from lagging schoolwork, to unhygienic appearance, or bruises on a child’s arm. Jessica never shies away from talking to parents because: “in the end our children are our priority”. She approaches parents with empathy and solutions – which often works.

In cases where her concerns are serious, she has no choice but to call the authorities, although this is never her first choice: “In my experience calling the authorities does not always solve the issue at hand – it can even make it worse. There are not enough tools in place to properly protect children, or if there are, I haven’t seen them in action.”

Jessica also admits that at times she is disappointed in the lack of involvement of the community as a whole: “We need to be more open towards one another – start getting more involved in the well being of our neighbours. This would help us overcome many of our challenges, and our children would be a lot better off.”

## Jonah and the whale

Jessica’s favorite sermon is that of ‘Jonah and the whale’: “I use it to teach the importance of embracing your challenges – no matter how daunting they seem. “

The success of the afterschool program and church are easy to see at the Open Mic Night through the performances of the children and parents alike. On stage, through singing, dancing, rapping, poetry, skits, games and even miming, they advise and uplift each other. One older teen that most would peg as ‘gangster’ by his appearance quietly recites a poem about wanting to be a good father to his future children. This is followed up by a parent who talks about the importance of being honest with oneself, before you can be honest with others.

“I think the most important thing that I learned from Ms. Jessica is that we have to confront our own flaws in order to overcome them.” 16-year-old Caesar states right before his rap performance. As nearly 100 kids and their parents sing, dance and laugh to upbeat Caribbean music, one can just feel any troubling thoughts fade away. A true safe-haven that is what Jessica, her staff and church members have managed to create, despite all the challenges in their way.







## WHAT IS SOCIAL SUPPORT?

Violence, neglect and abuse leaves a scar on children. The resulting stress is often traumatizing. But children are also resilient. Research shows that social support is an important factor if a child is to recover from their experiences with domestic violence. A child needs to feel seen, heard and supported. As a community police officer, teacher or childcare worker, you are in a position to provide social support in your daily work, but also as a neighbour or family member. For children who don't feel safe at home, a supportive figure is vital. It's important to let a child know that you are there for them, and that they can depend on you.

### **Safety**

Feeling safe from harm is a prerequisite for a child's development. There is a correlation between feeling unsafe and stress system disorders, whereby a child is constantly in a state of high alert for danger. As a result, a child finds it difficult to relax. A feeling of safety stems from a calm and dependable foundation. In addition, make sure a child feels safe in your space, be it a doctor's treatment room, the school hallways or day care common areas.

### **Routine**

Providing structure and routines builds trust. As a doctor or nurse tell a child what they can expect, what you are going to do. As a teacher provide a child with assigned seating, personal items and a clear daily schedule, with time and clear instructions between the different activities.

### **Trust**

Positive relations are essential for the wellbeing of a child. Due to their experience with untrustworthy or unsafe adults, a child can become distrustful of all adults. As a result, a child may be fearful and defensive or angry and defiant. Help restore a child's trust in adults by proving you are trustworthy and providing them with a feeling of security.

### **Positive experiences**

Positive experiences help children differentiate between safe and unsafe relationships. Every positive experience with a trustworthy-adult counts. By letting a child know they are seen, listened to and taken seriously, you play a role in restoring their trust. If you work with groups, you can facilitate friendships. Feeling part of a group aids a child's development.

A young girl with dark, braided hair is lying down, looking up towards the camera. A hand is resting on her head. She is wearing a blue top and a yellow long-sleeved shirt. The background is a warm, textured fabric.

# Children who witness domestic violence

## lasting effects

**It's often thought that children scarcely notice or suffer from violence between their parents. Unfortunately, this is not true. These children grow up with violence as the norm and many are themselves physically or sexually abused. This is why it's vital that professionals are well informed about domestic violence and child abuse.**

Parents repeatedly hitting or kicking each other or screaming aggressively: many parents think or hope that their children aren't aware, because they are asleep or are in a different room. Unfortunately, children are always aware of domestic abuse. Half of the children who witness domestic violence are also direct victims of physical or sexual abuse. Being a witness amounts to emotional neglect: a child lives continually in an unsafe environment. The child is constantly anticipating the next clash between its parents.

## Being a Witness

To be a witness to domestic violence means to notice in one way or another that there is violence in the home, or to be subjected to it. That commonly means that children witness violence against their mother, usually committed by their father or the (ex-) boyfriend of their mother. An American researcher determined ways children witness domestic violence. Here are the main instances:

- Before a child’s birth: the mother is abused whilst pregnant, leading to maternal stress and anxiety.
- First-hand: when a child is present in the same room where the act of violence is taking place or is able to hear it.
- Intervention: the child jumps between the parents in an attempt to stop the violence or calls the police.
- Direct victim: the child happens to be present and can be hit, for example whilst sitting on their mother’s lap, or is themselves physically mishandled.
- Participating in violence: forced or encouraged by the abuser, or a child eventually copies the abuser’s behaviour.
- Is faced with broken household items or a parent’s injuries, as well as the long-lasting consequences: such as being moved to a shelter or foster home or enduring their parents’ divorce.

## Two types of violence

There are two types of domestic abuse. The first is known as ‘intimate terrorism’ and occurs when the perpetrator (usually male) wants to exert power and control over a partner. These fathers often want control over their children too and are usually excessively strict and dismissive towards their child. The mothers are usually afraid that the father will hit the child too. In order that a child does nothing to antagonize their father the mother may be exceptionally stern with the child as well.

The second type is ‘mutual partner violence’. This occurs when parents have an unhealthy relationship and arguments turn violent. These arguments comprise severe verbal aggression and physical assault by both partners. It is likely that a child is aware of this kind of behaviour in some form or another.

Often parents think, and hope, that their child isn’t aware of the violence. They are not conscious of the fact that their child notices more than they would like, thinking instead that a child is in bed asleep, is too young to understand or is playing outside. Many parents also do not realize the serious impact that domestic violence has on a child. It is only when someone else points out the tell-tale signs that they truly understand the impact on their child.

### Cassandra Richardson, former Director of Safe Haven, Domestic Violence Shelter

“Our community can do much better when it comes to addressing and eradicating domestic violence. Violence is too normalized; many do not take into consideration or aren’t aware of the detrimental effects there are when you hit your wife or children. We wonder why there are so many school fights amongst our youth – this is because they are taught to use violence to ‘solve’ conflicts at home.



We need awareness campaigns and education for all segments of our community. Professionals who work with children and families have to be more diligent in detection and reporting. Our law enforcement chain has to be relentless in their duty to protect our community against domestic violence. Our whole community needs to take responsibility and work towards eradicating this epidemic.”

“Our whole community needs to take responsibility”

### Alexandra van Luijken, Developmental Psychologist, Intervention

“Domestic violence is a hidden problem. Children who are abused, or who witness abuse, have a myriad of mental health issues that they take with them into adulthood, if not treated. If abuse is occurring between parents, in my experience, eventually children will be abused as well. More often than not victims of domestic violence are caught up in the situation and are not able to seek the help they need.



The role of the surrounding network ‘if abuse is occurring between parents, children will be abused as well’ is important to break the cycle. Mental health care can play an important role in healing, but the situation has to be safe first. The effects of domestic violence should never be underestimated and deserves society’s attention towards both prevention and intervention.”

**Dientje Muller-John, Inspector, St. Maarten  
Police Youth & Morals Department**

“Our department is always involved if there is a child involved in a case, such as domestic abuse. Previously we have filed all domestic violence

“I do believe harsher sentencing for domestic violence is needed”

cases under ‘ill-treatment’, but the beginning of 2019 we are logging domestic violence reports separately. There are clear laws for all ill treatment, including domestic abuse, however, I do believe harsher sentencing is needed.

Reporting is very important, whether you are the victim, or a witness. Also, the sooner you report the better, as it’s often easier to collect evidence. The more evidence there is, the better the prosecutors office can do their jobs to build a case against the perpetrator.”

**Meredith Concincion, Senior Family Guardian,  
SJIS Family Guardianship Department**



“I think that many in our community, especially those who work with families or children, can take more responsibility in ensuring children’s safety. Often, our department or the Court

of Guardianship are seen as solely responsible to protect children from violence, but this is only possible if we work together as a community. When you are dealing with clients

that are in need, whom for example, have health issues, are arrested, are displaying concerning behaviour etc., it is always important to ask yourself: are there any children involved? The next step is to take responsibility to

ensure the safety of these children. Being an aware and involved community, is imperative to creating a violence-free environment for children.”

“Protecting children from violence is possible when we work together”

## Repercussions

Children exposed to domestic violence do not grow up feeling safe from harm. It is confusing when two people a child is dependent on, whom they love, harm each other. Children can develop serious problems as a result; the same issues that children who are direct victims suffer from. They may demonstrate anxiety, jumpiness and psychosomatic complaints such as stomach aches, headaches or fainting. They may be prone to feelings of guilt or shame and depression, have learning difficulties and poor concentration, or display signs of aggressive behaviour or withdrawal.

## Long term

Around forty percent of children who witness violence between their parents in the home develop signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Consequently, they are more easily shaken by unexpected situations, feel constantly stressed and uptight and avoid situations that remind them of their trauma. They grow up with violent behaviour as the norm and this impacts how they handle conflict as adolescents and adults. The risk of being an abuse victim in later relationships increases, as does the risk of being a perpetrator.

When there is (or has been) domestic violence, parents often struggle with delinquent behaviour from their children and discipline. Lack of attention and affection, neglect and anger, and indulgence in an attempt to compensate may all lead children to demonstrate difficult behaviour. It will be challenging for parents to recover their children’s trust. Professional help for a child will only be effective once the domestic violence stops.

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# Angels

“The school counselors I know are angels in disguise,” states Amy Arrindell. It is 8 a.m. and Amy is sitting in her office at the St. Maarten Academy. During our interview, multiple students walk in to give her a hug. A few even look disappointed that she is busy doing this interview. Amy reassures them: “We will be done in 30 minutes, you can come back to talk to me then.”



School Counselor  
Amy Arrindell

Amy, who grew up on the island, has been working as a school counselor for over 19 years at both campuses of the St. Maarten Academy. It was her first job after completing her studies to become a social worker and since then she has completed a double master's degree focused on education, counseling and guidance. “I do this job because I love to see people moving from one stage of their life to the next. Sometimes, when people are stuck in a rut, they just need someone to help them make that step forward so they can continue on their path.”

## A lot of roles

As a school counselor, she knows firsthand the challenges her students face and she is used to taking an active approach to help her students move on to their ‘next stage’: “Support systems for our youth are severely lacking, on a government level, but also, at times, on a family level. This is why it is so important that professionals working with our youth are invested. We fulfill a lot of roles to help ensure that they grow up safely.”

The breakfast corner at the school is one of the examples of how Amy and her colleagues try to support students and their families. Every morning, students are allowed to walk in and grab some tea or fruit and make themselves a sandwich. “It is

open to all students, so that we do not ‘single out’ students that are having a hard time. It also gives me a good opportunity to have a casual chat with the students.” For students who need more than a sandwich, the school arranges additional groceries for their families to take home.

## Babysit

Amy's investment in her work often pays off: “One of my favorite stories happened a few years ago. A student got pregnant in her exam year and delivered her baby a week before she was supposed to take her exams. I told her: “You are taking your exams, even if I have to babysit your child in my office.” Amy was true to her word, and looked after the baby in her office for the duration of the exam week. As a result, the student passed her exams, and because of her degree she was able to secure a stable job to support herself and her child.

Amy: “Let me be clear, we need to fight for better support systems for our youth. However, in the meantime we must also utilize our own abilities and networks to ensure that our youth have enough opportunities to become positive members of our society. What has impressed me lately? My colleagues, who help our students every day. They are angels I tell you.”

# ‘Who is going to believe you?’

**“I washed the sheets,” was the line I remember hearing when I first started to suspect that my ex-husband was sexually abusing my daughter. “I am going to kill you,” he said when he ran after me with a machete. “Who is going to believe you?” he asked when he found out I went to the police station.**

My name is Abigail. I started dating my ex-husband, Jason, twelve years ago. I had met Jason through mutual friends and he always seemed like a quiet, nice guy. In the first years of our relationship he was great, and I felt so lucky. I have four children from a previous marriage and was taking care of them by myself. Jason helped me with all kinds of things and even bought me a car.

If I think back on it, there were a few signs things weren't fully right. As soon as he moved in he imposed certain rules on my children and me. Initially I thought: “It's good, he is looking out for us” and some of the things he was saying made sense.

## **Losing control**

When Jason asked me to marry him, I had a feeling that I should've said no – but our life was already so intertwined and he convincingly told me: “If you love me, you should marry me.”

I did not realize that piece by piece I was losing my independence and confidence. Jason didn't want me to hurt myself, so he told me to stop playing sports. He didn't think my friends were a good influence, so told me to stop spending time with them. He didn't like that I had a night-job at a casino, so he told me I could quit, and he would take care of me.

Jason was very jealous, so he wanted to know where I was at all times. He would tape record phone conversations and eventually even conversations in our home.

## Washed sheets

When Maria, my eldest daughter was 13 years old, I had to fly to my country to do some paperwork. At that time, only she and her sister Amalia were living with us. In the two weeks I was gone he called me every day, asking many questions and complaining about the family responsibilities I was putting in his hands.

During one of the phone calls he was acting strangely, and he announced: "I washed the sheets." I did not understand why he announced this trivial fact, a bad feeling started growing in my stomach. I knew then that he did something to my daughter.

He denied it, and Maria did the same. However, I started noticing the changes. Jason, who has been extremely strict with my children, became very friendly and generous towards Maria. He put latches on our doors, so that I would have to knock before coming into the house. Maria's behaviour became increasingly angry and rebellious.

## Police department

Years passed. In those years my suspicions grew, and Jason, who was already an alcoholic, started drinking more. Amalia, who has always been timid, was easy to keep away from him, but I found Maria alone with him on multiple occasions.

I was never allowed near Jason's phone. One night when he was passed out from drinking, I checked his messages. I found multiple messages sent to Maria complimenting her on her appearance. With the messages in hand, I confronted her; finally, she broke down in tears and admitted that he had molested her. "He only did it once or twice, and I showered a lot after," she cried. I still suspect it has happened more often.

She was ashamed and did not want to tell anyone, but I could not keep quiet any longer. I took her to the police station to make a report. However, instead of helping us, I felt as if they attacked me and my daughter asking her "why didn't you come forward sooner," as she was 18 now.

## Physical abuse

I sent my daughter to a friend in Europe after I noticed she fell into a depression and started cutting herself. I thought about leaving so many times – but where was I supposed to go? We had a house together, and Jason controlled our finances.

Jason heard about the report, however the police never followed up. This is when the physical abuse started. I called the police four times. The first time Jason choked me, the second time he beat me with a drill, the third he tried to stab me with a knife and the fourth he ran after me with a machete and threatened my life.

## Getting help

Finally, I called Safe Haven, and took Amalia and left him. Jason blames Maria "for leading him on" though she was a 13-year-old child. He blames me for being a troublesome wife, and when he realized I would not go back, he started telling everyone else that I was making up stories. So many in our community still think he is a good man. Luckily, I have a few friends that have stood by me.

I feel like I'm a bad mother and that I did not do enough to stop the abuse. Maria says she still has many nightmares and she cries a lot. Amalia's grades are dropping, and I can feel her anger towards me. I don't know what my next steps are, but I do know that I need to figure out how to help my children.

## The cycle

My mother was an alcoholic and my father was never in the picture. When I was five years old my mother dropped my sister and I off at my grandmother's because she could not take care of us any longer.

Four of my grandmother's sons lived with her as well. I remember them touching me, lying on top of me, ejaculating on me, and so on. I pretended it was a nightmare. My sister, who ended up living with them for a longer period, told me years later: "It was not a nightmare. It was real."

My sister was so beautiful and she always had a smile on her face, despite the nightmare she lived in. She started living carelessly. She was a smart girl but did not seem able to make smart decisions. She didn't help herself because she did not think she was worth it. I have always felt worthless too. It is a cycle, you know.

## Surviving

You expect the law to protect you, but in my experience, it seems that many sympathize more with the criminal than the victim. The police told me that I should bring back my oldest daughter to file a report again herself. She still cries every night and doesn't sleep. How can I ask her to come back? How can I protect her while he is still a free man?

I want there to be justice, but also know this does not happen often. Many other women who sought help at Safe Haven have been waiting for years – their perpetrators are walking free without being arrested. When I am not sad, I am angry. There is a part of me that still can't believe everything that has happened is true. If only it was all just a nightmare.

But I will survive. I've always been a survivor."

\*names changed for privacy reasons. The woman in the picture is not related to the story.



# Corporal punishment is illegal on Sint Maarten

**On Sint Maarten most parents still believe in the proverb: “Spare the rod, spoil the child.” However, since 2013, Sint Maarten has a clear law on corporal punishment: it is not allowed at home, school or any other setting.**

Some might not be used to disciplining their kids any other way than physically, but not only is this against the law, there are many more effective and safer forms of discipline.

“People either don’t know there is a law or they don’t care,” states Guicindy Glasgow, who works with many parents through the Family Guardianship Department. According to her, corporal punishment is still the most prevalent form of discipline used on Sint Maarten.

In general, corporal punishment means: to cause physical pain or discomfort to correct or control a child’s behavior. This is often done by spanking or slapping the child with an open hand, striking with an instrument such as a belt, spoon, shoe, hairbrush, paddle. It can also include shaking, pinching, forced ingestion of substances such as soap, or forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions for prolonged periods.

Guicindy: “In the Caribbean we were raised with corporal punishment. Often people tell me: but my mother spanked me and I turned out fine. We respond: spanking, shaking, pinching; it is all abuse.”



## Escalation

Despite the perceived belief that physical punishment is an acceptable parental choice for discipline, research continuously shows that violence begets violence. Negative effects of corporal punishment can include physical injury, depression, anxiety, learning difficulties, anti-social behavior and increased aggression both as a child and into adulthood. The use of corporal punishment can also increase in severity in stressful situations and escalate to heavier abuse such as kicking, punching, biting, scalding and burning.

“And as we all know, we do what our parents taught us. So if you are hitting your kids, they will hit their kids in the future. Consequently, it is hard to explain to parents that using corporal punishment is unhealthy for their children. They are often not very receptive to learning other discipline techniques,” Guicindy adds.

In actuality, corporal punishment does not work. It can work momentarily to stop problematic behavior because children are afraid of being hurt, but it doesn't change behavior in the long term. The use of physical punishment also affects the relationship between child and parent, resulting in distrust and resentment, which can make it even harder to control a child's behavior as he/she is growing up.

## No repercussions

Based on UNICEF's data children from wealthier households are equally likely to experience violent discipline as those from poorer households. Also, Guicindy and her colleagues note that there are professionals that work with children who still use or condone corporal punishment as well: “I've had cases where we had given warnings about the use of corporal punishment. But only when it got life-threatening, the police would step in. In addition, there are often no real repercussions for those who resort to corporal punishment.”

As professionals, especially those working with children, it is important to be aware of the negative consequences of using corporal punishment. It is also important to understand the law regarding corporal punishment and to uphold this in your daily practices as well as when advising parents.

## More open communication

If corporal (and emotional) punishment is not an acceptable or effective form of discipline, what are the alternatives? More effective and safer forms of discipline are: open verbal communication highlighting bad and good behavior, taking away privileges such as a toy (never a basic need such as a meal), or giving a time-out.

Having children help to solve the bad behavior can also work, for example: if they break something, ask them to help clean it up. Lastly, often forgotten, using praise when a child does something good is also important in showing the difference between wanted and unwanted behavior.

**Research continuously shows that violence begets violence**  
**“There is no shame in asking for advice if you need help figuring out alternative parenting techniques”**

“Although we need more programs on the island, there are parenting classes available through the Student Support Services Department and Women's Help Desk. There is no shame in asking for advice if you need help figuring out alternative parenting techniques. This just makes you a good parent,” Guicindy encourages. Reputable websites such as [Healthychildren.org](http://Healthychildren.org) are also a good starting point.

Guicindy hopes that with education, awareness campaigns, and with a rising awareness of the law, the mentality on our island will start shifting from realizing that “just because our parents did it, it doesn't mean it is right.”

## THE LAW ON CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

Law reform following the achievement of autonomy in 2010 included the Joint Custody Ordinance 2013, which amends article 247 of the Civil Code to state (unofficial translation): “(1) Parental authority includes the duty and right of the parent to care for and raise his or her minor child. (2) Caring for and raising the child includes care and responsibility for the mental and physical wellbeing and safety of the child and the development of his or her personality. In the care and upbringing of the child the parents will not use mental or physical violence or any other degrading treatment.” The article also applies to all persons acting in the place of a parent.

Corporal punishment is punishable under the Penal Code 2012. In May 2012 the Joint Court of Justice of Aruba, Curaçao and St Maarten, in a case in which a crèche employee had been summarily dismissed after striking a child with the permission of the mother, ruled that hitting children will not be tolerated, and that anyone who does so will be punished.

Source: Corporal punishment of children in St Maarten, End Corporal Punishment, October 2017



## 6 POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS OF CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

### 1 Physically punishing children teaches them how to behave

There are no studies that prove that corporal punishment works. However, over 250 studies have proven that corporal punishment is associated with a wide range of negative health, developmental and behavioral outcomes such as poor mental health, poor cognitive development, lower school grades, increased aggression, poor moral regulation and increased antisocial behavior. These effects often follow children into adulthood.

### 2 A loving smack doesn't really hurt

Adults often don't appreciate the difference in size and strength between them and a child. This difference can have a big impact on the intended and actual physical pain felt by the child. Large scale research in which parents have been asked about the force used when "smacking" their child found that two in five had used a different degree of force than intended.

### 3 My parents used to hit me and I turned out OK

Many people are denying the hurt they experienced when the adults closest to them inflicted pain as a 'lesson'. Adults who hit their children in the name of discipline usually began doing so because they themselves were hit as children. It is pointless to blame previous generations for this because they were acting in accordance with the prevalent culture of that time. But times change and societies move on. We have enough research now that shows corporal punishment does not work and has negative effects. There are also plenty of proven alternative techniques that work better.

### 4 "Spare the rod, spoil the child."

Discipline grows from understanding, mutual respect, tolerance, and two way effective communication. Corporal punishment tells children nothing about how they should behave. On the contrary, it teaches children that their parents find it acceptable to use violence to sort out problems or conflicts. Respect should not be confused with fear. Good behavior due to fear of being hit means that a child is avoiding pain, not showing respect.

### 5 There is a difference in 'safe spanking' and child abuse

Lawmakers and governments have traditionally separated 'child abuse' and 'corporal punishment', but most abuse is corporal punishment – adults assaulting children to punish them and gain control. The well-known 'pedagogische tik' (safe spanking) can easily derail under pressure and more importantly: where do you draw the line? No such threshold is proposed in the case of violence against elderly people, where zero-tolerance clearly states that all violence is unacceptable. In reality, it is not possible to differentiate between child corporal punishment and abuse.

### 6 A law against corporal punishment is pointless

From international research we know that a clear law (like St Maarten has) in combination with public campaigns, is related to significantly reductions in violence against children, and violence committed by children as well.

# Restoring safety: ‘Most of our neglect cases are linked to poverty’

When parents are unable to adequately take care of their children, the child or adolescent can in some cases be placed under ‘protective measure’ by a judge. This is executed by The Family Guardianship Department of SJIS. How do you restore safety for a child? Cynthia Filemon and Meredith Concincion: “When we all work together, it makes it a lot easier.”



Cynthia Filemon



Meredith Concincion

“I’ve learned how to cope,” says Meredith Concincion, Senior Family Guardian, with a smile on her face. “In bad situations, where children are abused, people sometimes wonder how I keep so calm.... and ask me if I care. I care a whole lot, but to do this job well, you cannot let your emotions get the best of you.”

Meredith has been working with kids placed ‘under protective measure’ for over 30 years. A child is placed under protective measure when his or her situation becomes unsafe within a household. This can happen due to reasons such as neglect, abandonment, physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, witnessing violence or family conflict.

The Family Guardianship aims to safeguard the well-being of children placed under protective measure and guide families, when possible, toward restoring a safe environment for their children. At times the children can stay at home with the family guardian ‘guiding’ the family, but in severe cases they are placed out of home.

How does one restore safety for a child? Many variables have to be considered; is the child able to get all his basic needs such as food, water and shelter; does the child have access to education; is he receiving proper health care; and is the child getting proper emotional nurturing and stimulation.

### Restoring safety

Many cases within the Family Guardianship Department are due to neglect. Neglect is the ongoing failure to meet any of the abovementioned needs. Meredith: “For example, we have had cases where children were left home alone for days at a time, not receiving proper food, hygiene or supervision. This also leaves children open to other forms of abuse.”

In the case of neglect, Meredith and her team aim to work together with the parents of the child to remedy the cause of the neglect and prevent future incidents. However, this is not an easy task: “On Sint Maarten, most of our neglect cases are linked to poverty. For instance, a single parent needs to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. It is hard to demand that a parent is at home more when he/she needs to work to pay their rent,” Meredith explains.

In this case, restoring safety can include steps such as: encouraging both parents to be more involved, asking extended family to help out and advising the household to make use of available social programs that provide positive parenting classes, meal programs or after-school activities.

In severe cases restoring the safety of a child is also coupled with placing the child in a safe environment, providing needed therapy and medical attention, and ensuring that the child regains a sense of security.

### Delta Method

The Family Guardianship Department has had to deal with as many as 150 cases at one time. However, thanks to the implementation of new regulations, as well as the ‘Delta Method’, their cases have been in steady decline.

The Delta Method helps family guardians to eliminate the developmental threat(s) to the child by setting concrete goals for the family. This is done by formulating the concerns, as well as strengths of the family, translating concerns into possible disruptions to the development of the child, naming desired development outcomes, and then making clear action points with the family.

“Just last week we had a crisis; one of our clients who is 17 was sleeping on the street.”

“Since we have adopted the Delta Method, which is also used in the Netherlands, BES & Curacao, we have been able to close cases more efficiently,” says Cynthia Filemon, Head a.i. of SJIS.

Although the SJIS has seen improvements due to adapting the Delta Method, Cynthia expresses that bigger improvements will only be seen with more governmental support.

“We have been dealing with outdated laws, or lack thereof, in regards to child protection. For example, the judge can stipulate that a parent needs to go to parenting classes; however, it cannot be mandated. This means that in reality we can advise an abusive parent to learn alternative parenting techniques, but he or she can choose not to do this, which is often the case,” explains Cynthia, who has been petitioning to administrators that the laws need to be reviewed.

### SJIS: TWO UNITS

The Foundation Judicial Institutes St. Maarten (SJIS) includes two units: 1. Probation Services, 2. Family Guardianship Department and a Foster Families Central Unit. Sometimes parents are unable to adequately take care of their children. This can happen for a variety of reasons and children become victims of abuse or neglect. If it is beneficial for the safety and/or well-being of a minor, they can be placed under ‘protective measure’ by a judge. The Family Guardianship Department executes the protective measure. This can mean either that they provide guidance to the child and family within their own surroundings, or in specific cases are responsible for placement of the child in a safe environment.



### A leaking pipe

The lack of judicial repercussions for abusive behavior isn't the only challenge SJIS and other child-care entities face on Sint Maarten. "We do not have enough safe housing, care facilities, specialized staff or parenting programs to be able to fully do our job to protect children on Sint Maarten," expresses Cynthia.

Meredith and her team deal with the lack of specialized care daily: "Just last week we had a crisis; one of our clients who is 17 was sleeping on the street. His low IQ and behavioral issues made him a difficult case; he ran away from the few facilities we have available, but as he has not committed a crime, he cannot stay at the Miss Lalie Center. All we can do is our best. When my team gets frustrated I remind them that we are here for the child and we cannot give up."

Both Cynthia and Meredith can never 'clock-out', often staying after office hours: "Our work is underestimated. What happens

when you fix a leaking pipe with the wrong tools? It is going to leak again. We are not trying to fix a pipe, we are trying to protect our children – and our community should view this 'leak' as a crisis."

### Community effort

It isn't only in the best interest of the child to ensure his/her safety, but also for our society. Cynthia stresses: "Child abuse and neglect have been shown to increase the risk of later forms of antisocial behavior, including violence perpetration and crime in adulthood. We notice this firsthand with the adults that we deal with in our probation office."

**"As a neighbor you can talk to parents, offer to share a meal or carpool, or keep an eye on children playing in your neighborhood"**

SJIS messaging always includes: "The more our community gets involved with the well-being of our children the better." In their experience, people often think that they can only report child abuse but the public's role goes further than that: you can talk to parents, offer to share a meal or carpool, or keep an eye on children playing in your neighborhood.

Professionals who work with children have an even bigger responsibility. Especially teachers can play a big role in helping to ensure that a child regains a sense of safety after abuse. They often already have a relationship with parents, making it easier to encourage them to take steps towards improvement within the household. Family guardians try to work together with teachers, mental health care-professionals and social workers, but this cooperation could improve. Lastly, although a much bigger step, foster parents are hardly found within Sint Maarten, something that the SJIS would like to see change.

### Positive outcome

However many challenges the Family Guardianship Department faces, Cynthia and Meredith have seen the positive outcome when parents and the community do prioritize the well-being of a child: “Just a few months ago, the mother of two boys who were under supervision completely turned her life around. She has been going to parental classes, got help from her network, got a job and apartment, and has been actively showing that she wants to be a good parent.”

“One of our children, now a young man, grew up mostly in foster homes. Although he struggled a lot in those years, he got help from various NGO’s and individuals, and now has a stable job and is hoping to save enough to further his studies. A twelve-year-old girl got adopted by a foster family this year. She was placed in the system due to neglect. Although she could not be placed back at home, she was welcomed by a great foster family and is now in safe hands.”

Restoring the safety of a child can be complicated. However, when we all work together, it makes it a lot easier. Meredith: “Just ask yourself: what do I need to feel safe; and then realize that children cannot provide many of those things for themselves. They need their parents, family, teachers, doctors and community to help them.”

## THE DELTAMETHOD: WORKING IN A STRUCTURED WAY ON THE SAFETY OF CHILDREN

### In short

The Delta Method is a working method that was recently adopted by The Family Guardianship Department of the Foundation Judicial Institute St. Maarten. It is being used by family guardians who work with children placed under a protective measure. It concerns kids that are severely threatened in their health or development, for instance in cases of maltreatment, neglect, sexual abuse, abandonment or severe problematic behavior. The most important goal of the Delta Method is to eliminate the developmental threat to the child, by working together with parents, children and the immediate social network. With the help of a well-structured method, professionals and families build an environment in which the child is safe and capable of developing itself. Dutch research (University of Amsterdam, 2010) shows that the implementation of the method helps to shorten the period of the protective measure.

### Approach

Family guardians work according to a four-step procedure. These are:

1. Formulating the concerns, as well as strengths of the child and family, and the family’s view of the problems.
2. Translating the concerns into possible threats to the development of the child.

3. Naming the desired development outcomes.
4. Making clear action points together with the minor, the family or caregivers. The development and safety of the child must always be the leading factor.

### Role of the family guardian

To work with this method, family guardians should be good communicators. They are trained to motivate the child, parents and their social network to actively cooperate. Also, they are capable of clarifying the aim and meaning of the child protection measure. From the first meeting onwards, the family guardian tries to understand the factors that play a role in the threats to the child’s safety (signals and risk assessment). They work together with the family in a respectful, activating, positive and transparent way, paying attention to the wishes and strengths of the family. At the same time, they set clear limits when the safety or development of the child is in danger. Family guardians need to manage the skill of engaging and positioning themselves, and practice distance and proximity within their relationship with the minor and its family system.

Read more: [www.nji.nl](http://www.nji.nl) > Deltamethode (in Dutch)



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## WHY THIS MAGAZINE?

In May 2019, UNICEF Netherlands and Augeo Foundation together did an analysis on child abuse and neglect on St. Maarten. Thirty professionals working in the field of Child Protection were interviewed. Based on the outcome of the dialogues with these professionals, UNICEF Netherlands, Augeo Foundation and the Child Protection Working Group decided to publish a magazine to share knowledge, experiences and best practices among professionals working with children and the general public. This magazine is the first in a series of editions.

## ABOUT AUGEO FOUNDATION

Augeo Foundation believes that children should grow up safely and with love. That is why we work together with professionals, policymakers and volunteers to tackle child abuse and domestic violence as quickly and effectively as possible. If more people see what they can do for a child, we can make a difference for a child's future. With online training, an online magazine and experiences from the Youth Taskforce professionals we empower professionals. We organize support for children and together with municipalities, we conduct research into tackling child abuse in The Netherlands. Augeo Foundation is a non-profit foundation based in The Netherlands that is funded by donations from family assets. We use this independent position to actively implement pioneering improvements and address bottlenecks.

**More information: [www.augeo.nl](http://www.augeo.nl)**

## ABOUT UNICEF NETHERLANDS

UNICEF Netherlands supports the government of St. Maarten in the aspiration to improve the recognition and reporting of child abuse and neglect (CAN), as hurricanes Irma and Maria (2017) exacerbated the pre-existing challenges. UNICEF Netherlands' recovery programme in St. Maarten in 2019 is funded by the Netherlands Red Cross. On the issue of CAN, UNICEF Netherlands engages in a partnership with Augeo Foundation. Augeo Foundation offers technical support.

**More information: [www.unicef.nl](http://www.unicef.nl)**



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