

Final report Emergency Fund vulnerable children

the Netherlands in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

December 2020

What & how

The Covid-19 pandemic

When, in March 2020, the corona Emergency started and all schools closed, a large group of vulnerable children were in danger of being particularly affected. Not only children living in a family with a youth protection measure, but also children in the homeless- or women's-shelter, the asylum seeker centres, foster care were locked up in a vulnerable situation for weeks. Everything stopped, school, contact with care takers as well as social contacts. For example, children in the shelters and asylum seeker centres were barely allowed to leave their rooms, foster children could not visit their biological parents and children with a youth protection measure were missing that one place where they could escape the problems at home, school.

Something had to be done

Augeo Foundation, Stichting Kinderpostzegels and Stichting Het Vergeten Kind decided overnight to create a special Emergency Fund. With this fund they wanted to offer vulnerable children something to soften the lockdown period and reduce stress. Because vulnerable children and their families regularly lack the things they need to learn at home, to relax or to have online contact with their peers, a model with vouchers was chosen. Family guardians or foster care workers could apply for vouchers on the website *www.kwetsbaarthuis.nl*, which made it possible to purchase goods that were most needed by each child.



A flying start

The three initiators, who themselves invested EUR 250,000, approached a large number of funds to participate in the Emergency Fund. Within a short period of time, about 35 funds joined, with a joint contribution of one and a half million euros.

A temporary project and steering group set up the application procedure, arranged the assessment of the applications and brought the Emergency Fund to the attention of youth protection organisations, foster parent organisations, family home parents and shelters. All applications were closely monitored from the outset in order to keep a finger on the pulse: did the fund meet the right needs?



Phase 1 (March-June): games and leisure equipment to get through isolation

In the first period in which the Emergency Fund operated, youth workers could get vouchers from Bol.com (a Dutch Amazon type of internet shop)of 50 euros per child, with a maximum of 100 euros per family or 250 euros per (living) group. With the vouchers, the care workers, in consultation with the children and families, purchased materials to keep children busy during the isolation period: books, board games, active toys, headphones, sports equipment and educational computer games. Some more expensive items were purchased together for a group of children, such as a trampoline, an inflatable swimming pool or - for online education - a laptop, chrome book or tablet. From mid-May onwards, schools and childcare organisations could also apply for vouchers for children they were worried about.

Phase 2 (June-September): shift of emphasis towards activities

Aid workers shared their concerns with the Emergency fund about the upcoming summer holidays: another period in which vulnerable children would have few options. It was decided to shift the emphasis from the purchase of (educational) materials to relaxing activities. This time the Emergency Fund provided 'plumes'; vouchers for days out, cinema, zoo and other experiences, supplemented with Intertoys vouchers for toys. Summer camps, outings and activity days were also organised by the Emergency Fund and its partners.

Effect

What has been achieved and what have we learned?

Almost 50% of the target group were reached

In total, the vulnerable target group of the Emergency Fund consists of 90,000 children. The first objective, reaching out to 20,000 vulnerable children, could soon be adjusted, thanks to the enthusiasm of both funds and youth workers. Already in the first ten days 6,000 vouchers were issued.

In the phase up to the summer, the Emergency Fund approved about 10,000 applications, reaching a total of over 35,000 children. Most applications came from the youth protection sector, followed by foster care, youth care, residential youth care institutions, family homes and organisations for the disabled.

During the second phase, in the summer and beyond, the Emergency Fund reached another 8,000 children with vouchers and activities. In total, almost half of the target group was reached.

Impact phase 1 - partial lockdown: major diversion

In June, at the request of the Emergency Fund, the Verwey-Jonker Institute started researching the significance of the fund for participating children and families¹. The care workers who made an application to the fund, were asked to complete a questionnaire. More than 50% of the almost 3,500 care workers who applied for vouchers in the first phase returned the questionnaire. This is an enormous response and demonstrates the great commitment of the field.

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The children currently have absolutely nothing. No visits from their loved ones, no school, and no daytime activities. Their normal safety structure is completely gone and we're all dependent on each other. The Crisis Fund has put the smile back on their faces. Many children received new items to help them get through the day. This has made this dreadful period pass more quickly for these children.

The researchers conclude that it has been possible to reach the children who were most in need of help from the Emergency Fund. At the time of application to the Emergency Fund, the children were facing various problems. In almost 90% of the applications there was a lot of stress, in almost as many cases there were children's behavioural problems. Other frequently mentioned problems are poverty, behavioural or psychological problems of one of the parents, but also psychological problems of children. Many children also had school arrears. The lockdown exacerbated the problems that were already there. There was also a lot of loneliness: more than half of the children in institutions had to miss their parents, brothers or sisters for a longer period of time, and visits of foster children to biological parents were also halted.

The vouchers, which were described by care workers as a ray of hope in a difficult situation, distracted from the stress; they helped children in an institution, shelter or asylum seeker centre to get out of their isolation.

¹A summary of the report with an overview of the impact achieved, conclusions and recommendations can be found at the end of the report.

The vouchers gave children a sense of visibility and appreciation. As the Verwey-Jonker concludes: 'The children have the feeling: someone is thinking of me. That is almost more important than the gift itself'. Parents and foster parents felt supported and relieved. In addition, the gift moment helped to consolidate the relationship between family and care worker, and to create a positive moment within the family. The assessment of the needs of the children and the families was done by the youth care workers. This proved to work really well.

Care workers, as mentioned earlier, said they were worried about the summer holidays, another long uninterrupted time in an often unsafe home. This was the reason for the Emergency fund to adjust the offer for the summer holidays.

Impact phase 2 - the summer holidays: intensified link

All partners have reported that the activities they have organised during the summer period have had a very positive impact on the children. Often it was the only distraction in a period immediately following the heavy lockdown period. A wide variety of activities were organised throughout the country; from outings and amusement park visits to holiday weeks and workshops focusing on talent and language development.

To name a few examples:

- TeamUp organised extra activities in AZCs such as workshops or clinics,
- the Nidos Foundation organised outings for unaccompanied minor refugees,
- Foster care workers did the same for network foster families and mentors/mates ensured that contact between them and the children remained good during the summer thanks to the outings.
- And, through youth protection workers, pledges were made to families with a youth protection measure.

When organising activities, much attention was paid to the wishes of the children and young people themselves.



The most important effects of the summer activities are: a better bond between care worker and child, more cohesion within the groups, better language development and gaining of new experiences, such as going to a museum, cinema or amusement park for the first time. The care workers also felt better able to keep a finger on the pulse of 'their' children.

How to proceed from here?

Complementary qualities

The three funds at the cradle of the Emergency Fund welcome their unique cooperation. What unites them is the attention they give to children who are in trouble at home for a variety of reasons. Expertise, professional networks and organisational qualities complement each other in a beautiful way: **Stichting Kinderpostzegels** with its programmes offering development opportunities to a large numbers of children growing up in a wide variety of situations, **Augeo Foundation** with online education and support of professionals to tackle child abuse and domestic violence and **Stichting Het Vergeten Kind** with its programmes that ensure that children can be child again through a day out or a short holiday.

The power of cooperation

Because events demanded rapid action, practical and substantive differences between the three funds that normally could have stand in the way of progress were set aside. In times of Emergency, the three partners have proven to be able to react quickly, work well together and enjoy a great deal of trust from care workers, donors and funds. This partnership had an accelerator effect, with much greater reach than they had dared to dream of at the start.

This way, an emergency fund worth one and a half million euros was set up in a pressure cooker. Almost simultaneously vouchers were distributed to the target group, while also listening carefully to the wishes of the children for whom it all started. The experience of the Emergency Fund might be a starting point for more and closer cooperation in the fragmented charity world in the Netherlands. In any case, this cooperation tastes for more. Both care workers and donors of the Emergency Fund are enthusiastic.



Lessons learned

Thanks to its direct relationship with care workers, the Emergency Fund was well placed to reach its target group. The insight that small financial support in an emergency is of great and lasting value to parents and children is also valuable.

There are also lessons to be learned. We had a flying start and in hindsight we should have thought from day one about what to do in a possible next phase - total lock down, partly back to school and/or the summer holidays. And although a crisis cannot be planned, it would be fantastic if the Emergency Fund could involve children even more in organising aid.

Future

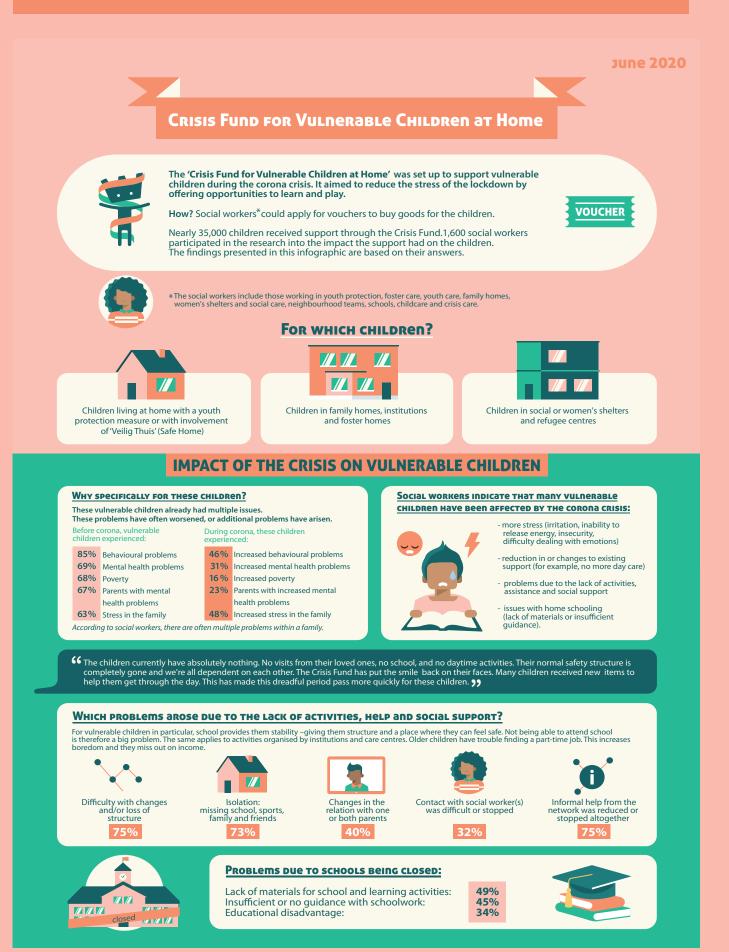
A more permanent focus on the situation of vulnerable children is not a superfluous luxury when we consider that the impact of the coronary measures - the closure of schools, the interruptions in aid, the loss of family contacts and structure - on the lives of this group will only become apparent in the long term. Network foster families in particular need more support. Kinderpostzegels is considering setting up a summer activities fund: with a relatively low amount of money it will invest in a leisure experiences for children and their development helping the relationship within families and between family and care worker. Het Vergeten Kind is busy setting up an expansion of its 'coronaproof' aid offer, making use of its large group of involved volunteers and corporate network, such as a packs to promote contact between children who have been placed away from home and their network. Augeo Foundation plans to support twice a year a group of 1,000 children with a youth protection measure through the Emergency Fund network.

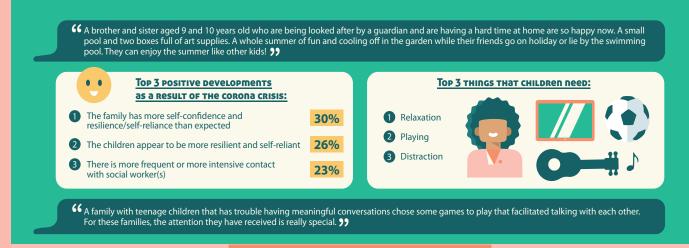


Making a difference

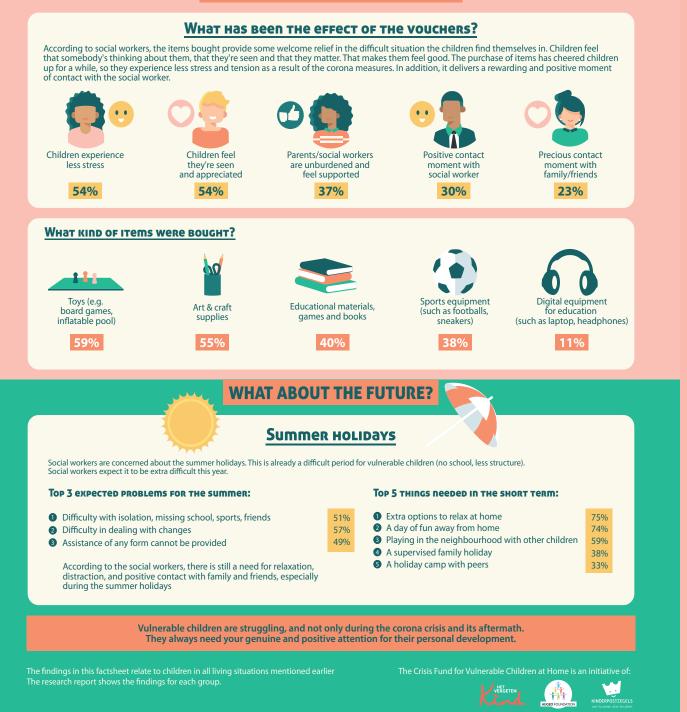
The three funds will be able to find each other in the event of a new school closure. As they did in March, they will then reassess what is most needed at that time. Because, as has become clear: The Emergency Fund can make a difference in emergency situations.

Infographic Summary by Verwey-Jonker Instituut





THE IMPACT OF THE CRISIS FUND





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