

"I was
eyes to
the blind
and feet
to the
lame. I
was
father to
the
needy; I
took up
the case
of the
stranger."

Job 29:15-16(NJV)

In Focus

Phyllis Kilbourn

In assessing which children are at risk in a certain area, disabled children are often overlooked. In any area of the world, most villages have at least a few blind, deaf, crippled or deformed children while several communities have a large number as a result of war, natural disasters or epidemics from diseases such as polio.

Imagine a deaf child who has never heard the soothing sound of music, joyous laughter or falling rain. Or a blind child who has never experienced the colors of a flower or a brilliant sunset let alone her parents' or siblings' faces. And what stimulation is there for the child who is both deaf and blind? What kind of mockery awaits the crippled child?

Richard Bransford, a worker at Kijabe's Medical Centre in Kenya, sums up the usual plight of the handicapped child. He states, "In the developing world, many of the disabled are referred to as 'cursed.' They often are a source of shame to their families, their village, and their country. Often they are hidden in their homes, neglected, and without education."

The first impact of disability is isolation. Usually, the disabled child is left to play alone or to stay in the company of adults. The disabled child must constantly struggle for the right to participate in society.

The psychological impact of a disability is readily evident in the disabled child. The trauma can be intensified when the handicap has been inflicted on them need-lessly

or thoughtlessly through acts of violence such as war or a parent's anger (especially in regard to discipline) or neglect in properly caring for the child's health.

As disabled children recognize differences resulting from their disabilities, they often experience and interpret these differences as negatives: places they cannot go, things they cannot do, schools they cannot attend. Often, this attitude results in a very low self-esteem: "If I cannot do all the things the other children can do, I must not be any good." Their feelings of worthlessness are intensified when other persons refuse to let them try. Disabled children may soon believe they really cannot do anything, and give up. Children need a wide range of stimulating experiences for physical and mental development.

Ministry to disabled children must also include their families. It is not easy for families to cope with the basic care of a disabled child. They, too, struggle with their own emotional responses and the limitations the child's disability places upon their family. Guilt, anger or fear are often near the surface. They, too, experience grief, as the limitations imposed by the disability replace the dream of what their child might have become. The death of that dream brings real grief with its anger, denial and, finally, acceptance. We cannot minister to a disabled child without understanding this chronic sorrow and also ministering to the child's family.

As we scan the Scriptures dealing with Jesus' ministry, we learn that ministry to the physically disabled was high on His list of priorities. It also is high on the list of Elizabeth Verssen's priorities. Elizabeth, Executive

Director of National Christian Service, a ministry to the disabled and disadvantaged children of India, pleads with us to not forget the disabled children. She not only paints a picture of their plight but also shares insights from what she has learned while ministering to many disabled children in Southern India.

It was a joy to visit this ministry on my most recent trip to India. Although I had corresponded several times with the founding director, Dr. Joseph Varghese, I was surprised to learn that he, too, is disabled—totally blind. What a source of encouragement he is to children struggling with their handicaps! His is a positive message of God's enabling to rise above any circumstances to fulfill God's plan for our lives.

As you read this article, check your awareness of and response to the needs of the handicapped children in your village or sphere of outreach. For example, is there suitable media available for the blind children? Perhaps tape recordings of Bible stories and songs in the local language or even school lessons on tape or in Braille. Do you make special efforts to include disabled children in church- and community-related activities? Are facilities accessible, enabling handicapped children to participate?

Do parents have adequate support groups to help them deal with the day-by-day care of a handicapped child? Could the church be more actively involved in practical ministries to help the family?

Caring for the disabled provides lots of opportunities for putting into action WEC's core value of compassionate caring.

Remember the Disabled Children too!

Elizabeth Verssen

The children in one of our Life Enrichment classes sang lustily "You are so precious to Jesus," with appropriate actions: smiling, clapping and jumping. After applauding their enthusiastic effort, I asked if they understood the meaning of the word "precious." None of them did. When someone supplied the Malayalam word, smiles of understanding came upon their faces.

Would that people worldwide understood how precious all children, including the handicapped ones, are to the Lord with His all-embracing love. "Let the children come to me," He said while walking this earth.

Dr. Joseph Varghese, Founding Director of the National Christian Services, claims, "A disabled person can function as well as anybody else provided he or she is given appropriate training, assistive devices, alternative techniques and opportunity." These provisos, however, are not being met for most disabled children in developing countries like India. When a country is struggling to advance the living conditions of the general population, how can they even think about improving the lot of their disabled population?

The plight of the disadvantaged child with a disability is sad indeed. A child could be handicapped as a result of a birth defect, an accident, violence or an illness. Among the countless poor in India, many of the handicapped owe their conditions to lack of timely health care. Many spend their waking hours in some corner of a hut, somehow existing. They don't get to attend school, church or other special functions, since they are believed to be omens of ill. Their lives are shattered and hopeless. To see children crawling along the street or walking with a stick for a crutch is a common sight in rural India even in some cities. In other words, there are literally thousands being hidden away in homes because their parents are ashamed of them. Isn't this a tragedy? Some with grotesque disfigurements are sent out on the streets to beg. Still others are purposely mutilated so they can bring in money from begging. Many are abandoned to the street or put to death. To obtain accurate statistics on their numbers is as improbable as it is impossible.

The World Health Organization estimates that one out of every eight to ten persons is disabled. Roughly, 42 percent of that number are children. If the acute social and economic disadvantages of a person are taken into consideration, the number of disabled persons may be many more. For example, physically normal children who have been malnourished in infancy may grow to be mentally underdeveloped

adults through no fault of their own. Similarly, untreated childhood diseases may result in disabilities later on.

BARRIERS TO BE BROKEN

Disabled children face many strikes against them because of their disabilities. These strikes are further multiplied, however, as they live in families and communities that add to their problems through misunderstanding concerning their needs and situations, neglect and even abandonment. The following are some barriers that need to be broken if children are to be fully integrated.

Inaccessibility

Tribal people living high in the hills of India may allow a baby to die when a handicap is discovered at birth. Usually they simply do not feed the infant. They know the child cannot survive the rigorous life he or she would have to lead. In a way we cannot judge them nor can we condone the practice; any spark of God-given life is very precious. We have a number of children in our program who have similarly been trapped because of the inaccessibility of their dwellings.

Liji

Liji, a fourteen-year-old polio victim cannot walk because her legs are so affected. Liji is now getting corrective treatment—casting, calipers and possible surgery under our care—but that doesn't change where she lives. The house is on a steep hill, full of rocks and gravel with no steps (let alone hand rails). At the top, one must walk along narrow dikes to get to the house. No wheelchair could ever go there!

Polio and Cerebral Palsy

India is one of the countries where polio is not yet wiped out. The great majority of children referred to our program for help has suffered polio in early childhood. Polio is still one of the serious causes leading to disability in children. Many children did not receive any immunizations due to fear, ignorance or unavailability of vaccines; they still suffer the effects wreaked on their arms and legs by this viral disease. Surgery and assistive devices can help these children receive the maximum rehabilitation.

Children disabled by cerebral palsy are less in number here than those suffering the effects of polio. (Probably the babies are allowed to die.) These children will remain with us after polio is eradicated and the debilitation of this condition may be even more severe.

Cultural Snags

I'm not competent to discuss authoritatively the cultural and religious beliefs that engulf disabled children in India. The Karmic Philosophy and the belief that a handicap is a punishment upon a person or a family for past sins may keep normally compassionate people from helping the handicapped. The "what's the use" feeling is there. People may not be concerned to see that disabled children have help to develop their full potentials. Education must tackle these attitudes. The belief is also strong that children with crippled legs are mentally retarded or slow to learn. How many wonderful minds, gifts and skills have been lost to humanity by this belief? The human mind is a terrible thing to waste.

Lack of Assistive Devices and Corrective Surgery

We are directly concerned with these two areas in our programs, both in trying to obtain the appropriate devices for specific children and in manufacturing these devices in India. We also are starting a rehabilitation hospital for these children.

Jayashaker

Jayashaker, age 16, now walks straight and tall. When he came to us at age 13, he bent over with each step and braced his knee. The thigh muscle was damaged which left his knee weak. Without the hand support his knee would not lock in place—a post-polio condition. You can imagine what years of bending with each step did to his back. He was fitted with a caliper and special shoes which corrected the situation. His whole personality has been helped as a result. Surgery, however, is often neglected because of poverty, fear and ignorance as well as lack of facilities.

Shame and Emotional Problems

Disabilities of children not only affect their physical bodies but may also cause serious emotional problems. A multitude of

Poverty has been defined as the lack of resources necessary to permit participation in activities, customs and diets commonly approved by society.

feelings such as inferiority, self-revulsion from being disfigured and unattractive, feelings of being unloved and rejected and shame must all be overcome. Counseling and supportive help from parents and teachers, along with good acceptance from peers and the community, are essential.

We conduct two integrated camps for our children and their siblings per annum. Counseling is provided for children and their parents. Forgiveness is taught and the campers are gently introduced to the healing and forgiving love of Jesus Christ.

Poverty

Poverty is a secondary theme for disabled children. We witness the cruel face of poverty here every day, almost everywhere. Poverty has been defined as the lack of resources necessary to permit participation in activities, customs and diets commonly approved by society. Poverty is hardly God's will but rather is propagated by the greed and mismanagement of resources of humankind. Poverty is anti-life and is demeaning. It is death. In Proverbs Agur states, "... give me neither poverty nor riches! Give me just enough to satisfy my needs! For if I grow rich, I may become content without God and if I am too poor, I may steal and thus insult God's holy name" (Proverbs 30:8-9, The Living Bible).

Poverty especially affects handicapped children as it denies them the treatment, assistive devices, education, security and accessibility they need to survive and succeed. Can they succeed in life? Of course they can! They only need consistent, timely and effective help. Poverty is the major stumbling block for children needing to overcome major handicaps.

I visit the homes of almost all the children we support—disabled and disadvantaged. It is and will ever be a shock to see how they live in huts and structures made of mud-balls and thatched roofs—some of them falling down, some of them leaking. Many have no windows. Most have dirt floors with only one or two rooms. The great majority have no

furniture at all. Compare that with the luxurious living accommodations in the west!

INTERVENTION: INTEGRATED PROGRAMS

Along with medical care, including physiotherapy where needed, the children are provided with stimulating learning activities at Life Enrichment Centers. Classes in language, school subjects, social skills, art, songs and motivational programs are taught at the Center. Spiritual nurture is provided through Bible stories, music and related activities. Children in these programs include the disabled children, their siblings and other needy neighborhood children.

Facilitators must be trained to teach the children to accept one another whether they are disabled or not. Children do this naturally when the program is positive, interesting and the leaders loving. They must be taught healthy learning habits and social skills. They should be given a nutritious meal. They also must be introduced to the love of Jesus Christ and His saving grace.

CHALLENGE

Disabled children desperately need love, faith and hope. They need education, rehabilitation, corrective treatment, assistive technology, a barrier-free environment, care and concern. Most of all they need to know Jesus' love that can transform them from the inside out, providing them with everlasting hope.

Whether we are ministering to children of war, children engulfed in poverty or disabled children, the fact is well known, but often forgotten, that mission to these is indeed costly. If the gospel cost Jesus His life, then surely that same gospel will also cost us dearly. As we love, serve, help, give and live with children in need, they will see love in action and through us God will act to bring solutions to these very desperate situations.

As we think and plan for children in need throughout the world, let us not forget the disabled children!