

Three innovative projects address the problems children face when they live in disadvantaged circumstances. Paula Richards reviews the results.

Empowering children to thrive in adversity

THE REPORT IN THE LAST ISSUE of *The Therapist*¹ that one in five children suffer a mental health problem was swiftly followed by an article in the *Sunday Telegraph*² claiming that 40 percent of children - particularly those in deprived inner city areas of the country - will suffer at some point from mental health disorders including psychosis, eating problems and suicidal tendencies

The breakdown of the family is cited as one of the main reasons for this increase. Children are not given the attention they need to fully develop their intellectual and social skills to thrive and make a positive contribution to society. An increasingly fragmented assortment of family living arrangements leads to poorer communication, which threatens the security and stability of family life. This can result in conflict, abuse, disorder and isolation. Divorce results in poorer physical and emotional health, lower standards of living and the disintegration of family units across all generations. In high conflict families where communication is at its poorest, children are

more vulnerable, more likely to get into trouble and have reduced life chances at school and in employment

The inability of parents to communicate positively, consistently and effectively produces a cascade of negative effects in children, with outcomes such as depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and criminality. Support and extension of initiatives in localities, work environments, education and families to improve relationship skills would advance the health of the nation and promote communication for everyone³

We examined three such initiatives to see what lessons could be learned

Stress management for children

The body psychotherapist Paulo Quadros worked with children at the Easterhouse Centre (see box 2) on a pilot programme to develop skills that they need to function better at school and at home

He ran the sessions with a group of six children selected by the school, a teacher and two therapists. They involved games and exercises which he designed and which Easterhouse now regularly uses with groups of up to 40 children

Quadros explains "The games are specially designed to help the children develop skills which they require to function better in their environments. The sessions have four main interrelated objectives

"First, to plant 'seeds' of self awareness, self-confidence, interpersonal relationship skills and self-responsibility which can grow with the children into adulthood. This enables them to understand that they can shape their own lives regardless of their backgrounds

Second, to develop focus. Lack of focus is possibly one of the most important factors affecting a child's poor progress in school. Through special games and exercises which demand focus in order to be played, children are given the opportunity to develop appropriate behaviours to given tasks. These qualities may gradually extend into other spheres of their lives

Third, to promote awareness of themselves and others. When children learn how to bring focus into themselves and develop self respect, they can also develop healthy attitudes which enable them to deal with different situations. This leads to them being more open to and respectful of other people's perspectives, resulting in more co-operation rather than competition, to negotiation rather than demand

"Finally, to give children the opportunity to express themselves and their needs in a variety of ways. This may be done through dramatic games, music, decision-making discussions and so on. Children also make collective decisions about

Box 1 : The social and economic costs of communication breakdown

- In 1993 32,500 children were listed on local authority "at risk registers 2 200 emergency protection orders and 3 000 care orders were made in child protection cases

- Every year in England and Scotland, an estimated 43 000 young people under 17 run away and are reported to the police. Family life for these children is characterised by family breakdown, sexual, physical and emotional abuse, and constant insecurity. Thousands of young people resort to a life on the streets

- Depressive illness may occur after prolonged exposure to parental conflict

- It costs about £115 million a year to run the Child Support Agency

- It costs £34,000 to keep a child in residential care for a year

- The cost for a child excluded from school is about £4,500 a year

- By the year 2000, three million children and young people will be growing up in a step family

- Children in violent homes experience more behaviour problems and diminished social competency skills

- Early disruptive behaviour results in more children being excluded from school. In 1991 there were 3,833 permanent exclusions and up to 60,000 exclusions in total. Failed communication and the loss of the father's involvement in lives is a serious problem for young people

Source: Communication Breakdown Report

Box 2: The Easterhouse Centre for Stress Management - aims and objectives

For people living in restricted and deprived situations, the difficulties of raising children, making relationships work, finding and maintaining employment and furthering one's career are enormous. This is partly due to the strain put on family relationships by unemployment or low income, and the damaging influence, particularly on children, of the high crime rates which may become common in such environments. The resulting stress can lead to anxiety, depression and despair, which leaves people feeling incapable.

The clinic is intended to use the stress management and personal development therapies to resolve some of the excess personal tensions that accumulate for everyone in today's pressurised society, but particularly for the poor, who have unique tensions due to living in deprived neighbourhoods and who do not have the economic choices available to those who are more affluent.

The goal of these therapies is to identify main points of tension and facilitate the ability to change response patterns; to build confidence through one-to-one assertiveness training; to enable people to resolve their conflicts at the personal, family and neighbourhood levels and to create an opportunity for them to explore, develop and direct their own internal strengths to help resolve their external needs, so improving their situation,

These therapies are integrated with medical massage, approaching the problem of stress through the physical body,

The Easterhouse Centre for Stress Management is based on ten years of work done in Glasgow by Dr. Jane and Ronald Rieck of the Association of Holistic Medicine,

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'disciplinary procedures' adopted by the group."

The feedback from children within the sessions was favourable; teachers reported a marked progress in the classroom behaviour of participating children and the children themselves expressed enthusiasm to participate in the activities. Some of the activities, such as the children practising massage at home, had a direct impact by enhancing closer relationships within the family.

Kids Company

Kids Company is a London-based project which aims to help meet the emotional needs

of inner city children living in challenging and deprived circumstances. It is currently working in four inner city schools and in council estates and is looking for £361,000-worth of funding to continue its work.

The founder is psychotherapist Camila Batmanghelidjh. She believes that "existing mental health services are often inappropriate for young children who may benefit more from working with therapists and groups in fun surroundings that from hours spent in clinics and psychiatric hospitals." She previously set up the Place To Be⁴ project in 1993. The exhibition "Behind Closed Doors" is another of Batmanghelidjh's initiatives (see box 4 on page 18).

Kids Company works alongside school staff and parents/carers. In schools, the company sets up a space where children aged 5-14 can go once a week to talk about their worries. These may be anything from divorcing parents, learning difficulties and bereavement to bullying, abuse and neglect. A team of volunteer and paid counsellors, therapists, musicians and sports enthusiasts encourage the children to respond through talking, art, drama and play. Kids Company also runs specialist after-school activities for vulnerable children.

Based on research undertaken at the Royal Free Hospital, Batmanghelidjh claims that after about nine months children show marked improvement in their self-esteem, attitude and behaviour. It also has the

benefit that in the long run it is a "socially intelligent" option - it costs Kids Company £500 a year to help a child, as opposed to the £2,500 that it costs clinics and agencies. To keep a young offender in an institution costs around £30,000 a year.

Children self-refer or are referred by teachers; they don't have to rely on parents to attend appointments or receive help. By operating in schools and housing estates, it is easily accessible to children and there is no stigma attached to asking for help. When Batmanghelidjh arrives in a school, her first

move is to address assembly. "I'm very open about the fact that this is a counselling service and that we are here for them, and I explain confidentiality and child protection. I tell them I'm interested to hear from children who are bullied, but also from children who bully, because they too need help. I say there are some children who have problems and some who just don't feel happy inside."⁵ She says that the main benefit is that Kids Company is reaching children early, at a time when they can be helped but have not been picked

By operating in schools there is no stigma attached to asking for help.

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Box 3: Purpose-directed games for children

The aims of the Easterhouse stress management for children project, developed by Paulo Quadros, are achieved by using purpose-directed games and exercises which are directed at many levels of children's development - physical, mental/emotional, social and so on:

- to take focus away from their minds and bring focus into their bodies
- to develop physical awareness and personal boundaries
- to develop relationships with other people
- to develop conscious breathing and to improve body oxygenation
- to develop sensitivity and touch
- to slow down their minds
- to release and redirect energies in a conscious and controlled manner
- to develop sense of value (self-worth) and use it in an interactive way
- to develop experience of working in a team

Box 4: Behind Closed Doors Exhibition

The work of inner city children is shown to the public at this exhibition in a warehouse that has been transformed to resemble a council estate. Behind Closed Doors, organised by Kids Company, invites us to open doors; behind each is a room which reflects a child's experience of home.

The exhibition includes drawing, painting and sculpture and features workshops in which children work with counsellors to express their daily lives at home through a variety of materials and media. By providing the children with a forum to express themselves and have their work acknowledged, Behind Closed Doors helps the therapeutic process. Camila Batmanghelidjh says: "Behind Closed Doors is more than just an exhibition; it is a reflection of the world in which these children live. These are children who have very little attention from adults and who cope with difficulties on their own. Many of them have experienced violence, bereavement, abuse or neglect from a young age. By offering warmth and consistency we give them new ways of coping emotionally."

Behind Closed Doors is at The Arches, 260-261 Grosvenor Court, London SE17. It runs until Friday 30th May 1997 - it is open from 11am to 7pm.



Paulo Quadros has been involved in relaxation and body work since the early 1970s. He has developed his own body work and energy release techniques for physical as well as mental/emotional application (body psychotherapy) and works at the Centre for Natural Therapeutics and Easterhouse Centre for Stress Management in Glasgow.

David Weikart is an educational psychologist who devised the High/Scope approach for children who have too little attention at home.

up by the conventional services. Another of her projects is a new Young People's Centre, which is funded, partly at least, by the money raised from the "Behind Closed Doors" exhibition. Located in south London, the Centre will provide a safe and supportive environment in which young people can pursue creative interests and receive counselling.

Activities on offer will include art, dance, drama, music, cookery and jewellery making. In addition, trained counsellors will provide support and therapy for children with emotional problems. Batmanghelidjh says: "In deprived inner city areas, many youngsters lack a positive nurturing environment. Many, by their own admission, would normally be roaming the streets, fighting or committing petty crimes. The Centre will be a place where children's talents can be developed and encouraged, and their worries can be

heard and understood. These simple things can rekindle a child's hope."

High/Scope Perry

The research department at the Home Office suggested to *Independent* columnist Polly Toynbee that nursery schools based on the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project may be the solution to the growing prison population.⁶ The project, developed by educational psychologist David Weikart, assesses whether high-quality, active learning pre-school programmes can provide short and long-term benefits to children living in poverty and at high risk of failing in school.

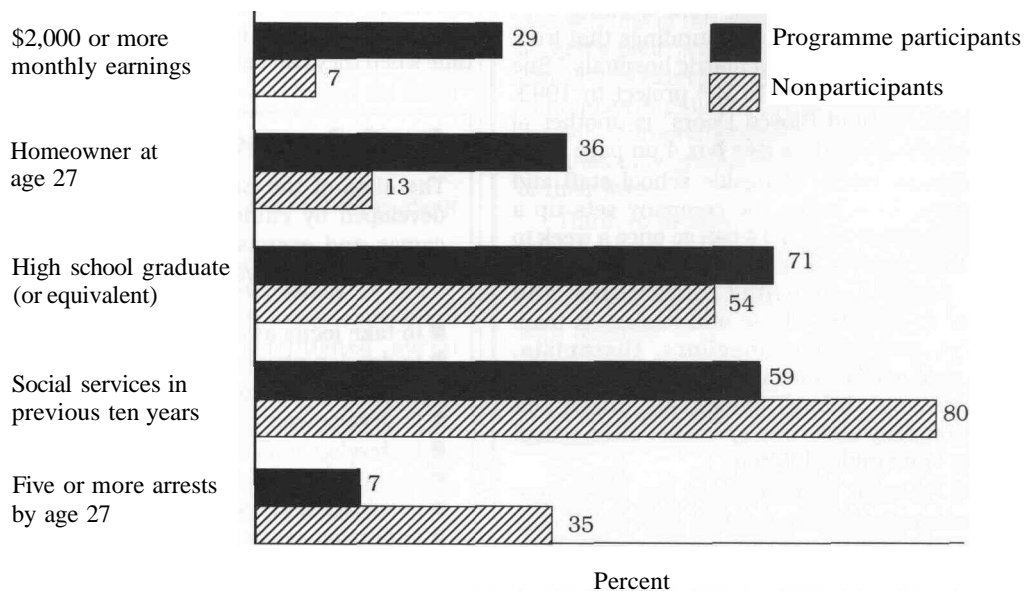
For almost three decades, since the project started in 1962, the study followed the lives of 123 children from African-American families who lived in the neighbourhood of the Perry Elementary School in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Limiting the study to participants of one race eliminated cultural variations and also enabled it to qualify for funding as a Cooperative Research Project of the U.S. Office of Education.

At the study's outset, the children were randomly divided into two groups, one of which had an active learning pre-school programme (see box 5). The other group didn't have any extra education. Researchers then assessed the status of the two groups annually from the ages of 3 to 11, at 14, 15 and 19, and most recently when they reached 27. They looked at variables representing certain characteristics, abilities, attitudes and types of performance.

The results of the study at 27 years old are shown in diagram 1 below. It concluded that such a programme provided African-American children born in poverty with significant lifetime benefits. First, that it created the framework for adult success; it significantly alleviated the negative effects of childhood poverty on educational performance, social responsibility, income and family formation.

Second, the lives of both groups followed a predictable pattern of development since their early

Diagram 1. High/Scope Perry Preschool Project: findings at 27 years⁷



Box 5: Features of the High/Scope Curriculum⁸

The High/Scope educational approach developed and used in the Perry Pre-school Projects's classroom and home visits is an open framework of educational ideas and practices based upon the development of young children. Drawing on the child development ideas of Jean Piaget, it emphasises that children are active learners, who learn best from activities that *they* carry out, plan and review. Adults observe, support and extend children's activities.

Using a set of active learning "key experiences" derived from child development theory, adults encourage children to engage in play activities that involve making choices and solving problems that contribute to their intellectual, social and physical development. These key experiences provide a way of thinking about education that frees the teacher from the resource books of themes and activities that characterise some early childhood programmes and from the scope-and-sequence charts, workbooks and standardised tests that dominate behavioural approaches. Not culture-specific, these key experiences are crucial to children's development the world over. Ten have been identified as:

- Creative representation
- Language and literacy
- Social relations and personal initiative
- Movement
- Music
- Classification (recognising similarities and differences)
- Seriation (creating series and patterns)
- Number
- Space
- Time

school years. Any subsequent intervention, such as special education or involvement with the criminal justice system, did not seem to improve the way the participants developed. Specifically, although special education for under-achievers was meant to help the children, girls who were placed in these situations were very likely to drop out of high school.

Third, the effects of the programme on females were different from its effects on males during school. In females, the project appeared to create the interest and capacity to remain in school and graduate - and that was in spite of difficulties presented, such as becoming pregnant while a teenager. For males, the programme appeared to affect their adjustment to society: it seemed to create a chain of events that led to their assuming greater social responsibility. This included a distinct reduction of

criminal and other anti-social behaviour. Fourth, the process connecting early childhood experience to patterns of improved success in school and the community seemed to develop personalities that could get on with other people and perform tasks. This was based neither on permanently improved intellectual performance nor on academic knowledge.

Finally, the lifetime economic benefits to the participants, their families and the community far outweigh the economic cost of the programme. If it had not been offered, the direct costs to society in lost labour force participation, increased criminal behaviour and additional welfare support would have far exceeded the programme's costs. Over the lifetimes of the participants, the pre-school programme returns to the public an estimated \$7.16 for every dollar invested.

Nursery schools based on this programme may be the solution to the prison population.

Each category includes several key experiences. For example, the category of social relations and personal initiative includes:

- Making and expressing choices, plans and decisions
- Solving problems encountered in play
- Taking care of one's own needs
- Expressing feelings in words
- Participating in group routines
- Being sensitive to the feelings, interests and needs of others
- Building relationships with children and adults
- Creating and experiencing collaborative play
- Dealing with social conflict

Adults listen closely to what children plan and then actively work with and question them to extend their activities to developmentally appropriate experiences. Adults concentrate on open-ended questions that initiate conversations with children, helping them to participate - they ask children to generate descriptions or ideas, encouraging free conversation between adult and child and this serves as a model for conversations among children. This permits the adult and child to interact as thinkers and doers rather than to assume the traditional school roles of the teacher who initiates and the pupil who responds.

A consistent daily routine is maintained, and is only varied when the child has fair warning that things will be different the next day. This adherence to routine gives the child the control necessary to develop a sense of responsibility and to enjoy the opportunities for independence. The routine includes a plan-do-review sequence which gives the children opportunities to express and act on their intentions while keeping the adult involved.



Camila Batmanghelidjh (above, as the children of Kids Company see her) is a clinical psychotherapist whose work has included teaching special needs, working as an art therapist for Westminster Social Services and work with bereaved children.

In 1993 she founded The Place To Be - a project to provide therapeutic support to children in primary schools. Her long term aim is "to change the way mental services are delivered to children so that many more children in need of help can have access to support in a non-threatening environment."

In conclusion

These three projects have similar features:

- Each provides a structured environment, so that children have a sense of security. Meetings and appointments are arranged for specific times of the week. Paulo Quadros uses a contract agreeing this which both he and the child signs.
- The children are empowered to make decisions and learn the consequences of their actions.
- Children are given the space and encouragement to express themselves in the ways in which they feel most comfortable, whether through words, art or play.
- There are consistent attempts to involve the parents and close family in the organisation's activities in order to strengthen the bonds and increase communication.
- Each leader has a clear "vision" for the children and the project.