

ABSTRACT STREET CHILDREN FINLAND

A Global View of Street Children in the Year 2,000.

The author begins by defining street children. He does this by placing them in the larger category of children in particularly difficult circumstances, and in relation to how childhood of both genders is defined in different cultures. He also says there are a variety of ways in which children come to the streets. In addition to abandonment and abuse these include war and natural disasters as well as culturally appropriate child rearing. He distinguishes between working and street children. The latter he says are children who take on adult roles at a time when from their society's perspective they are too young to be adults. The families of street children vary considerably, but many of them are coping adequately with poverty, encouraging their male children to find a way to help their families economically, while teaching their female children to typical female roles and protecting them from the vagaries of the streets. Because poverty is so important to street children in the developing world, the author notes that there are differences between street children in the developed and developing world. The author believes that the major problems of street children can be resolved through changing societal attitudes toward them. He concluded by offering several practical suggestions for working with street children.

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A WORLD WIDE VIEW OF STREET CHILDREN IN THE YEAR 2000

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INTRODUCTION

This talk begins by putting the topic, "A global view of street children in the year 2000" in perspective of children that UNICEF refers to as being "in particularly difficult circumstances". The term describes children whose suffering indicates the highest risk to mental health, and includes children traumatized by war, natural and technological disasters, and those who bring us here today, the street children. In the last 15 years since UNICEF began using the term "children in particularly difficult circumstances", the kinds of experience that children on the streets have had has changed. There are now children who have been war and disaster victims for example who are living on the streets. And of late there is the serious problem, particularly in some cultures of children in the streets who have AIDS or children on the streets who are orphaned because of AIDS. These children are not the ones that UNICEF used to refer to as street children. Nor are they characteristic of the children that UNICEF now refers to as street children. Street children from their perspective have suffered from prolonged deprivation or family violence at home and are poor, and therefore forced to go into the streets to earn money. They are often combined with working children whose labor exploitation can be excessive. The point is that we need to be careful about who it is we are talking about when we use the term street child. In fact as we talk about the differences between street children in the developed world and those in the developing world, we will see that all street children do not come from impoverished families.

The difficulty of understanding the origins and psychology of street children can be seen in an example of some of the children I have been recently working with in Ethiopia. In 1991, the 30 year war ended, (at least for the time being, it has since resumed) and Eritrea became independent from Ethiopia. All Ethiopians living in the new territory were made to leave. In fact the women who were considered Eritreans, even though they were married to Ethiopians were placed into a horrendous dilemma by being forced to make a nearly instantaneous decision. They could stay in Eritrea with their families of origins, but this meant saying good-bye to their husbands and children who were considered enemies in Eritrea, or they could join their husbands and children on the long uncharted march back to Ethiopia through the Danakil Depression. In the Danakil Depression there is no vegetation or water, and temperatures reach 140 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. The journey was even worse than everyone feared. For those who walked, the important thing was to make progress. However slowly they moved, it was always necessary to move forward. After the early morning hours, the heat beat down, and the wind began to blow. Before the middle of the day the marchers shuffled, and suffered in silence. For many, their feet gave out and they tied cardboard on them so they could carry on. The sun would not relent. As they scanned the sky for relief planes, they kept walking. They tried not to look at the old, the infirm, or the small children whose parents could no longer carry them, because they knew they could not help them, nor watch their agony, nor

participate in their death. Many of these survivors are now living on the streets, are they victims of war, or street children, or both?

To make matters more difficult the street children's victimization cannot be understood only by measuring the degree to which they have been abused or neglected. Staying for a moment with the example of children who have been involved in war from Ireland to the Middle East to the Soweto in South Africa for example we can see that in some cases, active participation in war has improved a child's mental health. This view of course depends upon whose side you are on, and in any event from my view any child who is on the streets after living through a war is deserving of help.

One place to start figuring out who are today's street children is with the definition of childhood. Many people in the West have a concept of childhood based on an ideal child who is seen as innocent and in need of constant attention. Although this child might commonly be found in certain cultures, to incorporate this concept of children across cultures poses problems. In fact the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, which has incorporated into international law the inalienable rights of all children, making this Western standard the world's standard and as we will see this can be problematic.

There are many instances of what appear to a Westerner to be unusually harsh forms of training for early independence in the developing world. Many 10 year old children, are for example expected (and are quite capable) to earn a living, take care of their own basic needs and contribute to the general welfare of their family, yet they are not (and perhaps should not be) given the privileges and responsibilities of adults. Is their society in compliance with international law? Are they abused? Are they street children?

When people of material comfort work with street children many preconceived ideas about children, which of course are ethnocentric and filled with morality, can be challenged. For example, it is far too easy for a person from the West to use Western morality and assume that the parents of street children are abusive. Whereas in the West abusive parents are seen as having mental disorders, and they abuse in ways, which deliberately hurt the child in non- Western cultures abuse comes less from parents than from society. Take for example, the numerous instances of how political contexts, invoking the "superior interests of the state", have led to the most painful forms of child abuse. During the "Dirty War" in Argentina children were tortured in front of their parents in order to motivate the parents to offer information to the state. Children in Iran were given the status of martyrs after serving as human shields in war against Iraq. In these cases abuse comes under state authority.

The importance of the state is also evident in the case of China's one-child policy. Children born to families that already have a child are "out of plan" amount to nearly 40% of the annual births. Yet, by virtue of the state's policy they do not officially exist. Hidden by parents who fear sanctions for having an excess birth, an unknown number remain unregistered, and therefor deprived of social services. As a result of the one child policy, the gender distribution has been modified by the increase in the level of female

infanticide and differential abortion. Thus, while Chinese parents positively desire a child's birth, the birth is simultaneously defined by the state in stigmatizing terms. This is another example where child abuse, which leads to street children is not solely the result of the wrongdoing of a few psychopathological parents, but of a state policy, resulting in wide spread problems.

DEFINITION OF STREET CHILDREN

Having mentioned all of these caveats we are ready to examine the figures of UNICEF. For many years they have said that there were 300 million street children in the world. This figure defines street children according to two dimensions, the time spent in the street and the absence of contacts with responsible adults. In short their definition characterizes street children as prematurely living and working without parents, a bit like premature adults. I believe under their figures, street children are essentially of a different category than child war victims, or children who have been victimized by disasters even though many of them end up in the streets.

What UNICEF has in mind under this definition is that street children come from poor families, almost always headed by women living in urban areas of the developing world. I will follow this general definition in this talk, although I want to add a third dimension, one that makes it possible to understand street children's survival strategies. To do this is to take the child's world view into account. When we do this street children emerge as social actors who develop a specific "microculture" that comes from balancing what they need to survive with wide-spread cultural reactions that often impinge upon them.

Using the child's subjective experience breaks down the monolithic view that presents street children mainly as victims of abuse or neglect, or as delinquents ready for re-education. It also helps us look more into their strategies for coping. For example, in one study of street children in Guatemala "living conditions on the street [were] often better than those at home." The malnutrition was worse among working children living with their parents than among street children living on the streets. The same in South Africa where street children ate better as well as escaping the daily abuse they faced at home. These positive coping strategies have been found in many cultures. In Brazil street children had a higher degree of intelligence, and were less likely to abuse drugs than their poor stay at home counterparts. In Bogota, Colombia street children were found to immerse themselves in a network of caring and supportive friendships. So it is possible that instead of succumbing to abuse or neglect, becoming a street child might also be a move toward independence, even if premature and filled with difficulty.

In order to distinguish between poor working children and street children UNICEF uses the words "in" and "of" the streets, the former are the working children the latter are the street children. This is somewhat confusing because they are not two separate groups. Street children frequently move between the streets and their homes, depending upon such practical factors as seasonal differences in the weather, the changing family dynamics in the home, the availability of friends on the streets, the degree to which the

police are harassing street children, and the comparative economic conditions of the home and the streets.

Rather than being abandoned, street children almost always leave home in a measured manner, initially staying away for a night or two, then step by step spending more time away from home. Gradually the amount of time they spend with other children increases, yet contrary to common belief they rarely totally break family ties. As many as 90% of street children in many developing cultures maintain contact with their families, and most of them contribute a portion of what they earn to them.

These factors make it difficult to see street children and working children as two distinct groups. It is probably more accurate to see them along a continua. Today I will focus less on the end of the working children who while living at home are exploited in the work place either because they are too young to be working or because their working conditions are unsafe or exploitative. India and several other Asian countries have often been the brunt of public exposure of this, I am thinking of the children forced to make carpets for example, and who as a result lose their health and childhood. So I am not speaking of poor children who are forced to earn something so their families can eat even though the line between child labour, which might be seen as abhorrent in the West and child exploitation in the developing world is not easy to manage.

Who then are we talking about when we use the term street children? We are talking about young children, too young from their society's perspective, who are living without parental or adult supervision in the cities of the developing world. This is still too general. It is far too common for example to refer to street children, instead of street boys and street girls, and thus the differences between the genders are minimised. The predominance of street boys, 90% in many African countries, over 80% in Jamaica and other Caribbean countries, and more than 75% world wide is particularly important since in most other cultures girls are more likely to be abandoned and abused than boys. If being a street child (of either gender) is the result of neglect or abuse then one would expect a much higher proportion of girls.

THE FAMILIES OF STREET CHILDREN

In order to talk further about this gender bias it is necessary to mention a bias in describing the families where street children allegedly come from. These biases are apparent in the three common hypotheses that have been advanced about the origins of street children. These are (1) that urban poverty leads to a breakdown of family and moral values, (2) that street children come from aberrant families who abandon, abuse, or neglect their children, and that (3) street children result from the adverse effects of modernisation. Note that all point to family dysfunction as the major reason for the existence of street children.

I recently visited a mother of four boys and two girls who lived with four of her six children in one room no bigger than a small bedroom in a middle class home. The room

was divided by two blankets hung up by clothes pins. Behind one blanket was the mother's loft, behind the other, three levels of shelves, each of which was used for a bed. In one corner was a small one-burner propane stove that was surrounded by two pots and a stool. The only source of light in the house was from the front door. Open sewage ran from the front door, through the walkway, down to the front of the house, where it met the drainage from other homes.

The woman was nearly able to support herself and her children by selling illegal beer. She never attended school, had no job skills, and was illiterate. Her two oldest boys, half-brothers well into their teens, both lived and made a living on the streets. They came home periodically, usually with some gift, and were very welcome. Their mother had taught them that the time they could stay at home without making a contribution ended shortly before puberty. The male children accepted this. They preferred the streets to their homes, particularly when they could come home when they needed to.

One cultural interpretation of this mother's situation would describe her as irresponsible and immoral. However, she can also be seen as coping adequately. She taught her two oldest boys to make their own way, she found a means to feed the other four children at home, and fulfilled her hopes of educating as many of her children as possible by using the sale of illegal brew to pay the children's school fees.

I have attended many meetings concerning street children, meetings, which I could call "what to do with street children"? They are often comprised of international and governmental organisations and NGO's working with street children and are the meetings are under the direction of high level officials. The results invariably point out that the numbers of street children are rising and that the reason for their increasing numbers is "broken families, single parenthood, and irresponsibility among parents ". The commonly accepted view that parents (and not poverty) are to blame for their children escaping to the streets contributes to the burdens the children must bare.

To pejoratively label these families, in large part because the mothers have developed their own cultural criteria for supervision and protection of their children which is different than those espoused by the middle and upper social classes, is to compound rather than solve the problem. Not only does the pejorative attitude condemn the hard effort of mothers, it dismisses the fact that unmarried mothers can raise children without a husband, as well as discounting the judgement of street children who have left unhealthy homes, such as girls who have been physically or sexually abused.

I contend that the cultural notion, which claims that single poor mothers are, by virtue of being single and poor, irresponsible and incapable of raising moral and productive children, represents a culturally ethnocentric point of view. Among the families that produce street children there are a wide variety of competencies and for the most part the families are adequately coping with extreme poverty.

As we begin to talk about street boys and street girls, rather than street children, then the

notion of erroneous notion of family deviance become much easier to see. I want to suggest that most (but not all) street boys are taught by their mothers to cope with the necessity of having to make do in a very limited economic environment by becoming independent at a far earlier age than the dominant society deems appropriate. Thus when compared to other poor boys and to the other boys in the family he street boys are the more resilient, the less resilient boys being unable to leave home. The opposite situation exists for street girls. Mothers teach girls how to cope with the vagaries of poverty by staying at home, and out of the streets. Thus, street girls (for the most part) are often more psychopathological than their sisters who stay at home.

Consider Pleasant, a mother of a street child in one our studies, but someone who I believe fits the mode in many cultures. She was 28 years of age and had been married by common law to a night watchman for five years. Together they had four children (three boys and a girl) whom they supported until about two years ago, when he began like the majority of other men in his culture, to drift away from his family. To Pleasant this did not come as a surprise, "this is what most men do". By the time he left completely she had developed strong ties to other women in her neighbourhood whose husbands had also left them. ("This is what women do.") These women helped each other with many things, including, when necessary, with food and gaining access to medical care.

By the time Pleasant's oldest boy, Mbisa, had his sixth birthday he was accustomed to playing in the streets with older boys in the neighbourhood. Mbisa had plenty of time to practice taking care of himself as his mother rarely supervised his whereabouts by keeping him within sight or shout. After his father left (and the household income dropped) the boy began to drift further from his home and go into other neighbourhoods to park cars, clean windows, and find other sources of income which he brought home to his mother's great delight. Pleasant worked on and off as a domestic worker, and showed her oldest daughter, Dominion how to take care of household chores. By the time Dominion was seven years of age she would fetch water, make fires, and cook most meals.

When Pleasant and Mbisa were bringing home income there was enough money to pay, at least on occasion, for school fees for the two younger boys. When, Dmisa, a man she had known from her up-country community moved in with Pleasant their combined incomes kept the two younger boys in school for longer periods of time, and even allowed Mbisa to back to school.

Pleasant knew of the ups and downs of a woman's economic and romantic situation. She was as aware that her boyfriend would move out, (or that she would kick him out) as she was of the demise in the relationship between herself and her common law husband. She knew what the economic implications of these changes would be. Without additional family income the two younger boys would have to leave school and go to the streets like Mbisa to find some income. As she told us, only complete financial destitution or the utter demise of her mental health would lead to sending Dominion to the streets. (Some women did have daughters begin in the streets, but an older child supervised the

daughters, and the mother would make every effort to see that her daughter was not abused.) By understanding how women like Pleasant, in the context of their positions as the heads of impoverished households, cope with poverty and with the men they live with is it possible to understand the mental health of street boys and girls.

The family dynamics of the genders are substantially different. At 12, or 13, or 14, years of age a boy's body image changes to that of an adult. The public no longer perceives them as cute and worthy of pity, but instead they are looked upon as dangerous. This public perception forces the boys who beg, or who do such make work jobs like cleaning car windows or helping park, or look after parked cars into the same kind of work as other poor adult males. This included work for trade, piece meal work, or intermittent salaried employment.

Girls began street life much later than boys, usually not before they are 10 years of age. Even though they may appear to be alone, they are most often being supervised by an older sibling. As girls became pubescent they are perceived (and evaluated) in sexual terms. By the time they are young women they follow in their mother's footsteps by having children, often many and by different men, who as a rule do not view them as legitimate wives, and thus not worthy of continued financial support.

Because boys are expected to bring income into the house, and thus go to the streets to do so, while girls are expected to stay at home and help out with the household chores, the street boys and street girls relate to their families of origin differently. It is common for street boys to remained connected to their mothers, indeed they often contribute part of their incomes to them. The girls because they are on the streets and not in the home often have more difficult and distant relationships with their families of origin.

Taken together, all of the above information suggests that street boys commonly are on the street because they have been brought up to be independent while street girls are on the streets because they are fleeing a very difficult situation. Their mental health is therefore considerably worse than that of the boys. Considering that all over the developing world as many 90% of street children are male we can say that contrary to popular opinion the vast majority of street children are not psychopathological, or otherwise delinquent and drug abusing. Many have developed adequate coping strategies, which allow them to function at least as well as their poor counterparts who pass less time in public view. These coping strategies include finding a niche in the economic market, which gives them sufficient income to eat and clothe themselves. They are also able to find and take advantage of programmes that serve them, being sufficiently informed about their physical health to stay reasonably healthy, forming close friendships with peers, and maintaining some form of connection to their family or origin.

SOME COMPARISONS BETWEEN STREET CHILDREN IN THE DEVELOPED AND DEVELOPING WORLD

Before I go on to the important task of understanding how street children are of both genders are perceived by the public and how these perceptions influence their lives I want to mention something about street children in the developed world. I do this because the reasons for being on the streets, and their family dynamics are so different.

In the developed world, one quickly notes that there are more female than male street children and when one looks into the background of these children, one discovers that they many do not come from poor one parent family. Instead their origins are often middle class and their family structure is what might be considered the ideal nuclear family, with two parents and a couple of siblings. In these cases there are two factors which push the children out of their families. One is the notion of abuse that I presented at the beginning of the talk. At home these children live under abuse that comes from one or more of their psychopathological parents or guardians. This is why as I also mentioned before, there are more female street children in the developed world. Females are more likely to be abused than males.

One factor that seems to account for a good deal of the male street children in the developed world is homosexuality. In several studies adolescent males were simply either afraid to come out to their parents and fled, or if they did come out they were forced out. Because the street boys were not raised for early independence as they were in many developing countries they do not have the skills or experiences to help them cope without parents and their mental health is considerably more precarious than their male counterparts in the developing world.

In the developed world there are also far fewer street children. This has less to do with mental health of families (which may in fact be less than families of the developing world) than it has to do with the power of the civil community. In the developed world the state is wealthy enough to police the streets, as well as having enough facilities to put children in confinement who will not conform to the rules and regulation of childhood.

Before going back to the far larger public health problem of street children in the developing world let me make one more comment about street children in the developed world. The comment really comes in the form of a question, are the delinquent gangs found in the West street children? They are living at home, however misguided that home may be so I do not consider them street children, although clearly they represent a large public health problem. I can use the words thief and thug to describe the differences of behaviour of street children in the developing and developed world. For the most part street children in the developing world are more likely to take advantage by cunning than power. The opposite is the case in the developed world, particularly if you consider delinquents gangs who are well armed as street children. It is almost as if lack of war in the developed world is compensated for by the violence found there.

Finally there is a parallel between the developed and developing world with regard to public opinion. In both cases public opinion comes from the top and move downward into the populace. This has two important consequences for street children all around the

world. The first is that teenagers are living more and more under an international culture that comes from the West, mostly from movies, music, and the multinational corporations. No matter where one goes, to the most remote places on the earth and no matter how poor the people are there, one always seems to find some evidence of this. Recently I was taken to a small rural Indian village a day north of Bombay and discovered that now only was there extreme poverty but that the village had a communal satellite dish. Street children there had the opportunity to idealise what they saw. It is clear that one of the easiest ways to make a conversation with a street child in the developing world is to talk about Nikes, or the latest rock group in London or New York. No matter how poor they may be they find a way to get these goods, or more likely to adjust what they have to look like them.

The second fact about public opinion that effects street children from the top down is that societal attitudes toward them are based on the morals of people who have more wealth than they have. As we know in much of the developing world the gulf between the well to do and the poor is extreme. In Latin America, for example, the families of the elite and the masses have different family traditions. Among elite Latin American homes, fathers are present and powerful. Boys learn to respect his authority. In contrast, among the poor in Latin America it is common to have women at the center of families. Boys in these families are raised not so much to respect authority as for an early independence from home. Much of the negative attitude toward the street children in Latin America comes from the ethnocentric perception that street children are not beholden to proper male adult authority.

PUBLIC OPINION TOWARD STREET CHILDREN

Almost all the research that has been done with street children has led to the conclusion that as difficult as the life is for street children, the worst problem the children face is from the public. In the case of girls this often takes the form of sexual abuse, in the case of boys it often takes the form of hostility. In many places in the world, street and working children have been assassinated for no more than petty crimes and haughty behaviour. In fact, the number of street children killed in Brazil supersedes the total casualties in the civil war in Lebanon.

I remember Simon, a child of 15 years of age, who was murdered by a police reservist. So many poor unkempt children had already been mistreated that his demise would not have aroused much concern except that he was shot five times at point blank range, kicked into the gutter, and then spat upon. Evidently, Simon had stolen a signal lens from a parked car. There were no other complaints about Simon. No one said that he was belligerent or that he assaulted anyone.. How was it that Simon's relatively minor crime aroused such anger in the police officer?

What was it about this boy that aroused such anger? Was he seen in the context of a grand menace? Was he used as a warning to the larger group of street children?

Ironically, the connection between Simon and the larger group of street children was not as clear as it might have seemed to the reservist. Simon was a street child, but he also had loving parents who were full of grief and who were present at his funeral. In their mourning they talked about his good character, his sensitivity to others, and his contributions to his family and younger siblings.

Like the majority of people in many parts of the world, it appears that the reservist construed a scenario about street children that did not include loving parents, or good character. The connection between adequate "parenting" and lack of character is at the heart of the dominant culture's concept of the origins of street children.

Street children, in nearly all cultures in the world, have become symbols of moral judgement because they violate the norms that most cultures give to children. They do this by not being under the same roof as their parents, by working instead of going to school, and by assuming the right to enjoy the fruits of their work as they chose (such as consuming drugs). What makes the climate so volatile is that the phenomena of children taking on the roles of adults are peaking at a time when many societies are moving from traditional codes of conduct. These codes related to birthrights and long accepted roles of authority to societies where conduct is based on rational values, democratic choices, and a world-wide culture based on the western entertainment media.

Like the alleged murderer of Simon, who seemingly quickly (and falsely) made a connection between large-scale societal problems and the petty problems of minor delinquency caused by some street children. Other murderers of street children justify their actions in self-righteous moral terms, seeing themselves as heroes in cultures rapidly approaching moral decay.

Street children have become cultural scapegoats portrayed as carriers of all the large scale social problems, including inequality of income, changing family values with concomitant alterations in the roles of men and women, and the reduction in personal security in the context of an overly romanticised past. Only when the vastness and complexities of this situation are confronted will the hostilities be reduced. There is an old African saying, "if you want to get to the root of a murder, you have to look for the blacksmith who made the panga". This is to say that if you want to help street children it is not the street children or their families, but the culture where they live that needs the help.

The press will not be much help. They dramatise the "bad boy" image of street children and intimidate the public. The image emphasises worse case scenarios, such as the youngest children on the streets, the severely intoxicated, and the most delinquent. While this approach sells newspapers (and raises money) it does not contribute to an accurate assessment of the problem. It has become widespread in many African countries to hear that street children are carrying syringes filled with contaminated HIV positive blood and are threatening anyone who refuses to give them money with lethal injections. Not one

case of this alleged behaviour has actually ever authenticated, yet the public's perception of this is that it is a common occurrence.

According to the press, which has contributed to the predominant cultural point of view street children are psychopathological, delinquent, carriers of AIDS, and drug abusing. I propose that this is an ethnocentric bias, and that most, but not all, street children function adequately, given their circumstances. No where is the negative point of view expressed more than in the alleged connection of street children to drug abuse. Because I have witnessed so many children inhaling glue yet still maintaining their ability to cope with demands of the streets I began to think there was more to their use of inhalants than the explanations most commonly given. These included the use of drugs to self medicate fear and depression, to kill hunger, to provide strength to live in difficult circumstances, or as indications of a pathological need for immediate gratification.

One evening I was visiting street children in the "Little Mogadishu" section of Nairobi. There were about a dozen boys on a small island of refuse in the middle of a busy roundabout inhaling glue. Around them sped a steady onslaught of traffic. I observed them through the traffic, as did other pedestrians. All I could see were many pairs of eyes peering over noses covered with paper bags or shirt-sleeves. It occurred to me that as the others and I watched the boy's eyes, the boys were also watching us.

To me the most impressive phenomenon about these scenes was not that one or two boys had obviously overdosed (even those these would be the boys most likely to be presented in the press and most likely to leave a lasting impression on most observers). The most impressive aspect for me was that as every street boy in the group was inhaling, every passer-by was consumed with interest. Each group eyed the other as if they were shopping in a market filled with exotic goods. The two were interwoven, making me think that the psychological value of using the drug was less important to the vast majority of these boys than its social value.

Knowing that the boys were very adept at manipulating public opinion, it was no accident that every passer-by saw the boys using the inhalants. In fact, if they had wanted to advertise their consumption they could not have developed a better strategy. Kenyan street boys come from traditional cultures where initiation into adult roles is a powerful experience, and one that is held in full public view of all the elders in the community. Staring down the pain of circumcision in front of one's parents and elders is needed to become a successful initiate. Similarly, part of the wide use of inhalants in public can be seen as a way of declaring adult status to the community.

The boys were also using inhalants to initiate and enhance friendships. In their traditional cultures, boys are raised with other boys in age cohorts. Ties between them are lifelong and intimate. The boys need and want this intimacy, and sharing in inhaling glue while in full public view of adults who do not approve builds group solidarity.

The combination of social, psychological, and cultural factors related to the use of inhalants by street boys is not fully considered before drawing conclusions about what

effects the use of inhalants have on the boys' mental health. If all the reasons for the use of inhalants were considered, and the emphasis was placed on observing the boy's coping skills, and not on sensational account of drug abuse, we would find that most of the boys who use drugs do not fall to them. Indeed the alleged inevitable connection between street children and drug abuse is more of an accusation that serves to diminish the children's capacities than it is a culturally free statement of their mental health..

By way of a summary I have talked about the UNICEF category of children in particularly difficult circumstances, which includes street children as one of many sub categories. This makes for some confusion in the year 2000 because there are children from many of these sub categories who are living on the streets. This makes it difficult to know which group we are talking about when we talk about the topic of street children. Street children are children who work and live in the urban cities of the developed and developing world without adult supervision. The numbers are so much greater in the developing world where poverty is the main factor that contributes to their going to the streets that I have centred this talk on them. Among them there are differences between street boys and girls that should not be ignored, boys being trained to leave home at an early age while girls were often forced from home. I said that many of the boys cope adequately by finding friendships with others, and seeking out programs that serve them. The girls have more difficulty. I said that for both groups their biggest problem was the public who often looked down upon them even to the point of treating them with extreme hostility, including sexual abuse and physical torture, in some cases leading to death. In fact the degree of hostility they face from the public is so exaggerated that it must be deep-seated, namely ingrained in middle class family and civic values.

PRACITAL SUGGESTIONS FOR WORKING WITH STREET CHILDREN

I want now to talk about some of my experiences with working with street children with the hopes that those of you who are so inclined might entertain my suggestions. For several years I worked with an elderly priest who had been working with street children for nearly four decades. Each Monday night he conducted street work on the streets of a large Latin American city with several young men and women interested in learning how to work with street children. It was my pleasure to accompany him. One rainy evening we stopped to talk to a group of about a dozen boys who were living at the back of a dead-end alley. After talking with them about getting help we bought each of them a bag of chips and we were off to the next group of children who received the same treatment. As was the custom at the end of each evening we sat down to discuss the evening's work over chicken and chips. Afterward, on our way home, we encountered a group of seven girls about thirteen to fifteen years old. They came into the street stopped our car and pointed to one girl who stayed behind in the shadows. This girl clearly had a high fever and was delusional. She was either suffering from malaria, or from an overdose of drugs, or even syphilis. Whatever the reason for the girl's illness they implored the priest to take their sick companion to the hospital. He refused and told them he would check on her in the morning. As we drove back to where I was staying I asked him why he left the girl in such a crisis. He said that it was past ten o'clock at night, and if he took her to the

hospital he wouldn't get home until past one in the morning. He had mass to give at six and a full day of street work already planned to do afterward. "I have to draw the line somewhere".

One fact of street work that needs to be learned is that there are always more troubled children than there are resources to help them. At some point everyone had to turn his (or her) back, if for no other reason than to move forward the next day. The priest's refusal to administer to the sick child, a decision learned from decades of experience, was based on the greater good. Yet, when I saw him leave this sick young girl alone in the rainy night I felt betrayed. He wasn't living up to the moral standards of his calling. I found myself evaluating 40 years of good work by a single late night's decision.

I had mistaken my own cultural view about the righteous life and made a judgement about what was appropriate and inappropriate to helping street children. I did this in spite of the fact that each time I visited a program for street children, no matter what continent or hemisphere, people spoke disparagingly about another program across town. They also spoke badly about people helping in a different style than their own. I have seen the religious assail the secular, touch disciplinarians complain about the easy going, those in favour of sheltering fight against those who favour fostering, etc., etc.

My own quick judgements were inappropriate for several reasons. There is little correlation between a program's official policy and the way the child experiences the program. Street children are also very different from each other, and their needs change over time. There is in short, plenty of room for nearly all philosophies and nearly every style of help. What keeps diversity, experimentation, and variety from flourishing in the work with street children can often be traced to ethnocentric values.

Another bit of experience I would like to share is street children by assuming the right to live as they choose have taken on many of the qualities associated with adulthood, (either attending or not attending school, entering public restaurants for something to drink or eat, by becoming intoxicated when and where they desire, and by working to support themselves). They have done this in full public view. As a result as I have said they have received sanctions, in many cases of immense proportion. We can help with this by educating the public about young children assuming adulthood earlier than certain cultural expectations allow. If we can do this we might be able to negotiate a peace in the troubled space where the children assume adult roles, and where the public views and responds to them with such fear and anger.

One task ought to be redirecting public concern, but unfortunately all but a handful of the tens of thousands of people devoted to helping street children work directly with poor children to change their behaviour, leaving the important work of changing society's attitudes toward poor children almost completely neglected. Whether this is because direct care is easier to administer and evaluate than community development is not clear, but whatever the reason for ignoring public health, the difficulty of changing the public's perception is not easy.

The UN Convention on the Right of the Child offers a promising opportunity for poor children. By bringing in all that is diverse among cultural variations of children's lives, the Convention can contribute to defining what is universal about children's rights, and therefore help to link the rights of street children to the reality of all children's rights, including those out of Western cultural contexts.

What specifically can you do? Ten commandments for working with street children:

1. Examine your culturally bound beliefs about the families of street children and about the psychological functioning of the children.
2. Embrace alternative family structures as legitimate,
3. Don't confuse poverty with psychopathology.
4. Accept young people in adult roles.
5. Focus on the child not the drug.
6. Work with street children without forcing them to accept your moral point of view.
7. Refrain from quick judgement against others who work with street children from different cultural points of view.
8. Give psychotherapy only to those who need it, Give the rest of the children practical help.
9. Do your best to increase income generation and self efficacy.
10. Educate the public, the most difficult, and potentially the most rewarding of tasks you can do.