



M'Lop Tapang (MT)

Parents' Points of View: The Impact of Special Needs Program Closures Due to COVID-19 (May, 2021)

Introduction:

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on the lives of children and families in many ways. One of the most significant challenges has been the suspension of education programs and families adapting to their children being at home while schools are closed.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cambodia, the government announced the closure of all education and training programs in the country for about a six months in 2020. Classes had resumed by early 2021, but following an outbreak in late February, education programs were once again suspended and remain closed at the time of writing this report. The closures have impacted all of M'Lop Tapang's education and training programs, including our Special Needs program.

M'Lop Tapang's Special Needs program provides daily classes at its Education Centre for children with physical, behavioral and developmental disabilities, offering regular medical care, nutritional support, organized sports and recreational activities, as well as group and individual learning programs. For children unable to attend these daily classes, home visits are provided on a regular schedule that includes social and medical support, physical therapy, and parental education. The program has been operating since 2007 and is the only one of its kind in the Sihanoukville area.



Children attend Special Needs program classes at MT's Education Center prior to COVID-19 closure

The study:

In March / April 2021 a survey was conducted with parents and caretakers of children who had been regularly attending the Special Needs program classes at M'Lop Tapang's Education Center prior to the closure of the program due to COVID-19.

The goal in conducting this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how parents and caretakers felt they, their children, and their families were being impacted by the suspension of Special Needs program classes. Furthermore, we hoped that the findings in this study would help our teams to identify additional ways to provide support to families during the pandemic crisis.

We used a self-created questionnaire and interviews were conducted in the community at the caretaker's home or by telephone.



The Parents / Caregivers Interviewed

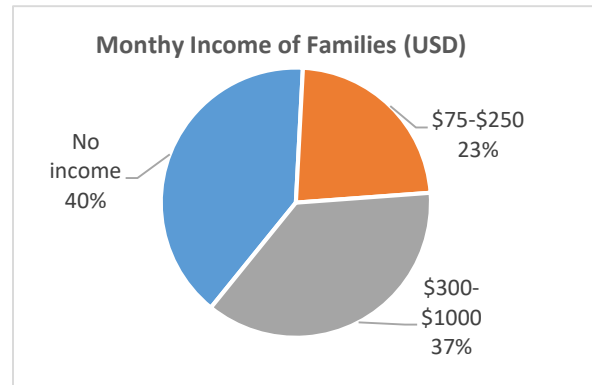
35 primary caregivers of children/youth in MT's Special Needs program were interviewed in this survey.

- 23 (66%) were mothers / 7 (20%) were fathers / 5 (14%) other primary caretakers

The average number of household members in the families interviewed was 6.

The average number of children in these households was 2.

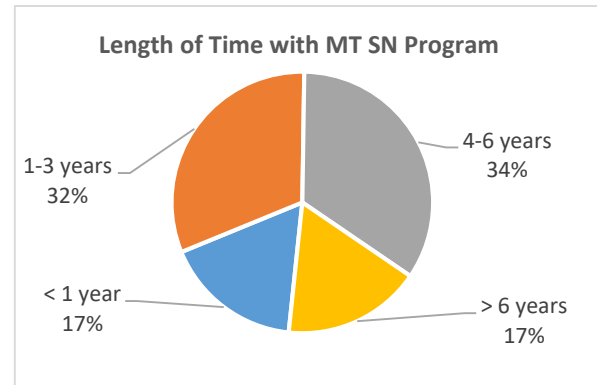
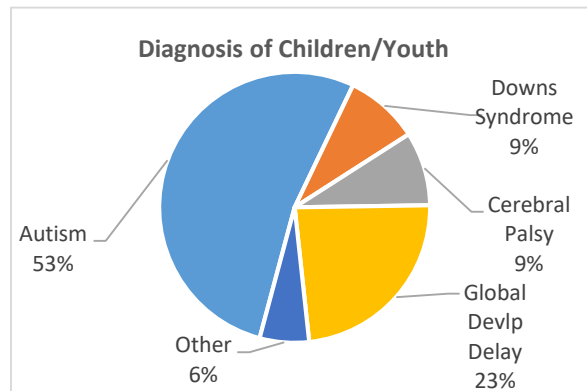
Most of M'Lop Tapang's programs are designed for vulnerable families living in poverty. The Special Needs program is one of the exceptions to this as there are no other similar programs in Sihanoukville that parents of children with special needs can access. This accounts for the range in monthly incomes of the families interviewed. Having said that, it should be noted that a significant number of families interviewed are living well below the poverty line.



The Children of the Caretakers

Each of the caretakers being interviewed had one child in MT's Special Needs program

- 8 (23%) of these children are female / 26 (77%) are male.
- The age range of these children/youth is 3 years old to 22 years old. The average age of these children/youth is 10.3 years old.



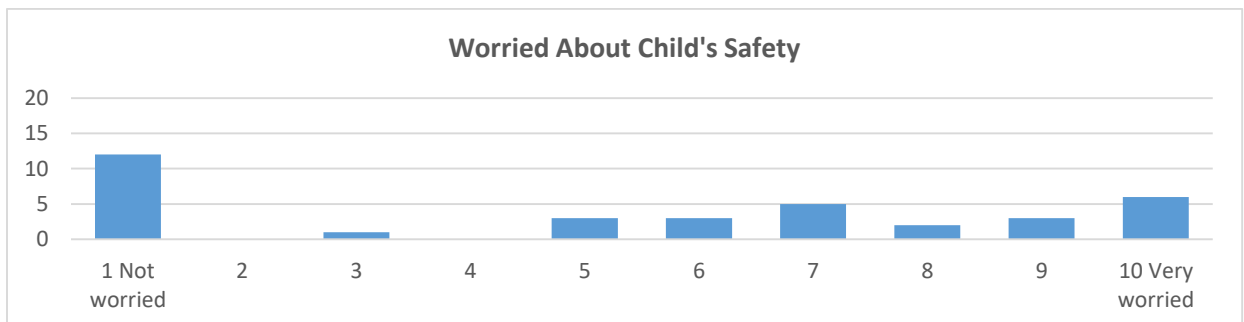
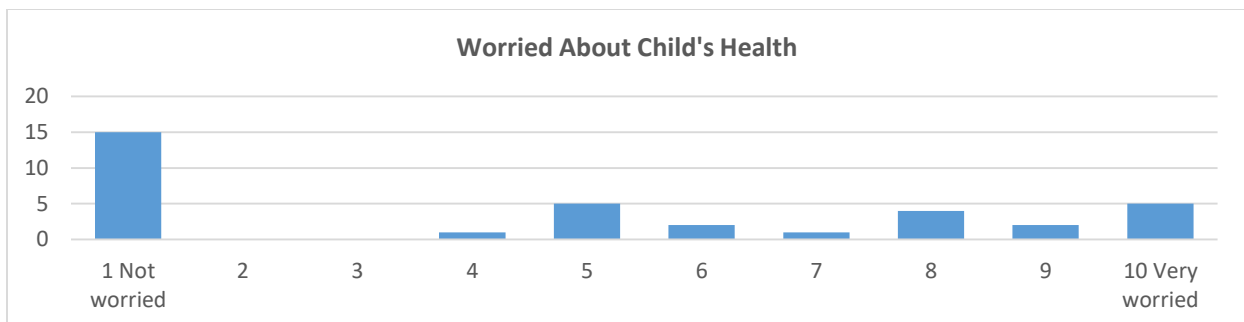
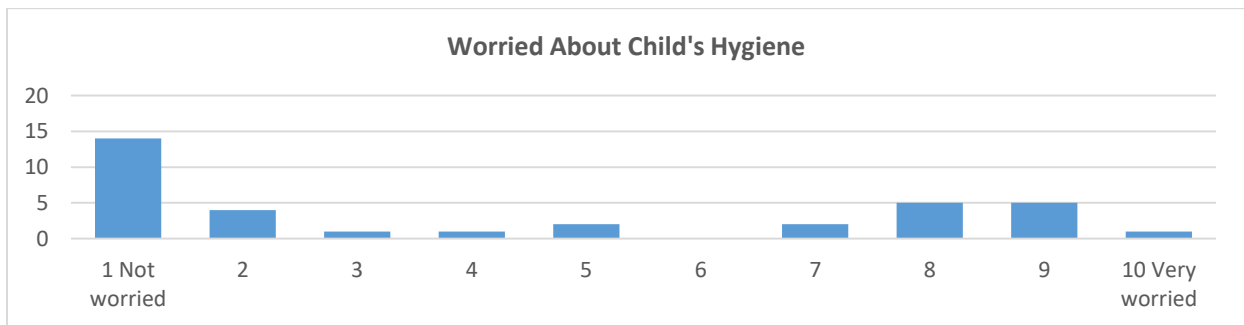


Survey Results

We asked parents/caretakers, using a scale of 1 – 10 ('1' being not worried, and '10' being very worried), how worried they were about their child's safety, health, and hygiene during this period when school programs are closed because of COVID-19 and students are at home.

What we learned is that, although about half of the caregivers interviewed are not very worried about program closure impacting the health and hygiene of their children, for some it was a significant concern. It is notable that more caregivers are worried about the safety of their children.

"It is very stressful because my son runs out and does not stay inside the house. When he is at M'Lop Tapang he is safer." - mother of 14 year old boy

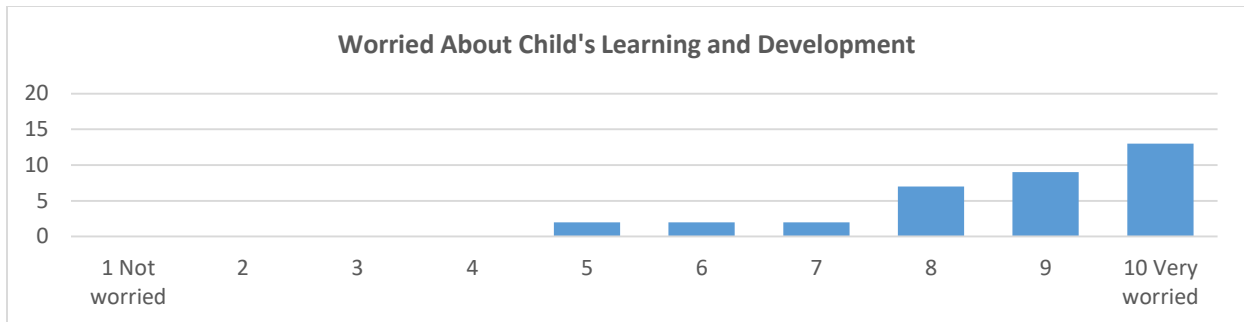


When asked if they worried about their child contracting COVID-19 while the child was at home and not at MT, more than two thirds responded that they were not worried.



While there were mixed responses about the level of parent's concern in regards to safety, health and hygiene, the concern of their child's learning and development was much more one sided.

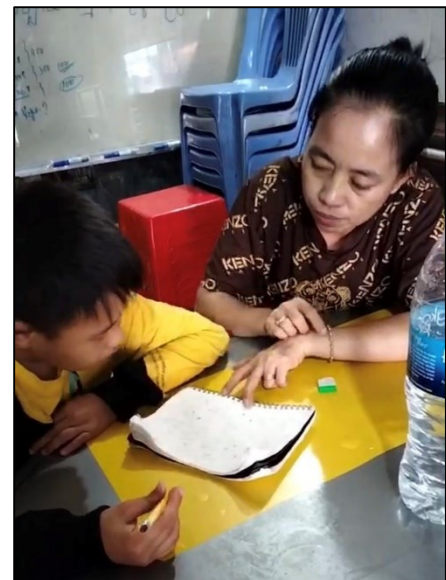
- **97 %** worried that they children would forget what they had learned from MT.



“I am worried that my child will forget what he has learned from MT because the school has been closed for a long time.” – father of 14 year old boy

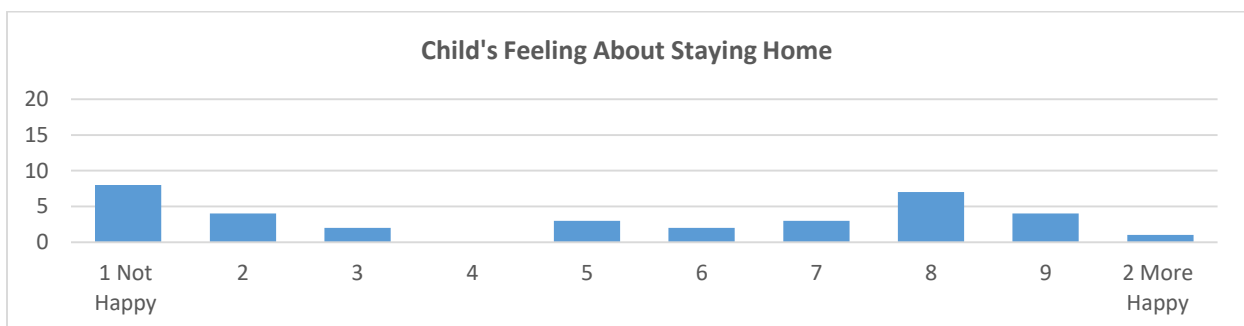
“I am afraid that my child will go back to where he was before.” - mother of 14 year old boy

“My son learns well with his teachers, but he does not concentrate when I am trying to teach him at home.”
- mother of 3 year old boy



Mother reviews lessons with her son at home when program closed at MT

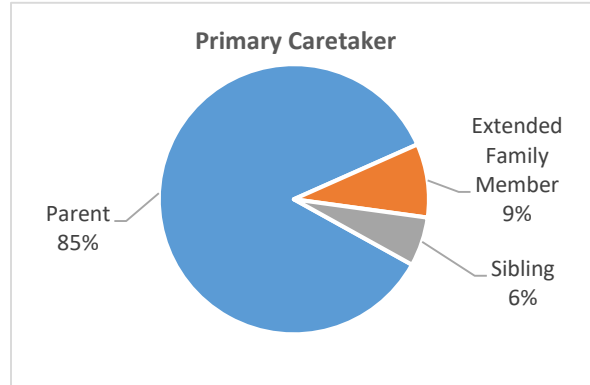
We also asked parents and caregivers how they thought their child felt about staying at home and not going to the program at MT every day. Again, it was a mixed bag; about half responded that they thought their child was happier and half thought their child was not happy about the situation.





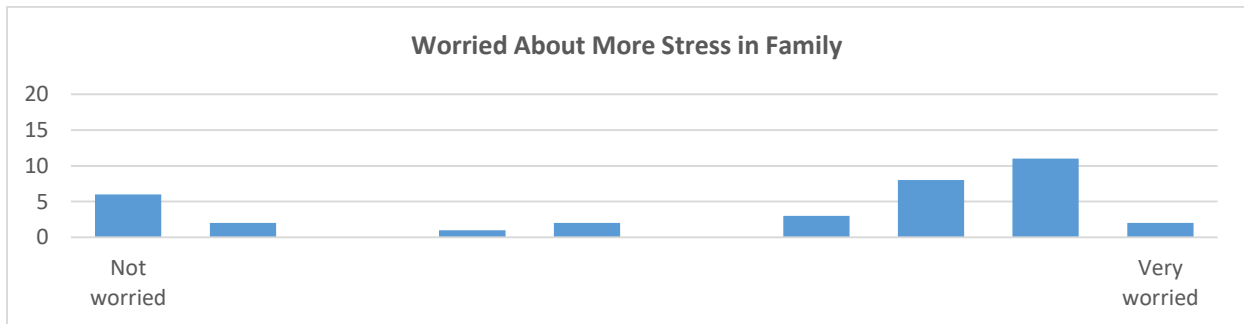
When the child is at home and not coming to MT, most times it is a parent who is taking care of them. Other primary caretakers include adult age extended family members (grandparents) and siblings.

No one reported that their child is ever left alone, but one respondent did state that the primary caretaker during the daytime is a sibling under the age of 15 years old.



“It is really difficult because nobody looks after her, I have her younger brother look after her because her father is in jail and mother ran away.” – guardian of 12 year old girl

A majority of the individuals that took part in the survey reported that they are worried about the increased stress in the family home due to the Special Needs program at MT being closed.



“My child is so mean sometimes and I am worried that he may hurt his younger sibling or grandmother.” - mother of 16 year old boy

“I am so grateful to your Special Needs team that is still coming to visit us during this difficult time. You have supported us with food and when we have been struggling.” - mother of 6 year old boy

26% of parents and caretakers interviewed reported that they have less time for regular household chores such as cooking and cleaning since schools have been closed and their children are staying at home.

“My son cannot do anything by himself. It is really difficult and he needs help from me for everything so it is difficult for me.” – mother of 15 year old boy

Significantly, 54% of interviewees reported that their children staying at home and not attending classes at MT has impacted their household finances. The most common reason stated was the need to buy more food.



M'Lop Tapang teams have been supporting families with emergency food and hygiene supplies since the COVID-19 pandemic began. When asked how the MT team could provide more support to families of children with special needs during this crisis when schools are closed, by far the biggest request was to provide more follow-up, if not in person then by telephone calls and text chats/messages.

Support Requested	
More telephone/text calls by SN Team to follow up	54%
Food support for family	26%
More frequent follow up visits by SN Team to the home	23%
More learning/teaching materials at home	9%
More instruction on how to care for child at home	3%

The final question asked in the survey was if the caretaker knew how to contact M'Lop Tapang if they had an emergency or concern about their child.

- **77%** reported that they would contact MT's 24 Hour Hotline and could recite the phone number when asked.
 - **23%** reported that they did not know how to contact MT.*
- **This was viewed as a teaching opportunity and our staff provided a hard copy card of the Hotline number info.*



Key Takeaways from this Study

Parents and caregivers are worried to different degrees about the health, safety, and hygiene of their children while the program is closed. These should be addressed on an individual case-by-case basis.

A very common concern among parents and caregivers is how the closure of classroom based Special Needs program activities is impacting their child's learning and development. Most are worried that without attending the program their children will regress. Additionally, the closure of the program due to COVID-19 is causing increased stress in many family households. For these reasons it is important that the program resume as soon as safely possible.

Ensuring that all parents and caretakers understand how to contact the MT team in the event of an emergency could with the safety and wellbeing of children and help to reduce stress for the family.

The majority of parents and caretakers interviewed reported that more phone text/calls from the MT team would be helpful during the period when the classroom based program is closed



At home helping with household chores – basic tasks they learned at MT



because of COVID-19. Moving forward, this should be done as soon as possible as it is a very doable and cost effective way to provide support to families.

With 40% of the families reporting that they have no income at present, continued emergency food support is critical for the health and wellbeing of these families and their children.



A few of the children we met at their homes while classroom programs are currently closed.