

crossing cultures

Jenny Bryden discusses child protection without children's services

You've almost certainly been lectured on child protection: warning signs and reporting procedures. Our textbooks usually stop after social services are called; well-trained professionals and a care system take over. In a low-resource setting, social services may not exist, with large children's homes the only care options.

In the West, the child's welfare is the obvious top priority; outside it's often the family's wellbeing and survival. The problem is clearest with sexual abuse. In the UK, any mother whose child accuses a relative is morally right to call the police. The shame and repercussions on the adults around them are necessary evils, what matters is protecting the vulnerable, innocent child.

In a low-resource setting, it's a lot more complex. With no welfare systems, social shame can threaten a family's physical survival. In the UK, our society focuses on guilt: what matters is that what you've done is bad. You might feel shame at something done to you, or by your family but support groups and professionals seek to help you past that. Society in much of the world focuses on shame that can attach to a victim and a family.

So imagine a mother whose child discloses incest. In some low-resource settings, the mother's greatest fear will be others finding out. This can be intensely realistic. If others know then the whole family is shamed. Not only will no one marry this girl, but the whole extended family's prospects will suffer. This isn't only in marriage, in a society where jobs come through personal connections, who'd give them to someone from a family who've been shamed? Suddenly it's the child who

threatens the family's survival, not an abuser who can be trusted to keep quiet.

Now suppose you're the one who's diagnosed an STI in a child. If the family can't or won't protect them, do you have anything better to offer? Maybe a nearby NGO runs a home, but what happens to the young people when they leave? Society works around family units, they're how you access relationships, food, jobs and marriage. With no social welfare, a girl without a family may have limited chances: a boy only slightly better.

so what do you do?

Get senior help. These situations need it regardless of the setting. Talk to long-term and local staff: they'll know the likely pitfalls, and any local child protection services and NGOs. In some areas, you need to consider the risk of an honour killing, in others, police involvement may endanger the child.

Where there's no child protection services, sometimes the medical team you work with will be comfortable calling in the family and discussing how to keep the child safe. Maybe there's a locally respected NGO whose involvement doesn't bring stigma. In the worst case scenarios, sometimes all you can do is to find a supportive adult, ask them to build a relationship with the child, pray for them and keep telling them that the abuse is not their fault. ■

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- International Rescue Committee. *Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse: Guiding Principles and Key Issues*. UNICEF; 2012:87-104 uni.cf/2p2ErTY
- Eapen V et al. *Where there is no child psychiatrist: a mental healthcare manual*. Glasgow, RCPsych Publications; 2012

these little ones

Jenny Bryden describes family life in one part of Eastern Europe



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Few attend school: their families rely on the money they get begging and being the class 'Egyptiane' isn't fun.

Social workers and police assume that these kids lie. Fostering doesn't happen here and there's a shortage of places in children's homes. Maybe that's why officials ignore kids who've been beaten unconscious, who're hungry and cold. Maybe, knowing the nature of so many large homes, they reckon it's better being abused within your family than within a children's home.

How do you bring hope in situations like this?

The centre is doing the most important thing: giving children an experience of reliable love and care. By caring, they're teaching the next generation to parent. By caring, they're showing them God.

And what can you do as a foreign doctor?

First do no harm. I'm trained in trauma therapies but can't use them here. You need to be safe before therapy can happen: these wee souls need all of their defences.

Second, accept that your role is supportive. The steady love and care from centre staff is so much more important than anything I bring. Nothing I do here will last if it's not taken on by staff. I need to bring teaching so they understand the problems, and leave techniques that they can use themselves. That means building long-term relationships, being available for problems and learning what they need.

Encouragement is vital. Caught between an unresponsive system and their care for the children, I don't get how they manage to stay sane. Being involved means they know there are people elsewhere who care about them and their work, acknowledging the importance of what they do and how well they're managing a hard situation. Here, in the darkness, they're demonstrating Christ. ■

It's cold upstairs at the street kids' centre and I shiver in my jumper. The children sit in thin tops, thoroughly injured. I'm doing coping techniques with the eight and nine-year-olds.

Breathing techniques, superheroes and bits of soft cloth have all gone well. Now we're making pictures of a magical safe place where everything is perfect. In the centre, two boys place a working lightbulb.

To get a place here, kids need to be neglected, abused and exploited. The centre can't stretch to all the child beggars, or all the kids who're roaming around, hungry. They simply grow up as best they can, alone.

The children are 'Egyptianes', visibly different from the community around them and generally despised. No one would give work to an Egyptian: 'everyone knows' they only beg and steal. For generations, they're left as the only career options.

In psychiatry, we talk about 'secondary deviance': the effect society's rejection has on you. In this community, girls are often forced to marry at twelve or 13. The legal age is 18 but the state doesn't care. Those 13-year-old mums were themselves brought up by mums who married by 13 and survived the same domestic violence the current mums do now. Predictably, many adults here have alcohol problems.

The kids live with their families in derelict squats.