



Considerations around the Psychological, Social and Emotional Impact of Short Term Teams on Children

October 2016

Background

For close to 25 years International China Concern (ICC) has been bringing short term service teams into the China's government orphanages (otherwise known as welfare centres), including ICC's partnership projects. The teams usually run for around two weeks, and the team members carry out various activities under the support of experienced team leaders. Since the beginning these teams have been very successful at modelling care, therapy and education within the projects, consulting in specialist areas, as well as introducing people from across the world to the work of ICC. The teams have also been a source of recruitment of long term international staff for our projects.

Recently there has been questions raised about the validity and psychological impact of bringing teams to orphanages in different parts of the world, and some people are even pushing for orphanage trips to be banned. ICC is committed to the holistic needs, including the psychological health, of the children and young people we serve; their health is at the centre of our service and concern. We are currently considering the implications of current research on attachment, and considering how our short term teams are run, and how they can continue to support the healthy growth and development of the children and young people in our care.

Considerations within ICC's Situation

In direct cooperation with various levels of the Chinese government, ICC works with children and young people with disabilities, both in their families of birth, and with those that have been abandoned. The children and young people generally range from moderate to high needs, with the majority being those with high needs.

Many of the care recipients we work with are now adults. In our project in Changsha, 78% of those in care are over 18 years of age. In Hengyang, 25% of those in ICC's care are over the age of 18 years. The high numbers of teens and youth mean ICC is not just facing children's needs, but also the needs of disabled adults, which include modelling healthy relationships, providing vocational and recreational opportunities, and giving opportunities for autonomy.

The children and young people in our care have suffered differing levels of neglect and trauma before, during and after their abandonment. That trauma, coupled with their disabilities, mean the need for secure attachment and a stable environment for is high.

While ICC recognises the best and most consistent care model for children is foster care and/or full-time parents, due to cultural reasons and the level of disability of the children we care for, this model is not always attainable in the context ICC works in. Though not all the welfare centres we work with have reached the standard, ICC aims to care for abandoned children and young people in small family units. Within these families ICC employs caregiving staff, and we work hard to maintain consistency of caregivers to support good attachment along with the holistic health of the children and young people. The caregivers are trained both in caring from the heart and attachment, and are the main caregivers of the children and young people. All children are each assigned one key person whose role it is to act as the child's main secure attachment. The caregiving staff are supported by local therapists, teachers and youth workers.

Role of ICC Short Term Teams

When ICC teams come to China they are placed within both ICC projects, and/or government-run welfare centres. Within both environments the main role of the team members is to support the caregivers with additional activities, outings, and play. This is much like a summer day camp where the children and young people meet new friends, and have opportunities to engage in new activities.

Due to the human resource constraints, the high needs of ICC's care recipients, and the lack of local community programs for special needs children in our project locations, ICC's short term team members become extra hands that provide valuable opportunities for our children and young people to engage in educational activities, go out to parks, and engage in activities like swimming safely. Without these "extra hands," some of the children and young people may not always have opportunities for these kinds of activities due to their high needs.

Some team members with specialised skills will be asked to consult in areas of their expertise, such as doctors, therapists, hand crafters, dieticians, etc. Those with Chinese language skills may have opportunities to do guest speaking in the classroom to encourage the children and staff. Some team members with practical skills or interests may do some practical projects, like simple renovations and repairs, depending on the need. They may also be asked to include the youth in some of these activities.

In the past almost 25 years, ICC short term team members have played a vital role in modelling play and craft activities to our Chinese caregivers. Our Chinese caregivers come from a social background where they experienced very little play and creativity in their own childhoods. They struggle to understand how to play with the children and how to develop their imaginations, most especially when the children have special needs. Through the encouragement and modelling by short term teams, the caregivers are inspired and learn ways to engage and play with the children, and how to use toys to stimulate development and bring enjoyment.

Teams provide a huge encouragement to ICC and government welfare centre caregivers. Caring for children and young people with high needs is difficult. In China the role of being a caregiver for disabled orphans is also looked down on by the community. ICC's international teams provide encouragement to our staff who say they are grateful to receive the encouragement, recognition and companionship of people from all over the world that travel so far to stand alongside them in their work. Our teams provide a lift to the local Chinese staff, and this in turn encourages them to embrace and care for the children with a greater passion and connection.

Sometimes children are abandoned in China with infectious diseases, or other conditions that the local Chinese culture caregivers are fearful of, due to cultural biases. ICC's short term teams have many times modelled love and care and an embrace of these children that has encouraged and enabled our caregiving staff to put down their fears and their cultural biases. This kind of modelling has a long term effect on the culture within our projects.

Benefits of Teams for the Children and Young People

Short term teams also give an opportunity for our children and young people to bless and reach out to others. ICC's teams are blessed to come and be with our children and young people, and the children and young people teach them much through their simple and beautiful attitude to life. Through teams our young people in particular become not just receivers of care, but are empowered to become givers as well as they teach the team members the dance moves, how to bead a bracelet, or how to clean the fish pond.

How ICC Safeguards Children and Young People in relation to Teams

All of ICCs short term team members go through a process of police checks and referencing before they are approved to travel to China to be part of a team. Trained leaders provide supervision to monitor all team members, and provide support to ensure the children and team members remain safe.

Team members do not stay with the children during sleep time, and generally do not feed, bathe or change the children unless there is a genuine shortage of caregiving staff to carry out these activities (which can often happen in government-run care centres). The team members are additionally not permitted to discipline the children, are never left alone with them, and are not permitted to take children out of the sight of staff.

Much thought is put into the placement of team members each day. Within ICC-managed projects where our children and young people's needs are well understood, team members do not usually work with the youngest children in care, and are usually focussed on those requiring activities and play, including our youth. Unless the team members are asked to consult they are also usually not placed in group homes where newly arrived children are attaching to their caregivers, or in the homes of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or other disabilities that require consistency and predictability. Additionally, due to the size of our projects, teams are rotated into different homes and locations, depending on the need. Because different areas require input at different times the teams are rotated into different areas, so each group of children and young people only have limited opportunities each year to interact and play with incoming team members.

ICC continues to monitor our teams program and discuss the benefits and implications they have for our children. At this point we feel that when run carefully, short term teams continue to be beneficial to the overall social, emotional and psychological health of the children and young people in ICC's care. We are open to advice in this area, however, and are discussing these issues with child and adult psychologists that understand the Chinese and government context we work within.