

Play Therapy

Having finished his round of rag picking, shujon collects his income for the day 60 Taka, (45 pence) returns to his spot on Kamlapur railway station and settles down for dinner and relaxation. He is around 9 years old, has a striking smile and playful mischievous eyes. Everything you'd expect of a boy his age. Only difference, shujon lives by himself, fends for himself and carries himself in a manner far older than his age. 'How long have you lived here?' He shrugs, 'a couple of years'. Dinner is a few dried out roti's from a street vendor and relaxation in the form of boot polish to sniff out of a polythene bag. 'You know this stuff is really bad for you' I warn him. 'Yes' he agrees, 'but I like it – I won't do I for long!' he grins. As he prepares his fix, other boys begin to circle around him hoping for a sniff.' How long have you been using this?' 'not long' he smirks again 'I'm only an occasional user'. The boys around him laugh and giggle.

'Do you go to the free schools they lay out for street kids here?'

'No' pipes up another boy 'it's a ploy to trap us.'

'What do you mean?'

'They take you away and take your blood and sell it,' say's another.' 'Or take you to the police for a beating' a sound of laughter goes round the group. They fight and banter as they all get high on the boot polish. All the boys have the appearance of a rough and menacing gang. After their session of sniffing finishes, Shujon invites me to watch him in a game of marbles on the train track. The aim is to shoot the marble through a course of obstacles and get to the end first. A game of marble golf if you like. As the 2 opponent's play, betting and money exchanges hands. Shujon is up. He has won every game and the wad of money in his pocket gets larger.

This is nothing', he says, 'I've won loads more before- only problems is how to keep it. Bloody ***** keep stealing it.' They all look at each other. When asked further who takes the money he becomes cagy. 'Life is alright here' he says, 'I manage. I work when I can, beg when I can't. I have my friends- we watch out for each other.' As I look around the group I notice cuts and bruises on some, healing scabs on others. They are dirty and dressed in rags. Somehow I get the feeling he is not giving me the full picture.

Life for these children is tough. All have escaped poverty and abuse to find themselves in a complex and sinister system of life on the streets of Dhaka.

The allure and opportunity of the city against the poverty and lack of jobs in the villagecauses people from all walks of life, all over the world to uproot and head for the bright lights. But nowhere is this played out more than in the city of Dhaka the mega city with a population of 20 million (World

Bank Figures) squeezed between high rise flats, shanty towns, and generally on the streets.

Children like Shujon are at the bottom of this pile. They are the most marginalised, vulnerable and voiceless victims of this complex and over populated city. Kids running away from negligent parents or violent employers arrive into Dhaka via train or boat. On arrival they are overwhelmed by the sheer number and activity around the stations and port. Alone and Vulnerable, they are targeted by Mashtans, drug pushers, pimps as well as the general public who view them as vermin. They are unprotected by the police and often abused by them. To survive they have to get themselves into gang, they care for no one and nothing, and live by their own rules. It's easy to understand why they are treated as vermin. It's a cycle. They mistrust the adults who have let them down, and their lawless behaviour continues to attract the wrath of the adults.

The Mistrust of adults, for these kids runs so deep that they will not accept any help. Even after spending 3-4 months in a child refuge where they are fed, cared for, and protected they choose to go back to life on the station or port. They choose a lawless and dangerous life on the street over protection and opportunity. The sad fact remains there are no statistics to show how many of these kids make it to adulthood. Nobody cares if a street child goes missing or a body turns up. It's one less vermin, and still these kids choose the street.

Are these kids beyond help? Clinical psychology is not an idea that has been explored in Bangladesh. To most these kids are beyond repair.

Louise Bomber a specialist in child psychology says a child that rebels against structure, needs it the most. It's a cry for help. The fact that these kids choose the streets over security and protection indicates they have deep psychological trauma that has not yet been dealt with.

These are the kids we need to help. We need to reach out to them in the correct way as we will not accept Shujon and his friends are beyond help.

Play Therapy is a self-healing process enabling children to work through issues and problems at their own pace using a variety of techniques and materials such as sculpting a child's world within a small sand tray and the use of toy figures and doll houses to represent figures within a child's life. Therapists oversee the child-led process, providing a narrative through a commentary containing feelings and emotions for children to process.

Play Therapy techniques have been used with children following periods of trauma around the world including after the 2004 Tsunami in Sri Lanka, projects led by the Palestine Trauma Centre UK are currently ongoing in Gaza and research has shown a positive change in behaviours of 83% of children undertaking periods of Play Therapy in Ethiopia.

Following such success, The Orphan Trust is working closely with the British Association of Play Therapists and its publications to send qualified Play Therapists to work alongside, support and

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train the councillors and volunteers on the ground with the projects we support.

We believe Play Therapy is the vehicle for positive change in these young childrens' lives, Play Therapy is a process between a child and a Play Therapist which allows a child to explore issues in their lives which may have occurred at different stages of the child's life but which are currently effecting the child's life at present. Play Therapy is a child-friendly counselling strategy which works upon the basis that children use play as their primary method to communicate and to transmit emotions, thoughts, values and perceptions and speech as a secondary method (BAPT).

With the use of paly therapy, Shujon who currently spends his recreational time playing with marbles, gambling re-enacting the sinister world in which he lives, can process the events that brought him here, deal with it and move onto to a life with hope and opportunity.

Like any other child Shujon and his friends deserve a chance at a future.