

Conversations in a taxi: firearms and forks. A systemic analysis of youth crime

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ABSTRACT – By dismissing children who behave dangerously as ‘morally flawed’ society manages to place the blame for social breakdown on the most vulnerable. Children acquire the status of ‘demons’ and civil society is perceived as ‘angelic’. In simplistic narratives the complexity is disguised. However, medical science is presenting a different paradigm. The quality of care a child receives sculpts their capacity to regulate emotion and energy. Failure of care by biological and corporate parents is forcing children to resort to savagery in order to survive corrupted inner cities. Civil society seeks power by distributing punishment, imprisonment, and sanctions. The abandoned child similarly seeks status by generating a reputation for causing harm. No one is winning. For the ‘demon’ and the ‘angel’ to partner in delivering a solution the polarisation needs to be diminished. The vulnerable child cannot solely be made responsible for adult failings.

KEY WORDS: abandoned children, improvised cares structures, savagery for survival, seeking solutions

A 16-year-old who has been homeless on and off for two years was sitting beside me contemplating the recent shootings in South London. Her protest was about the media distortion. The news was being recounted from the perspective of comfortable middle-class reporters. ‘They don’t understand,’ she said. Eleven years ago I would not have understood either, but as the founder of Kids Company, a children’s charity, I was forced to comprehend.¹ It is about violence as a currency of survival.

In 1996, we were a group of white therapists, trained in the schools of Hampstead where Freud never got as far as describing Peckham. Our aspiration was to set up a service for under-11s in order to provide them with some care during the school holidays. It began in two railway arches in Camberwell where we filled the space with soft furnishings and toys.

On our opening days we were greeted by a large group of adolescent boys, which grew rapidly to around 100. The capacity for violence was their

common denominator. They set the furniture alight, ripped the cushions with knives and generally terrorised the staff. It was a ritual of terror they exposed most local provisions to and consequently got banned from them.

I was out of my depth, terrified, unable to understand their language or their criminal network. A mixture of Persian hospitality courtesy of my heritage and a sense of vocation from my spiritual discipline forced me to greet ‘the terrorists’ with a welcome, a smile, and a request not to spit. Years later, when we had gone beyond surviving each other, they told me that my gentleness surprised them. They expected to be banned from the centre just like everywhere else.

Over the years, hundreds more arrived, always wishing to greet through violence. Kids Company currently supports 11,000 children by providing therapy, arts and social work services across 33 London schools. Our most disturbed children are catered for through our two ‘street-level’ services. A thousand of these children are being re-parented by our staff seven days a week. We meet their basic needs for food, shelter and clothing. We also address emotional wounds by providing therapeutic and health provisions.

The child who sat next to me embodies the rotten childhood lived by so many of our young clients. The media polarised the story into ‘demons’ and ‘angels’. The demonic side is represented by young people who mindlessly shoot, deal drugs and rob, adversely affecting the quality of the life of the voter. The general public is seen as angelic, terrorised by the lawlessness of children who live in ghettos.

It is a fairy-tale construct with no shades of grey in which to find a meeting point between the black and the white. I have not called it dark because even BBC Radio 4 has allowed itself to believe that the bullet only belongs to the black community. It is not about the racial divide or the colour of the skin; the darkness is psychological.

Curiosity is always a prerequisite for knowledge. Some of the media have not shown curiosity so they have not captured the real reason why these children present with violence. The 16-year-old girl beside me has the answer because she has experienced it and

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because she has the depth to process and articulate it. It is from children like her that I learnt a very important lesson. Criminal children are not born, they are made.

The impact of one child

Last year the 16-year-old girl was sentenced to custody three times. She spent nine months incarcerated. The outcome was not a resolve to avoid prison but delight. She told me that it was the longest she had spent in the same bed. Her crime is that when she feels cornered she loses control and slaps people. Her capacity for violence is a perverse gift from her parents. Her father is a major drug dealer. She remembers his crazed outbursts and his firearms in between his prison sentences. Her mother learnt the art of artificial control but from an early age she battered her own child. Her middle-class eloquence creates a veneer, hiding parental dysfunction and parading her child as the source of her miseries. The mother was believed over and over again while the tiny little girl in her care received multiple blows and was denied compassion.

Children like her are initially victims; powerless to effect change, they memorise the blows, physically encoding the shock into their cells. The smells, the sounds and the visual horrors store into the brain ready to be repeated in haunting memories. It is a chronic state of emergency as your face is pinned beneath your father's shoe while you struggle to breathe and yet again, you wonder whether you will survive. There is no time for aspirations or play. No time to be a child. The timetable is dictated by horror; your duty is to cling onto life and avoid death. You notice your mother as a heartless bystander; she does not stop him, he presses long enough on your cheek to leave shoe marks for days. The physical evidence etched into your face simultaneously scarring humiliation into your heart. You remember she encouraged him; your mother was no saviour.

After a while, the survival drama becomes exhausting and living renders itself meaningless. A chemical and psychological shutdown is a consequence of the exhaustion. You stop feeling and it is a relief. The numbness avoids the begging and the pleading. You do not care anymore. Feelinglessness becomes your tool for survival.

Civil society is nowhere to be seen. The abuse goes on behind closed doors and the abused child does not have any effect on the quality of the life of the voter. Worlds apart, the two do not meet until the little girl or the little boy makes a shift from being the abused to becoming the abuser. It is better to victimise than to be a victim. Humiliation and the shame of never being rescued are avoided. There is a sense of being so profoundly worthless that nobody noticed. Nobody protected. There was no society when the child needed it, so the child owes society nothing. It is a dog-eat-dog world and this 16-year-old will be the dog that eats.

Before she found Kids Company, she had a firearm in her suitcase. It was a replica. She needed it to survive the street. The older drug dealers were running her and she was a member of the PDC (Poverty Driven Children) gang. Without functioning parents and on the streets the gang was 'her family' and protec-

tion. She tried to put herself into care many times but the social work department wrote off her childhood when she was 14. The department elevate their thresholds of intake to reflect their depleted budgets. In poor areas, abused children are too many and demand outweighs resources.

Kids Company had to take the social work department to court in order for a children's home placement to be provided but the local youth offending worker and social services then threatened the children's home with withdrawal of their contract if they did not exclude the child permanently. At £2,000 a week in care she was costing the department too much. Nobody bothered to show curiosity about her slapping behaviour. When the male care worker suddenly grabbed her from behind he triggered the same sense of urgency as when her father grabbed her to batter her. The care worker was at the receiving end of her flashback and her impulsive survival response. It was not a premeditated slap but by subsequently making her homeless, they forced her into failing her bail conditions. They knew she would end up in custody and the eventual responsibility of the national budget rather than the local one. The owner of the home did not want her to go but if her contract with the local authority was withdrawn she would lose her business.

I have frequently attended professional meetings where disturbed children were left undiagnosed and unprotected, the professionals knowing that eventually they would commit a crime and that care would be provided in youth custody. The professionals also survive the humiliation of not being able to help appropriately by shutting down their capacities to feel. As workers whose emotions are numbed, they function; but their spirit is defeated and their soul burdened with a despondent deadness.

Savagery as survival

Too many young people are products of abusive homes. They hit the streets hoping to survive on morsels of other people's humanity, but compassion is in short supply. The absence of it facilitates savagery. Empowered by their weapons and shielded by their own feelinglessness the children terrorise. They despise their victims for pleading. The begging reminds them too much of when they themselves were being battered; when they cried and pleaded for mercy. The humiliation of not being saved makes them lethal in their hatred of seeing the vulnerable child they once were reflected in their current victims.

The stolen money pays for designer goods. The labels increase their street credit. An enhanced status acquired through designer goods and the capacity to inflict harm sends out the message that you are too 'sorted' to become somebody's victim. In order to preserve personal safety no disrespect or wrongdoing can go unavenged. Revenge is essential for survival. To be defiled goods, violated and victimised makes you more vulnerable to assaults. So it is important to appear invisible.

As you cause harm, and you are harmed, you get closer to a sense of meaninglessness, condemned to psychological and economic ghettos. You begin to lose your desire to self preserve. Nothing of your humanity or anybody else's is worth saving.

Like a suicide bomber, you are prepared to die. It makes you lethally powerful, as others around you seek to preserve living. Your new-found detachment emancipates you from the notion of morality, the constructs of punishment or the demands of civil society. You are a lone soldier pounding the inner city, playing a game of Russian roulette. Maybe you will die today or maybe someone else will get your bullet. It is this nihilistic mindset that the 16-year-old felt was not understood. The making of rotten childhoods begins with the angels not taking responsibility for the protection of vulnerable children.

I asked the 16-year-old what would make a difference. If she was sitting in Downing Street, what would she do about the shootings? She explained that more than anything else, she wanted to be 'legit' (legitimate, legal). None of them want to be gangsters, but they are pushed into violence because somehow they are excluded from the norms of society. The reporters, she tells me, have food and somewhere nice to sleep. They do not have to worry every night about whether they are going to be safe. She feels people do not understand that there are lots of children like her whose parents are not functioning, and due to the lack of a competent adult in their lives to navigate the path, they end up on the peripheries of everything. For her, Kids Company and its staff is a lifeline. She says that is what the government should do.

I was conscious that we had sat down to dinner and the girl did not know how to hold her fork and had to be shown how to do it properly. We talked about the fact that neither social services nor the education authorities had come looking for her, in fact, no one picked her up from prison and, despite being listed with social services, no adult took over her care. There is no point in blaming her parents – they were children like her damaged by their own childhood tragedies – but there is no excuse for the corporate parent in the form of local authorities to be failing so profoundly. The way ahead may be a strategy of robust compassion, firm policing and sanctions combined with the availability of comprehensive care wrapped around these lone children.

Working towards a solution

At Kids Company we have experimented with a model where all the professionals work under one roof, in a club-style atmosphere; assessments happen around the pool table over lunch and dinner. Children acquire a substitute family structure which facilitates relationships and re-parents a child back to the centre of society. The model is not reliant on the cooperation of biological parents. If they engage and start to care for their child, we have met our primary goal. But if they do not, the service's accountability is to the child whom we will support seven days a week for as long as required. It is not a case of files opening and closing; the child becomes a member. At age nine we will play football with them. When they are eleven we take them to secondary schools. When they are 18 we help them into college and jobs. When they have children we help them be parents. The service was evaluated in 2006 by London University. The children gave it a 97% effectiveness rating. Our most important

function is to love children who have felt abandoned and to ensure they sustain a resilient attitude through the challenging times.

The 16-year-old girl will do something amazing with her life, provided we continue to believe in her goodness. The danger with current media coverage is that the story being told is a shallow fairy tale, with the demons attacking the angels and the angels fantasising triumph through retribution. Their brand of retribution is given legitimacy because it is distributed as punishment. Within two years after custody, 82% of young offenders re-offend.

The statistics keep telling us that punishment is not working. It takes courage to face the truth. The angels need to have conversations with the demons and learn from them about what has gone wrong. The repair has to be a collective task, the origins of which commence with eliminating the polarisation. While I taught the 16-year-old how to hold her fork, she taught me how the firearm trade operated at street level. Both of us needed to know.

Reference

- 1 Kids Company. www.kidsco.org.uk

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