Attitudes of Street Kids Toward Foster Care

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ABSTRACT: Forty-seven kids who frequented drop-in centers in three Western cities were interviewed to determine their attitudes toward statements related to foster care. While the teams indicated that they believed foster parents care about children and want to help them, many did not want to risk foster care. The major reason for remaining on the street is their perceptions that conflict within their family cannot be resolved. These teens have chosen to develop their own family from other street people rather than risk further rejection. The need for early family intervention is stressed.

Street kids choose to live on the streets rather than return home or risk foster care. These adolescents become survivors—sleeping, eating, taking care of themselves in any way possible. These children turn to prostitution, dealing drugs, and petty thievery as a means to survive. The street is known to be dangerous. Yet, many of these children refuse to consider foster care. This study examines the attitudes of street kids toward foster care.

The Reason Why Adolescents Leave Home

The reasons given by adolescents for leaving and staying away from home are multiple. Family conflict is usually present (Wilkinson, 1987; Roberts, 1982; Adams, Gullota & Clancy, 1985). Attempting to escape physical and sexual abuse is another frequent reason (Wilkinson, 1987; Roberts, 1982; Adams, Gullota, & Clancy, 1985). Another reason for leaving home is rejection of the child by the parent or school (Johnson & Carter, 1980; Wilkinson, 1987). A few children

Reasons why kids stay on the street closely parallel the reasons why they run away. Not being accepted by their parents, family conflict, abuse, were found to be factors by (Wilkinson (1987).

Foster Care Experience

Adolescents and adults who have been in foster care report mixed experiences and perceptions about their foster care experience. Foster care experiences perceived as being positive by subjects were those where they felt they belonged. The recurring themes expressed by subjects were feeling welcome, loved, and accepted (Gil & Bogarth, 1982; Festinger, 1983; Harari, 1980). Foster care was seen as positive in large families which offered fun and independence and when there was no competition from biological or foster children (Jacobson & Cockerum, 1976).

Negative factors described by past foster children included: lack of communication, unfair treatment, favoritism, excessive discipline, questionable motives of the foster parents (Allison, 1984; Jacobson & Cockerum, 1976; Harari, 1980). Some subjects felt uncared about and unloved and others reported physical and sexual abuse by someone living in the foster home (Allison, 1984; Harari, 1980; Jacobson & Cockerum, 1976; Wilkinson, 1987). Some experienced a sense of being exploited: used for money their placement provided, the work they could perform, or the prestige they brought to the family (Jacobson & Cockerum, 1976; Harari, 1980).

Factors Undermining Foster Care

Factors found to be unrelated to failure in foster placement included the nonsupportive attitude toward foster care of the birth parents, lack of school attendance, and substance abuse (Smith, 1986). Lack of contact with a living parent in a voluntary care situation can erode lines of authority (Smith, 1986). Fear of rejection by the foster parent is another important variable (Smith, 1986). A struggle for control can also mean failure for the foster home (Proch & Taber, 1987).

Research Methods

A 50 item attitude statement instrument was created. The literature served to suggest categories and attitudes statements about foster