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NGOs

Street children of Bangalore get some help

Those most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS are often those who know least about it. Rienke van Nieuwland reports on a programme that's educating Bangalore's street children about the taboo topic of sex.

This is the story about Raju. Raju is 15. He lives on the streets of Bangalore, after his mother died and his alcoholic father was incapable of taking care of him. Choosing to live on the streets because of the freedom it seemed to offer him, Raju takes care of his little brother and survives through rag-picking. At some point, Raju became HIV-infected.



This story is not just about Raju, though. The target group is hard to define and hard to find, so accurate facts and figures today are unknown, but one thing is certain - Raju is not the only street kid facing the spectre of HIV/AIDS.

Estimates of street children range from about 20 million to well over 100 million worldwide. Street children often engage in sexual activity at a young age, but lack knowledge or the skills to take preventive measures - which consequently makes them highly vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. Reaching out to these children is a difficult task. Most are disconnected from existing social and health services, such as families, local communities, hospitals and schools. Many have problems stemming from a lack of adult support, a life-history of neglect and abuse, and engaging in risky behaviour.

Street children of Bangalore



Meindert Schaap, a clinical child and adolescent psychologist from the Netherlands, has dedicated a great part of his life to tackle such challenges. During 2001 and 2002, he conducted in-depth research into the sexual life of 25 Bangalorean street children aged 12 to 16. He found many of them became sexually active early on. The reasons they gave for their behaviour varied. From immediate satisfaction to material gain - for drugs, money or just food.

Programmes to tackle these problems are few and far between, but in 2005 the Sexual Health Intervention Programme (SHIP) was launched in partnership with APSA (Association for Promoting Social Action), a child-centred community development NGO. The project's goal is to provide a sexual health intervention programme for street children and a training programme for social workers.

The team works together with eight partner NGOs in order to reach as many street children and facilitators as possible.

The programme addresses teenage sexual development and general sexual health. It covers topics including other sexually transmitted illnesses, sexual abuse and coercion, and unwanted pregnancy. The exercises aim to increase the children's knowledge, build up their self-confidence and improve their social skills and coping strategies.

Toolkit of activities

The programme comes with a 'toolkit' of activities and resources specifically developed for street children.

The exercises are suitable for illiterate or semi-illiterate children and those with a short attention span, because of the active methods and visual materials. Some of the exercises are variations on games such as 'Simon says', 'spin the bottle', 'hide and seek' or board games. Other games include drawing the male and female bodies, discussing statements or acting in a play or puppet show. The positive and playful approach keeps them motivated. "Basically all the tools one needs to guide and support these street children to lead a happy, healthy, responsible life can be found in this box," Schaap says.

The SHIP team has trained social workers in three states of South India: Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

The eight partner NGOs have field-tested the 35 half day sessions and the results are promising. Schaap believes this programme is more likely to succeed because it is evidence-based and takes into account the reality of a life on the streets.

Good response

Sonia J Cheruvillil, the current Programme Manager, is buoyed by the programme's early success.

"The responses from partner NGOs and the children themselves have strengthened our idea that this programme is needed," she says. One of the facilitators said the youths had really enjoyed the programme. "It made the boys get into their personal lives and also come forward to share their similarities, even in terms of their sexual behaviours." "Why did we not get a programme like this earlier?" asked another NGO.

The next phase will be to expand the programme's reach to many more NGOs and street children.

It is a first step, but a huge step, towards helping Raju, and children like him, stay a little safer on the streets. If you would like to know more about the programme visit www.streetkids-SRH.org

(The author is a Dutch psychologist.)



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