

Arise, cry out
in the night,
as the
watches of
the night
begin; pour
out your
heart like
water in the
presence of
the Lord. Lift
up your
hands to him
for the lives
of your
children, who
faint from
hunger at the
head of every
street.

Lamentations 2:19

In Focus

Phyllis Kilbourn

100 million... 142 million... 167 million... UNICEF's estimated count of street children continues to climb daily.

As long as homes continue to be torn apart and poverty makes daily living a fight for survival, children will be placed at risk of calling danger-laden streets "home." As situations worsen, UNICEF predicts the number will rise to 200 million by the year 2000.

These numbers, however, must not be seen as stark, overwhelming figures. Rather they must be interpreted into real flesh and blood children—children having a giant-sized hunger to be loved, to belong, to feel special, to be valued and to feel wanted. Children who have been robbed of their childhood dreams, longings, expectations and hope. Children who are being kept away from the loving embrace of Jesus as they fall prey to the violence, turmoil and exploitation that engulfs them. What a mission field! And workers can find these precious, needy children whatever ministry they engage in.

Several projects for street children have already been launched and others are in the planning stage for Rainbows workers: South Africa, Russia, a city in Asia, Cambodia, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico... This newsletter focuses on some basic intervention principles to stimulate your thinking as you

develop these vital centers of refuge and hope or as an evaluation tool for existing projects.

Research is a vital tool to get your project off to a great start. Too often workers are overwhelmed by the children's needs and want to act immediately to rescue them. Although research takes time, it results in more long-term benefits for your ministry and for the children. It is crucial that you know the children and their living environment. Some vital questions you will want to discover answers for include:

- Which groups of children are most at risk?
- Which groups of children are receiving the least help?
- What groups are already working with these children? What services are they providing? Can you network with them?
- Which of these at-risk groups are you best able to help?
- What skills are needed on the local job market? (Vital to know for vocational training!)
- What is the local image of street children?
- What further information is needed about these children before starting to plan a project?

To do research doesn't mean you should present yourself to the children armed with a recorder or clip board! If you do the children will not only be wary of you but they also will not open up to talk about their real felt needs. Children need time to develop a trusting relationship. It is far better to build a bridge to

the children with a simple way of attracting their attention such as a frisbee to toss around or a guitar-led songfest. Hanging around with the children over a period of time, joining in their games or quietly talking with them will open the door to deeper sharing.

Providing a basic service for the children also can be a real door-opener. One group in the Philippines noticed that children had to buy water by the glass. This meant that they drank less than they needed. So the project arranged for barrels of water daily. The children could drink and even wash their hands. Slowly they began to drift in and came to know and trust the workers. Through conversations with the children, the workers discovered that their first priority was simply to have a place to rest out of the sun and a flat place where they could play.

Project workers cleared the area around their building and enclosed it with a fence of discarded bed springs. Attracted by footballs and simple games, the children began to flock in.

The principles of intervention planning for street children are by no means exhaustive! As you discover effective ways of establishing street children's projects or gaining the children's trust and confidence, share them with your fellow workers through the Barnabas newsletter! We can all learn from one another's practical experiences.

Up and Running:

Effective Street Children's Projects

Phyllis Kilbourn

The following principles will help you launch an effective intervention program for children. The principles deal with issues that you will need to address as they relate to your own cultural context. It is vital to get local church and community leaders on board, taking ownership in the project and becoming actively involved. They can help you have a culturally relevant program.

I. Target Prevention

Finding solutions to family problems can prevent children from being forced onto the streets or sold into a life of prostitution. Identifying vulnerable children and their families must always be a top priority. Help those at risk to identify the source of their problems and seek appropriate assistance. Families must be helped to cope with their living situations. This process may require helping them acquire the necessary skills to earn a living or strengthening disintegrating family life. If the family cannot be held together, the child should have viable options other than hitting the street.

II. Plan Community-Based Programs

Community ownership of programs for street children is a must where possible. Usually, this plan can be worked out through the local church. Once a community embraces ownership of a project, it is much more likely to succeed. Community ownership often opens up many vital resources for project development.

For a community program to be effective, street workers must be sensitive to the local culture and values of the community. Community leaders will have valuable insights to contribute. They also can be an asset to prevent ignorantly breaking laws or causing legal problems.

III. Keep Projects Simple and Indigenous

The number and problems of children are too great to allow for a few extravagant programs. In the street context, the "less for more" principle must determine our practice—less investment to reach more children. Simple projects run by local resources will allow local churches to run the project even if overseas workers are not present.

Research local resources such as churches or community centers. Often buildings can be "borrowed" during night hours, even for feeding programs. There may be derelict buildings that can be repaired or rooms in places such as health centers that can be used. Involve families and community leaders as resources. Local

organizations or the business community may be glad to provide assistance—especially if it can be written off as a business expense.

IV. Understand Your Primary Resource: The Children

Take time to get to know and understand the children before starting a project for them. Your first task will be to determine their needs and no one knows that better than the children. Do they really need food? Maybe they're not hungry. Maybe their resourcefulness enables them to meet some of their basic needs. They are the experts and know what are their deepest concerns, problems and needs. Unless you target their concerns in your intervention planning, they will not be too keen to listen to what you have to teach or provide. Once an understanding of the children and their needs is gained, children can be used as peer educators.

V. Beware of Creating Dependency and Special Groups

Be cautious about, for example, separating girls from boys when it comes to offering project services. Many projects tend to favor girls, creating a feeling of dependency. When you make differences, have a valid reason for doing so and discuss this action with the children. For example, it usually is not wise to break up "gang families" by limiting a project to children of a certain age. These "families" have bonded to one another and are very loyal to each other. They don't need to suffer the loss of a second family.

VI. Remove Obstacles

If workers are not careful, their own attitudes can become an obstacle to effective ministry with street children. Workers must be able to look beyond the dirt, the lice, the rebellion and the revulsion of

the child's lifestyle—loving and valuing them as Jesus did.

Workers cannot expect children to change their lifestyle if they have no sense of their self-worth. And children will not gain this valuing of themselves unless respect is consistently expressed to them. Street children should not be seen as passive recipients of care. They are survivors in their own right and must be respected as such. Children also must learn that in God's eyes they are precious and of utmost worth.

VII. Utilize a Multi-level Approach

No one strategy will work for every child. Different approaches will be needed through various phases of rehabilitation. You will need to start with a low-structured program such as a drop-in center. Children who have grown accustomed to an unstructured environment on the street will find it difficult to adapt to structure at first. Structure, however, is vital for the children's rehabilitation, discipline and training. Structure can be increased through night shelters, day programs and, finally, into a 24-hour structured program.

VIII. Provide Alternatives

Street life can become an addiction. To overcome this dependence, children must be given a challenging alternative to street life. Along with the hardships and dangers of street life, children enjoy the benefits: bonding to friends, sense of pulling together, and a sense of belonging and being understood within the relationships they have formed.

IX. Examine Your Motivation

Allowing the vulnerability of the children to satisfy one's emotional needs must be avoided.

Build a bridge to the children with a simple way of attracting their attention such as a frisbee toss or a guitar-led songfest.

Workers must go beyond feelings of mere pity to a genuine compassion that enables them to identify with the children's feelings and needs.

X. Investigate Networking

Networking conserves limited time and resources. Networks also enable workers to research available resources that may already be in place. Through networking, opportunities are provided for mutual sharing of resources and experiences, thus avoiding duplication of efforts. Networking also gives opportunities for feedback and evaluation.

XII. Plan for Reintegration

Returning children to their families, where possible, must be the ultimate goal. Street workers can be the catalyst for necessary change in the families so this can occur. This strategy will require addressing the root causes of existing problems such as the need to empower families to care for the children or counseling in cases of parental abuse. In our Russian project, for example, at least half of the 80,000 street children could be returned to their homes if parents were not alcoholic and abusive. Obviously, the parents need help with their alcohol problems, addressing the root issues that led to this problem. Working with families must always be a part of our intervention work.

Often, however, reconciliation is not possible to achieve. Children are just too emotionally scarred. In these incidents, alternative "family" must be provided through adoption, foster care or the church finding creative ways to be family for the children.

XIII. Voluntary Participation

A street child's most valuable possession is his or her independence. Despite the disadvantages, children often enjoy coming and going as they please, not being controlled by an adult. Thus any project for real street children has to address their tendency to run away from problems instead of discussing and solving them. To effect change will mean a voluntary participation in the project. Children must feel they are taking charge of changing their circumstances—not being coerced. Because they often reject authority figures as hypocritical and punitive, voluntary attendance is an essential attraction.



Lord, let me feel Thy burden for
the lost,
A shepherd's heart that counts not
pain or cost.
I look beyond life's shallow quest
for fame,
And find Thy cross, O Christ, my
greatest gain.
No calling here on earth could
higher be
Than the command to feed these
lambs for Thee.

Lord, help me see each child
through shepherd's eyes,
Tune thou my heart to hear the
lost one's cries:
Cleanse me from sin and all that
would offend
These little ones whom angel hosts
attend.
Before Thy throne I pray on
bended knee,
Oh make me fit to lead these
lambs to Thee.

—W.C. Greiner

May be sung to the tune of "Be Still My Soul."
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