

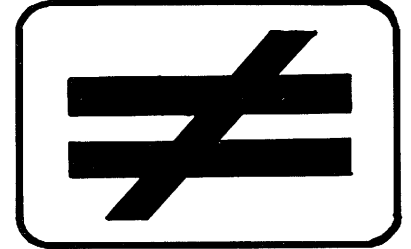
# ABANDONED CHILDREN

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## INTRODUCTION :

Abandoned children are children who have been deserted by their parents and have no other family members, relatives or friends to care for them. Some abandoned children are cared for in children's homes and Places of Safety, but the shortage of institutions to care for children in South Africa means that many live in hospitals for years. The plight of children is a challenge to those concerned about the future of this country.



### HOW MANY CHILDREN ARE ABANDONED?

A survey of abandoned children living in hospitals in Natal/ KwaZulu conducted in 1991 revealed that 289 abandoned children were living in these hospitals. Many others are living in Places of Safety or Children's Homes. There are no statistics available concerning the number of children abandoned in the whole of South Africa but in the greater Johannesburg area alone, an average of 3 children are abandoned each day.

### WHY ARE CHILDREN ABANDONED?

Many factors cause parents to abandon their children, but poor socio-economic conditions are probably the primary cause of abandonment.

- \* The impoverishment of Black people by dispossession of land and other unjust apartheid measures means that abandonment of children occurs primarily within Black communities. The lack of an adequate social welfare system means that unemployed and other poor people are unable to provide for their children.
- \* Most of the mothers who abandon their children are single women without financial or emotional support from partners or family.
- \* More children are abandoned in urban and peri-urban areas than in rural areas. This suggests that social transition, with its accompanying pressures can make it extremely difficult for parents to continue caring for their children.
- \* In the past, the extended family has been able to care for such children, but with the breakdown of traditional family structures and increasing financial pressure on families this is no longer so common.
- \* Violence has left many people homeless and displaced from their communities. It is difficult for such people to care for their children.

How do children feel when they are abandoned?



They feel heartbroken. They become sad, afraid and distrustful. They can become withdrawn from lack of stimulation and affection.

## PLACES OF SAFETY

Places of Safety are institutions intended to provide temporary accommodation for children in need. There are only 11 Places of Safety for Black Children in South Africa, with a total bed occupancy of less than 2000. This means that most Places of Safety are overcrowded with inadequate facilities to provide a healthy and stimulating environment for children. Another problem is that many children with histories of delinquency are cared for in Places of Safety, making these institutions unsuitable for the care of abandoned children. Many abandoned children remain in these institutions for many years because there is nowhere else for them to be accommodated.

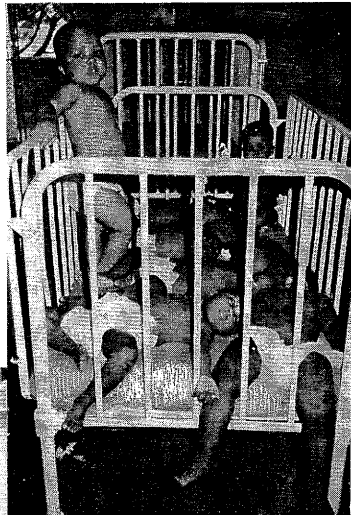


Although much has been done to care for abandoned children in some hospitals, they are still prone to suffering developmental delay as a result of being restricted to hospital wards for years.

# WHAT HAPPENS TO ABANDONED CHILDREN?

## CHILDREN'S HOMES

According to the National Committee for Children's Rights there are 29 children's homes provided for Black children in South Africa compared with 600 'white' homes. It is no longer illegal to place Black children in traditionally 'white' homes but because disparity still exists between government grants for children of different races most 'white' homes are reluctant to include Black children in their homes. Many 'black' children's homes are overcrowded and have poor facilities while the number of children in 'white' homes is decreasing and some are underutilised.



## HOSPITALS

Hospitals are used as places of safety because of the shortage of care facilities for abandoned children. This is problematic for a number of reasons.

- \* Abandoned children are exposed to sickness and infection. Some children have died as a result of hospital acquired infections.
- \* Abandoned children in hospitals suffer developmental delay as a result of being restricted to hospital wards for years and years. Hospital staff are not trained to stimulate healthy, growing children and lack of stimulation contributes to their developmental delay.
- \* The cost of accommodating abandoned children in hospitals is unjustifiable. A rough estimate of comparative costs to the state per child per day is:
  - in hospital - R300.00
  - in a children's home - R21.00
  - in a foster home - R7.00

## FOSTER OR ADOPTIVE CARE

Placing children in foster or adoptive homes is usually preferable to keeping them in an institution. Living with a family can help a child to become more integrated into society and can help to heal a child from the traumatic effects of being abandoned.

The difference between foster care and adoption is that an adopted child legally becomes the child of the adoptive parents for ever, and assumes the parents' surname, whereas a foster child keeps his/her own surname and can be moved from the care of a foster family.

Many families who want to foster or adopt a child are ignorant of procedures for adoption. There is a need to teach people about what is involved in fostering or adopting a child.



Living with a family can help an abandoned child to become more integrated into society and can help to heal a child from the traumatic effects of being abandoned.

There is also a need to provide more training and emotional support for foster and adoptive families.

Since June 1991, the South African law has allowed children to be adopted or fostered by parents of any race. But the law says however, that "regard shall be made to the religious and cultural background of the child concerned as well as that of his parents as against that of the person in or to whose custody he is to be placed or transferred." Adoption of a child by parents of a different race is known as transracial adoption.

Single people can be considered as potential foster or adoptive parents.

Government grants are given to parents to assist them in caring for foster children but difficulties and delays are often experienced in obtaining these grants. Attention needs to be given to ensuring speedy provision for such children.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Long term strategies should aim at preventing abandonment. Much needs to be done to improve the socio-economic conditions of Black South Africans. Efforts should be made to identify parents who are likely to abandon their children and provide them with support before they do so. This would require tremendous input from the social welfare system, but would ultimately be less expensive than caring for abandoned children.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO? - SUGGESTED ACTION

- \* Enquire into the location and care of abandoned children in your area, and assist existing organisations in their work with abandoned children. For example: Make a donation of money, clothes or toys to Child Welfare or other organisations that care for abandoned children. Play with children in hospitals by volunteering for an organisation such as Thandanani.
- \* Consider taking an abandoned child into your home as a foster or adopted child.
- \* Educate others about the plight of abandoned children.
- \* Ensure that employees in your employ are paid well enough to care for their children. Provide care centres for employees with small children.
- \* Assist single parents in caring for their children.

## SCRIPTURES FOR PRAYER AND REFLECTIONS

*Psalm 27:10* 'For my father and mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me up.'

*James 1:27* 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.'

*Matthew 19:14* '...but Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them: for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

*Isaiah 40:11* 'He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.'

*Mark 9:36-37* 'And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them; and taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.'



Stimulation at a young age is crucial for future normal development.

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