

Module 1 Unit 2

This is a **REQUIRED READING**.

Lees, J. and Ojha, S. (1999) Listening, Respect, and Caring: The Heart of Participatory Work with Children. In: Shirley, W (1999) The Art of Facilitating Participation. Sage Publishers, New Delhi. pp.121-147

Listening, Respect and Caring: The Heart of Participatory Work with Children

Jim Lees and Sonali Ojha

We began our work in India charged with making use of two video productions on HIV and drugs, putting them in the hands of adults working with street children in Mumbai. Early on, the team of eleven of these children convinced us that it was important to move beyond interpretations of the videos, beyond AIDS and drugs. They convinced us that the real subject of our work was children's lives, and that sense cannot be made of drugs or AIDS without understanding how they fit into their lives. It became a question of meaning; what HIV means and what drugs mean to street children. Understanding children's lives meant asking the team to teach us how they interpret their own lives and how they understand their own behavior. It also meant learning how street children interpret the world of adults who they see every day.

'It doesn't matter how much you know about AIDS or drugs. If you don't care about yourself, you're still going to get HIV or use drugs.' This statement was disturbing. It was from a 12-year-old boy, a child of the streets living without his family on the streets of Mumbai. We

had gathered a group of these children together for an afternoon to help us in our work with HIV, drugs and street children. Immediately, the voices of the other dozen or so boys in the room rose in support of the 12-year-old's statement.

One of the boys began crying, asking through his tears why we were not doing something about the older men who force young street boys to have sex with them. He had witnessed his parents' murder during the Mumbai riots of 1993 and was immediately gang-raped by his parents' assassins. For the following two years, from the age of 11, he had been living alone on the street. All the boys agreed; they wanted to know why older men rape them. They told us that if someone did not stop it, they would some day end up doing the same thing to younger children. That, they told us, is how it works on the street.

Drugs? 'Well,' they said, 'how else can a child survive?'

Our work in India was to distribute two videos on drug use and HIV that had been created specifically for street children. The videos were designed as universally applicable pieces to be used throughout the globe and were to be accompanied by a training workshop for their use. Curious about how children and adults would respond to the videos in India, we showed them to the group of children. We were ready with our questions. What messages did the children get from the videos? What scenes did they feel were most important? Were the messages of the videos the right messages for children? Would the videos make a difference in children's lives? But we were not ready for the children's response. What began as an attempt to learn how the videos could best be used with children in India, became an experience that surprised and frightened us. Videos designed to trigger discussion, triggered memories as well, the results all too clear in the children's tears which flowed before us.

Our afternoon with the group of boys was upsetting beyond the experience of hearing of the children's horror stories of how they have been treated and what they must endure daily. The foundation for our work, which had been pre-established, seemed to slip from under us. Our videos were about HIV and drug use prevention. They were ostensibly designed (and liberally funded) to educate and protect the child viewers from AIDS and drugs. We now had more questions. Could the ideas alone meet such a goal? Was it

videos produced w/o much involvement in project planning



realistic to think that children's behavior would change with the viewing of two short videos? And did the videos' messages blame children for behaviors that were out of their own control? These children obviously knew a tremendous amount about HIV and drugs, perhaps more than many of the adults who work with them. But the trauma they expressed upon viewing the videos could not be ignored. It did explain, in part, why the HIV video, which had first been distributed five years earlier, had not been successfully used in India. The claim was that people did not know how to use it with children or how to answer their questions after they watched the video.

By the end of that significant day, we were convinced that we could not proceed with our training and distribution project as planned by our employer in North America. We needed to re-think what it was we had been hired to do. We had to re-examine the assumptions our employer held about street children—assumptions upon which the two videos, the training and our 'work plan' had been created. It was clear to us that the children in the room that day did not need any more messages about HIV and drugs than they had already received. Rather, they needed options to HIV infection and drug addiction. We needed to understand how these children understand HIV and drugs, and what meaning HIV and drugs have for them, in their lives. We were impelled to address the haunting statement: 'If you don't care about yourself, you're still going to get AIDS or use drugs.'

We proceeded in a manner that involved children and the adults who work with them, to understand the role and meaning of HIV and drugs in street children's lives. Our primary focus evolved away from HIV and drugs and onto street children's lives. Our 'product' evolved from two globally distributed videos to a participatory process of self-discovery that would transform the relationship between street children and the adults who work with them. Working side-by-side with a team of street children, following their directions and believing that they were leading us on an important journey, was a remarkable process of faith and discovery—faith in the children, discovery about ourselves. The children, the street educators, and we, as facilitators, all experienced repeated moments of self-introspection. Participating openly and honestly with each other, we all learned and we all grew.

In the following pages, we would like to take the reader to what we believe to be at the core of the art of participatory work with

children. We would like to fuel thinking on what it means to undertake participatory work with children, what this means for the involved children, and what this means for the adults. And we would like to fuel thinking on what it means not to participate with children in addressing the issues that affect their lives. Ultimately, we would like our readers to see that adults are the ones who should participate with children as they work to figure out their lives. It is not that adults should ask children to join them. It is that we, as adults, should learn how to join children and assist them in doing what it is they are already doing: living, learning, and growing.

The Mumbai Street Child

In a nation plunging headlong into the global economy, Mumbai occupies a unique position as the financial center, shipping center, and video center of India. For many of India's 950 million inhabitants, Mumbai's opportunities are intimately wrapped in the images and illusions of a false prosperity generated by the 'Bollywood' movie industry (a film industry that far out-produces Hollywood). For children throughout India, familiar with its larger-than-life images on celluloid, Mumbai is a place to go when the present is intolerable, or opportunities for the future are few.

'Street children' arrive in Mumbai at an average age of 6 to 7 years old. They are about 35,000 in number in a city of twelve million. Street children must be distinguished from 'pavement children' who live with at least one relative, 'slum children' with some kind of roof and family, and 'beggar children' who are born into families which put their young to work asking strangers for money. Street children are *alone* on the street, away from their families, many with no chance of ever returning home. The risk of their encountering physical and sexual abuse is extraordinarily high, drug use common at age 8 or 9, life expectancy far lower than the national average, and the possibilities for their futures, few. While 75 percent of the girls who come to the streets of Mumbai unwillingly end up in the city's notorious brothels, street boys face their own daily threat of physical attack, hunger, and homosexual rape.

In his description of the New York life of the heroin-addicted character Sonny in his brilliant short story 'Sonny's Blues,' James

Baldwin unknowingly captures children's lives on the streets of Mumbai. I was sure that the first time Sonny had ever had horse (heroin), he couldn't have been much older than our Mumbai street boys. They were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. They were filled with rage. All they really knew were two kinds of darkness: the darkness of their lives which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies which had blinded them to that other darkness about which they now, vindictively dreamed. They were, all at once, more together than at any other time, and more alone.

Together and alone. Rage. Darkness. Dreams. Who are these children? And by what right or seemingly good intentions could we enter their lives?

The Indian novelist, R. K. Narayan, in his work *The Malgudi Omnibus*, writes about the somewhat eccentric headmaster, Gajapathy:

'(These children are) wonderful creatures! It is wonderful how much they can see and do!' says the headmaster. 'I tell you, sir, live in their midst and you will want nothing else in life. These are the classrooms,' he points out. 'Not for them. For us elders to learn. Just watch them for a while. We can learn a great deal watching them and playing with them. When we are qualified we can enter their life.'

Challenging our assumptions about street children, why they use drugs, what puts them at risk for HIV, and why, in general, they do what they do, we began to define the values that would guide our own behavior throughout our work. Our first value seemed that of basic respect, that the time and values of all organizations, individuals, and children will be respected and protected. Many NGOs and individuals with whom we had already been in contact, expressed strong feelings about how they had been treated by western development organizations in the past. They were discontented with the large number of foreign organizations visiting their centers, taking workers away from direct work with the children for long periods of time. Several referred to AIDS and drug abuse tourism, where 'visitors walk away with their heads and arms full, their camera film

exposed with unauthorized shots of children, and leave little of practical value behind.'

We agreed that we would recognize children as the knowledge base about situations that affect their lives, and see street children not simply as recipients of services but as conscious actors. Children, we believed, have the ability to perceive their needs, organize solutions, and make rational decisions about their behavior within the context of the choices and resources available to them.

We knew that substance abuse and HIV/AIDS risk reduction and treatment, present street educators (a term referring to those persons who work directly with street youth) with new and difficult problems. We saw that street educators had a critical role to play in the ongoing process of risk reduction among street children. Substance use and HIV/AIDS work by educators elicits their own reactions of fear, anxiety, powerlessness, frustration, anger, and sadness due to death, loss, transference, counter-transference, and burn-out.

We were aware of how little is done to support and develop the skills and effectiveness of street educators, though they account for the majority of any organization's face-to-face time with the children they serve. Since street educators would be the people using the two videos we represented with children, we felt it imperative that street educators themselves must be valued and supported to address their personal issues and attitudes, and to attain the professional skills required to sustain their work through time.

Throughout our participatory work with children and street educators, we looked to these values to guide us. While at times we were tempted to impose our own beliefs on those with whom we worked, or to direct discussions toward a place more comfortable or easier for us, constant reference to our values prevented us from doing so. Stating our values and having them written on paper also helped us to represent ourselves and our project, making the decision to participate with us easier for the three organizations, seven adults, and eleven children with whom we eventually worked.

It was through our last value that the next step in our project became clear. The leadership role in developing intervention strategies, aimed at reducing risk behavior related to HIV/AIDS and substance use, we believed, must be given to children. This did not mean involving children in what we as adults were doing, but rather it meant that we became involved in what we found children already

doing: trying to understand their lives. It did not mean culling information from children about drugs, HIV, and their lives, developing 'interventions' on our own and returning to the children to 'test out' those interventions. It meant having faith that, with adequate support and resources, children would be able to find their own solutions to the problems that plague them, including the threat of HIV infection and drug addiction.

Examining Assumptions, Challenging Beliefs

'They will come the first time because they are curious,' we were told, 'and some will come the second because you are paying them. But after that, they won't come.'

'These children have short attention spans,' someone else said, 'so you will have to keep everything short. They will never last three hours.'

Yet another person suggested that we must be entertaining and plan lots of physical activities. 'They will get bored and restless. You know how much energy children have.'

We had identified eleven street children in Mumbai and our plan was to gather them into a team to guide our work. The youngest child was 10 years old at the time, the oldest 17. We wanted to meet with the boys three times per week for three hours each session, (access to girls for the team proved, sadly, impossible at the time in Mumbai). We wanted to meet for four weeks. At the suggestion of the newly forming team, we arranged to meet at a neutral location away from any of the centers serving street children which these boys might depend upon in some way. At the boys' suggestion, we would meet late in the afternoons, after they had completed their work and earned what money they needed for food or shelter that day. Sixteen individuals had joined us, uncertain of any outcome of their efforts. That these individuals were willing to experiment with us, that they were willing to risk investing their time and experience in a participatory process whose outcome could not, at the time, be clearly defined, was to their great credit. We had already met with five street educators who were to be part of the team, but their

bosses and ours seemed less than convinced that our plan would work.

Our first team meeting was in February of 1996. Our intent was to explain what it was we wanted to do with the group. The children's need, however, was to understand why we wanted to do it. What were our motivations? Could they trust us? Why were we interested in listening to them? Did we want something from them that we were not telling them about? Our answer to the boys' direct question of why we wanted to teach them about HIV and AIDS was a fairly generic explanation of the risks associated with HIV and the consequences of infection. The boys seemed restless and half-interested, until we said, 'And we don't want you to suffer with it.' The short but heartfelt statement changed the atmosphere in the room. The children later explained that here they sat with adults they did not know, who said, however indirectly, that they cared about their lives and had good wishes for them. These adults somehow cared enough to go to the trouble of arranging a place to meet, getting the boys together, and providing tea and snacks. In addition, the adults had taken direction from the children to schedule the meeting times for the late afternoon so their daily work activities to earn money for food, would not be disrupted. The boys were curious. Not trusting, no, but curious.

The weeks that followed were a powerful mix of learning and unlearning. Meetings we had planned for three hours regularly stretched to four. The boys insisted on meeting four days per week, and after five weeks of meeting, still wanted to continue. More than two years later, they still ask us when we can do another project together. Our meetings had neither entertainment nor 'fun' exercises. The children chose to talk, sometimes for four hours uninterrupted. The common adult assumption of children's 'short attention span' or 'need for entertainment' was proven false, and those assumptions replaced by honest discussion about difficult lives within a setting of respect and care.

Within moments of our first meeting, we recognized that the two videos on HIV and drugs would not be the subjects of our meetings. We thought, then, that the subject of our work must be HIV and drugs. It seemed logical to us. But the team of children quickly taught us that we were wrong. Without a verbal discussion, they showed us each day that the subject of our meetings, the focus of our work, was their lives—their lives, and the lives of the tens of

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The rail passengers rushing by rarely notice our friend sitting on the curb. Thousands of boys and girls eat, sleep, work, wander, and play on the streets of large cities like Mumbai. It is the playing that the public seems to notice the most. 'These children are only interested in their freedom,' we hear. 'They are irresponsible;' 'They are lazy;' 'Look at them, running and laughing and shouting like that,' as if laughter in children was a bad thing. 'They are bad and worthless, the police should do something about them, running in and out of traffic all the time;' in and out of traffic because the police will not allow them to run, play, sit in, or even enter the nearby park. One American movie star, on her visit to Mumbai, commented on how 'joyous' these 'wonderful little children' are. She wanted to 'scoop one or two up' and take them home to Beverly Hills. The public, like the movie star, rarely sees beyond the darling or devil interpretations of who street children are. They never venture into darker alleyways or abandoned buildings to see the sick child being cared for by his friends. They do not know the dangers of the night when the rail station is empty, and children drawn into dark corners by adult men and raped. They do not experience the pain and stigma of a life alone on the streets, struggling with abusive words and physical violence.

As the boy outside the rail station gets older, as he understands how his past has handicapped his future, he will need more than the comfort of a tattoo or the pain of cutting. Lacking nourishment, his ability to care about himself will diminish. And he will learn through experience what the small group of boys told us so many months ago: 'It doesn't matter how much you know about AIDS or drugs. If you don't care about yourself, you are still going to get HIV or use drugs.'

Interpretation: A Child's Eye View

Children interpret their own lives far differently from those of the adults who pass them by each day. Through their own experience and logic, they have learned to make decisions within the set of options that they see as available to them. Children will not reject or stigmatize a child with HIV. During the Mumbai riots of 1993, Hindu street boys were known for protecting Muslim boys from

attack by armed and violent bands of Hindu men. Children are forever aware of their feelings, which are constantly under attack in a life on the street. Though they may not understand what they are feeling, they do know that hurt is the primary motivator in their lives for their own behavior, and that sometimes their own behavior is harmful to themselves. Harming themselves is a response to the hurt that has been done to them. Feelings and tension need constant monitoring, with various efforts employed to cope with feelings or reduce tension. Feelings and tension explain behavior. A child who is sad may sit for the day feeling low. But a child who has been beaten or has lost his job will experience far greater tension and struggle to cope with his emotions. He may use drugs. He may beat a younger boy, cut his arm, sleep, or attempt to kill himself. *But, he must do something with his feelings and tension.*

Children develop a logic that is not unlike that of adults, yet they are often belittled for it. As boys reach puberty, visits to prostitutes are not unusual. The boys explained that a prostitute charging ten rupees (about thirty cents) will probably carry HIV or another disease and require the use of a condom. One charging forty rupees will be 'clean,' making the use of a condom unnecessary. Tension and feelings also influence their sexual behavior. 'If your tension is low,' the boys relate, 'then you will probably use a condom. But if your tension is high, then you need maximum relief. You can't even think about condoms at a time like that.'

Adult interpretations of street children's behavior are far different from children's interpretation of their own behavior. Adults take little time to move beyond their superficial impressions. Yet street children are constantly trying to understand the behavior of the adults who surround them, interpreting their behavior and trying desperately to anticipate their next actions, for it is the adult's next action that could bring food and shelter, or abuse and rape.

Following the Children's Lead

Supporting and respecting the leadership role of the team of children and following their direction was hard work. Lack of daily plans and weekly agendas for team meetings made our distant bosses uncomfortable. We were constantly challenged not to jump

into the children's discussions and lead them toward what made sense to us as adults. How we asked questions was important. We were rebuked one afternoon for writing down the names of who said what in our daily notes:

'Why are you writing names?' we were asked.

'So we can keep track of who said what,' was our reply.

'This is the first time you have hurt us,' the children said. *'It does not matter who says something. The important thing is that it is coming from us, from all of us.'*

Following the children's lead forced us to dispel our false assumptions about children and brought us to a richer understanding of their lives. Challenging our own assumptions about the children with whom we were working was an essential and continuous part of our process. As adults involved in a participatory process with children, we did a lot of unlearning, letting go of what we thought we knew about children that proved false. Such 'letting go' is not always easy for adults vis-à-vis children. As adults, we certainly felt a sense of loss of our age-old (or, perhaps, old age) position of authority, along with the anxiety about not knowing when, or at what point, the team would succeed in its project. Our team could not have succeeded however, if we as adults, had tried to maintain a position of authority over the team's children. Though responses of 'I don't know' or 'I was wrong' to children's questions are not always easy for adults, the respect they communicate to children is tremendous. Slowly, as a team of children, street educators, and adult facilitators, we were learning to respect each other for our experiences and for who we were. The unique qualities of each team participant were being revealed. Working with the team of children in Mumbai, we developed a profound respect for our ignorance, for the more we were willing to reveal it to the children, the more children were willing to reveal the complexity of their lives to us.

Two weeks into our meetings with the team, the children clearly defined for us the primary task of their lives on the streets: *managing their hurt*. Using the term 'tension,' the children were able to talk about their mechanisms and strategies for dealing with their hurt. Drug use and sex took their places as examples of two of the many different coping mechanisms street children employ, two of a long

list which includes sleep, hurting others, talking to a friend, damaging property, cutting on ones' own body with a blade or glass, crying, and suicide. While adults group some of these coping mechanisms under 'positive alternatives to drug use' or other 'risk behavior' (i.e., sex), the team was clear that street children *do not* place drugs or sex at the center of their conceptual understanding of their behavior. Rather, they experience their own lives and emotions as central to their behavior choices, of which drug use and sex are but two possible options. Drug use and unprotected sex are potentially harmful behaviors in which street children engage. But to focus on harmful behaviors or on drugs and HIV, in themselves, reduces children to the risks they take. And, it fails to understand the place that drugs and sex occupy in the range of behaviors, harmful or supportive, in which the street children engage.

'Fifty percent of the children on the street,' the team said, 'have so much tension that they are unable to hear any message you are trying to give them.' This revelation was a jolt for us. Our work had been focused on messages adults wanted to convey to children. We had been hired to begin with those messages, in fact to deliver those messages and move on. 'Should our starting point really be tension rather than drugs and HIV?' we asked the children. 'No,' they replied. 'Your starting point should be our lives, the lives of street children.' It was at this moment that our hope and faith that these eleven children would lead our project to its rightful place became trust in the children's ability, caring, and will to do so.

Children Creating for Others

Working with a graphic artist and a cartoonist, the children eventually developed a workbook to accompany the two videos through which children and adults can work together, to understand from street children, the complexities of their lives. The artists were immediately comfortable with our instructions that the eleven children were their bosses, not us. Being on time for each meeting and really listening as children spoke, was paramount to communicating our respect to them. As for the artists' drawings and all of our work, it had to reflect our care for the children and their lives. We would have to keep at it until we had successfully reflected this. The drawings had to be of the highest quality possible.

The artists responded well to our instructions and to the children. Each day, the children and the artists were engaged in drawing and creating characters for the workbook. The artists were continually willing to abandon characters they had developed with the children if the children felt the characters were not right. Such willingness to take direction and to be redirected by children strengthened the children's ability to express what they felt was important. By the end of our second week of team meetings, the children knew we were genuine in our commitment to them. They responded, unasked, with near perfect attendance, to the meetings in the following weeks. If they could not attend, they always sent word and apologies. Though we never made a reference to it, each time we met, the children's physical appearance was changing: they made certain their clothing was washed, replacing tattered shorts and shirts. They bathed before our meetings, washed, and cut their hair. No matter how early we arrived for meetings, we were never the first; a group of children was always waiting expectantly.

Some discontent was generated when we learned that a number of other children requested that they be allowed to join our team after hearing reports from the current participants. They were sad when we said no, but our resolve was clear. We recognized how vulnerable the team children had become, and we recognized our responsibility to assure them that in their vulnerability they were neither harmed nor exploited. No new members would be added. No visitors would be allowed. And all proceedings would be confidential, though the end product would be shared throughout India. Several journalists heard of our project and requested interviews with the children. Respecting what the children had already said about their lives being written about and photos appearing before the public, the journalists' requests were politely denied.

During the third week, something we did not expect happened: four of the five children who had been actively using drugs stopped their use. We had never spoken to them about their drug use, nor had they spoken about their drug use during team meetings. But they stopped.

From the first day of our meeting with children, we followed a rule that contradicts the cathartic approaches to working with 'troubled' children so common in the west. We never asked any child to talk directly about his own life. The children supported this group rule and developed it into a value: that all children have a right to

decide when, where, how, and with whom they will reveal aspects of their personal life and feelings. Adults often ask questions of children that would be found offensive if asked of them. Have you ever used drugs? Do you use drugs now? Which drugs? How often? How much? Have you ever had sex? How old were you when you first had sex? Have you ever been paid for sex? Have you ever been raped? Children feel compelled to answer adults' questions, though not always with the truth.

The team children explained that they feared being evicted from organizations they depend upon for food and shelter if they do not 'tell their story' when asked. Telling one's story, however, is commonly a traumatic event for street children, one too traumatic to tell outside a relationship of trust with another. There are many children, the team said, who avoid all organizations because they are not going to answer the battery of questions repeatedly fired at them. We respected this value refined by the team, looking toward each team member to talk about the lives of street children in general, not their own. We were very surprised one day, then, after working again and again with the video on drugs, when the team of children said, 'Now we want to tell our own story.'

Adults Learning with Children

Telling their Own Story

We did not know what that meant. So, we watched as the team collectively created and told the story of two street boys' experience with drugs. (see Figure 7.1)

In the weeks prior to this, the children had directed the artists to illustrate ten pages about decision-making and harmful behaviors. Using the concept of life as a path, the illustrations represent various stages of the decision-making process that children go through relating to their behavior. Decisions and choices, the children maintained, are central to a street child's involvement in drug use and other harmful or supportive behaviors. Tension and feelings influence decisions and can put a child on a path he would not choose under different circumstances. On one's path in life, whether by desire or not, one will enter crossroads where decisions about one's path must be made. (see Figure 7.2) It is on these crossroads that

Figure 7.1: What is Our Boy Thinking?

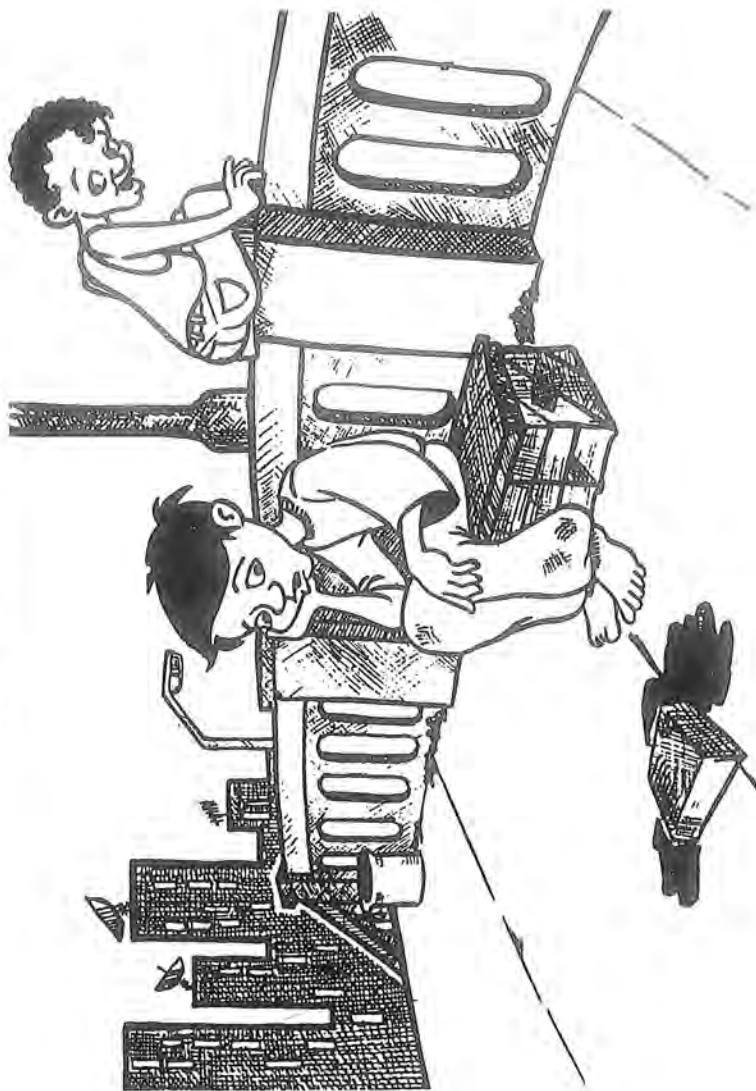
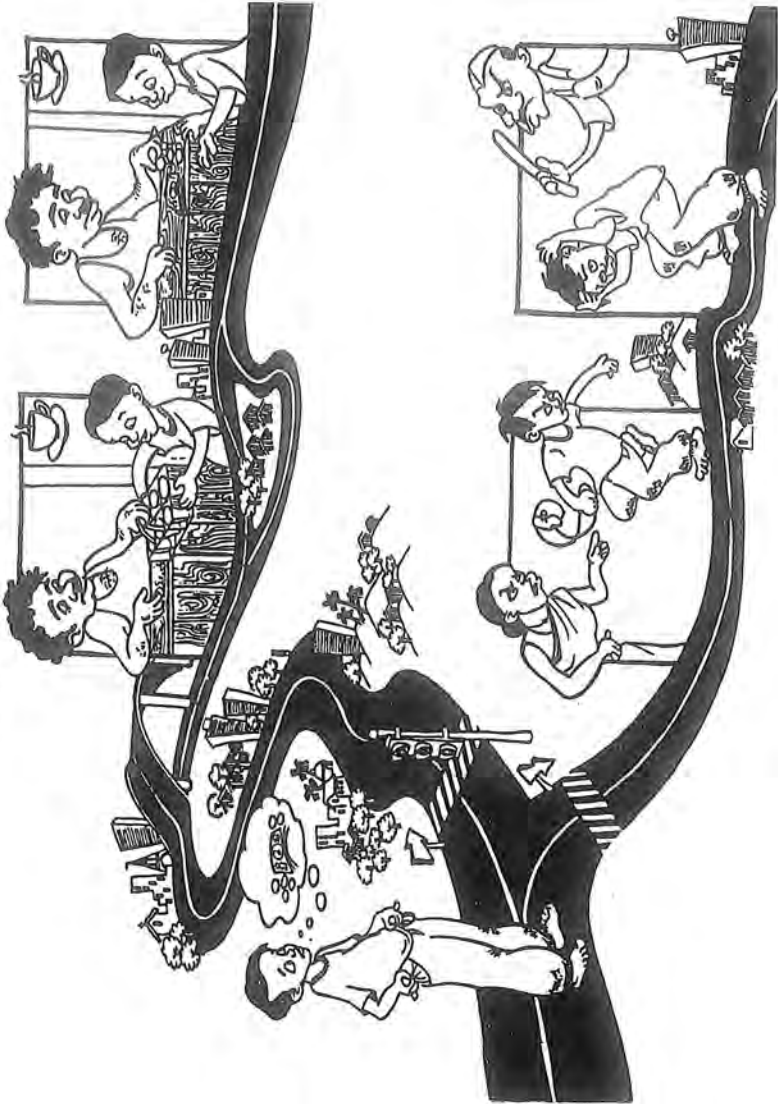


Figure 7.2: Standing at the Crossroads



the children focused their attention. With the artists, they developed through drawings, a format where any child can discuss the influences on children's decisions, explore options and choices, understand the importance and consequences of decisions, and perhaps learn something more about him or herself. The ten drawings require a collective interpretation by children and allow them to make connections between feelings, tension, harmful behaviors, and the paths of their lives. It is, if you will, a collective self-inquiry into many individual paths in life (see Figure 7.3).

The illustrations, created and first drawn by the children, are free of all language. Though language is used in many non-formal education materials, the team insisted that the mere existence of words intimidates children who are unable to read them, removing them from participating in the process of learning. The drawings also had to make sense no matter where on the page one began 'reading' them. As literate adults, we were used to reading books and drawings from left to right, and top to bottom. Such is not the case with non-literate children.

When the team of children began to tell 'their story,' their own language and understanding was already steeped in the lessons they learned and concepts they put forth in their ten decision-making illustrations. They had already tested these illustrations with their peers on the streets throughout Mumbai. It was crucial, they said, that children be allowed to interpret the illustrations for themselves and share their interpretations with their peers. There were no right or wrong interpretations of the drawings, and the role of the adult using them with children should be to ask questions that prompt children's discussion and exploration. Adults should not, they stated, be interpreters of any of the illustrations.

What we had discovered by this point, was that by listening to children interpret the ten decision-making illustrations, we were learning more about their lives. Though by instruction, children were asked to talk about the lives of the characters in the illustrations and were not being asked to talk about their own lives, a dynamic was emerging before us that we had not expected. The children, it seemed, were very comfortable projecting their own experiences onto the drawn characters, though never revealing to one another that this was what they were doing. The children seemed freed to talk about many of the complex, hurtful, and dangerous and sometimes humiliating situations they face on the street—all covered by the cloak of projecting on their own experience onto

drawn characters. Stories, situations, and behaviors we had never heard before were shared and discussed by the group of children, and we listened. We thought that the illustrations and methods for their use developed by the children, were for teaching other children, but they turned out to be equally useful for teaching adults about street children's lives.

Nearly one year after our team's work was complete, we were still learning from the various children with whom we had participated, in the use of the decision-making illustrations. On one occasion, we asked how the boy in a particular drawing would feel about himself if he left the path of work that he was on and entered the path of stealing. We were pleased when the reply was that he would feel bad about himself, the move to steal being a blow to his self-esteem. One quiet child suddenly differed with the group's opinion. 'He would feel *better* about himself,' the boy insisted. We were taken by surprise. Shouldn't the boy feel worse about himself with his stealing? Isn't this the message we wanted children to understand? We had to make a decision ourselves at that moment: push this lone objector onto our belief path, or take the risk to enter onto his path and see where it would lead.

We entered his path with a simple question. 'Why?' we asked. 'Well,' replied the boy, 'this fellow in the drawing has been working for this man for almost a year. In that year he has been repeatedly beaten by him, forced to sleep on a filthy floor where the garbage is kept, gets paid only rarely, and has to fight off the sexual advances of the man's friends. He was constantly humiliated, and he had almost lost all of his dignity. He finally found the courage to leave the man. He knew that stealing is wrong and he did not really want to steal. But the only choice he saw for himself was to steal or to lose the last bit of dignity he had left.' The boy in the drawing was saving his self-esteem, not losing it. Once again, as adults, we learned a valuable lesson from a child.

And now, our team of eleven in Mumbai wanted to tell their own story.

A Participatory Learning Story

Most children who viewed the two videos we represented enjoyed the inspired animation and rapid-paced story. The last line of the

drug video asks children to tell their own story. The Mumbai team found this invitation problematic. 'Telling one's story,' as they had said, can be a traumatic event for a street child. The video's request went against the team's stated values of the privacy, respect, and care that should be shown to children.

The team found a way, however, to tell their story. We believe they knew the value of the healing that can take place in the telling. What they created was a collective story, recorded through nineteen pages of drawings on paper, told collectively by each group of children who interpret the drawings. Again, no words exist on any of the pages. Children receive their own photocopy of the story, inexpensive and easily reproduced, upon which they may draw, write, fold, sit, or do anything else they wish. Sitting in a circle, page by page they narrate the lives of the two boys who wind through the nineteen pages. Similar to the decision-making illustrations, the story provides children the opportunity to anonymously project their own experiences onto the characters in the drawings. Listening to what other children say gives children the opportunity to compare their experience with others, or perhaps to see alternatives to their own situations. Telling their own interpretation of the drawings to the group, each child is afforded the respect of others as they listen. And in the collective and shared telling, children learn from each other and discover more about themselves.

The story as developed by the Mumbai team focuses on the lives of two children, Ravi and Baldie for our purposes here. When used with a group of children, the first task is for the participating children to agree upon names for each of the two boys, and the street educator who appear in the story. The nineteen drawings are an outline allowing stories to be projected onto them, drawings that illustrate people and situations familiar to most street children. The story begins with Ravi, a child of 10 or 11, leaving his village and family for the distant city. His head filled with more fantasy than fact about city life, his first days living on the street are difficult. Hunger, loneliness, and threats of abuse follow him everywhere. Ravi's life takes a turn for the better when he meets Baldie, a street boy several years older than he is. The boys become good friends and the story proceeds through pages of their exploits and exploration of the city.

One day, both boys are attacked by a group of older boys and their source of income, a small shoeshine kit, is stolen. Overwhelmed

with anger and despair, the boys take to drugs. A street educator eventually enters the story, and Ravi enters a drug rehab program (though Baldie refuses to go). After successful completion of the program, Ravi is released to the streets and is reunited with his friend, Baldie. Baldie has been in tough shape since his friend went to detox, continuing with his drug use even while knowing the affect of the drugs on his body. But Baldie is unable to care about himself, unable to summon the will to change. Despite Ravi's pleas and the street educator's efforts, Baldie's life ends, dying on the streets, found by Ravi and the street educator in a busy crowd of passers-by who care nothing of the child's death.

As the Mumbai team created the original story, we objected to the death of Baldie. As adults, we simply did not want Baldie to die and questioned the value of having him do so. Despite our pleas, the team refused to back down in their insistence at Baldie's death. 'One child will succeed,' they said, 'but one must die.' So Baldie did die. And one year after his paper death, we have repeatedly seen the powerful grip on children's lives that Baldie holds. They recognize Baldie, they see Baldie on the streets, and they see Baldie inside of themselves. The adults who attended our workshops had equally strong reactions to the character, and we knew that the team had been right. Baldie's death was important, and it continues to motivate change in children's lives.

As with the decision-making illustrations, this story created by the Mumbai team provided the opportunity for children and adults to learn about the lives of street children. The story, eventually termed a *Participatory Learning Story*, allowed even more. If adults would participate with children in its use, if they would listen carefully to children's interpretations, they would be better able to understand their own role in children's lives and better see what they can do to support street children in their struggle toward the future. The learning story becomes *participatory* when the adults organizing its use are able to challenge their own thinking and are willing to learn from those whom they have been hired to teach. The existence of the street educator character in the *Participatory Learning Story* allows adults working with children to learn to ask street children what they can and should do, to best support children in their lives.

Participatory Learning Stories, we realized, can be created on many subjects with a variety of groups. The children with whom we

were working asked if we could create other stories, one on the difficulties of returning home, and another focused on the relationship between street children and street educators. They wanted yet another on the relationship between the emotions children struggle with, and their attempts to build a life on, or away from the streets. The creation and use of each story would initiate and continue a process of mutual discovery involving targeted groups (in this case, street children) and those who are in a position to assist that group (street educators here.)

Through the story of Baldie and Ravi, street educators are presented with a powerful opportunity to examine their own role vis-à-vis children, and can better their ability to assist children by participating with them. Children are able to learn more about their emotions, their tensions, and the decisions they make. The team's children created a character who represents their fears, Baldie, and one who embodies their hopes, Ravi. Both characters are real, at times painfully so. Children recognize the potential they hold for living out each character's life. Through them, through two black and white characters on photocopied pages, one who continues toward the future and one whose end comes tragically early, they are able to communicate to the adults they depend upon, who they are and what they need.

Relationships

By truly listening to children's experience, we were able to see how adults' faulty interpretations of who street children are can limit supportive work with them. We saw that adults' explanations for a child's behavior can be very different from that of the child, and can potentially harm that child's chances for their future. And we discovered that for street children, filled as they are with information about drugs, AIDS, and other threats to their lives, filled with observations about their peers and the lives of the adults who surround them, their relationships with adults are powerful motivators of both supportive and harmful behavior.

Where do street children learn to care about themselves? It is a difficult question to answer. The Mumbai team believes children learn to care or not to care about themselves in their relationships

with the adults who surround them. Through one adult having genuine care for a child, that child can begin to learn to care about him or herself. The child will believe in a future and strive to get there. A child who is abused, like Baldie's, struggles with his or her own sense of worth, and often destroys any possibility for his/her own future.

Street children are surrounded by a world that appears uncaring to them, a world that constantly threatens their physical and emotional well-being. Many adults look to exploit street children in numerous ways. Society's failures to provide safe places, education, employment, or even a basic meal, are all interpreted by street children as signs of their own insignificance and lack of value. And for most children on the street, their position of insignificance is emotionally compounded by the impossibility of a return home.

Street children, according to the Mumbai team and many other children throughout India, place special significance on their relationships with street educators. Hired to give children support, street educators represent a final source of hope, caring, respect, and possibility for many of those children. Children expect their relationship with these adults to be free of hurt. But the potential and reality of children being hurt by street educators, we discovered, is tremendous. Disappointment or hurt from one of the few adults left with whom a child might receive support, can be devastating to a street child. One child spoke of being hit by a street educator, an experience that is not unique. 'I left home because my father beat me,' the boy said. 'If I would not let my own father beat me, I certainly am not going to let some stranger beat me. I left that center and I will never return.'

One child of twelve years related a similar incident. 'I asked uncle (the term children use for male street educators) to get me into the drug detox program. I had decided that I had had enough of drugs, and I really wanted to quit. But when I asked him, he laughed at me and said he did not believe I was serious. He told me all that I really wanted was a free place to sleep and free food. He gave me thirty rupees (eighty cents) and told me that if I was really serious about quitting drugs I would come back tomorrow with the thirty rupees and he would take me to detox. Then he sent me away, saying that I would spend the money on drugs. I was so hurt and humiliated by him that I immediately bought some drugs, and I made sure that uncle saw me using them.' The child of twelve struck out at the adult

who had hurt him by hurting himself. The educator simply reaffirmed his own belief that the child did not want to quit drugs.

Relationships between street educators and street children hold in them a tremendous potential for motivating change in each child. But, as the team pointed out, they are relationships that are fraught with problems. Street educators, like the children with whom they work, have very little status in India. Though they account for most of any organization's time spent directly with children, little investment is made to increase their skills and sensitivity. This potentially powerful relationship between street children and the adults whose job it is to support them, became the focus of the next phase of our work in India. The decision-making illustrations and the *Participatory Learning Story*, we hoped, would help transform these relationships so that their potential could become a transformational element and agent of change in more street children's lives.

One Year Later

The team's hard work eventually resulted in a companion workbook to the two videos made for street children. Using the videos and the materials and strategies developed by the Mumbai team, we conducted workshops for street educators throughout India. The workshops were divided into two parts, the first comprising three full days with a two-day follow up two months later. The street educators involved in the workshops were challenged to move beyond what they thought they knew about the children in their charge, and to learn how to learn from them continually. It was a difficult challenge for many. One year later, some of the participants have reported an evolution in their relationships with children similar to what we had experienced within our Mumbai team. Their language has changed with children, and they continue to learn where they are passing judgment and what that means to children. Most striking of all, the street educator's relationship to themselves seems to have undergone change. Some are able to speak of why they continue their work with children, their sense of their own value having increased. And a few have built on our experience and are creating new participatory learning stories on various subjects with team of children and adults.

Listening to children requires dropping assumptions about them. Adults throughout the world maintain a number of assumptions about street children; that they are lazy, immoral, corrupt, have no values, and seek only fun and freedom. Yet, street children are castigated for wanting what every parent wishes for their own child:

- Days of joyous play,
- Freedom from hunger,
- Freedom from the threat of physical abuse,
- Freedom from the threat of sexual abuse, and
- Freedom from the kind of hurt that damages the very spirit of a child.

Street children experience their unique position of stigma almost everywhere in the world, from the moment they set out from home (most, ironically, in search of a better life and a better world). And street children are aware of the stigmatized position they occupy in the world.

Like most children, street children respond to genuine respect and caring. We made an emotional investment into each child on the team, and the team clearly made an investment into all the street children of India who would use their workbook. The respect and care invested in the workbook the Mumbai team created, was recognized by street children throughout India. They recognized it as respect and care for them. Children have hopes and expectations of all the adults they meet. Children feel deeply. And every child is an individual, composed of their own unique combination of emotions, experiences, memories, decisions, and dreams. Every child looks to and responds to each adult in his or her own particular way. Truly listening to the team of children in Mumbai, showing them genuine respect and care, believing in their abilities, and trusting them led us to places we could never have anticipated. In the end, because we listened, because we participated with children as they tried to figure out their own lives, the children's lives changed and our lives changed.

Eleven street children in Mumbai developed an approach and a set of materials that transformed the passive viewing of two videos on drugs and AIDS into an active process of exploring their lives. They developed a way in which adults and children can participate

together, can learn together, and can build children's futures together. We are no longer daunted by the children's statement, 'It doesn't matter how much you know about AIDS or drugs. If you don't care about yourself, you are still going to get HIV or use drugs.' We are no longer daunted because we learned from eleven children what matters. We learned from eleven children what makes a difference. To those eleven children we give our sincerest thanks.