

## **FAMILIES OF STREET CHILDREN IN THE TRANSKEI: A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, there is a paucity of literature on families of street children. A recent literature search (on the internet and in other resources) reveals that reasons for this state of affairs are many, some of the main ones being:

- The tendency on the part of researchers to investigate the “obvious”, in this case the children roaming the streets, instead of viewing the phenomenon in depth, i.e. taking cognisance of the root causes of the problem. Thus, resources that seek to investigate the phenomenon are likely to be misdirected towards addressing the problem after it has occurred, rather than examining its causes. Also, focusing on the phenomenon of street children negates the fact that a child is part of a family and thus can never be rehabilitated in isolation from his family, hence this study to determine the “character” of families of street children.
- The difficulty researchers have in locating families of these children since the children have de-bonded from their families for a variety of reasons, some of which are: family disorganisation, poverty at home, school-related problems, a breakdown of social networks in the community as well as disillusionment with the existing societal values, hope for an alternative glamorous life-style, to mention just a few (<http://web24.epnet.com/citation>, 2006; Kuse, 2001). In the Transkei, where this study was conducted, families were “traced” through links with the extended kin who had sheltered the street children after leaving their biological families to fend for themselves.

In the present study, the researcher seeks to determine the characteristics of these families with a view to understanding the environment from which the street children come.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF FAMILIES**

In South Africa the family is still regarded as the normal biological and social structure, which should guide the growth and development of a child. “This perception still underpins the political mindset in South Africa and informs social policy, as it does in many parts of the world” (Swart-Kruger, 1996:233). A study conducted in Johannesburg on inmates of two shelters indicates that half of the sample of the 97 street boys interviewed expressed a genuine desire to return to their families or even find a substitute family (Richter & Van der Walt, 1996). In another study, also conducted in Johannesburg, nearly half of the sample had frequent contact with their families (Richter & Van der Walt, 1996:218). This has often been endorsed by researchers world-wide, who believe that many street children are working in the streets and at the end of the day go back to their families (Aptekar, 1996; Richter & Swart-Kruger, 1996; Swart-Kruger & Donald, 1994 in Dawes & Donald, 1994; Black, 1993; Richter, 1989). In South Africa these children are referred to as “children on the streets” (Richter, 1989). They are temporarily on the streets to work, but maintain contact with their families at the end of the day. This clearly indicates the value and the significance of families.

One way of understanding the significance of the family is to look at the functions of the family. The family provides the basic material goods for the survival, growth and development of the child. It nurtures its young, provides affection and as the children grow, it becomes a powerful



















