

Volume 5 Issue 1

REACHING

Children at Risk

For Christians in front-line child care



Addictions

Listening

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Children



In Northeast Thailand I sat with a group of school children discussing the problem of drug and alcohol abuse by young people in the community. They described how easy it was to get alcohol.

"You can buy a 'shot' of whisky from every corner store and you can buy a bottle of whisky between 3 or 4 of you and get drunk", they said. But when I asked how the problem could be dealt with, they suggested that adults needed to take their responsibility of protection seriously and stop blaming young people.

In Christian missions historically, smoking and drinking (not to mention other drug misuse) has been seen as high up on the list of 'worst sins', making it difficult for young people to communicate with adults who might otherwise be able to help them. At the same time adults, who quickly forget the difficulties of youth, do not easily communicate with young people and are not necessarily aware of the underlying reasons why they seek fulfilment in tobacco, alcohol and drugs. Programmes set up to deal with drug misuse are not

always properly researched, and children's views are not always sought.

One way of listening to young people is by using surveys or focus groups

Their answers reflected a clear understanding of the hypocrisy of adults

(small groups focusing on a particular issue). These enable children to share their understandings, and then education can be made more effective by being based on what they already know.

Young people often know some of the health effects of tobacco, alcohol and drugs, but they are not always aware of the relevance to themselves – for example, how it can effect their relationships, sporting or educational abilities.

In a survey I was able to ask Thai school children what they felt would help prevent children from drinking alcohol and take drugs. Their answers reflected a clear understanding of the hypocrisy of adults in how they manufacture and

distribute these products, and how their parents and teachers did not practise what they preached. The school children thought that reducing accessibility was the best way for young people to be prevented from using drugs.

Looking at this issue, then, how realistically can accessibility be reduced? It isn't easy to reduce the selling of illegal drugs, but what about alcohol? Some countries have age

restrictions or limit the sale to certain licensed premises. Local authorities may need to enforce these regulations and your organisation could be involved in campaigning.

Be encouraged: local officials may not be unwilling to collaborate. When the results of the Thai survey were taken to the Chief Medical Officer of the Province, for instance, he made a public demonstration of the law. Shop owners selling alcohol and tobacco to children 'under age' were prosecuted, and a TV crew was brought in to cover the event!

A detailed electronic version of the survey report is available from Glenn Miles.

