

Being There

If you want to have a lasting impact on children, get into the community and build relationships

ROB PERRY, 2003

Reverend Eugene Rivers, a pastor in Boston's inner city, tells the story of a conversation he had a number of years ago with local drug dealer Selvin Brown. Selvin explained to Reverend Rivers why so many kids were joining gangs instead of a church. He said, "I'm there when Johnny goes out for a loaf of bread for Mama. I'm there, you're not. I win, you lose. It's all about being there."

The first chapter of the book of John in *The Message* says: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood." It's an excellent description of incarnational ministry, and a vital concept for those who wish to have a lasting impact on the children in their community.

The corps I attend in Toronto is based in a neighbourhood called Regent Park. We make a conscious effort to be truly community-based. Our kids ministry at 614 Regent Park has made great efforts to come alongside the children of our neighbourhood. I want to share four things we have done in our community to build relationships with kids and "train them in the way they should go."

First, we have built relationships with the schools in our area. In various schools Salvationists have coached and refereed sports, volunteered as tutors and teacher's aids, and conducted anger management programs. Our YPSM even left her old school and home to move into Regent Park where she now teaches in one of the area schools.

None of our school-based ministries are evangelical by definition. We choose not to fight that battle. If we wanted to preach inside the schools, none of the principals in our area would let us in. Our goal is to establish relationships, to have our faces recognized by kids. We meet the kids in the schools, and when we see

them in other contexts within the community, we are free to invite them to whatever we want, whether it is to McDonalds for a burger or to our Sunday school programming.

A second key ministry is what we like to call "hang-out ministry." We have made excellent contacts simply by going to the park with a soccer ball and starting an impromptu game with whatever kids are around. Other ideas include going into the neighbourhood and painting faces or doing balloon animals, conducting interactive outdoor Sunday School, running a carnival, or simply taking a few kids out for lunch.

The third aspect of our incarnational concept is community networking. Get to know the community leaders involved with the children in your area. I sit on a committee in my community along with principals, teachers, and community leaders involved with children and youth. The monthly two-hour meeting may be dull, but I have met people who are doing positive, creative things that our church needs to be a part of. After nearly two years of building relationships with other community leaders, we are almost always at the table when something is happening in Regent Park. If there is a community celebration or sporting event, we don't just show up, we make sure that we are at the forefront of the planning. When our community faces important issues such as race relations, education, or crime, we are at the table. After nearly two years of community networking, we get calls from different agency leaders asking for help with particular children. Secular institutions are referring their kids to our Bible Based programs.

Lastly, do not forget the parents. In an incarnational ministry paradigm that is based on relationships with children, getting to know parents is imperative. Before taking children out for lunch or inviting them to

programs, make sure you get parental consent. We need to respect parents' authority, as well as protect ourselves from misunderstanding. At 614, our kids' leaders go out weekly visiting homes in our neighbourhood. This one-minute visit consists of a hello, a reminder of programming for the coming week and the delivery of a flyer. This engenders greater trust in us, and gives us opportunities to witness to parents. In some cases, parents want to discuss religion and Christianity. In other cases, as a result of their children's involvement, parents have become regular members of our adult church, making decisions for Christ, and working towards membership in The Salvation Army.

To grasp incarnational children's ministry, a church must first get beyond a program mentality. The main thing is building relationships, not programs; although eventually biblically-based programs must be integrated into the system. Whatever you do, do it with excellence as far as you are able.

During our first year at 614 we ran a Saturday afternoon Kids' Church based on the Metro Ministries model out of New York City. Although the model works very well in the New York context, after almost a year of trying, we found that the program was simply not transferring well to our context. Although we were steadily building relationship with more and more kids in the neighbourhood, we could not get more than 20-40 kids out on Saturdays for Kids' Church. And, quite frankly, many of those kids who came were getting bored.

Then, an interesting thing began to occur. For a while, some of our leaders had been inviting kids over to their houses to bake cookies. On a consistent basis, more kids would show up than were invited. They would invite 10 kids and get 16. Kids not only enjoyed coming, but they loved to invite their friends.

From this basic idea, we have begun to develop the idea of children's cell groups. We call them squads. Each week, a team of leaders hosts a group of kids in their home. They spend the first half of the evening doing activities such as crafts, games and sports. Then, for the second half of the night they learn about Jesus, prayer, and living according to the Bible. After a month and a

half, and are now running four squads of 10 and 15 kids, with two more ready to start. One group has grown to the point that we can divide it into two groups.

The decision to move to squads was because of what we had learned about our community. In our particular context, children are over-programmed. On Saturdays, they are offered kids' clubs, sports teams, music lessons and programs put on by other evangelical churches who parachute into the neighbourhood. Our Kids' Church program became just another option competing for their time. In the intimacy of small groups, however, the relational aspect of our ministry can flourish. The kids have fun, and biblical truths are shared with much more ease and freedom. We still have large group gatherings where the kids can worship together, but now they are monthly rather than weekly.

Effective programming will look different for every neighbourhood. But in every neighbourhood, the key is the relationship and prayer. There are good people in all of our communities doing good things. However, what our communities are lacking is the transformational power of a living God.

In the movie *Sleepers*, Robert Deniro plays a character called Father Bobby. He is a Roman Catholic priest who lives in Hell's Kitchen, New York, and is a friend and pastor to the kids in his neighbourhood. His pulpit is the basketball court. He visits his kids in the hospital and in prison. Even in adulthood, he is the one they turn to in their darkest times. He is not perfect. In fact, during the course of the film he makes some very difficult and questionable decisions. But even his mistakes came out of a motivation of care and love for his kids. As one man who grew up in the neighbourhood observed: "He was a priest, but he was also our friend." To me, this is incarnational children's ministry.

If we are going to impact communities of children for Jesus, we need to be Jesus' incarnational presence to communities of children. No matter the cultural diversity of our neighbourhood, or the socio-economic level of its residents, I believe that incarnating is the key. Pray first, and then go; and don't forget the words of the drug dealer, "It's all about being there."