

THE ROLE OF TEEN-AGE VOLUNTEERS IN WORKING WITH MULTIPLE-HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

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This article will deal with the roles played by a teen-age volunteer group in the Children's Unit of a rehabilitative chronic disease hospital. The Children's Unit is composed of about 31 children between the ages of 8 months and 12 years. Most of the children have multiple handicaps and possess one or more of the following disorders: hydrocephaly, microcephaly, paraplegia, hemiplegia, spastic quadriplegia, hyperkinesis, brain damage, hypoglycaemia, convulsive seizures, malnutrition, urinary tract dysfunction, cortical blindness, deafness, horseshoe kidney, neurogenic bladder, and battered child syndrome, etc. A large number of these children are mentally retarded, ranging from mild to severe.

A number of these children do not have parents and close relatives and rarely do they have any visitors. Although the children receive excellent medical and nursing care, they get a very limited exposure to different people and to the stimuli of the outside world. In the summer of 1971 a group of young people from Bowie Sacred Heart Church, as part of the summer program, contacted the hospital to spend some time with the children, especially to take them out to the playground to play. Initially the group started with only three volunteers but as word spread, the number grew much larger.

Presently the group consists of 33 young boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 17 years with 3 adult leaders. These teen-agers are all from the Bowie, Maryland area and attend either Bowie Senior High, Bel Air Junior High, Benjamin Tasker Junior High, or Samuel Ogle Junior High Schools.

During the initial phase of the volunteer program, this group was limited to spending time playing with the children, since the group did not have any knowledge of medical, nursing and other psycho-social techniques. This posed some risks as many of the younger children needed careful handling. As a result, some training and teaching sessions were introduced to these young volunteers covering the areas of mental retardation, feeding techniques, handling techniques and a general assessment of each child. The psychotherapist provided several training sessions to the volunteers in how to assist the children in walking, dressing, feeding and other activities without causing any discomfort.

The initial purpose of this church group was to give the teenagers an opportunity "to grow as Christians by serving others." At Glenn Dale Hospital they could give of themselves without necessarily receiving anything in return. When I asked some of the teen-age volunteers what motivated them to come regularly and work with these handicapped children, their answers were invariably that they got satisfaction by helping children that "did not have it as well as I did while growing up," "how little the kids have," and "how much we could give them." As some of the children did not have parents or relatives to come and visit them, these young volunteers played the roles of substitute parents and visitors.

Now the young volunteers not only play with the children but also they feed and provide companionship on a regular basis. Because of the great impact of this group on the psycho-social aspects of these handicapped children, the group has extended their services even further. They are now taking the children twice a month to the Church for cookouts, barbecues, or for dinner-recreation. They bring a large number of normal children of the same age from the community to freely mix and play with the handicapped children. These youngsters play records and games, sing, and provide other recreation depending on weather and other factors. They also take some children to their own homes for dinner and for a week-end visit.

In addition to the above activities they also arranged birthday parties, Easter party, Christmas party, Halloween party, etc. During Christmas they gave gifts to each child. The expense of these activities are mostly borne by the group members themselves. On several occasions they

collected money to cover the expenses of some of their activities by bake sales.

This volunteer program provided an opportunity to these young people to take the initiative in responding to other's needs who were so dependent for day-to-day survival on others. In so doing they tended to grow into compassionate and understanding individuals. Another positive aspect of the volunteer participation is that a number of young people have strongly indicated the desire to work with handicapped children as a vocation.

This teen-age volunteer group has not only brought new life to these children but it also has acted as a catalyst in involving other disciplines in collaborating with other community agencies, and, finally in opening new doors for the total and more humane treatment of the children.

