



Bolivian Street Children Project

# Sanctity on the Streets



**Focus on the Family "Discovery" Series  
July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

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## Bolivian Street Children Project

- **Children *on* the Streets vs. Children *of* the Streets.**
  - The Bolivian Street Children Project focuses its efforts on the Children *of* the Streets.
- **Street Ministry**
  - On-street outreaches
  - Off-street activities
  - Caring for their wellbeing while on the streets
  - Encouraging and leading children to decide to leave the streets



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The Bolivian Street Children’s Project outreach is currently focused on La Paz, Bolivia working with Children of the Streets. There are two general categories of street children: those on the streets and those of the streets. Children on the streets typically spend their days and some nights on the streets, but maintain some contact with family members and have a home base. Children of the streets have nowhere else to go. The street is their home and other street children are their family. We focus our efforts on children *of* the streets.

We do on-street outreaches and care for the wellbeing of the children while they are still living on the streets. We also organize off-street activities to provide them with experiences outside of their living environment. These off-street activities are a positive influence and often an important factor in a decision to leave the streets. Some of these off-street activities are things like going on a hike and camping trip together, going to a pool. We also host a Christmas dinner which is one of the favorite activities of the kids. This dinner is served at a nice church with white table clothes and center pieces. We bring all of the kids to the church, dress up, and serve them dinner that night. The first year we did it on child who had been on the streets for over 10 years shared, “In all my life on the streets nobody has ever thought enough of us to take us away from the streets and do something for us in such a dignified environment.”

All of these activities are designed to help these children understand their worth and understand that they deserve a better life.



## Residential Care Programs

- **Transition home for children leaving the streets**
- **Permanent homes with substitute parents for long-term residential care**
- **Private tutoring in both homes in order to bring the children up to grade level**
- **Family Centered events and activities**
  - Going out as a family on Sunday afternoons
  - Celebrating birthday parties together with all of the homes



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The bulk of our ministry resources go to our residential care program. We currently have three homes – one transition home, and three permanent homes. All of the homes are a family environment with a maximum capacity of ten kids per home. In many homes in the city you need to “earn” things like a mattress, bed and sheets. In our home children are told from the moment they enter that, “This is *your* home. This is *your* bed, and these are going to be your brothers.” It is amazing to see how the children react. There are two boys per room and once we were introducing a boy to his new roommate, and the boy who had been with us said, “You don’t have any toys. Why don’t you come pick one of mine to have for your own?” The boy reluctantly picked a small car. The other boy then said, “That isn’t enough... you need to take another one too.” It is amazing to see how quickly children respond and can transition from the street environment of defending yourself to an environment of loving and sharing.

The permanent homes also house 10 boys each. These homes have five bedrooms, so the boys are able to sleep two per room.

Each home makes its own food, has breakfast, lunch and dinner together. Each family is allowed to decorate their own home, resulting in diversity from home to home. We want each family to grow and to develop their own character as a family, not simply be a replica of a ministry model.

We provide private tutoring in all of our homes in order to bring our children up to grade level and help them to excel in public schools. Even after having missed years of education while living on the streets, many of these children later skip grades as they begin to flourish in this academic environment.

We are family centered. Each home is treated as a family, and we encourage each family to decide on their own activities. Each family is given full control of the budget for their family, and they do shopping together and plan activities together. When a child has a birthday they are allowed to invite whoever they want to their party, and always invite all of the boys from the other homes, and often invite friends from school and church.



## Characteristics of Care

- **Our care is characterized by:**
  - Making Christ known
  - Christian values
  - Family based care in groups of 10 children
  - Focusing on and promoting the individuality of each child and each family
  - Focusing on the *potential* of each child
  - Providing opportunities that result in a change of socioeconomic class for each child to ensure that the cycle of poverty is ended
  - Long-term committment

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These are some of the characteristics that I feel explain the care we provide for our children.

- Our families and staff model Christian values and seek to make Christ known. We seek to make the love of Christ a reality for these children so that they grow into a faith relationship with Him. We also seek to make the love of Christ known to the community by the love and respect we demonstrate within the home and in interactions with our community, school and church.
- We are focused on providing care in family units.
- We promote the individuality of each child and each family.
- We focus on the potential of each child, and seek to mold our program in a way that will never limit a child's development.
- We provide opportunities that will result in a change of socioeconomic class for each child, ensuring that the cycle of poverty is ended with these children.
- As part of our family model, we are committed to these children for life, and hope that each child will continue to participate in their family as they grow older.



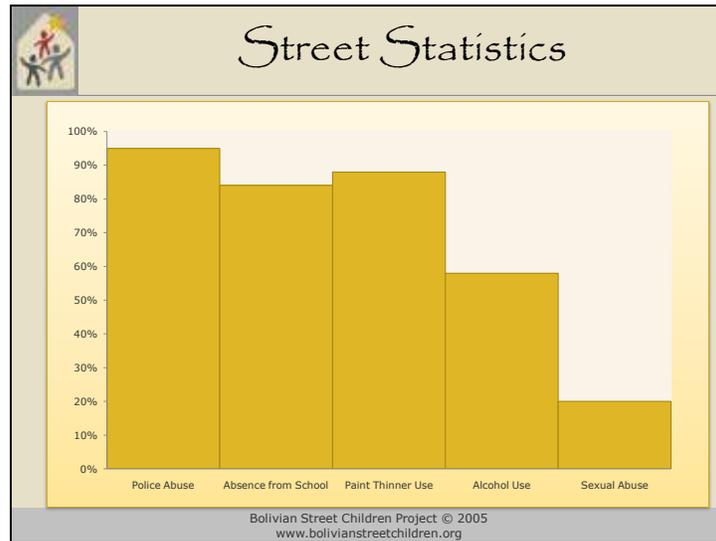
## Dignity of Creation

**"So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them." –  
Genesis 1:27**

**"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth,  
whatever you did not do for one of  
the least of these, you did not do for  
me.'" – Matthew 25:45**

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We believe in both the sanctity and the subsequent dignity of human life. Our work is based on the belief that God created children in His image and that in creation human kind is proclaimed as "good." We believe that children deserve, and God demands, that the Church protects this sanctity of human life. Our reverence for human life is practically expressed through the value and respect given to children by society, families, the Church and government. I invite you to consider these passages, and this viewpoint as I introduce you to our children. I invite you to consider what the lives of these children demonstrate about the sanctity of human life as lived on the streets of La Paz.



Little research or statistics have been done on children of the streets. Most of what people “know” about them is from their own anecdotal evidence, and generally portrays the children in a negative way. It is easy to focus on the negative lifestyles of some of these children, and attempt to place blame on them. Rather than focusing on what the children do in this harsh environment, we are called to focus on what their lives are like, and what we are doing in response to their situation.

We start with some simple statistics on how these children live. Their daily lives are characterized by a number of elements. Over 90% of the children have experienced abuse by police and regularly inhale paint thinner. As children grow older they are taught by older kids to supplement their paint thinner use with alcohol. About 55% of street children abuse alcohol. While some children, on their own self initiative, attend public schools during the day, almost 85% do not attend school, and have not attended school for a number of years.

The statistic on sexual abuse is markedly lower than what we would expect. The reason is that this is “sexual abuse” as reported by these children. In their eyes sexual abuse is what we would consider violent rape. Inappropriate touching, prostitution, sexual coercion, are all a part of the daily lives of these children. Often times girls are forced to have sex with one or more boys on the streets but simply consider this a part of regular street life. 20% of these children have experienced what we would consider violent rape at the hands of police or other adults in society.

While we have not done any official research we find that the life expectancy of a child on the streets is 22-25 years of age. By that age they have either died of suicide, beatings, falling into the river, or multiple causes. About 10% of the children die each year.

Slide 7



These children have constructed for themselves what they consider their street “homes.” These homes are typically constructed of cardboard, tarps, or leftover construction materials. They are in isolated parts of the city, crowded with children and dogs, often saturated with the smell of human feces and paint thinner.

Slide 8



This is one of the nicer homes with one wall being a property fence, and the others constructed of construction blocks. The roof is made of corrugated steel from construction sites and tarps. This is home to about 16 children and 6 dogs. This home is about 6 feet away from the La Paz river, the second dirtiest river in the world. To get to the home the children have to walk along one of the banks, which is about 1 foot wide and drops off down into the river. Many children die each year by falling into the river, and the children often remark that the river has taken the bodies of many of their friends.

Slide 9

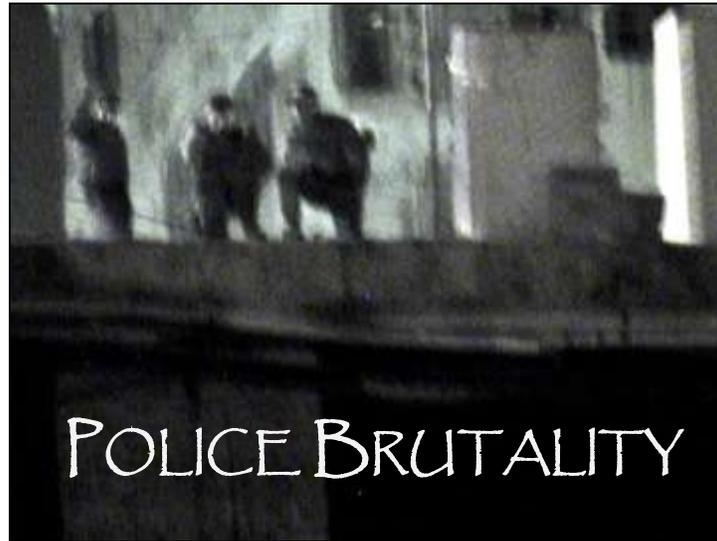


This home is made simply of sticks, boards, and tarps. It is the home to about 10 children and is located underneath a bridge in the city.

Slide 10



This is another home made of bricks and corrugated steel, with cardboard used for the floor. Eight children live in this home, including an infant and four dogs.



Life on the street is characterized by negative treatment from the authorities and society. Police brutality is one of the most frequent issues and takes a number of forms.

\*Extortion – The police come down to the homes late at night (about 3:00 AM) and demand a certain amount of money from that group of kids. If they do not provide the money, they are beaten.

\*“Batidas” – The purpose of a batida is to round up the children and take them off the streets for the purpose of rehabilitating them. The children are often beaten, taken to a prison where they are beat or sexually abused, and then placed into a state-run home. The state-run homes do not provide adequate supervision and the children are physically and sexually abused by older boys in the homes. The children quickly run back to the streets. Recently the police have been driving the children three hours outside of the city and dropping them off with no water or supplies, expecting them to “learn their lesson” on their way home.

\* The Destruction of Property is another form of helping to “rehabilitate” the children and to clean up the city. The police often come and destroy the shelters the children have made and burn all of their possessions. When the children return they are left with no protection for sleeping in what is often below freezing temperatures. This also causes the children to drift and constantly move in the city, making it more difficult for our ministry to reach them.



Another form of police brutality stems from false allegations, and looking for a scapegoat. This is the leg of a pregnant girl who was one of 35 children who were abused one night when a drunk off-duty police officer had his wallet stolen. He was sure that one of the street kids did it, so he found some on-duty officers and they went down to the area where the children live and started beating everyone until someone admitted to stealing the wallet. That child was taken elsewhere and beat severely. The officer never recovered his wallet that night. It was stolen by a group of adults who were later reported to the police by these same children.

Slide 13



This boy suffered a broken pelvis and severe arm injuries after jumping in an attempt to escape the police.

Slide 14



This is a baton hit to the head.



The children often cut themselves as a response to the trauma they suffer on the streets. Cutting is a severe reaction to trauma and helps the children to get a sense of reality and feel that they have control over some component of their lives.



Most children can tell you a story behind each cut on their arm.



I want to share with you the stories of a few individuals who we have met on the streets, to help you better understand the lives of these children.



Beatriz was 14 years old when we met her. You might notice the number of cuts she has on each of her arms. She is huffing paint thinner in this picture. Early one morning we were called to the streets by the other children. She had hung herself from a support beam under the bridge. Having no one to claim her as family we took her to the morgue, bought her a dignified dress and coordinated a wake with a local catholic ministry who does funerals for street children as part of their outreach.



This is Daniel. He is about 10 months old, and this was during the Christmas season. His mother and father lived on the streets with him.



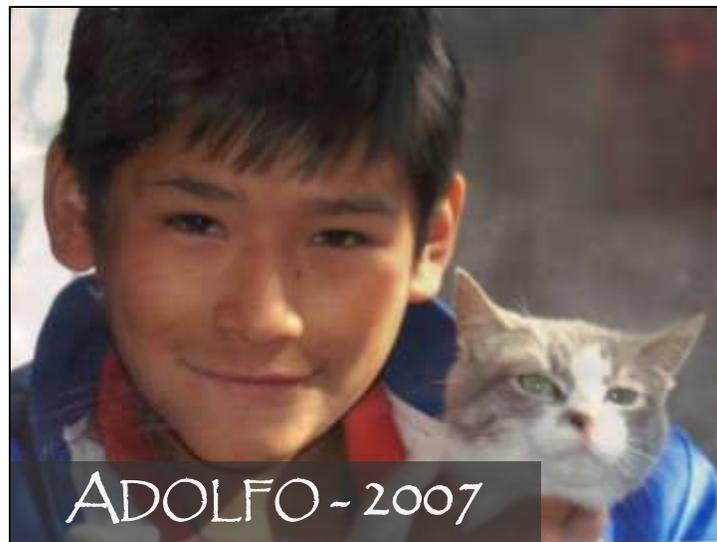
These are Daniel's parents – Marcos and Sylvia. They separated when Marcos stabbed Sylvia in the leg. Sylvia later died by falling into the river. Daniel went to live with his grandmother. Parental rights are very strong in Bolivia and even though both the children of Daniel's grandmother ended up living in the streets there was no way to remove Daniel from her custody. Marcos has made it off the streets, and is living with his parents and working on a public transportation route.

Slide 21



This is Adolfo in 2002, and this is one of the earliest pictures we have of him. We are not sure when he went to the streets, but also know his older brother grew up on the streets.

Slide 22



After more than five years living in the streets Adolfo found a new home in our Bethany family. He currently lives with five brothers and his house parents. After a year of tutoring in our home he began to attend public school and is excelling in our home and in school.



This is Jaime. We don't know when he first moved to the streets, but we met him in 2005. We know that he comes from a family with an alcoholic and abusive father.



Jaime joined our family in 2006. While he has struggled with the burden of wanting to work to support his family (his father does not work), he continues to work with our tutor to make up years of lost schooling.



## Beginning to Help

- **Unique situation of both a spiritual and physical need**
- **The realities of working in a society characterized by a “Faith and Prosperity” Gospel**
- **As a Christian ministry we attempt to meet both the physical and spiritual needs of these children.**
- **There is a need in all stages – wellbeing on the streets, transitioning to an off-street life, and long-term residential care. We provide all three.**

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As a ministry we face a unique situation of attempting to meet both the spiritual and physical needs of these children. One of the challenges in meeting this spiritual need is the reality of working with a context where a “faith and prosperity” Gospel is proclaimed. Many children often end up even more disappointed as they are taught by someone that their life is a result of their own sin. Following the lead of a pastor from a church, they repent, accept Christ, and are told to expect improvements in their lives. Having regular contact with these children we are faced later with the question of “What did I do wrong?” or “Am I really a Christian?” when they find themselves still living on the streets.

The physical needs occur in different stages – caring for the wellbeing of the children on the streets, helping them through a transition into an off-street life, and providing long-term residential care and a substitute family for these children. We provide care for all three stages.



## Beyond Conversion

- **The Church is called to share the Gospel**
  - Colossians 1:28, Matthew 28:18-20
- **The Church is called to promote and care for the social, educational, and spiritual well-being of children**
  - Ezekiel 16:49, 1st John 3:17-18, Isaiah 1:10-17
- **The Church must be involved in caring for children and facilitating their transition into an loving, safe environment.**
- **How do we demonstrate that this is based on their value as a person, not a decision they have made?**

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I am sure that we can all agree that there are two important goals for these children. As Christians, we want them to grow into a faith relationship with Christ and we want them to know Christ. We also see the importance of providing a family for them and a safe life. We see it as a clear calling of the church to provide a safe life for these children. The church is called to promote and care for the social, educational, and spiritual wellbeing of children. The church must be involved in the lives of these children. But practically speaking, how do we make those two things happen in a way that demonstrates the value of each child? In other words, how do we provide services for children so that they know that our love for them is based on their value as an individual, rather than because of a decision that they have made?



## Our Beliefs

**Our love and passion for working with street children is a natural extension of the love we have received from Christ. While sharing this life-giving experience with others is of utmost importance for us, our work with street children is out of our love for them, *not* our fear of their condemnation. We believe that a street child can come into a full and complete relationship with Christ while living on the street. We also believe that God is calling the Church to provide a higher standard of care for children. We do not believe that leaving the streets is a necessary part of a child's spiritual growth, or that it is sinful to live on the streets. We do believe that God desires a life for children in which they grow up in a family, experience joy in their lives, and can safely enjoy their childhood. We believe that God has called his Church to act together to make this a reality for street children.**

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Our statement of faith begins to address this question. Our full statement of faith is much longer, but I think this segment highlights and explains how our work is motivated by faith, and how we see the division between the conversion of children and the services they receive.

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Our faith in our homes plays out the same way it would in most families. We do daily devotions with our children, our staff prays together and with each child, the children attend church and they attend youth group. While we encourage and provide opportunities for each child to express their faith, the services they receive are not based on their expression of faith. We want them to know that their home is unconditional and provide an opportunity for them to embrace their faith on their own terms.

Our ministry on the street is, however, more clearly divided. We do this to both confront some problems caused by a "Faith and Prosperity" movement in Bolivia and to focus on the value of the child.



## Divided Tasks on the Streets

- **We focus on two goals in our street ministry in order to distinguish a difference between evangelism and the provision of social services:**
  - That a child knows Christ as their Savior
  - That a child leaves the streets to find a new life in our home, or through family reunification
- **The goals of a child coming to know Christ and a child leaving the street must be kept independent**
- **We want children to know that Christ values them where they are AND desires a better life for them**
- **A child is called to make their own faith decision based on their knowledge of God, not their physical needs. (Matthew 6:25-33)**
- **We love them for who they are, not for the decision they make.**

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While the spiritual and physical can never be totally separated, we have the burden of ensuring that the messages we deliver are clear. We want the children to know two things. Therefore we find it helpful to focus on two separate goals in our street ministry.

• First, that a child knows Christ as their Savior

• Second, that a child leaves the streets to find a new life in our home, or through family reunification.

These must be treated as independent – not because there is no relationship, but in order to help us deliver a clear message.

\* First, that God loves them for who they are and where they are. We want them to know that God loves them as a person. We want to ensure that the children do not feel that God loves them only because they made a “good” decision to leave the streets, but simply because of who He is and the intrinsic value they have as children.

\* Secondly, Children are called to make faith decisions based on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and their knowledge of God – NOT based on their physical needs or as a form of currency for receiving services.

\* Finally, we want them to know that we love them because of who they are, not because of a spiritual decision they have made. Therefore we are sure to provide our services for any child regardless of where they are in their spiritual journey, allowing them to come to faith on their own terms and in their own time.



## Our Biblical Framework

- **Dignity of Creation - Genesis 1:26-27**
  - Focus on the positive in each child
  - Protecting the “innocence” of childhood (1st Corinth 13:11, Exodus 22:22, Deuteronomy 24:17)
  - Promoting individuality (Rev 2:17, Isaiah 40:26, Psalms 139:13-16, Luke 12:6-7)
- **Forming a part of creation**

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We also base our residential programs on a Biblical framework that we feel begins to help us understand what residential care should look like.

- First, we start with the basic belief in the dignity of creation – that humans were created in the image of God, and that God proclaimed this creation as something that is “good.” We believe that each child is uniquely created in the image of God, and we are therefore called to focus on the innate goodness in each child. Practically that means we focus on the good things the child does in order to help them improve their self esteem and to demonstrate the value we see in them.
- We protect the “innocence of childhood” meaning that each child in our homes is never identified as a “street kid.” We do not label our homes, our vehicles, or in any way make the public aware of a child’s background. While most people know who we are and what we do, and know which children are associated with us, this is a testimony to the children that we do not see them as a marked child, simply as our child.
- Finally this means that we need to promote individuality. I think that one of the keys to our success as a ministry is maintaining the value of knowing each child individually and continuing to maintain flexibility in our expanding program to respond in a unique way to the needs of each child.

Forming a part of creation, means that we need to help children to participate in their schools, churches and society. We need to teach them how to play a constructive role in creation. They need to understand how to serve the church. We need to teach them about reading the news, analyzing current events, making informed political decisions and how to express their political voice. We need to prepare them to be a part of society. We also need to teach them about the environment, and caring for God’s creation.



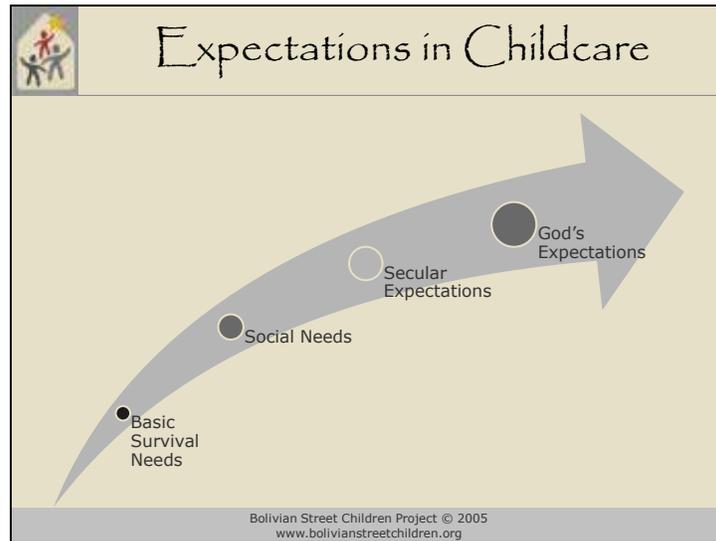
## Our Biblical Framework Cont.

- **Helping children know their Creator - Matthew 16:15**
- **Being a voice for the voiceless - Proverbs 31:8-9, Isaiah 1:17**
- **Living in a family (father to the fatherless) - Psalms 68:5-6, Deut. 10:18-19**
- **Comprehensive wellbeing - John 10:10, Isaiah 65:20-25, Luke 2:52**
- **Promoting good parenting practices:**
  - Discipline with Dignity, quality family time, mentoring, household individuality

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In addition to those characteristics of care that reflect the dignity and uniqueness of creation, the following also forms part of our Biblical framework.

- \* We work to help each child know Christ and come into a faith relationship with him, preparing each child to answer Christ's question of "Who do you say that I am?"
- \* We advocate for the rights of our children in our homes, as well as the children on the streets. We advocate not only for their basic rights, but for their right to live a normal productive life.
- \* Our homes are run as a family, and we feel there is a solid Biblical basis for providing substitute families for children in need.
- \* We seek the comprehensive wellbeing of our children – spiritual, educational, physical, social, and psychological.
- \* We seek to promote good parenting practice within our homes and within the church.



I want to shift gears a little and talk about the burden of care, and what portion of this we feel belongs to non-government organizations (NGOs), the Church and society. In answering the larger question of care, it is helpful to think through the differing expectations for the lives of these children. The life of a child can be divided into four basic care levels – basic survival needs: social needs, secular expectations, and God’s expectations. The basic survival level is essentially what street children have – shelter, food, and clothing. Social needs go slightly beyond this – growing up in a community, having friends, ability to interact with others, etc.

#### Basic secular expectations and hopes for children

- UN Declaration of Human Rights...
- Name, Identity
- Education
- Right to play
- Safe home to live in

#### God’s expectations for children

- To be known as an individual
- To be loved in and by a family
- To be innocent
- To be given an opportunity to know their creator.

It is important to recognize that we cannot expect society to fulfill the expectations of God’s kingdom for these children, but we must hold society accountable for completing their expectations for children



Who is responsible for meeting these needs? Are families, society, churches, children, NGOs (non-government organizations)? Based on the previous slide, we can say that everyone has a certain level that they need to be held accountable to. There are also overlaps. Everyone is responsible for part of raising a child, but who is responsible when the family fails? In the US the society steps in to help raise this child. Who is responsible when families and society fail? In other countries the Church steps in to help. Who is responsible when the Church fails? The NGO. When we as an NGO have work to do, I feel it is a result of a failure in the system. There should not be a place or a job for NGOs to provide direct residential care for children.

In my opinion, NGOs are the attempt of individual Christians to fill the void left by the irresponsibility and failure of families, society and the Church. We feel therefore that part of our job as an NGO is not only to provide care and a future for these children, but to advocate on their behalf and both equip and hold accountable families, society and the Church. Each component here needs to be held responsible for doing their part – families, communities, the government and the Church. There needs to be accountability at all levels.



## A Role for Children?

- **What role do we expect children to play?**
  - In the case of children of the streets we are expecting the children to play *all of the roles*.
- **Opportunities for children to demonstrate their own initiative and capacity for change**
- **Loving adult guidance – let the child be a child.**
  - Leaving the streets
  - Staying in the home
  - Allowing children to make appropriate decisions

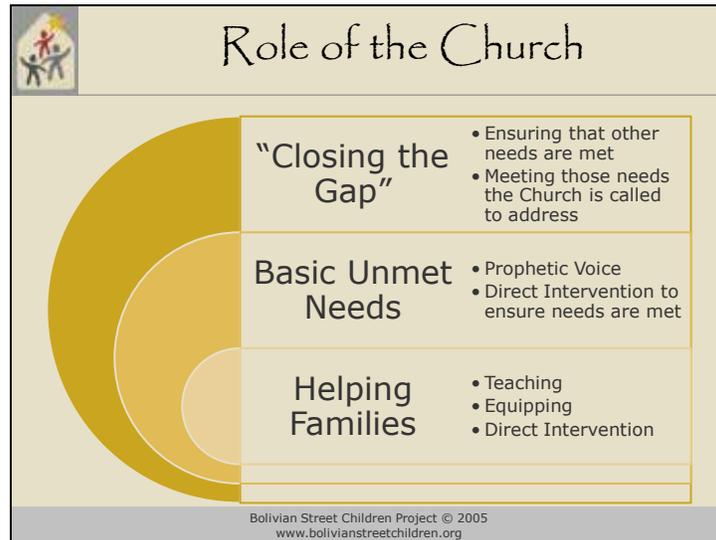
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When families, communities, government and churches fail, children are left to fend for themselves. In the case of street children, we are often expecting the children to play *all of the roles*. They are their own parents. Society is not only disinterested, they would prefer to simply dispose of these children. The Church is often also disinterested – working with street children is complicated, time consuming, and often frustrating. The Church often fails to even advocate for these children in society, focusing more on the conversion of individuals rather than being a prophetic voice against society's failures.

Yet children, and these children in particular, need to play some role in their lives. We have found that an overwhelming predicting factor of success is for a child to express a wish on their own terms to leave the streets. They know that they can “survive” on their own, and they demand a certain respect for doing so. Even children need to have opportunities to demonstrate their own initiative and capacity to change. We need to respect and honor that, but without making them responsible for major life changes.

For example we want a child to leave the streets and express that desire on their own, but we are responsible to help guide them in making that decision. Children in the home often express a desire to leave within a few weeks of arriving at the home. This is often rooted in their addiction to paint thinner, and they simply want to leave to be able to go huff. As adults we can project that decision forward, seeing that their decision to return to the streets may result in them never making a transition away from the streets. One night might turn into a week, a week into a month, and a month into a lifetime. As a child, they see the immediate need are often simply not capable of analyzing the long-term affect that decision will have on their life. In this instance we need to be responsible as adults and simply not allow the child to leave, knowing their short-term need will eventually pass, and that is the best decision for their life.

We also need to allow them to make decisions that are appropriate for their age. For example, we as an institution have no need to define a rigid schedule of sports or activities, and can allow the children to decide what activities to do, what sports to play, etc. This is an important part of allowing them to play an active role in their lives that is appropriate to their age.



The Church's ultimate role should be one that "closes the gap" between secular expectations for children and God's expectations for the lives of children. This means providing spiritual care, helping families to raise their children Biblically, providing Biblical teaching, and opportunities for form a part of a faith community.

However, the Church's role has to expand itself if society is not completing its part. The Church needs to ensure some of these basic needs are being met while continuing to be a prophetic voice calling the government to meet its obligations for the lives of these children. In many countries the government will do as little as possible. For example, if the church simply steps in and provides education, what motivation does the government have to provide a good education? The same thing often happens with healthcare. In developing countries the government should be responsible for ensuring that there is care available for its citizens. Often times the government does not rise to the challenge, so the mission starts a hospital. Years later the best hospitals are still mission hospitals, receiving funding from outside of the country when the country should be starting to fund its own health initiatives. But what is the motivation when someone else is taking care of the problem?

Non-profit organizations face this same issue with the Church. We often present our ministries to a church, trying to advocate for greater participation and responsibilities for the care of these children. Often the response is reflective of an attitude of, "Well, I am glad someone is taking care of these children." Nobody is going to step up to the plate unless someone is holding them accountable to do so.

The Church must also continually work with families to teach and equip them to properly raise their children and ensure that quality care is given in the home.



## Challenges We Face

- **Depth of the problem**
  - Systemic problems
  - Frustrations due to inability of government to complete its part
- **Breadth of the problem**
  - There is far more need than resources
  - Ministries end up making very difficult decisions
  - “Survivor” guilt in the children
- **Cultural stereotyping of children (even within the Church)**

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In Bolivia we face a number of challenges. The biggest simply being the depth and the breadth of the problem.

First, the problem is systemic. Bolivia has essentially no social services at any level. The ability of the government to care for even poor children is only a fraction of the need. In our case we limit ourselves to only taking children of the street, but are continually requested to take more and other children. Unfortunately, we don't have enough life rafts for everyone, so tough decisions need to be made. Even with children in the home we continue to face problems with the system. We send our children to public school to enable them to socialize with other children, yet the public schools are overcrowded (60+ kids to a classroom), have gangs, and the kids do drugs. There is little to no supervision, and the quality of teaching is poor. We try to get our children birth certificates and national IDs, but are blocked for almost any and every reason possible. We have been working on our government accreditation as a home for over a year. Some homes have been in this process for over four years. There are certain tasks that need to be done by the government but the capacity and willingness are simply not there.

We face the fact of the problem being bigger than the resources in many ways. One of the most prominent is children who end up having “survival” guilt because they find themselves in a better life than their family, and they want to leave so that they can work and help their family. We would love to help their families live a better life too, but we can't help the families of every child in our program, and we are forced to focus on helping that child see how they can better help their family in the future, realizing that they are continually worried about their family.

The stereotyping of these children happens on all levels and is very detrimental to our work. Some of these problems are a direct result – schools not wanting to register kids “from a home”, courts dragging their feet for documentation, police not wanting to protect the children on the streets, even members at the church pointing fingers too often and quickly at kids “from the home” whenever something bad happens. Even years after leaving the streets the kids still identify themselves as a “street child”, something we hope that they remember as part of their past, not part of their identity.



## What About Girls?

- **Currently our resources limit us to expand only in a way that maintains our current program.**
- **Expanding our program to girls requires many changes**
  - New land
  - Ability to care for children
  - Handling all of the problems associated with prostitution
- **What about babies?**
  - We think the best way to help children is by helping their parents.

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The number one question we get asked about our ministry is why we are only working with girls. The answer is simple: resources. Currently we only have enough resources to expand our current program on our current land. Working with girls implies developing new components to our program and requires us to purchase new land and build new homes.

- We need to have the boys and the girls substantially separated. We cannot face the risk of boys and girls sneaking out at night to have sex, something that happens in other ministries.
- Girls have more needs than boys. Typically they are attached to an abusive boyfriend on the streets, and we need to help them leave this relationship and stay out of this relationship. Anyone who has worked with battered women knows how difficult this can be. This is especially the case with street girls. Even though their “marido” has abused them, they have also protected them from worse abuse from other street children, adults and police. In the eyes of these girls they are their protectors.
- Girls almost always come with kids. We need the ability to help girls and their children, and to take care of these children during the day so that the girls can attend school.
- Almost all street girls are or have been involved in prostitution. We need the ability to protect them, and protect ourselves, from the problems arising from removing a girl from prostitution.

We are also often asked about caring for babies. Unfortunately the rules for parental rights in Bolivia are *very strong*, and this creates a problem for us. It is nearly impossible for us to remove a child from the custody of their parents, even if their parents are living on the streets. We were able to do this once, and temporarily place a child somewhere else, but it also destroyed our street credibility and severely limited our ability to continue working on the streets. A child is a means of income for someone on the street, and they will not voluntarily give up their child. We feel that the best way to help these street babies is to help their street mom.



## Some Domestic Gaps

- **There is no substitute for a family – kids need foster/adoptive parents.**
- **Transition out of the foster care system**
- **16, 17 year-olds**
  - Too young for an adult program
  - Often too old for programs oriented towards children.
  - 50-100 of these kids in Lincoln, NE with a population of 250,000.
- **2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Shift Daycare**
  - Represents a good portion of families in need.
  - These families are left without many options besides very expensive child care solutions.

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In Bolivia there are a lot of gaps to fill in caring for children. Sometimes we feel there is no end to the need presented by children of the streets. In the US we are blessed with a more complete system of child care alternatives: a culture of adoption, foster care, state run homes, privately run homes, secular homes and faith-based homes. One of the biggest assets is families willing to work as foster parents. There is simply no substitute for growing up in a healthy family environment. Kids need parents, and they need individualized attention that tends to be out of reach in any residential care program. This highlights that even in the US, there are gaps yet to be filled. A local faith-based foster care agency shared that they are only able to place about 20% of their cases – not because the children are too tough to place, simply because there are not enough foster care parents.

Another big need is transitioning a child from foster care into independent living. In Nebraska this burden falls largely on non-profit organizations as the state-run programs are limited to the age of emancipation, which is 19. Without the proper support these state wards often end up living life as a homeless adult.

In Lincoln, NE, and I would guess this is the case in many other cities as well, children who run away at 16 and 17 tend to be too old to join a program for children, but too young to go into a program for adults. It is a gap in Lincoln that needs to be addressed. There is about 50-100 such children in Lincoln, and this must number into the thousands nationwide.

In speaking with the Executive Director of the People's City Mission he also mentioned that 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> shift daycare is a big need for some of the neediest families. Having no other opportunities to work other than these shifts, they are often left with only expensive alternatives for childcare.



## What Can We Learn?

- **Children living on the streets and the concept of sanctity of life are not compatible.**
- **These conditions reflect on the *spiritual condition of the Church.***
- **We need to intervene to close the gap *and* fix the system**
- **The church needs to focus on what secular development misses**
- **Individualized care**
- **Going beyond a bed**

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I think we all agree that the street is no life for a child, and does not reflect the dignity and sanctity of life that we believe is inherent to each person.

Yet it is important for church leaders to recognize that homelessness does not reflect the spiritual condition of a child. The fact that children are allowed to lead this lifestyle, and the fact that more intervention is not occurring, reflects on the spiritual condition of the Church itself. Let me repeat that, the global situation of abused, abandoned children living on the street reflects on the spiritual condition of the Church, not the children.

There is a big gap between the reality of how these children live, and the kind of living conditions that God expects children to have. The Church must be simultaneously addressing this gap and advocating for the participation of others in forming a long-term solution. Caring for children cannot simply wait for the development of an infrastructure, without sacrificing the lives of many children in the process. Children are only children for a short time, we must be sure that children grow up with their childhood intact.

In the developmental world, I think that society tends to focus these marginalized populations as one of the last aspects of the development of their society. People are worried about roads, exporting, developing factories, companies, etc. While the fruition of all of this should lead to an environment where children are cared for, the development of all of this often leaves marginalized children uncared for. This is precisely why I think the church needs to start with the most marginalized.

As organizations we need to continue to recognize the importance of individuality in the development of each child. We need to continually reflect on how we can help children by the masses, while providing individualized care. We need to help the masses one child at a time. People often think that providing a bed for a child will provide a new life for them. This is not the case. Children need more than a bed. They need a family where they can experience unconditional love and can grow into a relationship with Christ. Where they have the security to grow into their unique self, and are known as an individual, not simply one of many.

# Q & A



**1** out of every **1,100** Bolivian children **live on the streets.**

**We are a Christian social welfare organization that addresses the unique needs of these homeless children. We work to uncover their potential and make a lasting difference in their lives...one small child at a time.**

[www.bolivianstreetchildren.org](http://www.bolivianstreetchildren.org)