

Jamaica

Hope for Children

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It took children's groups, including Hope for Children, 10 years of determined advocacy to get the Child Care and Protection Act 2004 onto the statute books in Jamaica. This piece of legislation largely embodies the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and should be a major step forward in reducing, among other things, violence against children.

Having won that battle, though, now we're faced with an even bigger one – because getting a law on the statute books is not the same thing as achieving real change on the ground. Many of the provisions of the Act have not yet been implemented. We applaud the recent appointment of Mrs Mary Clarke, the Children's Advocate, but the much-anticipated National Register for child abuse has not yet been realised.

But the most important challenge we are facing is to make sure people know about the Act, what it says, and why it's important.

Hope for Children has especially been concentrating on raising awareness of one particularly important provision of the Act, which makes it mandatory to report incidence of child abuse. When there is suspicion or evidence that children are being abused, teachers are now mandated by law to report this.

We have partnered with the Jamaica Coalition on the Rights of the Child and 30 early childhood education institutions affiliated to the South West St Andrew Association of Basic Schools to support this mandatory reporting. We have involved a senior family court judge to talk to educators about what the law means. Our aim is to demystify the law, to explain to teachers and principals what are their obligations under the Act, and get them to support it.

Crisis

Tackling violence against children is a difficult issue in Jamaica because there are deep-seated

cultural causes underpinning it. Corporal punishment, or 'flogging', has traditionally been seen as an integral part of child-rearing. Since it has been banned in schools, its incidence has reduced, but teachers complain that they have not been given any alternative procedures for disciplining children. The ban has consequently created a sense of crisis.

Flogging is not the only kind of violence in schools. Child-on-child violence has become a major problem in some areas, with growing numbers of students bringing knives or cutlasses to school in their schoolbags. The problem is so bad the government has launched a campaign to try to get weapons out of schools, with designated police officers assigned to some schools.

Child-on-child violence is a spillover from the culture of gang violence that afflicts many of the communities in which we work, with groups of young men fighting over women, drugs, guns, or sometimes political issues.

This means children are exposed to violence from an early age. And they lack positive male role models. In some of the areas where we work, as many as 90% of children are growing up in female-headed households. To make matters worse there are high rates of unemployment and poverty among these single mothers, many of whom are themselves practically still children, having become pregnant as teenagers.

These are the fundamental issues that lie behind violence towards children. And some of those incidences of violence are very serious and shocking. For example, in April 2005, Shanika Anderson, a 6-year-old member of our organisation, was abducted from a local market. Her body was found the following day; she had been brutally raped and murdered.

The programme works closely with child and family centres run by the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare). The activities are mainly workshops facilitated by a group of psychologists who have undertaken diagnostic work in the field of children and domestic violence. The workshops provide activities that address the specific needs of individual children, using playtime and drama to help them lose their fear of physical contact and start to form more normal relationships. The dramatic improvisation exercises use puppets and then real-life examples from both children's and parents' lives to uncover their histories. The children are encouraged to tell stories and to respond to the investigators' questions by acting out the roles of fathers, mothers, older siblings and peers. This helps clarify where they see themselves in the domestic and socio-cultural contexts. These workshops help the children to not only express and focus their emotions, but also to learn how to care for their physical health, to protect themselves from strangers and to present themselves well.

The workshops also encourage the parents to participate in activities with their children, helping them develop more peaceful and appropriate techniques of child rearing. Many parents appreciate the chance to exchange views on topics such as domestic violence and children's rights. Families who have taken part in the workshops appreciate the chance to think and reflect as individuals. They feel comfortable and value the opportunity to learn basic forms of theatrical and creative expression. Each person has taken charge of their own learning and addressed problems in their own way. This has helped them decide what to do next and where to go to seek help.

The programme also aims to create links among the main groups of people who influence the children, i.e., their parents, teachers and the wider community. Teachers play an important role and are a key component of the play therapy. In addition to helping parents see the need for change, they can mediate between the child victim and the abuser.

Conclusions

The techniques used in this project have proved very useful, both for the child victims of domestic



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violence and their parents. Play and artistic expression allow them to become more open and grow in confidence. In addition, working in groups brings a feeling of community support into the home. The parents, especially the mothers, appreciate the chance to tell their stories, share their problems and have someone who listens to them. The children especially appear to open up when expressing themselves through play and drama.

Such programmes of psycho-social intervention for child abuse are therefore more than a social service. They can help people change and become masters of their own destiny, especially in the case of the victims. The methods used here introduce new ideas to both children and adults: not only the right to be protected, but also how to develop new skills to confront adversity.

References

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In Shanika's name we are now launching a campaign to highlight the issue of missing children; 762 persons who were reported missing in Jamaica in 2005 are still unaccounted for. And in the first few months of this year alone, over 300 people have been reported missing, the majority of them girls aged between 11 and 19 years.

We need to get communities involved in helping the authorities to tackle violence against children. Helping teachers to fulfill their obligation to report evidence of abuse is one of several vital steps. Another is improving parenting skills.

In June 2005, we received funding of over JMD 4.8 million (EUR 60,000) to train 600 parents from the 30 early childhood education institutions we partnered with. We were happy with the results. Out of the 600 parents we targeted, 571 enrolled in the course and 479 graduated, after 22 hours of training.

One of the reasons the programme went well was that we were clear from the start about what we expected of participants – they needed to attend at least seven of the 10 sessions to get a certificate of completion. We also put great effort into identifying someone in each of the institutions who would serve as a community motivator, phoning around and making visits beforehand to talk to the parents about the sessions and remind them to attend.

Another important success factor is that we involved the parents right from the start in defining what they wanted to achieve from this training. We asked them, what does it mean to be a good parent? How will you know, at the end of this course, if you've become a better parent?

Some of the most common responses were that they would hug and kiss their children more, beat them less, spend more time with them, talk and listen to them more, help them with their homework, or attend the Parent Teacher Association. Once the parents themselves had set their own targets, they developed more of a sense of ownership of the training sessions.



Hope for children uses drama to promote public education about stopping violence and respecting the rights of the child.

We asked the parents to score themselves before the course, midway through and at the end of the course, using their own indicators. And we were able to point out to them how they were assessing their skills at parenting in ways that don't cost money. This is an important thing for them to realise. You don't have to be in employment to be able to hug your children.

Although we were generally pleased with the outcome of this training course, we had one major disappointment – only 5% of the parents who attended it were fathers. So we're now working on a prototype course, along with other agencies, specifically to reach out to young men and teach them parenting skills. We know this will need a different approach, and we will need to package the course specifically with men in mind.

We have written a proposal to run this prototype course with 200 fathers. If it goes well, one of our aims is to run these training sessions in prisons. This would be a valuable place to reach young men who are not being good fathers to their children, to try to make them think about how they could be more responsible and better role models when they're released.

Talk show

Useful as they are, training sessions can only reach so many people. So we're also making use of the mass media in our efforts to demystify the Child Care and Protection Act and reduce the levels of violence against children.

Twice a week, Hope for Children hosts a one-hour talk show on Roots 96.1 FM, a community radio station which has over 450,000 listeners. We talk about our methodologies of work, and advocate for giving a greater priority to implementing the provisions of Act. The programme has been very successful, and we have been asked to host a special four-hour programme based in one of the communities which has the biggest problems with violence.

Finally, we make use of drama as a tool to promote public education about stopping violence and respecting the rights of the child. Our drama group, comprising children aged from seven upwards, has devised a production entitled "Talk Done Tome Fi Action" which highlights these issues. To date the organisation has staged 15 live performances for a combined audience of approximately 4500 people. All the performances have been well received.

Hope for Children is hoping that within the next 15 months, its drama group will be staging live performances in 15 state-managed places of safety and children's homes, and that we can also find the funding to produce a DVD so it can reach an even wider audience.

We are especially proud of our drama group because we strongly believe in involving children in advocating for their rights. We are not a paternalistic organisation – we draw our strength from the grassroots of children who want to make a difference in their own neighbourhoods. For Hope for Children, children are not just recipients of services, they are agents of change.

Hope for Children Development Company

Hope for Children Development Company (HCDC) has eight youthful staff and over 250 community volunteers. We emerged from the institutionalisation in 1992 of two community-based interventions: Camp Hope, a summer rehabilitative residential programme initiated in 1986 to improve the coping skills of at-risk children, and the Urban Children's Project, which was funded by Save the Children-Canada, established in 1988 and which organised young people to provide a homework programme, sports and recreational activities.

Hope for Children's mission statement is: "To improve the quality of life of children in extremely difficult circumstances in the inner city communities of South and South West St. Andrew through programmes that enable their development, enhance their creativity and promote their rights and responsibilities, utilising strategies of community development, child advocacy and development training, in keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child."

In its first nine years, HCDC concentrated on children between 9 and 14 years of age. In early 2000 we made a strategic decision to shift our programme focus to children within the age group 0-8 years, believing that this is the most important stage of a child's development and the one that has the most potential to deliver long term societal returns on investment.

Since 2001, in partnership with the Bernard van Leer Foundation through our Child Support Project, HCDC has been building the institutional and programme capacities of 30 early childhood education institutions to improve services to over 2000 children. Among other things we provided scholarships for the training of over 80 teachers and principals, upgraded seating and toilet facilities in schools, and procured outdoor play equipment.