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A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON MENTAL HEALTH OF STREET CHILDREN LIVING WITH THEIR FAMILIES AND RUNWAYS FROM FAMILIES

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Abstract:

The objective of the study is to find out the mental health of street children living with their families and runways from families with reference to age and gender. In the present investigation, 120 street children were selected. Sixty subjects belonged to the age group of 7-11 years and 60 from 11 to 15 years of age group. Of which equal number of 30 were males and females in each of the age group. Equal number of 15 in each gender category belonged to street children living with their families and street children who were runways from families. Augustine's Mental Health Inventory (1981) was used to measure the mental health of street children. The collected data were tabulated and subjected to statistical analysis. The results of the present study revealed that there was a significant difference in the mental health of street children living with their families and runways from families. With regard to gender, 7-11 years old male street children who were runways from families had better mental health than the female street children. Seven to 11 years old female street children living with their families had better mental health than the street children who are runways from families. Age did not have any effect on mental health of street children.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of street children is global, alarming and escalating. No country and virtually no city anywhere in the world are without the presence of street children. The term street children are referred to those children for whom the street more than their family has become their real home. It includes children who might not necessarily be homelessness or without families, but who live in situation where there is no protection, supervision or direction from responsible adults. These children live in abandoned buildings, containers, automobiles, parks or on the street itself. India now has one of the largest number of street children in the world due to unemployment, increasing rural, urban migration and attraction of city life. These children are subjected to malnutrition, hunger, health problems, substances abuse, theft harassment by the city police and railway authorities as well as physical and sexual abuse (Clausen, 2002).

Street children are classified into three categories, They are: children on the ghetto is the largest group consisting of children who work on the street. Children of the palace include runways, abused and alienated. Children from deprived and poverty stricken families who are unable to maintain normal family units. Children in the street is the smallest group covering orphans and abandoned children whose parents may have died from war, illness or simply been unable to look after the children because of their family circumstances (UNICEF, 2005). An indepth studies on street children were conducted on the reasons why the children of the street leave their homes, how they survive and meet their daily needs, what problems

they encounter whilst on the streets and how they surmount them (Thrane, 2006).

Mental health is the term which describes either a level of cognitive or economical well being or an absence of a mental disorder. Mental health is a condition of psychological maturity, relatively constant and enduring functions of personality. The mentally healthy individual has a clear concept of his life goals. The mentally healthy individual has a philosophy of life that is based on conviction, belief and goals that contribute to his happiness and the happiness of those around him (Michael & Vira, 2007). Children and adolescent with good mental health are able to achieve and maintain optimal psychological and social functioning and well-being (Wright, 1991). They have a sense of identity and self worth, sound family and peer relationship, an ability to be productive and to learn and the capacity to tackle developmental challenges and use cultural resources to maximize growth. Moreover, the good mental health of children and adolescent is crucial for their active social and economic participation. Numerous studies have focused on the mental health problems of homeless children (Mente, 1998).

Hence, the present study was undertaken, which is a comparative study on mental health of street children living with their families and runways from families. Living with families are those street children who are with their parents, siblings and relations. After their daily chores they join their families. Their earnings greatly supplemented their family income based on their own survival. The runways from families are those who had runways from their homes due to intolerable environment arising from poverty, breakup of family due to death, desertion or maltreatment and live on streets without their families.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives discussed in this study were

- to study the effect of family on mental health of street children.
- to determine whether age has any influence on the mental health of street children.
- to understand the effect of gender on mental health of street children.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample for the present study was obtained from various non-governmental organizations and slum localities of Chennai city. These street children have been brought to these organizations either by street educators from railway stations, bus stands and different corners of the city. The non-governmental organizations were Mariyala in Broadway and Don Bosco Anbu Illam in Royapuram and the various localities were Central railway station, Parris Corner, Ottery and Kasimedu. Sixty subjects were selected from 7-11 years of age group and 60 from 11-15 years of age group. Of which equal number of 30 were males and females in each of the age group. Equal number of 15 in each gender category belonged to street children living with their families and street children who are runways from families.

Tool

Augustine's Mental Health Inventory (1981) was used in the present study to assess the mental health of the street children. This was translated in Tamil language. High score indicated good mental health and low score indicated poor mental health.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the comparative study on mental health of 7-11 and 11-15 years old male and female street children living with their families and runways from families are presented below.

Mental health and family

The following Table-1 provides details of mean scores, and standard deviation and 't' value of mental health of street children with reference to their family.

TABLE-1

Effect of family on mental health of street children.

| Variable | Group | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | 't' value | Level of Significance |
|----------|----------------------------|----|-------|--------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Family | Living with their families | 60 | 34.07 | 5.74 | 2.39 | 0.05 |
| | Runways from families | 60 | 31.97 | 4.71 | | |

*Significant at 0.05 level

The results from Table-1 indicates the mean scores of mental health of street children living with their families and runways from families. The mean values of street children living with their families and runways from families were 34.07 and 31.97 respectively. Thus, the calculated 't' value ($t=2.39$) was greater than the table value 1.96 at 5% level of significance. The results showed that the street children living with their families had better mental health than the street children who were runways from families. It is because these children after performing the days' chores are with their families. The family is a place which is responsible for good mental health in an individual whereas, the street child who do not have a family encounters many more problems whilst on the streets and hence suffers from mental health problems.

TABLE-2

Effect of family on mental health of 7-11 and 11-15 years old male and female street children.

| Gender | Age (in years) | Group | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | 't' value | Level of Significance |
|--------|----------------|----------------------------|----|-------|--------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Male | 7-11 | Living with their families | 15 | 32.4 | 5.86 | 0.07 | NS |
| | | Runways from families | 15 | 33.2 | 4.70 | | |
| | 11-15 | Living with their families | 15 | 33.3 | 5.65 | 0.15 | NS |
| | | Runways from families | 15 | 33.60 | 3.44 | | |
| Female | 7-11 | Living with their families | 15 | 33.47 | 5.44 | 2.27 | 0.05* |
| | | Runways from families | 15 | 29 | 4.97 | | |
| | 11-15 | Living with their families | 15 | 37.1 | 4.80 | 0.66 | NS |
| | | Runways from families | 15 | 31.27 | 7.36 | | |

Note: NS – Not Significant

*Significant at 0.05 level

It is apparent from Table-2 that no significant results existed between the mental health scores of 7-11 and 11-15 years old male street children living with their families and runways from families. Since these male street children living with their families or without their families are equally exposed to the

unhealthy street atmosphere and are vulnerable to many dangers and abuses including ill mental health. Whereas, 7-11 years old female street children living with their families had better mental health than street children who were runways from families. It is due to the fact that these female street children face a major problem of sexual harassment and ill treatment. But, no significant difference was seen in 11-15 years old female street children because these female street dwellers irrespective of whether they are with the family or not, they are equally subjected to the ill-treatment meted out to them which in turn affect their mentally healthy life.

Mental health and age

Table-3 provides details of mean scores standard deviations and 't' values of mental health of street children living with their families and runways from families with reference to age.

TABLE-3

Effect of age on mental health of street children living with

| Families | Age (in years) | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | 't' values | Level of Significance |
|-----------------------|----------------|----|-------|--------------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Living with families | 7-11 | 30 | 32.93 | 5.68 | 1.54 | NS |
| | 11-15 | 30 | 35.20 | 5.58 | | |
| Runways from families | 7-11 | 30 | 31.10 | 5.28 | 1.14 | NS |
| | 11-15 | 30 | 32.43 | 3.88 | | |

Note: NS – Not Significant

The results from Table-3 reveals no significant difference in the mental health of 7-11 and 11-15 years old street children who were living with their families and runways from families. This may be because both the younger and older street children are equally exposed to the same situations and encounter the same environment of street life, hence no difference in mental health.

TABLE-4

Effect of age on mental health of 7-11 and 11-15 years old male and female street children.

| Gender | Families | Age (in years) | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | 't' values | Level of Significance |
|--------|-----------------------|----------------|----|--------|--------------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Male | Living with families | 7-11 | 15 | 32.4 | 5.86 | 0.43 | NS |
| | | 11-15 | 15 | 33.3 | 5.65 | | |
| | Runways from families | 7-11 | 15 | 33.203 | 4.70 | 0.25 | NS |
| | | 11-15 | 15 | 33.60 | 3.44 | | |
| Female | Living with families | 7-11 | 15 | 33.47 | 5.44 | 1.87 | NS |
| | | 11-15 | 15 | 37.10 | 4.80 | | |
| | Runways from families | 7-11 | 15 | 29.10 | 4.97 | 1.38 | NS |
| | | 11-15 | 15 | 31.27 | 3.60 | | |

Note: NS – Not Significant

It is observed from Table-4 that no significant difference existed between 7-11 and 11-15 years old male and female street children living with their families and runways from families. This finding brings to light the fact that irrespective of age, street children are the major sufferers whose real home is the street. They are tortured and abused physically and sexually, there is none to take responsibility of them, hence this affect their mentally healthy life.

Mental health and gender

Table-5 provides details of mean scores and standard deviations of mental health of street children living with their families and runways from families with reference to their gender.

TABLE-5

Effect of gender on the mental health of 7-11 years old male and female street children

| Families | Gender | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | 't' value | Level of Significance |
|-----------------------|--------|----|-------|--------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Living with families | Male | 15 | 32.40 | 5.86 | 0.51 | NS |
| | Female | 15 | 33.47 | 5.44 | | |
| Runways from families | Male | 15 | 33.20 | 4.70 | 2.29 | 0.05* |
| | Female | 15 | 29.0 | 4.97 | | |

Note: NS – Not Significant

*Significant at 0.05 level

A perusal of Table-4 indicates the mean scores of 7-11 years old male and female street children living with their families and runways from families. No significant difference existed in the mental health of male and female street children living with their families. Whereas significant difference was observed between male and female street children who were runaways from families. It was seen that 7-11 year old male street children who were runaways from families had better mental health than the female street children. This is due to the fact that female street children live in situations where there is no protection, no family connections, no shelter, no food and this lowers their mental health.

TABLE-6

Effect of gender on mental health of 11-15 years old street children living with families and runways from families.

| Families | Gender | N | Mean | Standard Deviation | 't' value | Level of Significance |
|-----------------------|--------|----|-------|--------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| Living with families | Male | 15 | 33.30 | 5.65 | 1.89 | NS |
| | Female | 15 | 37.10 | 4.80 | | |
| Runways from families | Male | 15 | 33.60 | 3.44 | 1.74 | NS |
| | Female | 15 | 31.27 | 3.60 | | |

Note : NS – Not Significant

The results from Table-6 indicates that no significant difference existed between 11-15 years old male and female street children living with families and runways from families. It is because both the males and females of higher age group spend most of the time on the streets almost doing all the odd jobs. Irrespective of gender, they are abused physically and sexually with no guidance and protection from responsible adults. Hence, they are emotionally disturbed with no positive feelings towards themselves and others.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion drawn from the present study revealed that on the whole street children living with families had better mental health than the street children who were runways from families. Thus, 7-11 years old female street children living with their families showed better mental health than those who were

runways from families. Age of the child had no effect on the mental health of street children. With regard to gender, 7-11 years old male street children who were runways from families had better mental health than their female counterparts who lived on the streets without protection and shelter.

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