

Working With Street Children

MODULE 1 A Profile of Street Children

A Training Package on Substance Use, Sexual and Reproductive Health including HIV/AIDS and STDs



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Introduction

Street children are the casualties of economic growth, war, poverty, loss of traditional values, domestic violence, physical and mental abuse. Every street child has a reason for being on the streets. While some children are lured by the promise of excitement and freedom, the majority are pushed onto the street by desperation and a realisation that they have nowhere else to go. In many countries, street children are named after their main survival activities. For example, **vendors** (Dakar, Lusaka and Manila), **street gangs** (Stuttgart), **juvenile prostitutes** (Stuttgart, Manila). What is obvious is that street children are poverty-stricken and their needs and problems are a result of wanting to meet basic needs for survival. Street children go through the struggle of providing themselves with basic things such as food, shelter, health and clothing. Providing targeted interventions that meet the needs of street children requires an understanding of who they are, what they need, what they do and how they can be identified. This module presents features of street children.

Learning objectives

After reading the information and participating in learning activities in this module, you should be able to:

- ✓ Define street children in the context of your own culture.
- ✓ Describe the typical age and gender of a street child and the importance of identifying street girls.
- ✓ Explain why there are fewer street girls than street boys in your area.
- ✓ Describe reasons why street children live or spend time on the street.
- ✓ Describe the problems, basic needs and daily activities of street children in your community.
- ✓ Explain how street children survive on the street.
- ✓ Describe the strengths that street children have.



Lesson 1 - Who are street children?

1.1 Street children

A street child may be:

- a **'child of the streets'**, having no home but the streets. The family may have abandoned him or her or may have no family members left alive. Such a child has to struggle for survival and might move from friend to friend, or live in shelters such as abandoned buildings.
- a **child 'on the street'**, visiting his or her family regularly. The child might even return every night to sleep at home, but spends most days and some nights on the street because of poverty, overcrowding, sexual or physical abuse at home.
- a **part of a street family**. Some children live on the sidewalks or city squares with the rest of their families. Families displaced due to poverty, natural disasters, or wars may be forced to live on the streets. They move their possessions from place to place when necessary. Often the children in these 'street families' work on the streets with other members of their families.
- **in institutionalized care**, having come from a situation of homelessness and at risk of returning to a homeless existence.

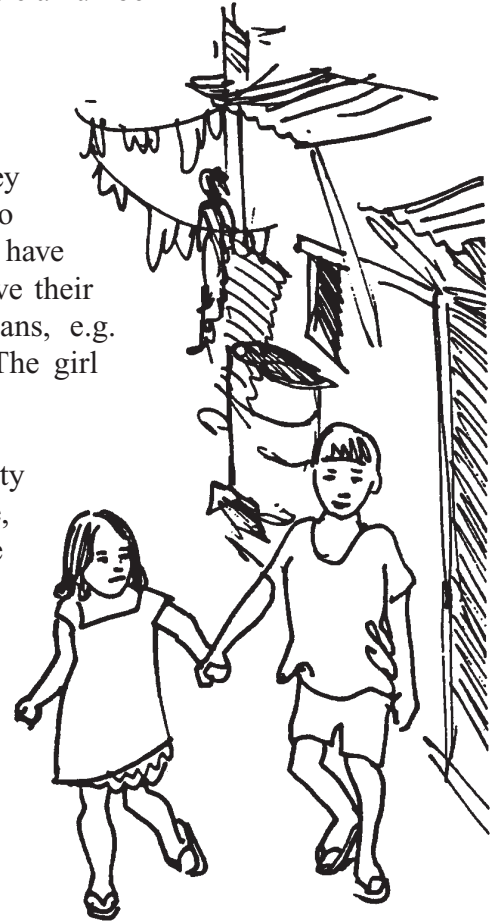


Some children live on the sidewalks or city squares with the rest of the family.

1.2 The typical age and gender of a street child.

The typical age of a street child varies from place to place. In developing countries children as young as eight live completely on their own. In developed countries, street children are usually over the age of twelve. The proportion of girls among street children is reported to be less than 30% in developing countries and about 50% in many developed countries. There are a number of reasons why there are fewer street girls:

- Fewer girls may be abandoned by their families. Girls are often socialized (taught by their families and culture) to be submissive and caring and therefore they tend to have fewer behavioural problems as compared to boys. Since girls have fewer behavioural problems, they have less conflict with their families and do not need to leave their home. Families might get rid of girls by other means, e.g. ‘marrying them off’ when they are as young as 13. The girl would then have another family.
- The authorities or individual members of the community may pick up girls on the street more quickly. For example, girls may be recruited to do domestic work in private households or to work in the commercial sex industry.
- Street girls may be less ‘visible’ to researchers or educators. Some street girls disguise themselves as boys to protect themselves from harassment by the police, welfare workers, employers and other street children and others may only appear on the streets at night.



The typical age of a street child varies from place to place.

1.3 The importance of identifying street girls.

Girls on the street have more difficulties and are often overlooked by street educators. Street girls are looked down upon in many societies and are easily exploited. They usually have less economic opportunities than boys and are given less money than boys for similar activities. Educational opportunities are denied to them and street educators usually engage street boys in various activities while paying little attention to girls. It is important to seek and work to improve the situation of street girls because by doing so, you would be:

- Ensuring that young girls and boys have equal opportunities.
- Boosting their low self-esteem. They may then participate in income generating activities and thus break the pattern of vulnerability.
- Ensuring that street girls have improved nutritional status.
- Helping minimize the possibility of early unwanted and high-risk pregnancies by providing them with information about sexual and reproductive health.
- Ensuring the return in investment into future generations, as young women with some education tend to ensure that their own children are educated.

Learning Activity



1. Definition of street children.

What is your definition of a street child?

A street child is:

2. Profile of street children.

It may be difficult to cope with the requested information on the spot, but going through the activity initiates the process of wanting to understand the local situation better.

a. How many street children in your locality are:

- Living on the street?
- Returning to their families?
- Living with the family which is on the street?

b. What is the percentage of the following groups of street children in your locality:

- Children below the age of 12 years? %
- Children at or above the age of 12 years? %
- Boys? %
- Girls? %

3. Reasons why there may be fewer street girls in your community.

In small groups, discuss the reasons as to why there are fewer street girls in your community. Note the information and present it in a bigger group. Collate the reasons given by each group.



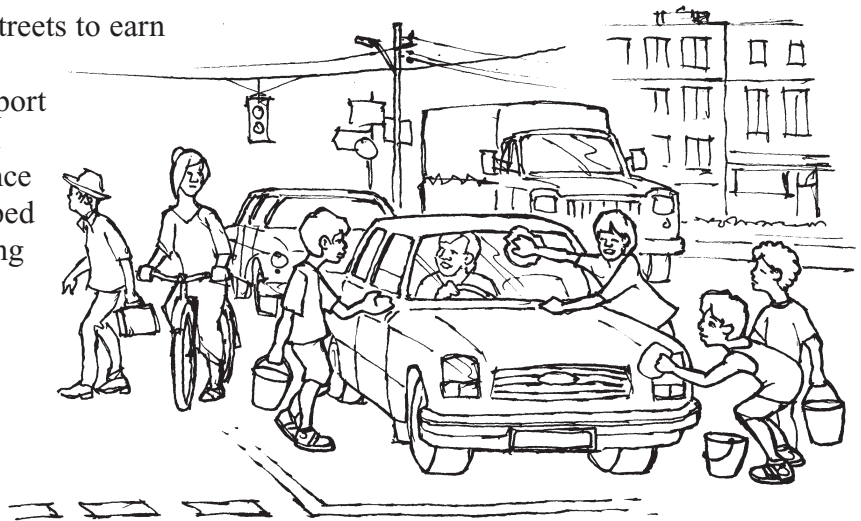
Lesson 2 - Why do children take to the street?

2.1 Why children are on the street.

The reasons why street children live on the street vary. However, there is one explanation that holds true for both developed and developing countries - **poverty**. Most street children go onto the street to look for a better way of life. The following are some of the common reasons:

- **To earn money for themselves and support their families.**

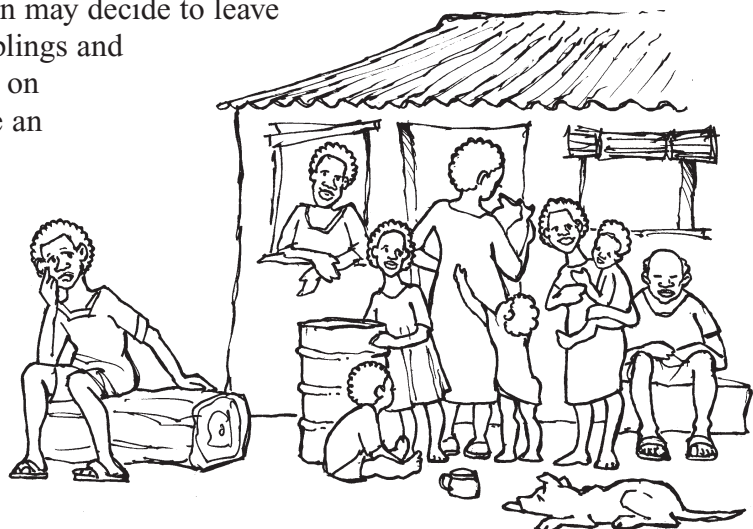
Street children work on the streets to earn money for themselves. Some children need to work to support their families. Some children may have been denied a chance to go to school or have dropped out of school and have nothing to do. They can earn money by begging, carrying or bearing, car washing, drug trafficking, juggling, performing music, running errands, scavenging, sex work, shoe shining or vending.



To earn money.

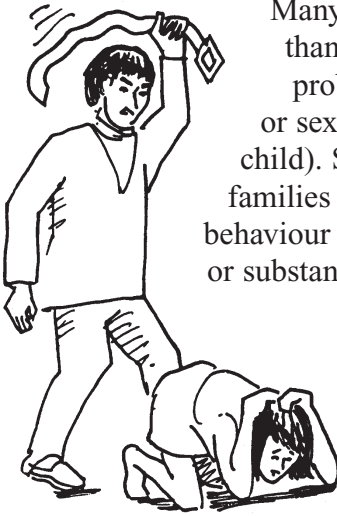
- **To find shelter.**

In overcrowded households, children may decide to leave home to make room for younger siblings and elderly family members. Others are on the streets because they do not have an alternative. They may have become separated from their families during civil unrest or their parents/ caretakers may have died from illnesses such as AIDS or killed during armed conflict. Other children may have nowhere else to go when they are released from institutions such as a jail or a detention centre.



To have more space to live.

- To escape from family problems including rejection.



Many children feel that living on the streets is better than coping with problems in their homes. These problems can include conflicts with parents, physical or sexual abuse or neglect (e.g. an abandoned disabled child). Some children are forced to leave home by their families because the family does not approve of a child's behaviour or its consequences, e.g. pregnancy, homosexuality or substance use.

Conflict with parents including physical abuse.



Family does not approve of behaviour.

- To escape from work demands in the home.

In many cultures, children are expected to participate in routine family tasks. At times the demands on children may be more than they can take. This leads to the child feeling that he or she is a slave or a servant. Such children leave home in search of freedom from adult demands.



The work demands may be more than they can take.

- **To escape from a children's institution.**

Street children may feel that children's homes are 'like prisons'. They cannot adjust to rules after experiencing the freedom of the streets. At times the personnel in these institutions may abuse children.



Children may have to do many unhealthy or dangerous things to survive.

Example

The Philippines.

Studies in the Philippines have found that various characteristics of the child, the child's family, the local community and the society explain why some children are on the streets.

Causes related to the child or the family.

- Poor, uneducated and large families.
- Lack of knowledge and skills needed for parenting.
- Lack of responsibility on the part of parents, family conflicts and parental behavioural problems e.g. giving priority to material gains, substance use, gambling.
- Physical abuse of the child.
- Rebellious behaviour and attitudes of the child.

Causes in the local community

- Inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities in the community, e.g. lack of adequate employment opportunities, problems in working conditions, lack of recreational activities.
- Congestion in slum areas, and inadequate/poor housing facilities.
- Restrictive and inflexible educational system.
- Poor law enforcement and exploitation by law enforcers.

Causes in the general society

- Political and economic conditions, e.g. poverty and underdevelopment of resources.

Learning Activity



1. Why are there street children in your area?

Describe the reasons why children have taken to the streets in your area. The reasons that you have identified may be based on the characteristics of the child, such as age, sex, personality, general health, the child's family and the community. If you are new to street work, ask neighbours, friends and street children or read about it from local documents. Give the reasons in the spaces provided below:

2. The needs of street children in your community.

Review this list of needs of street children

Acceptance	Medical care
Affection	Shelter
Clothing	Money
Companionship	Protection
Food	Recreation
Sleep	Relaxation

- Circle the needs that you think are most important.
- Mark the needs that are probably most important in the **eyes of the street child**. These are called 'felt needs.'
- Are their needs and your priorities the same?
- Give reasons as to why their priorities and yours may be similar or different.

3. Meeting the needs.

How can you fulfil the needs that you perceive as important for street children and their 'felt' needs?

4. Positive and negative attributes of activities undertaken by street children.

From your experience, discuss the positive and negative attributes of the activities that street children undertake in your local context.

Begging	Playing	Shoe shinning
Car washing and watching	Running errands	Stealing
Drug trafficking and dealing	Scavenging	Using alcohol and other drugs
Fighting	Selling blood	Vending (selling items often in the market)
Juggling	Sex	
Performing music	Sex work	



Lesson 3 - The problems of street children

Street children have a greater burden than other poor children who are supervised by adults. Their problems could be grouped into three classes: **social**, **physical**, and **psychological**.

3.1 Social problems.

- **Poverty and illiteracy.**

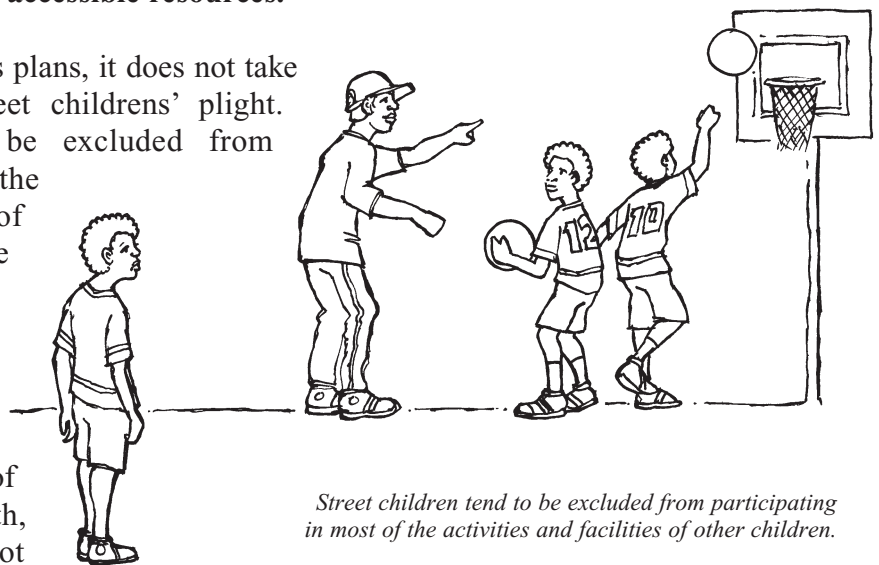
They lack basic resources to sustain a healthy living. They usually have no financial means to buy decent clothing (which may be necessary in cold places), and no money to buy food, which is crucial for their development. Because of the costs of services most street children cannot afford to go to school. Even where schools are free, many children cannot afford to buy uniforms, shoes and books. Street children live in places where they are not adequately protected from the environment. They rarely have access to facilities that they need for hygiene and sanitation, such as toilets and clean and safe water supply. They are therefore more vulnerable to health problems resulting from poor sanitation.



They lack basic resources to sustain a healthy living.

- **Discrimination and lack of accessible resources.**

When the community makes plans, it does not take into consideration the street childrens' plight. Street children tend to be excluded from participating in most of the activities and facilities of other children. This is one reason why street children often do not have access to medical, educational, recreational and vocational resources. They face problems such as lack of vaccinations; poor health, illiteracy and they cannot acquire skills needed for finding jobs.



Street children tend to be excluded from participating in most of the activities and facilities of other children.

● **Violent Environment.**

The street is an unprotected environment and street children are exploited frequently. In some places, street children may even face the possibility of physical injuries or death from violence. Common sources of violence are: the police, gangs, drug syndicates, those who operate commercial sex businesses, death squads, other street children, families and sexual partners.

Example

Young Pablo is startled awake by the sound of rattling next to his makeshift bed, the back seat of an abandoned car. He quickly grabs a knife that he keeps by his side for protection, and turns to make sure that the older boys hadn't returned to bother him. He sighs as he realizes that he is safe, it's only a dog rummaging through some old debris. Pablo thinks about the events of the previous day and wonders whether he has enough strength to face yet another day at the shopping centre where he and some of the other street children mind cars. The previous day he had been spat on by some of the car owners, insulted by a group of vendors, and chased by the police. And to top things off, he had been harassed and beaten by some of the older boys, who stole the little money he had managed to earn. He isn't sure he has enough courage to carry on, but he doesn't really have a choice. He has not had a decent meal, only scraps, in days and the pain in his stomach is growing stronger by the minute. Pablo picks up the small jar containing the glue. He takes a very long sniff. Somehow, the sensation helps to clear his head and alleviates some of the pain he feels in his stomach. Hopefully, he will be more successful in finding something to eat after the market closes. Although he does not have a clock or a watch, he knows that it's about mid-day. He gets up and wanders over to the shopping centre, wondering what surprises this day would bring.

(WHO/PSA/Mentor Foundation)

● **Stigmatization.**

Society usually perceives street children as difficult children who are out there to cause trouble. In general, the public thinks that street children are uncontrollable and violent, have substance use problems, have no morals, have lost all the ability to feel emotions such as love and that they turn into terrorists and revolutionaries. They tend to be unsympathetic to the street children's plight. This negative attitude may be a result of the society's inability to care for its people.

3.2 Physical problems.

- **Lack of adequate nutrition.**

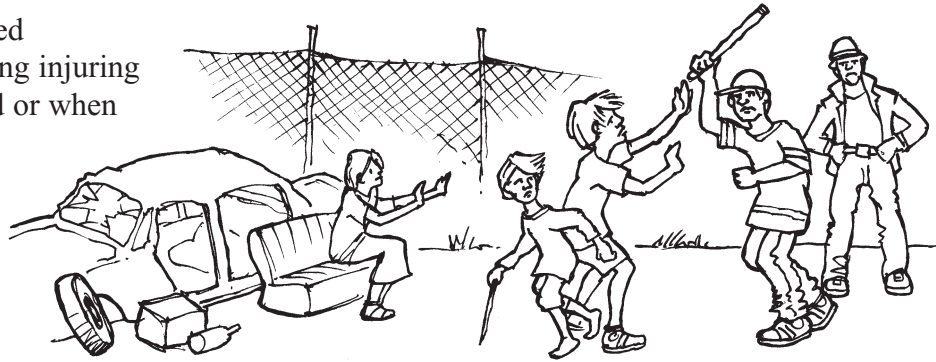
Even though some street children can usually get enough to eat, they do not have nutritious diets. This leads to malnutrition, anaemia and vitamin deficiencies.



They do not usually have nutritious diets.

- **Injuries.**

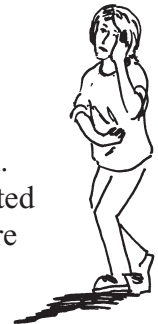
Injuries may be caused intentionally (including injuring self while intoxicated or when depressed) and unintentionally, e.g. due to use of tools which have been designed for adults. The rate of injuries is usually higher for male than for female street children.



Injuries are usually higher for male than for female street children.

- **Sexual and reproductive health problems.**

Sexual and reproductive health problems affect both girls and boys. However, street girls are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse and exploitation. Common sexual and reproductive health problems include sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions (details are provided in **Module 4**). Pregnant street girls do not receive adequate antenatal care.



Sexual and reproductive health problems such as unwanted pregnancies.

- **Common diseases.**

Street children experience many common diseases such as tuberculosis, skin diseases, dental problems and parasitic diseases which can be prevented easily if these children have enough resources and their basic needs are met.

3.3 Psychological/mental problems.

- **A Stressful Past.**

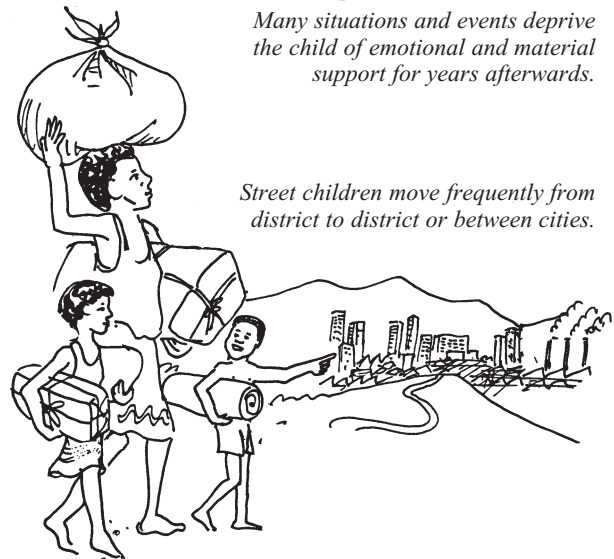
Many situations and events that pushed these children onto the street in the first place (like natural disasters, man-made disasters, exploitation and conflicts) may have a lasting impact on their well being. For example, the family conflict that pushed the child onto the streets continues to deprive the child of emotional and material support for years afterwards. When the child has his or her own baby, neither the new parent nor the baby will have the benefit of the previous generation's support.



Many situations and events deprive the child of emotional and material support for years afterwards.

- **A Transitory Lifestyle.**

Street children in some large cities move frequently from district to district or between cities. Sometimes they do this by choice, but at other times they are forced to move to hide from the police, welfare authorities, gangs, and drug syndicates. This type of lifestyle leads to problems of social isolation and loneliness and difficulties in developing emotional attachments to special individuals.



Street children move frequently from district to district or between cities.

- **Mental Health.**

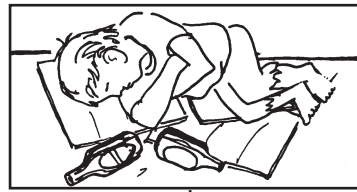
The stresses that street children experience make them vulnerable to emotional problems, psychiatric disorders and learning difficulties. They do not receive adequate care for these conditions.

- **Substance use.**

Many street children are involved in harmful use of psychoactive substances. This can lead to overdose, increase the chance of accidents, violence, unwanted pregnancy and unprotected sex. Over time, the continued use of substances can lead to complications such as brain and liver damage (details are provided in **Module 3**).



Substance use can lead to many complications such as overdose and violence.

Social Problems**Psychological/mental problems****Physical Problems**

Problems street children experience.

Example

To exemplify the life of street children, an extract from a report on street children in Zambia, by the Zambia Red Cross (Echos of their hearts: The Street Youth Panel, 1995) is given below:

“When my father was alive, I went to school with well-to-do children. I used to go to school in our private car. I never thought of walking in my life and I never even thought of being a street child. I thought the life I was leading was going to last forever. When my father died in 1988, his relatives shared all his belongings and left us with nothing and no one was prepared to look after us. When the situation worsened, I thought of coming to Lusaka (Capital City) to look for work.

In Lusaka, I lived at the Inter-city bus terminal with some friends. We used to do ‘piece-work’ (temporary job) to earn our living. We never used to steal, but what surprised us was that the police would pounce on us for no reason at all. The only crime we committed was that of looking scruffy and dirty. We would ask ourselves, why are policemen treating us like this? We are all Zambians, and we are not thieves, we are people like them. Now if the police who are supposed to help and protect us chase us, what will happen if I come to you Mr. Vice-president, how are you going to treat me? My appeal to the government is that ‘we street kids’ need help, we need protection, we need work for us to live like other Zambian children. Please do not ignore us, as we are still suffering. We are not thieves, and we are not vagabonds. The problems we are facing are too numerous but these are the main ones. We need a shelter to lay our heads, food, and clinics that we can attend when we are ill”.

(Maron Chisha, 20 year old street boy)

Learning Activity



1. Problems street girls and boys might face in your area.

Discuss and write down the problems street children face in your area.



Lesson 4 - How do street children survive?

Survival for street children means obtaining food, clothing and shelter, and protecting themselves against violence and other forms of abuse. It depends on:

Personal strengths: The child's resourcefulness (the ability to solve problems quickly and efficiently with available resources), and resilience (the ability to recover from shock, depression, and other difficult circumstances) determine his/ her survival. Resourcefulness and resilience would depend upon the child's creativity, hard work, intelligence and concern for one another.

Example

Brazil.

In Brazil, many street children travelled regularly to the beach in Buenaventura at weekends, some three to four hours away by automobile. To be able to do this, the child would have to negotiate a ride on a freight truck, raise money by shining shoes and begging to feed himself, and successfully negotiate transportation back within a set time frame. This is no small accomplishment for an unsupervised 10-year-old.

The peer group: Peers are individuals who share common interests and needs. Peer groups tend to be homogeneous in age and gender. The peer group has a strong influence on street children because of the child's need for acceptance, belonging and protection. The group often determines the process of change, socialization and development among street children by providing emotional and material support.

Street children often help in one another's survival. They often join together to form emotional and material support networks. The networks can range from a simple circle of friends to an organized, business network. Experienced street children teach new comers how to survive. Members of the group share food, clothing, shelter, information and psychoactive substances.

Example

Nong, a street child, works in the marketplace as a porter. The rest of his siblings earn money by taking care of children in the neighbourhood and by running errands for their neighbours. Their mother takes care of the youngest child and manages the household. Their father works as a contractual labourer, moving from one construction site to another. Sometimes these sites are so far from the slum community where they live that he has to be away from home for a long time.

Nong's older brother used to work with him in the marketplace, but one day he was run over by a car. The family grieved for him but had to carry on with their lives. The sight of his brother lying dead in the streets has never left Nong's mind. The older children in the marketplace have become a replacement for his brother. However, all of these children sniff solvents and drink alcohol.

Chance factors: An important thing that determines the mode of survival is the people whom the child meets on the first day away from home, whether it is a group of car washers or drug traffickers. Being new to the situation he or she does not know that there are other ways of surviving on the street.

Exploiters: Street children may have to do many unhealthy or dangerous things to survive. Other street children, the police, and the adults who run the sex and drug trades may easily victimize them.

Other support mechanisms among street children: These mechanisms could be related to trade or activities in the streets and tend to be hierarchical. For example, there may be a leader and a spokesperson. The roles of group members can vary depending on their strengths and weaknesses. The members tend to protect each other in the face of gang wars, police arrests or other risky situations.

Learning Activity



1. How do street children survive?

- Why do you think some street children in your area seem to survive better than others in the same circumstances?
- What specific things do local street children do that shows their resourcefulness?
- Street children say their greatest resource is other street children. How specifically do street children in your community support each other?
- Resilience is a person's ability to recover from shock, depression, and other difficult circumstances. Some street children are able to get along better than others in the same circumstances. You are a new street child on the street. The pressure for you to make friends is high at this particular time. You spot a group of children inhaling a substance. What would be your response? Role play the situation.

- Roleplayers:
- new street children
 - group of old street children

The learning point is that the pressure to conform and need for acceptance are dilemmas of street life and that street children have also the strength to overcome some of their problems.

2. To conclude this module, on the next page, you will find a sample profile form to help you collect quantitative (numerical) data about the street children.

Try filling it based on what you already know. Use one sheet for each location where street children are found.

The Street Children Profile Form

Date:

Name of Area (specify precise location):

Type of Area:

Urban Poor Community Centre or Institution Park or Public Place

Street Compound Other

Age

less than 7 8 -12 13-15 16-18 18 and above Total

Number of youths who are parents

Number of youths in category - Boys Girls

Reasons for being on the streets

Family problems Need for income Civil disturbances

How long have children been on the streets ?

A week or less A month or less Several months

Six months to a year More than a year

Have they been home and returned to the streets ?

Usual activities

Economic:

Number of children in category

Boys Girls

Carrying Scavenging Vending (selling items in markets)

Licit services (e.g. car washing) Illicit services (e.g. sex work)

Non-economic: Informal education Using substances Unmet needs

Adequate shelter Food Health care Education

Social Connection Counselling Legal services Recreation

Assistance with care of their own children

Bibliography and further reading

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Key Messages

- **Being on the street makes street children more vulnerable. Street education can alleviate some of their problems.**
- **Any one trait or background cannot define street children. There are a variety of conditions and circumstances that define them.**
- **In most developing countries there are fewer street girls in comparison to street boys. Street girls are especially more vulnerable and must not be overlooked.**
- **The reasons why street children are on the street are many. Poverty is a common factor.**
- **Street children engage in a wide range of activities to meet their daily needs, some of which are risky.**
- **Identifying their positive characteristics can contribute towards the development of relevant, appropriate interventions in which they can play a key role.**
- **Recognising resilience, strengths and the resourcefulness of street children can help street educators to effectively meet some of the needs of street children.**



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