

Volume 4 Issue 3



# REACHING

## Children at Risk

For Christians in front-line child care



Family

# Listening

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# to Children



In a small research project here in Cambodia I spoke with children in an orphanage where many of them had lived for over 5 years. I asked about their past, present and future. I have seen a number of bad orphanages, but this was not one of them. The children appeared happy and stable, they enjoyed good food, good education and many friends, but most did not have their parents or other relatives nearby.

## Talking pictures

Without indicating what I expected or wanted, I asked them to draw pictures and write comments on what they remembered previous to the orphanage, how they saw themselves now and how they saw themselves in the future after they had left the orphanage. They were then invited to explain what they had drawn.

The pictures of the future gave a strong impression of hope. Many wanted to pursue careers in teaching, nursing, the church and Non Government Organisations! The pictures of the present were also impressive. They appeared to enjoy the food, leisure times and schooling they were now receiving.

However, I was concerned about the pictures the children drew of the past.

Many children drew in detail members of their family left behind in the provinces. The impression I had was that they really missed them. They did have the opportunity to visit extended family up to twice a year. Yet the high cost of travel and of stopping work usually

## Who is the project for?

prevented the relatives from visiting them at other times. Some children had siblings with them, but many did not.

## Understanding the extended family

It became clear from discussion with the staff of the orphanage that there was only limited understanding of each child's extended family. For some children, entering the orphanage may have been the only available choice at the time. My concern, however, is that with a little support some of the families may have been able to (or could still be able to) reabsorb the children into their families again.

Another issue was the fact that the 'orphanage' had been moved to the capital city - a more convenient location.

More convenient for the organisation, perhaps, but what about the families? Had anyone asked them or the children what they felt about it?

The organisation had no worker assigned to talk with relatives about the possibility of children being re-integrated into their communities. Furthermore, there had been no exploration by the organisation of foster care by other Christian families. We need to ask ourselves - who is the project for? What is in the best interests of the child?

## Part of the plan

Let's look again at the role of the family and our responsibilities to support families in their communities. We know that family and community are at the heart of God's plan for human life. So why do we give little consideration to them in the lives of the children we seek to help?

*How does your programme place children in the context of their family? How do you involve and impact the families of children in your project?*