

Volume 4 Issue 1



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# REACHING

Children at Risk

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Emotions



**For Christians  
in front-line child care**

# Listening



# Children



There is a story of a programme involving street children where the programme managers had built a brand new day centre. It had a kitchen, dining hall, day-cots, games rooms, showers and staff all ready to get started with a huge range of activities, but on the first night no children came. The previous week, staff had gone out on to the street to invite children and their friends to come and use the facilities and the kids had seemed to want to come but when it came to the time the place was empty. The staff couldn't understand it. What had gone wrong?

Steve, the co-ordinator went out for a long walk onto the street and bumped into Pablo, one of the natural leaders of the boys on the street, whom he had known for a long time. They sat down together and talked about things and then in a rare moment of vulnerability, Steve admitted "I just can't understand why none of the street kids are using our new centre". Pablo looked at Steve and asked him if he had thought about where the centre was situated? Even though it was round the corner, it was only 500 metres from the nearest police station.

"Most of the kids would be afraid of going that close to the police station even if they hadn't done anything wrong" Pablo said. Steve had a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach as he realised what he had done. "But why didn't you tell me?" he asked Pablo, but even as he said it he knew the answer. Slowly and quietly Pablo responded, "But you never asked!"

Is "But you never asked!" something that children in our programmes might say if we asked them, or do we value and include their opinions in

made in the image of God and therefore have inherent worth. Instead of doing things for children, we do things with children. Doing things for people without involving them may be necessary in emergencies but we must quickly move into a situation where we can involve them. We should enable children to 'have a say in things that affect them' even, where possible, young children or those with learning difficulties. Otherwise we can be exerting our power as adults in an unhealthy way feeling that 'we know best' when we actually only have half the picture. Isn't 'exerting our power as adults' another form of abuse, the very thing our programmes are trying to address?

## Isn't 'exerting our power as adults' another form of abuse?

policy, planning and programme development? Why listen to children? Well, this story illustrates the importance of listening because of the importance of understanding the context. Unless we listen to the recipients of the programmes we are developing then we are likely to miss vital components of what makes it appropriate in the context.

As Christians, listening to children is also about giving them value because they are

*This column will try to explore different ways that we can listen to children using different methods when doing needs assessments and ongoing evaluations. We will look at some basic principles of listening and some more technical approaches to listening to children in research using questionnaires, drawings and drama. If you have ideas of how you have listened to children I would love to hear from you.*

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"Listening to Children" is a new column by Glenn Miles, an independent child development consultant, with over 10 years experience focused on child health and welfare in Southeast Asia.

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