



# CHILDREN AT RISK: HOW DO WE RESPOND?

PACSA FACTSHEET NO. 40

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It is not easy growing up in South Africa today as a child. In fact it can be life-threatening. Most children will experience more than one of the following difficult life situations before they enter high school, irrespective of their culture or upbringing:

- \* violence in the home: verbal, physical or sexual abuse
- \* broken family relationships: spousal abuse, divorce, separation or death of parents
- \* rejection and abuse on the streets: street children and child prostitutes
- \* battle for survival: inadequate food or housing
- \* inferior education with little future job prospects
- \* increasing threat of AIDS and need for sexuality education
- \* life in a changing society: the need to learn to understand and relate cross-culturally
- \* poor role models: negative perception and mistrust of adults
- \* a justice system that treats child offenders as "little adults".

These experiences, and others like them, have a negative impact on children and can have life-lasting consequences. Children are often helpless as they are not in control of things that are happening around them. As adults, we need to attempt to see things as children see and experience them. The good news, however, is that many children are open to being positively shaped by a caring adult - ordinary people who reach out in love to them and their situation. Jesus stressed the importance of children and relating with them - in Matthew 18:5, he said,

"Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me." How will we respond?

## As individuals, we can choose to respond in several ways:

- \* give time and skills to get involved in a positive way;
- \* give money or resources to organisations so that trained people will work with the children;
- \* have feelings of sympathy but not know how to do anything constructive about the feelings; do nothing;
- \* refuse to accept that such situations exist in our homes and community;
- \* ignore these situations and reject any responsibility as adults in the wider community.

What did I do wrong?  
Is it my fault?  
Why have they taken me away?  
Why is Mom always crying?

What do I do when a street child asks for money?  
What is wrong with this child?  
What do I do when I see a badly bruised child?

Often it is ignorance or feelings of inadequacy that stop us from acting positively. This factsheet focuses only on three specific situations where children are at risk: violence in the home, children on the street, and the criminal justice system. This factsheet is a means of making us all aware about some of the situations that our children face. It can also be the beginning of a process that can lead to a more positive personal response towards children and our own childhood. Read, reflect, and act ... much of our children's future is in our hands.

## Violence in the home:

### How are children affected?

*Ann's father regularly beats her mother. Ann and her younger brother watch, terrified and helpless to intervene.*

Many children are exposed to violence in the home and their lives are deeply affected by it. Even those not living in violent homes, are exposed to violence in our society.

### Emotional Effects

The children live in a state of tension and stress. They may feel the beating of their mother is their fault because they have made a noise or for some other reason. Or they feel they should be able to stop the violence but nothing they do helps. Sometimes they withdraw from any form of contact with people - because they are scared they will do something wrong, and so that they won't feel vulnerable. They may find it hard to concentrate at school, and may suffer from depression - shown in crying a lot, having difficulty sleeping, nightmares or eating problems. If their mother is being beaten and is under stress, she will find it difficult to give children the attention and affection they need. The children might do all types of things to get attention.

### Physical and Social Effects

Their fears, feelings and stress may be expressed through illnesses, like headaches, nausea, vomiting, stomach-aches or nailbiting. If children learn that their parents don't respect each other and each other's limits, it is hard for them to learn 'right' from 'wrong'. It is hard for them to learn other ways of solving problems, like 'talking it out'.

### Lasting Effects

Children's education may be affected by moving in and out of home, or by not being able to concentrate. Trust may be difficult because children see that their parents often do not keep their word. Or they see that those people who are closest and are supposed to love one another and provide a safe place, actually betray and hurt. They may be unable to commit themselves to close relationships when they grow up. They may believe that men have the right to hit their wives, and girls may believe they must 'obey and honour' their future husbands, which includes accepting violence.

Children often learn that what happens at home is considered "private" and they learn not to talk about it. Or they think that no one will believe them or help them, or that if the father finds out they have told someone, their mother will be hit again.

The above are also some of the effects on children who are being abused at home, physically, sexually, emotionally, psychologically. The effects are devastating and long-lasting. Often the child is told not to say anything. He or she has a deep sense of violation, shame and guilt, believing the abuse is their fault. It is difficult for a child to speak about what is happening to them, or even to know that it is wrong and that it is not their fault. They don't know who they can trust. Often the awareness and acknowledgement of abuse never surfaces until they are adult and have the coping mechanisms to deal with it. There are agonizing questions of 'where was God?', or 'How could someone who is supposed to protect me, do this to me?'

Child abuse is a subject that requires more detail than is available here, but we will deal with it in more depth in a later factsheet. Contact FAMSAs for more info.

### Church's response (some suggestions)

- \* challenge patriarchy and teachings that condone domination of women and children
- \* learn about abuse and violence in the home and learn to recognize it
- \* train pastors and parishioners in counselling and support (contact Karen at PACSA or Virginia at FAMSAs for training)
- \* name the sin of abuse and provide a safe environment for someone to come forward with such information
- \* provide a safe place for families to stay in a crisis
- \* intervene in violence
- \* dispel the notion that what happens in the home is "private"
- \* provide help for abused people and abusers
- \* link up with FAMSAs, Childline, Lifeline - arrange for speakers to talk and raise awareness at your church
- \* deal with the issues in youth and children's programmes, empowering them to act in such situations.

## Street Children

*Mandla was 8 years old when he saw his father and brothers and sisters killed. His house was burned down. His mother went mad from the trauma and moved away. He ended up on the street.*

Children live on the street for different reasons. Violence in the community, abuse at home, being orphaned by illness such as AIDS leaves a child without a lot of options. The most common reason is because of poverty at home. No one is working, there is no space, no food, no schooling, no clothes for the child. Often families are broken - perhaps the parents have divorced, and if remarried, the relationship with step-parents may not be good. Children may actually relieve the family by leaving, even though parents may be deeply concerned about the child. Life on the street is hard and dangerous.

In Pietermaritzburg children come more and more to the street. Basically, there are 2 profiles of children: those who have been on the street for a long time and who will likely stay, and those who are there temporarily and who can be sent back home. Khayaletu, a joint venture of the PMB Street Children project and Youth for Christ, provides 5 shelters for children:

- a night shelter - children sleep there but do their own thing during the day
- 2 homes on Havelock Road for older boys housing 23 boys; 21 are at school in Sobantu
- 2 homes on Pine Street for younger boys housing 24 boys; all are at school in Sobantu.

They provide a service that is filling a gap but it is temporary. The facilities are too full and too few, and are an intervention at the point of crisis. There are lots of children at home who live in situations of dire poverty who are one step away from the street. Families in crisis need support from the state with some sort of social service safety net. Churches and communities need to mobilize their resources to find support for families.

Contact Trevor Crouch at YFC (452 970) for more information.



### What can we do as Church?

- \* donations in kind are helpful
- \* re-examine the way of understanding our faith in the light of Ubuntu and Africanism and traditional ways of community support for families
- \* link children back with their families if possible and support the families in crisis
- \* adopt-a-child for the weekend or longer - contact Trevor Crouch at 452 970 for details
- \* financial support to an organisation like YFC - indirect involvement but so important
- \* influence policy on advocacy for children - welfare systems and economic safety nets for families
- \* be concerned with children as people - be a person to whom children feel free to go.

## Criminal Justice System:

### How are children affected?

*Sizwe was 11 years old when he arrived on the street because there was no breadwinner at home in a family of five children. He found the street was a more welcoming place. Having no money, he begged and shoplifted for food and ended up in jail one night. Sharing his cell with a range of boys between the ages of 11 to 17 years, he was attacked and raped.*

Children involved with the Criminal Justice System come from a range of backgrounds, though most have difficult home circumstances. Getting caught up in the criminal justice system is the next logical step for children who have few options, but the criminal justice system is not geared to children. The adversarial system is based on the arguing out of a problem between a prosecutor and a defence attorney representing the victim and accused. However, over 90% of the children in court are not represented.

Prior to trial children usually spend at least 1 night to several weeks in custody. They are usually deeply shocked by imprisonment, and may be attacked or raped. They feel the treatment they receive in the system is out of proportion to the seriousness of the offence. The most common offence is theft. A small number of children commit serious offences.

Children caught up in the criminal justice system feel like the victims, not the offenders. Rather than experiencing a sense of accountability for what they have done wrong and for the effects their actions have on others, they feel abused by the state intervention. It hardens them and draws them into a negative cycle of offending and re-offending.

A lot of work has been done and is being discussed to reform the way the law deals with juvenile offenders.

Two major thrusts of the suggested reform are to involve the family and community in the justice process, and increase accountability of the children for their own actions. Currently, the victim is left out, the child has no control, and the parents feel powerless and have no role. People look to the courts for insight but the courts are not qualified or competent to deal creatively, compassionately and justly with children to stop them from going off the rails. Proposals include convening a family group conference to include the family, the victim (or representative) and other community members. They will be brought together by a trained justice worker who will mediate and facilitate discussion. Together they will come up with a solution. This will include restitution, whereby the offender will "pay for" his/her wrongdoing. The suggested reforms will create a system where it is the easiest option administratively to take children to the parents and guardians, and most difficult to bring them through the criminal justice system.

These proposals draw on and modify traditional community methods of dealing with offenders. Contact Ann Skelton at Lawyers for Human Rights (421 130) for more information.

### What can Churches do?

- \* encourage community participation in family matters
- \* be prepared to act as guardian for a child
- \* help with family finding if the court finds a child and knows where she/he comes from, but cannot make contact with the family
- \* work out a network of support for families
- \* raise up a person from the church to act as a community representative for the courts to be able to make contact in the area
- \* persuade families that it is still worth working with the child
- \* over a period of time, the family and community will be more in control of the situation - more so than the family facing this on their own
- \* provide supportive networks for families struggling alone who feel isolated
- \* some children are a disappointment - church provides strength and love to persevere in hope.
- \* people can provide foster homes for a night for a child to avoid their spending a night in jail - contact Ann Skelton for details.

# GROUP BIBLE STUDY: CHILDREN AT RISK

**AIM:** To help adults better understand some of the situations facing children today in their homes and community, and how to respond positively as individuals or as a group.

## **I REMEMBER WHEN I WAS..10 YEARS OLD!**

Ask group members to think back to when they were about ten years old. Briefly describe things they remember about their own life and what they felt life was like for most children growing up during that time.

**CHILDREN AT RISK TODAY:** Read aloud the editorial on the front page of this factsheet. Let group members comment on what has been read and how it compares to what they shared about their own life as a child. Now divide the group into three smaller groups and assign each group one of the situations found in the middle pages of this factsheet (ie: violence in the home, children on the street, and the criminal justice system). *NOTE: you will have to give each group member a copy of the factsheet or photocopy the middle pages.*

**FACE FACTS:** Each group can begin by reading Matthew 25:31-40 and then, in the light of this, read their particular section on children. Finally, discuss the following questions:

\* How did you feel as you read about children in this situation?

\* Practically, how can you integrate what you have read in Matthew 25 and this factsheet with your feelings?

\* Complete the following sentence: "As a result of reading and reflecting on this situation, I am going to ...".

**WHERE TO FROM HERE?** Have one person from each small group report back to the whole group. Allow time for further discussion and for groups to respond to each other's assigned situation. Let individuals share the sentence they completed if they wish. Importantly, focus on practical suggestions for a positive response from individuals or the group as a whole.

**CLOSE:** End off with prayer for children in their homes, church and community, for adults in your group who may have shared painful aspects of their own childhood and for any decisions that were decided upon as a response to what was read and reflected upon.

*Please note that a follow-up to this Bible Study could be to invite someone from PACSA or another organisation to speak more fully on a specific situation that children find themselves in and to facilitate in group members responding in positive ways.*

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## **Resources**

- \* Childline - children phone for help - 0800 123 321
- \* Child Protection Unit - SAP - report abuse of children - 453668 or 443380
- \* Child and Family Welfare - 428971
- \* FAMSA - 424 945
- \* Lifeline - 944 444
- \* Lawyers for Human Rights - Advocate Ann Skelton - 421 130
- \* Youth for Christ - Street Children Project - trying to make contact with, and link up children on the street with their families or shelters in PMB - Trevor Crouch - 452 970

- \* Thandanani - at Edendale hospital, working with children who have been abandoned - Margie Pretorius - 428 971
- \* SOS Children's Village - Mlungisi Sithole - 63783
- \* Pietermaritzburg Children's Homes - 423214
- \* ATICC - AIDS training, information and counselling centre - 942111
- \* NICRO - National Institute for Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation of Offenders - diversion for children out of the criminal justice system - 454425
- \* Juvenile Justice Office - to assist children in trouble with the law - 421 592.
- \* National Children's Rights Committee - P.O. Box 30803, Braamfontein, 2017. (011) 4033 871/2

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***Please contact PACSA at the address below if you wish to place bulk orders for this factsheet or if you wish to have more copies to distribute to others.***

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