**PSYCHOLOGICAL CARE OF THE YOUNG AT RISK**

**Don Bosco Ramanthapur Model of Psycho-Social Services**

1. **INTRODUCTION: CONCEPT OF THE YOUNG AT RISK AS SEEKERS AND AS AGENTS OF CHANGE**

Providing psychological support for the children at his centre had been in the understanding and plan of people working here from the very beginning. Efforts were made to train the staff so that they would in turn listen to the children with respect and understanding. Counsellors are hard to come by. Nonetheless we have reached a stage when have the possibility of providing psychological care and support for all the children that come to us at this rehabilitation centre.

We work with children at risk with a very specific perspective. The children leave home for various reasons such as:

1. Abused
2. Beaten badly
3. Broken family
4. Child labour
5. Constant harassment
6. Corporal punishments in school
7. Drunken father
8. Enticed by friends with attraction of better opportunities
9. Extreme poverty
10. Fear after committing some mistake
11. Fear of examinations
12. Fear of punishment
13. Lost
14. Misled
15. Not allowed to go to school
16. Not wanting to go to school
17. Orphans with no one to care for them
18. Punished unjustly
19. Quarrels at home
20. Schools did not function
21. Sense of adventure, attraction of travel, city life
22. Shaming that they could not stand
23. Step parent(s)
24. Thrown out of home
25. Unduly high expectations from parents, care-givers.
26. Victims of violence
27. Violence in school
28. Misunderstanding at school or home
29. Parents not available (E.g.: In prison)

In general we tend to say that these children ‘*ran away*’ from home. It is very true, yet this is a prejudiced expression that puts the child in a negative perspective. If we look at most of the reasons given in the list above as the common reasons for leaving home, who would be expected to stay at home except those who have given up all hope and have decided to stick it out and suffer in silence. As people who have committed our lives for these children, we could think first and foremost from the children’s perspective. There is no other perspective that we could take honestly if we are to work with children as their friends or care-givers.

So, why do the children leave home? Children need/want to escape from the cruelties and troubles at home and had the courage to leave the “so-called” security of home to find a less violent and more acceptable environment where they can really be themselves, where they will be accepted and loved for just what they are. The children set out on a quest for that “haven of freedom” that Tagore speaks of. They are truly THE SEEKERS.

This is how they reach the bus stand or railway station and finally the street. And the society immediately brands them, “*The Street Child*.” They are often seen as young criminals or potential criminals; many find their way to Juvenile homes (or Children’s’ jails – as some children refer to them). History of literature has a different take on this. Those who leave the so-called security of their homes, for whatever reason, face more problems and suffering than they had imagined or bargained for. Fortunately, they meet someone, a sage or a mentor, who befriend them and accompany them on their QUEST. These children or young people, return home as HEROES. Could we be such sages or mentors accompanying the children at risk on their quest for dignity, acceptance, and love? We could look at Don Bosco as one of those sages! Psychological care begins here, with this attitude.

1. **STAGES OF THE COUNSELLING PROCESS**

At present a volunteer counsellor meets all the new children; she meets them again occasionally. Others have supplemented this in various ways. One area of work that supplements our programmes for psychological support has been documentation. This is a herculean task and we are now practically at the end of the beginning. In other words, we have sufficient documentation about the children to go about a systematic programme of counselling for the children. Our follow up of the children takes place at various levels.

1. **INITIAL COUNSELLING AT THE SHELTER**

This is a very preliminary work. This consists in building trust in the child to come to the shelter and choose any of the following:

1. To go back to the family
2. To stay at the shelter and explore possibilities
3. To go to the rehabilitation centre where further choices can be made.

Needless to say, some choose a fourth option of leaving the shelter without informing. Much is still to be done to improve the current situation. The staff members need more training. We are planning to have a trained counsellor to join the shelter team at least on a part-time basis. In the meantime we are training the existing staff.

1. **COUNSELLING PROCESSES AT THE REHABILITATION CENTRE**
2. **Initial Counselling at the time of admission to the rehabilitation centre**

The counsellors meet the child as a group on the very first day of their arrival. After the initial chat and welcome to the centre, the admission procedures take place. The children are followed up on the first few days so that they get accustomed to the institutional set up. They are also introduced to the different departments of the technical school and the staff.

1. **Link with the Child Welfare Committee of the Districts**

We are still working on the methodology of connecting with the local CWC. Though it is physically impossible to take the children to the CWC which sits generally only once a week, we are trying to oblige. There is always ground for misunderstanding. Similarly, we keep the police informed of all the new arrivals, when children are missing, and so on. The documentation department of the Shelter coordinates this work.

1. **Preliminary counselling and documentation at the Rehabilitation Centre**

The children are interviewed individually. Care is taken to re-check the information given at the shelter and the basic bio-data is gathered. Initial case study is also initiated with the possibility of identifying areas the child needs special attention. Individual Photos of the children are taken to complete the basic information of the child and the Bio-Data Card and Health Card are prepared. Confidential information is separated and the counselling file is opened. Specific issues connected with the child are taken note of for further follow up.

1. **Collaboration with HLK: Sub-Centre at Ramanthapur**

The Documentation-cum-Counselling Centre is now linked to HLK as a Sub-centre. DBNJ Shelter at New Bhoiguda, Secunderabad, functions as the main centre. It was hoped that counselling follow up could be stored against the basic data, with due attention to confidentiality. This has to wait till HLK becomes fully web based. We hope to use the sub-centre concept in a limited way and help to update the data with regard to children who are admitted at this rehabilitation centre.

1. **Academic or Vocational Counselling**

After the preliminary counselling, the children are placed in the Bridge School. During this period we explore with the children their interests and motivate them to choose either schooling or an option for vocational training for the bigger children. The typical programme to bring the children to an academic level in keeping with their age is still to be realized. A programme for learning English through Skype is being mooted by volunteers from Accenture. Children are also motivated to get in touch with their families. Those who have difficulty in returning to their families are given an option to come back after the initial contact is made. The children are assured of support till they are 18 years old.

1. **Individual and Group Therapy**

As part of the follow up of the children, we have just initiated individual and group processes to support the children. Most children need the follow kind of support:

* + 1. Trauma or trauma like situations and experiences that are deeply emotional
    2. Behavioural and relationship problems
    3. Issues of trust and self-esteem
    4. Addictions

We are convinced that therapy puts the children who have come to us as Seekers to return home and to the society at large as Heroes and as Leaders, Agents of Change.

1. **Vocational Guidance and job placement**

The senior children and those who choose vocational courses during their stay here receive vocational guidance and exposure to various activities. Everyone old enough to join work and has some skill is given job placement according to their particular skills. Initially they may go from here. Later they are placed outside to manage on their own. Those who are linked with the family return home. It is our intention that all are enrolled as past pupils. They will continue to receive support from the counselling centre as past pupils.

1. **Home and Community Re-integration**

This is programme is the plum in the pudding. All our programmes are geared to this. A description of this is given in the next section on Community Based Organisations and Social Re-Integration. We do this in collaboration with OOTA-WELLSPRINGS, the Hyderabad Province Centre for Psycho-social Services which works in tandem with the Counselling and Documentation Centre of DBNJ.

1. **COMMUNITY BASED ORGANISATIONS (CBOs)**

We need to look at our work with the Young at Risk and the Social Re-integration programme holistically. By associating with Don Bosco Psycho-Social Services, we have the support of both the psychological net work as well as the social action network of OOTA-WELLSPRINGS. As the name indicates, the children are brought into touch with their own inner resources and build themselves up as healthy, dignified and empowered individuals. They are also put in touch with empowered communities which are being promoted through people’s organisations which are community based and through these CBOs with the families of children. This is the way we seek to function:

1. From the moment we find a child, we are anxious to establish a link with the family of the child.
2. We care for the child so that the child begins to build up trust and begins to feel at home with us even though away from the real home.
3. We assure the child of protection, even against his own family, if there is reason to believe that the child has come away because of abuse or violence or neglect at home and the child does not want to go back home.
4. Along with the link generated with the family of the child, we establish link with the community the family hails from so that the child can, sooner or later, return to the family through the support of the community.
5. Establishment of a Community Based Organisation (CBO) in the community the child comes from so that we could deal with the community directly and the community could deal with us directly.
6. Strengthening the CBO to work for child rights and child protection in their own community as well as in the surroundings. This will ensure that the community will attend to the needs of the children and provide protection for them. The children will not need to leave the community as in the past.
7. Networking of the CBOs so that Child Care and Protection becomes a reality in larger areas.

The objectives of the counselling and home integration departments are expanded to include community based approach to home integration in the lines mentioned above. Formation of community based organisations is our means to the social re-integration of the child at risk. We seek to facilitate the children to return home as heroes and as natural agents and leaders of a process of change in favour of children beginning from their own community.

1. **TRAINING PROGRAMMES**
   1. **General Staff Training**

The basic training is to focus the attention of all the staff and of all the activities on to the children as the basis of our very existence as Don Bosco Navajeevan centre for the young at Risk. Programmes are facilitated by the Counselling Centre to ensure that all the staff child friendly and have a listening attitude and style.

* 1. **Training programme for the staff of Children’s Homes (JJ Desk)**

Regular programmes are conducted for staff / volunteers at boys’ homes, both governmental and non-governmental, through the auspices of the AP-JJ Desk. Some of the trainees are already working in government homes or are members of Child Welfare Committees.

* 1. **Collaboration with Don Bosco University (Certificate, PG Diploma and Degree)**

With a view giving adequate recognition for the training given here, we have approached Don Bosco University. They are open to accept the training under their on-line training mode. We hope to introduce, hopefully from July 2012, the following Psycho-Social Training programmes: 6-month Certificate, 1-year PG Diploma and 2-year degree programmes. The contents of the course conducted in a Participatory Action Research Training format will have the following contents: 1. Counselling Skills, 2. Human Rights / Child Rights, 3. Pedagogy of Presence. Practicum will include placement in recognized centres for centres for Young at Risk, with exposure to other centres. The programme is open to: Volunteers wanting to work with young at risk, Those who feel called to work with the young at Risk, and those already working with the young at risk in governmental or non-governmental organisations. Salesian Psychological Association (SPA.SouthAsia) has evinced interest in taking up this training for young Salesians going for their Practical Training.

1. **CONCLUSION**

The ideas expressed in this project have evolved to the current level through intense efforts during the past three years. This requires the building of awareness at various levels. At every level the efforts have finally been accepted as important and necessary, if we are to keep our focus on the best interests of the child in the Don Bosco Way. It is hoped that these efforts will pave the way for a new society where child labour, child abuse and so on are a thing of the past, and our society will stand out as one that is very, very child friendly. The Young at Risk as SEEKERS would have been the agents of this change.