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WHERE THE CHILD IS WITHOUT FEAR

By Pallavi Bhattacharya

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Think of a teenaged student burdened by factual overload the night before an important examination. His parents are urging him to not only to top his class but the board examination. The student on the other hand is anxious whether he'll be able to attain pass percentage. His brother has made it to IIT and he believes that he will be a 'loser' scorned by teachers, family and peers if he fails. His irrational fear of doom may urge him to do something drastic to himself even as extreme as taking his life. In a critical situation like this the student needs an empathetic and objective professional to confide in. In Kolkata, the city which records the highest numbers of suicides in India, SERVE (Students' Empowerment, Rights & Vision thru Education), an NGO founded by Abbas Bengali, Rajesh Arora and Dr.Br.Brendan, arranges for tele-counselling, face-to-face counselling and SER-Friends (a phone-contact structure for isolated senior students).

CEO of SERVE, Dr.Br.Brendan MacCarthaigh, an Irishman by birth, came to India in 1960 as a Christian Brother. A respected educationist, Doctorate in Psychology from USA, Fellowship in education from London, gold medal Masters Degree from Guwahati, B.Ed from North East Hills University in Assam, he started off by teaching many subjects as well as Value Education in various boarding schools of India. His visit to Kolkata in 1981 was a life changing experience for him. "There's a taste of reality about Kolkata which attracts me very powerfully," he explains. While Br.Mac was teaching at St Joseph's College, he noticed that street children living near the school were illiterate. He soon started teaching them and joined CINI Asha in 1990 as an ordinary field worker, in hovels, on the platform and wherever there were kids.

Br.Mac soon discovered that children from well-off families suffered from different kinds of academic problems. He talked to innumerable children regarding their views on success and failure in examinations and came to the conclusion, "The entire examination system in India runs on fear." He sadly reveals, "I asked a little girl if she thought that she was a good girl. She answered that she was good as she scored high marks in class. It was indeed unfortunate that students who fare poorly in examinations are considered to be bad. A child of twelve who had hanged herself left a suicide note in which she apologized for her poor spellings." Parental pressure to excel and not accept failure

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traumatizes children further. "I asked a Class VIII boy what his family would do if he failed. He candidly answered that his mother would wail, his father would beat him up, his relatives would scorn him for being the first boy in the family to ever have failed an exam, his principal and teachers would scold him and his peers would mock him." Br.Mac feels, "The basis of this fear is the izzat factor – fear of personal reputation, of social contempt, of teacher, parental, familial and personal disappointment." As a teacher Br.Mac tried his utmost to make classes interesting for his students and always promised them that he would do his bit towards revolutionizing the education system in India so that his students' children would not have to go thru the same kind of trauma they went through.

In 1996, when Irishman Edmund Rice, a millionaire who had devoted his entire life to alleviate the condition of street children in Ireland was beatified, Christian Brothers all around the world were invited to mark the occasion by doing something special. Brother Mac decided to organize a dance drama Alor Pathe enacting Edmund's story. After the programme was over Br.Mac's former students Abbas and Rajesh reminded him of his promise to bring about a change in the education system and taking

Edmund Rice as an inspiration, the three set up an NGO SERVE in India to 'eliminate the suffering of college and school students under things-as-are'.

To begin with, SERVE came up with an alternative pedagogical method called 'Where the child is without fear' suited to the Indian psyche–style, the huge number of students, and yet retaining the high academic standards, but virtually stress free. Says Br.Mac, "The ranking system creates tremendous stress on students. After all only one student can come first. Moreover since teachers are human they often tend to work out their anger on children in the class. We have therefore introduced the system of group learning. We put the class into teams of six, thereby encouraging collective learning. The teacher supervises but doesn't have an authoritarian role."

In Delhi, where the government has embraced the system warmly, 1000 teachers, trained in the SERVE system, are absorbed into the schools every year with the aim of bringing about a new generation of teachers who will be more understanding to the students' psychological needs. Dr.Sanjeev K.Ghai, Program Manager of the U.E.E. Mission, Directorate of Education, Government of N.C.T Delhi, says, "Delhi has more than a 1000 schools. At the moment, 9 lakhs students are learning in the SERVE system. Performances of most of the students improved after the SERVE system was introduced. We are trying to replace the traditional bookish method of learning to a modern and innovative method."

The public can help SERVE in its mission by financial grants or becoming a member / volunteer of the NGO. If more people come forward to fight for students suffering due to academic pressure, maybe schools where children are without fear won't be utopian any more. Or if you are a student in distress you can call up SERVE for free counselling. Contact: The SERVE Centre, 8 Bansi Dutta Road, Beniapukur, Kolkata 700014, Ph: (033)22842218, Email:

serve@vsnl.net

<http://www.ryze.com/go/heathcliff>

Child Safety Tips

By Monique Dyer

Child Safety Tips by Monique Dyer

6 Ways to Prevent Child Abduction

1. Never leave your child alone in a public place, car, or stroller.
2. Point out a safe house or houses in your neighborhood, where children can go if they are in trouble.
3. Check older friends of your child and all potential babysitters.
4. Do not use clothing and toys with your child's name on it. A child will less likely to fear someone who knows his/her name.
5. Always accompany your child into a public restroom.
6. Keep an up-to-date color photograph of your child, a Child ID, and medical and dental history, and have your child fingerprinted.

Child abduction is a growing concern and there are simple precautions that you can take to help safeguard your children.

Monique Dyer, President of Accurate Drug & DNA Testing, a Atlanta-based company selling on-site drug testing kits to businesses and DNA Testing services to consumers. She currently has a bi-weekly child safety tips newsletter, promoting safety with Children's identification, fingerprinting, and DNA Kit to parents. To subscribe go the website at the bottom of the page
<http://www accuratedna.com/childrenSAFEGUARD YOUR CHILD!>

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