Street Children

Reaching street youth on substance abuse
Christopher Lowry

Street children and youth involved in substance abuse are often felt to be the hardest people in the world to reach with counselling, as well as those most obviously in need of it. The idea of making a work of art that both captures their imagination and steers them towards a safer way of life may seem more like wishful thinking than a practical proposal, but the author explains how it is done.

It is one of the unfortunate facts of our times that poor children and youth in cities all over the world live in conditions of severe stress, experience serious emotional and physical abuse, and have extremely limited access to education or health care. These assaults on their dignity come from relatives, authority figures, and other youths who have been born into this violent milieu. It is not surprising that drug abuse is common among these youth. They turn to drugs in order to be able to tolerate the intolerable, to rise above pain and difficulty that no child should have to endure, and simply to deal with the stress of surviving in a hostile adult world where they are marginalized in every way. It is commonly recognized that youth may use drugs in an effort to improve their mental health.

Stoned kids are the hardest to reach, and kids suffering the side-effects of substance abuse are extremely difficult to work with. Many educators say they are unreachable. Substance abuse, including the use of inhalants, is among the most pervasive health issues for street children and youth (on a continuum with sexual health problems and injuries from street violence). It is the most frustrating barrier to effective street outreach, and there are few or no audiovisual resources available internationally to support counselling work with high-risk youth on substance abuse.

Common culture

Street youth all over the world share a culture which is characterized by economic marginalization, the formation of youth gangs in the face of family breakdowns and the misery of slum life, and mistrust of authorities. They value friendship, courage and ingenuity. They also place primary value on the ability to take care of oneself. This may include the choice of taking drugs to feel good, and to exchange sex for money, shelter or drugs. Street youth may engage in high-risk behaviour such as unprotected sex or needle-sharing in order to meet the urgently felt need of improving their well-being. Thus the most effective attempts to promote safety in sexual and drug-taking practices are those which place it in the context of “taking care of yourself” without passing judgement.

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Research indicates that solvent abuse is common among street children and youth across cultures. Sniffing glue and other solvents provokes a quick, stupefying high, and these substances are easier and cheaper for children to obtain than alcohol or controlled drugs. This aspect of street life provided a starting point for inventing an adventure story in which all forms of substance abuse can be talked about.

**Effective resources**

One definition of “effective” resources for this target population would be audiovisual or print material that stands up to repeated use by educators, that is enjoyed and seen positively by out-of-school youth, and that is regularly used for outreach and counselling by youth workers who serve the needs of street youth. *Karate Kids*, the first cartoon video made by Street Kids International, meets these criteria. It deals with AIDS and sexual health, which is one of the most pervasive and life-threatening street health issues. Since 1989 it has been dubbed into 25 languages and welcomed by educators in over 100 countries as a useful tool for outreach and discussion.

To develop a story dealing with substance abuse, our creative team worked in close cooperation with educators and youth workers, to make storyboards for testing with street youth in nine countries. The aim of the new cartoon is to provide youth workers with an effective participatory means of reframing the old question of drugs in a way that helps motivate youth to make positive decisions and changes in their lives. It will be a “trigger video” to promote trust and dialogue with the educator. The story emphasizes the rewards of friendship, self-respect and life skills in contrast to the powerful but destructive comforts of substance abuse.

Just as *Karate Kids* is helping to change the way that sex education is provided by many community-based organizations, the new cartoon is intended to enable youth workers to
Goldtooth – the story

Little Karate and his sister Nina live on the street and work in a bakery. The boy likes to get high on glue and other substances, and one day he is so stoned that he loses a basket of bread. We learn that he has good reasons for trying to feel better: his mother is dead and he ran away from his father who beat him every day. He gets into further trouble and joins a gang of hard-core street kids. Goldtooth, the local pimp and drug dealer, seduces Nina. Karate tries to rescue her but in the ensuing fight with Goldtooth the bakery catches on fire and burns down. Nina is killed in the fire while defending her brother against Goldtooth. All the kids mourn for the death of Nina. Don Pedro, the baker, tells Karate that some day he will see through Goldtooth, and then he will know how to deal with him.

In the marketplace, Karate meets Goldtooth, who offers him drugs. Karate stands up to him, telling him he is nothing but a cockroach who exploits kids. As the child stands up to the man, the man becomes smaller and smaller until he turns into a cockroach, still repeating the words he used to use to manipulate young people and take advantage of their problems. Karate and the other kids run after Goldtooth, and Karate steps on him.

behaviour, and build on the proven ability of young people to take care of themselves.

Story development

To start the new project, Street Kids International engaged artists and consultants who had worked on the first Karate Kids cartoon, including the Academy Award-winning writer and director Derek Lamb and the chief animator Kai Pindal. It took about a year to outline the initial ideas for a story in consultation with youth workers, other film-makers, substance abuse experts and street kids in several parts of the world, and to raise seed money for the project. To make a test version of the story, a set of 350 drawings was prepared, which could be used as a slide show or a video with young audiences. The picture sequence was accompanied by a simple script recorded in three language versions: American English, international English, and Spanish. At this stage there were no sound effects, music or moving pictures.

This version of the story was tested by community-based partners working with street youth in seven countries, including India, Peru and Zambia. In response to initial reactions, the story was reworked to feature the hero’s childhood much more prominently, as this had aroused particular interest among the street children and youth who had seen it. Gradually, through constant reworking and retesting, a powerful adventure cartoon emerged with the title of Goldtooth. It is 25 minutes long and so far has withstood the fire of young street people’s critical scrutiny extremely well.

Reflection on the process

The story development process is entirely dependent on the willingness of the writer to expose his work to the reactions of many “critics”, recognize useful suggestions, and
assimilate these in revising the narrative and drawings so as to appeal more deeply to the audience. The most difficult part of this process is to put the variety of technically and culturally important content into a form that will both delight and instruct young people.

The need to expose new work at the vulnerable development stage to comments from all directions presents a difficult challenge for creative artists, and the willingness of Derek Lamb to allow his work to be influenced in this way is very unusual in the field of animated cartoons. Most film-makers are not willing to subject their work to this kind of scrutiny, partly because it can be extremely disheartening, and partly because of the cost of creating a new storyboard. However, the cost of finishing and releasing an inadequate product is much higher. The elaborate feedback loop serves as a very effective “reality check”, which can go on testing the resource until the creative team gets it right.

The artists must often be as resilient as street kids, to defend their work against contradictory messages from various directions. For example there is a scene in the final story where the kids steal a vehicle and go for a joy ride. One of our consultants strongly suggested that the vehicle should not be an American sports car but an old pick-up full of chickens as this would add both humour and realism. The film makers refused to make this change, because the sports car had tested very well everywhere – the kids loved the fantasy of this “pure entertainment” sequence – and there was some concern that the chicken truck would not be accepted in Canadian and United States cities.

On the other hand, the artist can only exercise this kind of stubbornness beneficially from a position of legitimacy which is gained from immersion in the subject matter through first-hand experience and thorough research. The creative team must be given the resources and access it needs in order to know its audience, consult it and respond to its reactions. In this instance, many of the lessons learnt from audience responses to the first Karate Kids cartoon provided invaluable guidance for the second one.

Producers of resources for street youth are accountable not only to their audience and the educators, but also to the donors and the institutional “gate-keepers”. Thus it was important to consult various international institutions during the process of developing both the films. Several of the consultants involved were selected because their views were likely to be representative of some of the more conservative agencies, and their approval of the storyboard provided an important indicator of distribution potential. On the other hand, excessive attention to the opinions of “gate-keepers” can be misleading. In the case of the second film, for instance, there was some strong donor approval for an early version which subsequent testing showed to be badly flawed. In short, not only talent but sensitivity and tenacity are needed for a project of this kind.