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# NURTURING CARE FOR CHINA'S ORPHANED CHILDREN: HALF THE SKY FOUNDATION BABY SISTERS AND LITTLE SISTERS PROGRAMS

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NURTURING CARE FOR CHINA'S ORPHANED CHILDREN:  
HALF THE SKY FOUNDATION BABY SISTERS AND LITTLE SISTERS PROGRAMS

A lecture delivered at the Early Childhood Education Conference for Peace,

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by

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NURTURING CARE FOR CHINA'S ORPHANED CHILDREN:  
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Abstract

As the number of the world's orphaned and abandoned children continues to increase, worry escalates among those concerned about their rights and welfare. Yet, people are finding some helpful solutions. This paper describes an international foundation called Half the Sky's success in providing *infant nurture* and *preschool enrichment* programs, in partnership with Chinese national and provincial governments, through a coherent blend of cultural practices in curriculum and program operation. Both programs foster emotional intelligence and self-esteem, in a way that promotes peace education. Half the Sky opened two pilot programs in 2000 and today operates in 30 institutions in 12 municipalities and provinces across China, serving over 3,500 orphaned children. This presentation focuses on curriculum and the methods of nanny and teacher training. The infant nurture programs demonstrate that infants and toddlers in large institutional nurseries can begin to thrive from nanny care and attention in a stimulating playroom where the babies receive responsive attention that follows their actions, interests, and initiatives. Likewise, the preschool enrichment programs show that children aged 2 to 6 can become curious, eager, competent learners given the chance to participate in education led by teachers trained to provide child-centered play and learning activities based on the Italian Reggio Emilia approach.

## Introduction

As the number of the world's orphaned and abandoned children continues to increase, worry escalates among those concerned about their rights and welfare. Children without parents or loving guardians become vulnerable to the behavioral and emotional problems of being marginalized, educationally disadvantaged, unaware of their own value as human beings, and generally unprepared for adult life much less for helping to create a better world. Many of these orphaned and abandoned children are institutionalized, and by now it is well established that the longer the time children spend in institutional arrangements (particularly during the early years of life), the worse the impact on their long term development. As governments and international NGOs struggle to assist, they too often find that their insufficient resources and levels of staff training hamper their efforts to provide comprehensively for the physical, social, and emotional needs of children without families.

Yet, people are finding some helpful solutions. This paper describes an international foundation called Half the Sky's success in providing *infant nurture* and *preschool enrichment* programs, in partnership with Chinese national and provincial governments, through a coherent blend of cultural practices in curriculum and program operation. This is an accomplishment of interest and note for several reasons. First, it was not known whether listless infants and toddlers in large institutional nurseries could begin to thrive simply from intervention by nannies trained to encourage bonding and attachment while providing loving attention that followed the babies' actions, interests, and initiatives. Likewise, given the extent of the behavioral and developmental issues and delays of the preschool aged children (typical of children who had spend years in institutional care), it was not known to what extent they could respond and benefit from an enrichment program. After all, the intervention would not alter their fundamental status or situation but instead only give them the chance to participate in education within renovated environments led by teachers trained to provide child-centered play and learning activities. Furthermore, it was uncertain whether attachment frameworks of adult-child interaction and the

complex Italian Reggio Emilia approach (never before used in welfare institutions) could be culturally translated to make good sense in the Chinese contexts and situations. Nor was there evidence to predict whether Half the Sky teachers and nannies would be able within the time frames of their working day and week to develop strong and secure enough relationships with these particular children to energize substantial catch up learning and development on the part of the children. Finally, it was not known whether the programs could be taken to scale and sustained over time. The answer to all these questions turned out to be a resounding yes; but only through the emerging partnership among well meaning people willing to continually reexamine their goals and negotiate perspectives on behalf of a concept that was essentially integrative, holistic, and humanistic.

### **Half the Sky Foundation: Brief History and Description**

All the children who are held and loved will know how to love others....

Spread these virtues in the world. Nothing more need be done (Meng Zi, c. 300 BC).

This quotation from Meng Zi expresses the central vision behind Half the Sky. The Half the Sky curriculum is grounded in contemporary Chinese educational philosophy and methods, with strong elements added in from the Italian (Reggio Emilia) approach and American strategies of teacher training/staff development. As we will describe, the goal of the Infant Nurture program is giving young babies the emotional stability that they desperately need early in life to build trust in others—a first attachment that gives them the sense of safety essential to venture out, explore, and learn to solve problems and work well with others. Likewise, the goal of the Little Sisters Preschool program is to help 2- to 6-year olds grow up responsibly with tolerant hearts and the ability to work collaboratively with other people, competent in sharing ideas and recognizing one another's strengths and possibilities. Both programs are directed toward promoting a high quality of life and helping children move beyond the fears and negative behaviors that create conflict,

violence, and in general, are an obstacle to social harmony and understanding. Both programs foster *emotional intelligence and self-esteem* in a way that explicitly includes *cooperative education as the foundation for peace education*.

Half the Sky (HTS) was founded in 1998 by adoptive American parents in order to enhance the lives and improve the outcomes and prospects of orphaned children living in China's welfare institutions. The Foundation's name comes from the Chinese adage, "*Women hold up half the sky*," to acknowledge the situation that the majority of healthy abandoned babies in China are girls. The sheer number of these children—estimated in the millions—has presented a formidable challenge to the authorities charged with their care, and meeting all of their needs—physical, social, emotional, and educational—has proved overwhelming. With support from the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, HTS launched two pilot programs in June, 2000, a Little Sisters Preschool and a Baby Sisters Infant Nurture Center in Hefei, and a Little Sisters Preschool in Changzhou. (NOTE: Both programs serve all applicable children, both boys and girls, without regard to gender.) HTS is in a unique position among foreign NGOs in China in that its work takes place wholly within state-run welfare institutions. The pilots were well-received by the staff and administrators of the orphanages, and the children showed such rapid, obvious, and visible improvements that the program was expanded; and systematic fundraising and staff training efforts began. In the following years since 2000, HTS preschools and infant nurture programs have been so warmly embraced by Chinese partners, that besides building and staffing programs, HTS has gone on to create two additional kinds of programs to reach older children who fall through the cracks of institutional care. In 2002, Big Sisters Programs began providing learning opportunities for older children who remain in orphanages—providing individualized language classes, computer training, music and art lessons, vocational education, and even college tuition. In 2005, HTS opened its first Family Village in Gaoyou to provide stable, two-parent homes for children whose physical or developmental challenges preclude them from being adopted. The new families move into furnished apartments provided by HTS in partnership with local

government and foster parents sign on to raise their young charges until adulthood. This Gaoyou program was also so successful that applications began coming in from welfare institutions across the country for similar projects. The Family Villages complement the Chinese government's ambitious national initiative to expand care to include nurture and individual attention as well as food, shelter, and medical care. HTS has partnered with the China Center for Adoption Affairs (CCAA) to help create new guidelines that will raise the quality of care on a national level.

Over 3,500 orphaned children are currently enrolled in HTS programs and approximately 12,000 have received a direct benefit since 2000. Today, HTS operates in 30 institutions in 12 municipalities and provinces across China. All programs come under the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, in partnership with the China Association of Social Workers. Whereas in the early years, financial support came mostly from adoptive American families, today the funding is truly international and balanced between individual and corporate contributions. While developing and expanding its programs, HTS has also sought to disseminate information throughout China about the importance of nurturing care and educational enrichment for orphaned children. In 2003, a national conference on nurture and education in China's welfare institutions was held in Hefei, Anhui. With support from the Ford Foundation, HTS published *For the Children* (Evans, 2003), a teacher and nanny training manual (developed by Chinese and Western educators) distributed free-of-charge to welfare institutions across China. Richard Bowen (2005) published a set of portraits of the children. In the summer of 2007, Half the Sky begins another training initiative for welfare institutions that are not supported by Half the Sky funding but would like to adopt its practicing principles. Evaluations of the children's growth and development outcomes are being conducted by a Chinese and American team of physicians and psychologists led by Dr. Dana Johnson of the International Adoption Clinic at the University of Minnesota (Johnson, 2003).

## **The Infant Nurture Program**

Thousands of Chinese children abandoned by their families spend their early years in social welfare institutions. The institutions hire women to care for the babies, but often there may be only one caregiver responsible for feeding, bathing and diapering 15 to 20 children. The caregivers work hard at meeting basic needs, but they rarely have time to give each child individual attention or respond to their cries. Children spend most of the day in their cribs (**INP Photo 1**) or else propped in wooden chairs (**INP Photo 2**) with little time for stimulation or interaction. Such neglect comes at a time when experience is critically important to the sensitive, malleable brain of an infant. Pervasive neglect in the first three years of a child's life has a profound effect on the neural development of the brain. Early and persistent neglect causes severe developmental delays (Rutter, 1981). Infants without adequate stimulation and human interaction develop chronically over-active stress systems that leave them at risk for a greater incidence of medical and behavioral problems including growth retardation and malnutrition, sensory processing difficulties, behavioral and emotional problems, language delays, and attachment disorders (Bower, 2000; Judge, 1999; Perry, 2002; Zeanah, 2000). It is possible that in some cases, disrupted early attachments may lead to social/emotional incompetence in later childhood, or beyond (e.g., Bowlby, 1951, 1960; Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006; Parkes, Stevenson-Hinde, & Marris, 1991; Waters, Weinfield, & Hamilton, 2000).

Nevertheless, young children are resilient. Early intervention studies indicate that a life of early adversity can have a number of diverse outcomes, with long-term effects heavily dependent on the nature of subsequent life experiences (Beckett et al., 2002; Clarke & Clarke, 2000; Rutter, Quinton, & Hill, 1990; Skeels, 1966). For instance, intensive, well-designed, timely intervention improves the prospects of institutionalized Romanian orphans at risk of cognitive, social, or emotional impairment (Carson & Earls, 1997; Chisholm, 1998). Furthermore, a well established body of literature examining United States early education



programs concludes that strong, appropriate, and responsive early care and education programs that are staffed by knowledgeable, skilled, and caring individuals produce long-term gains in children's language and cognitive development, especially for those at greatest risk for developmental delays (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Darlington, Royce, Snipper, Murray, & Lazar, 1980; Infant Health and Development Program, 1990; Lazar, Darlington, Murray, Royce, & Snipper, 1982; Ramey & Campbell, 1984; Schweinhart, et al, 2005). For infants and toddlers, this care should emphasize the formation of secure secondary attachments as a basis for child well being and learning (Edwards & Raikes, 2002).

HTS recognized that babies need at least one consistent person in their young lives to whom they can depend upon to comfort them when they cry, feed them when they are hungry, stimulate their active brains, and provide security when they are uncertain. It was reasoned that this person would not have to be present 24 hours a day, because infant care in many cultures is shared within the extended family so that mothers can contribute to household and economic work (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). What babies need is a predictable and substantial primary relationship; this seems to provide the neurological and emotional foundation for development. HTS hires women from the local community to serve as "nannies" (Chinese word *zumu*) for infants and young toddlers. The nannies are selected carefully because it takes a person with special emotional qualities to bond with and nurture the development of young children who are not from her own family. The nannies are assigned 2 to 5 children (depending on the babies' developmental needs) (**INP Photo 3**), and they lovingly touch, talk, sing, feed, and actively engage in play with these babies six days of the week for at least 7 hours a day. They work with the same children until they are adopted or are developmentally ready to move on to a HTS Little Sisters Preschool program.

A team of volunteers from across the world prepares playrooms in the institutions for the infants and young toddlers. These rooms have open spaces for crawling and walking, low shelves

for storing developmental toys, and long mirrors and bars all designed to promote physical, cognitive, language, and social/emotional development (**INP Photo 4**). The children spend their days in these specially prepared and equipped rooms with their nannies. Nannies sit on the floor surrounded by their children. How they respond to each child depends on what he needs or in what he is interested. For example, they may hold and talk softly to a young baby that needs comforting (**INP Photo 5**). They may see a child looking at a book and join the child labeling what is in the pictures (**INP Photo 6**). They may encourage a baby that is about ready to crawl by dangling a favorite toy in front of her just out of her reach (**INP Photo 7**). Nannies strive to provide activities that meet each child's emerging developmental needs and interests.

Prior to beginning work as a nanny, each must participate in 5 days of basic training. Throughout the week of training and afterward through site visits by the field supervisors, the nannies are encouraged to discuss how to combine their own Chinese views on child rearing with what international research has revealed about stimulating young children's development. By the end of the training the nannies should know: (1) how important their work is to the children's development; (2) typical social-emotional, cognitive, physical and language development for children birth to 2 years; (3) how to provide responsive care that stimulates growth in all developmental areas; (4) temperamental characteristics of infants and how to work with them; and (5) some basics on how to work with children with special needs.

Through lecture, discussion and problem-solving, the nannies grow professionally. By tradition, Chinese believe that what children "learn" is what they are "taught," and that teaching starts during childhood but is not essential for babies. Thus they are often surprised to learn how important the early years are in children's development and are excited to know what a difference their interactions with the babies can make in their lives both in childhood and adulthood.

A significant part of the training is working directly with the children. The nannies spend time practicing what they have learned and making written notes about what the children can do, and then discussing them together (**INP Photo 8**). They get practice in doing observations and

making anecdotal records so they can provide appropriate, responsive care that responds to children's specific needs and desires. Later on, their regular notes, together with photographs and hands and foot prints, are collected into the children's Memory Books. Thus, these Memory Books not only hold the early history of each child but serve the nannies as a tool to observe and learn about their children.

Integrating new elements into their repertoires requires the nannies to see beneath the surface of cultural practices to the "core" values beneath. For example, Chinese women are very familiar and comfortable with "game playing" (**INP Photo 9**), and they cheerfully and patiently hold and cuddle the children without reference to the passing of time. In the training, however, they must learn to play following the child's lead and to interact in a way that matches the child's interests, instead of simply requiring the child to follow the nanny's game. Traditionally, Chinese are very tolerant and indulgent towards young children; however, the concept of control is still seen as an essential part of education (Bond, 1988). The nannies discuss how this new style of "game playing" still leaves the nanny in charge, but in a new way, by means of observing and responding to the child.

Given the importance of communication and language development for children's later school readiness, nanny supervisors have begun focusing more closely on the children's language skills and realizing that more conscious effort needs to be made to improve language interaction. In the typical Chinese home, of course, babies are bathed in a constant flow of family talk even if they are not specifically talked to a great deal, but in an institution, that household language must be compensated for. Through the HTS training, nannies are encouraged to recognize the cues the babies give to them in order to communicate, to respond to their facial and body expressions and to stimulate early communication as well as develop language skills (**INP Photo 10**). They learn that simple activities can promote language skills, e.g. labeling what children are looking at, describing in simple terms what the children are doing, and singing to the children. After language and communication development training sessions in Nanchang and Changzhou, the

nannies listed some of the interactions they would have with their babies: “While talking to a child, I will observe whether or not the child is following the movement of my lips, “I will encourage the child to respond to me in different ways,” “I will repeat each sound that the baby makes.”

Also new to the nannies is the idea of giving the children many opportunities to use and develop their muscles early in life. Chinese traditional child-rearing practices imply a disposition towards inhibition (Kagan, 2006; Kagan, Kearsley, & Zalazo, 1978). Adults strive for a “calm” baby as a well cared for child, and they seek to protect babies by holding or carrying them or by placing them in secure cribs or chairs while the mother works close by. Indeed, such is a common practice worldwide in traditional cultures, and research has shown that it does not generally delay the major motor milestones (Chisholm, 1983). For children in institutions, however, the practice of physical confinement has different and more deleterious consequences, probably because of the amount of time the child is confined and the barren sterility of the environment. Some nannies assert that if the child is healthy, she will eventually learn to lift her head, roll, sit, crawl, and walk without early use of her muscles. However, upon observing the difference it makes to the babies to move freely on the floor in the Infant Nurture room, their views quickly change and they are delighted to see how much progress the children make and how much the children enjoy active movement (**INP Photo 11**). After a week of training, the women recognize the importance of the work. A team of nannies wrote these words after completing the Half the Sky training.

They wrote these words from the perspectives of the children.

We are the healthy and the disabled orphans of the children’s welfare institute. Although we cannot speak, we can feel that you are all good people. When we came to the room that you had furnished for us, AHHH, we were very surprised. How pretty it is. To be honest, in the past we have always been sitting in those wooden potty chairs and could not move freely. Sitting was very tiring. In the future, everyday we can come to this big activity room to crawl, roll around, jump, and play. How lucky we are. We thank you for helping us train a lot of nannies, as well as letting the nannies learn how to observe and satisfy our needs. In the future the nannies will all use this knowledge when taking care of us as we grow up. They will help us to develop in a healthy, proper way with our bodies, emotions, cognitive abilities, and communication and language skills.

Each institution has a nanny supervisor who is the team leader for the nannies and the liaison between HTS and the institution. She supervises the nannies' day-to-day work, coaches them as necessary, and leads them as a group in increasing their understanding of how to better promote children's development. She assists the nannies in preparing the Memory Books. Each child's Memory Book is sent with her when she transitions to the Little Sisters program, or if she is adopted it is given to the adoptive parents to cherish.

The nanny supervisors also work closely with the teachers to transition the children into the Little Sisters Preschool program. As a team they plan how the nannies and teachers can work together so the children will make successful moves. This involves the nanny and the child visiting the preschool program every day for two or three weeks, with the nanny gradually increasing her time away from the child. While it may be difficult for the child to leave her nanny because of the attachment they share, the close relationship has actually provided the child the emotional stability to build a new relationship with another caring individual, the teacher.

Children in Half the Sky programs make remarkable progress as noted by multiple anecdotal records. Children who once lay in beds all day with flat expressions become children who eagerly move their bodies, jump with joy when they see their nannies arrive in the morning, reach for toys to explore, and babble and laugh with glee (**INP Photo 12**).

Children with special needs make good progress as well. In the past year, they have been increasingly coming to the institutions—in particular, babies with cerebral palsy. The institutional staff used to think that these were not capable of making much progress and so they fed, bathed, and changed the children but rarely stimulated their development. Now, specialists are providing additional training for nannies and nanny supervisors, and it is overcoming people's fears and concerns. The following account was recently sent to the Infant Nurture Program Director and shows the effects that early intervention can have on children with special needs. This story, one among many, illustrates how a nanny's consistent and appropriate stimulation given in a loving

manner can change a child's emotional outlook and social competence, increase the child's cognitive abilities, enhance language, and improve motor development.

Lian Genhui's Diary. May, 2005. I met Lian Genhui, a 22-month old toddler who has cerebral palsy and floppy muscles. She became one of the children under my care. I observed that she was emotionless, unaware of the outside world and did not react when I tried to make contact with her. She was quite weak and drank only milk; she could not hold the milk bottle herself or eat anything solid. When I held her in my arms, she felt so soft, and she had no strength in her muscles at all. She could neither speak nor crawl. Most of the time, she lay in her crib. She didn't know how to play with toys or other children. **(INP Photo 13)**

November, 2005. It has been six months since I began work with Genghui. I was determined to change her environment. Everyday I massaged her muscles while talking and singing to her. I gave her my warm smiles and made eye contact with her to let her know of my existence and my love for her. I often spent time playing with her on the floor. Now, she can smile at me and can even recognize the people and objects around her. She can make a sound like, "Eneahah," to communicate with me, and she understands some simple words. She learned to crawl, stand up by holding on to something, and move her feet. She can play with toys now and eat other food besides milk. I frequently encourage her to try new moves and little bits of progress and she loves it! It makes me feel we have built trust between each other. I hug her a lot because she has become part of my daily life now. We are attached to each other! When there is a stranger visiting, she will be scared and only I can calm her down.

December, 2005. Lian Genghui brings me joy everyday. I have been trying very hard to help her walk and to strengthen her large motor skills. Many times I put her back up against my chest so that we were facing the same direction. In the beginning, she didn't cooperate and would refuse to put her feet down on the floor. So I gently held her up and moved my legs against hers to push her forward. In this way, she was actually practicing walking as I walked. Day after day, she could even move a few steps forward with me though she still had to hold my hand. What a considerable progress she has made. Now she can imitate some simple gestures, for example, "goodbye," "welcome," and "blow a kiss." She can also point out the location of her nose, eyes, and mouth. Sometimes she even says, "Mama." She will crawl to me and ask for my hugs and kisses. She seems to trust me and gradually has begun to take my advice and eat new foods.

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February, 2006. I am so excited that Genghui is able to eat all kinds of food, and she looks much stronger and healthier. On February 24, 2006, a miracle came true, Genghui stood up without any help. We were so happy and excited. I held her tightly in my arms, kissed her face again and again, and praised her ceaselessly and loudly. All the nannies clapped their hands for her and were really proud of her. She was happy too! She snuggled into my arms with her arms around my neck and her face against mine, uttering “Mama, Mama.” I was so happy, and my eyes were full of joyful tears.

May, 2006. A year from the time I first met her, Lian Genghui can walk about ten meters and play or sit for a while, holding any nanny’s hands. She was even able to stand up on her own for about one minute. She understands my instructions. Gradually she can now stand steadily and walk about six steps all by herself, which is a wonderful achievement. Genghui is not who she used to be. She is no longer the shy girl who shut herself off from others; instead, she has become a happy and cheerful little angel. She loves and asks for exercise and helps nannies do whatever she can, such as collecting the toys. She is a warm-hearted “older sister” too. If she finds the rails of the bed are not lifted as required, she will kindly remind the nannies. Everybody thinks she is a clever and cute child. Here I want to say thank you again for giving us this opportunity of making these children full of hope for a new life. We believe these special needs children can have happy and colorful lives just as other healthy ones do. **(INP Photo 14).**

This story illustrates what a dramatic difference that intervention can make for infants and toddlers once left to languish in their cribs. Babies need at least one consistent person in their young lives whom they can depend upon to comfort them when they cry, feed them when they are hungry, stimulate their active brains when they are awake and alert, and provide security when they are uncertain. This consistent, loving relationship helps both the nannies and the babies. For the nannies, the close relationship is a source of insight into each child’s particular strengths and signals, so they respond in timely, appropriate ways. For the babies, attachment and responsive care are sources of emotional competence, so they learn how to regulate emotions and stress reactions, empathize with others, and interact smoothly with the people in their lives.

### **The Little Sisters Preschool Program**

The HTS intervention curriculum is a pragmatic combination of methods drawn from the Italian Reggio Emilia approach, preschool teacher training approaches from the United States, and the Chinese national educational guidelines, in order to promote the well being of children in Chinese social welfare institutions. The goal of blending Italian, American, and Chinese

educational values and practices is to bring the educational wisdom of different countries together and perhaps thereby to provide orphaned children the best chance of reaching their potentials and preparing for a brighter and more hopeful future.

The **Reggio Emilia approach** is not an educational model in the formal sense but instead a set of working concepts and strategies that are always evolving and that are based on a “powerful image of the child,” that is, a vision that children come into the world social and interactive, intelligent, competent, curious, motivated, and eager to express themselves in all manner of ways using their bodies, voices, and things they can make with their hands (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1988; Gandini & Edwards, 2001). Loris Malaguzzi, the founder, was an integrative thinker, inspired by the great European progressive education tradition and by constructivist psychologists such as John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky. Reggio-inspired teachers seek to hold before them this powerful image of the child as they support children in exploring and investigating. They help children grow in competence to represent their ideas and feelings and to investigate concepts through many avenues, or media, for communicating with others and representing their ideas. Teachers follow children's interests, and at teachable moments, they provide appropriate instruction in skills of reading and writing. Teachers foster skills in language, literacy, counting, measuring, and problem-solving, as they help children analyze, record, and manipulate their concepts and write them down. Teachers try to understand each child's viewpoints and abilities, seeing each child as full of strengths rather than full of needs or deficits.

**Long term projects** are particularly valuable for the children. These provide a way for the children to work together cooperatively on things that seem important to them, and that weave together their experiences from one day to the next in a continuous fabric of meaning that gives a new coherence and stability to their lives. During project work, children are part of a happy learning group but at the same time they get frequent individual attention and support from



their teachers, as well as encouragement, and guidance when needed. They construct themselves positively as desired social beings in secure child-adult and child-child relationships.

Another important feature of the Reggio approach is a kind of observation and recording called **documentation**, where each step of learning process is carefully documented through notes, photos, or other means, to help the teachers with assessing and planning next steps and also so they can be emotional supports. The documentation becomes the tool that teachers use to make decisions about how to scaffold each individual's learning, and at the same time the tool to reveal and make visible the architecture of the child's learning and development. Teachers work together to review their documentation and to discuss how their project is unfolding and ways the children can be pushed further into deeper inquiry where more learning topics and concepts are interconnected. Project learning and documentation help children become more excited about learning and more competent in their learning capacity.

Documentation also serves a critical role in promoting emotional intelligence, sense of identity, and self-esteem in children. It reveals the beautiful relationships between teachers and children; children and children; children and environment; and teachers and children with the community. For example, teachers fill their classroom walls and hallways with pictures, notes, and photos that portray the course of project work, and children love to examine them and talk excitedly about what they see happening and what it means. For another example, teachers add weekly to the children's Memory Books, which record the unfolding story of each child's life and growth. The Memory Books are a beautiful way of collecting and displaying some highlights of the teachers' daily observations of the child, the work the child does (and products created), notes on the developmental changes observed, and anything the teacher thinks is special about the child: the kinds of things that family life would provide in an informal way. If children are adopted, they take their Memory Books with them; and if they are not, the books become personal treasures that children can use to construct their "story of themselves." Children often get their own and their friends' books out to explore and talk over, and we believe the whole

process helps them in an essential way to form the “autobiographical,” or “narrative, self” that is essential to healthy emotional development.

Prior to beginning work, each HTS preschool teacher undergoes one month of **intensive training** that covers studies of brain and attachment development, developmental characteristics of institutionalized children, and Reggio Emilia education in a Chinese context. The teachers get practice in a classroom to cover all the skills of observing, curriculum planning, and instruction, and they learn to reflect and self evaluate on the changes in their own thinking and understanding. Afterwards, they receive careful supervision and use a teachers’ website to communicate with each other about issues related to their work. They do weekly professional journals that are shared with their supervisor and the HTS Preschool Program Director.

Through all these components, teachers grow professionally and find ways to integrate Western educational approaches into their Chinese context. In Chinese society, it has been long believed that the purpose of education is to teach children the knowledge they need to know (Bond, 1988). Teachers are regarded as the experts who deliver the knowledge, while children are perceived as recipients. This clear boundary between the teachers and learners is well accepted in Chinese education, and a typical classroom emphasizes order, structured lessons in a large group, and the teacher’s authority. Even in a preschool classroom, there is a focus on learning impulse control as it is widely regarded as a precursor to academic achievement (Ho, 1988), and young children are expected to be well behaved in large groups with a low teacher/child ratio (Rao, Koong, Kwong., & Wong, 2003). HTS teachers realize the need to find ways to promote child individuality and autonomy while maintaining the cultural value of fitting into the group. They have bravely embraced this challenge by providing opportunities every day for children to voice their own thoughts and make decisions; yet, they also encourage children to build the cultural sense of collectivism by maintaining order and harmony in the classroom. They want children to be able to mediate the transition from the HTS preschool to the community primary school, and so they have tried to help children observe the differences for themselves and notice the

obedience and structure expected in the primary classroom. In the dramatic play area of their HTS preschool, the children use the props of primary school and take turns acting out the roles of teacher and students in preparation for moving on to the next exciting stage of their lives.

The philosophy of the Little Sisters program is to believe that each child has a great potential no matter how severe the environment she is in; to believe that the establishment of positive relationships between adults and children are the starting point to help children learn to trust the world, respect themselves and others, and believe in themselves. The goal of the program is to help children become competent and capable in learning, decision making, and social problem solving--individuals confident in pursuing the future and looking forward to leading a successful life.

**Promoting positive relationships as a basis for cooperation.** What do institutionalized children, with their limited access and experience in building close relationships, know about affection and love? Although people from local and international communities occasionally pay visits, give the children presents, and play with them from time to time, the children have a very limited understanding of the meaning of “love” and “care” for themselves as well as toward others. The Chinese children in welfare institutions that we have observed commonly show a lack of positive emotions toward others prior to being part of HTS programs. Therefore, one of the primary educational goals is to promote self worthiness and self confidence in these children so that they can become responsible citizens and lead a successful life. At the beginning of the program, HTS teachers blend these self concepts into daily activities and projects through careful planning and implementation. They also make the Memory Books that promote positive self development. Teachers pay special attention to each child and document the child’s emotions with her peers and then discuss the observations at teachers’ reflection meetings. The following notes illustrate some frequently observed behaviors at the very beginning of the program:

A child, named San Yuan, who was four years old when he entered the program, doesn’t show any signs of peer relationship skills. He screams whenever anyone touches him. He becomes angry when he doesn’t get what he wants and grabs toys from other children or hits or

spits if other children won't give him the toy. When people from outside the institution come to visit the children, he and the others run to the visitors asking for presents and grabbing. Children don't know what sharing means and refuse to give away anything they have to their peers.

Discussing the meaning of these observations, the new teachers came to realize that the children's lack of close relationships may contribute to their behavior. Therefore, they set it up so that everyday in the Little Sisters classrooms, every child would have some opportunity to be a leader or special person and receive applause from her/his friends each time a job was well done. Every time a child gave help to one of her/his friends, the teacher would be there to teach the children to say, "Thank you," and "You're welcome" to one another. Teachers helped create an environment where children had opportunities to encourage one another and appreciate and value what each child accomplished. What follows are examples of moments that happen often in Little Sisters classrooms across China. These anecdotal notes may be put into children's Memory Books to allow the children to relive them over and over.

Moment One: A discussion about each child's creative art work

Teacher: "Boys and girls, I would like to hear what do you think of Fangfang's drawing?" (The teachers invited Fangfang to talk about her drawing to the whole group.)

Child (A): "I like her picture. She did a good job in making the person pretty."

Child (B): "Yes, I like the way she used the colors in the drawing."

Child (C): "I think if Fangfang makes the tree with more leaves, it will look prettier"

Teacher: "Fangfang, what do you think your friends' comments about your drawing?"

Fangfang: "I would like to say thank you to my friends that you like my drawing. Now I have more ideas for my drawing. I want to draw a new picture."

Appreciating and valuing other people's work are key elements to building positive peer relationships and laying a solid foundation for collaborative work. Teachers create an encouraging environment where children are given opportunities to develop pride through expressing and receiving acknowledgment within their group of "brothers" and "sisters." These are the seeds of positive social emotions and cooperation.

Moment Two: A child crying during group discussion time

Teacher: "Boys and girls, Yongxin is crying, How can you help him to be happy again? Let's make a guess why he is sad, shall we?"

Child (A): "I think when it was his turn to talk, we didn't pay attention to him. We all want to talk at the same time."

Child (B): "We didn't listen to his talking so he felt sad."

Teacher: "Let's ask Yongxin to see whether your guess is right or not."

Child (C): “Yongxin, are you sad because we didn’t listen to you?”

Yongxin nods his head, ceases crying, but still looks sad.

Teacher: “Thank you, Yongxin for telling us how you felt. Boys and girls, let’s find out how we can help Yongxin feel happy again.”

Child (D): “We should let Yongxin finish his talking.”

Child (E): “Yongxin, I will listen to your talk now and won’t interrupt you again.”

Other children all agree to keep quiet and let Yongxin talk. Yongxin shows a shy smile but doesn’t speak.

Teacher: “I saw a smile on Yongxin’s face. Children, now you are doing well showing your respect to your friend, Yongxin, by being willing to listen to his thoughts.”

Learning to show respect to other people has been the focus of activities and learning since the early operation of the Little Sisters Preschools. HTS teachers try to catch every chance to highlight children’s emotions and connect them to whatever is going on to help children develop an awareness of others and show respect for their feelings. The conversation above demonstrated how the children were able to recognize another child’s feelings and regulate their own emotions and behaviors, when guided by a skillful teacher.

#### Moment Three: Children preparing a performance for Chinese Children’s Day.

A child named Luwen who cannot hear was sitting watching her friends while other children sang and danced in practice for a performance for the public.

Xiaogang: “Teacher, we can invite Luwen to be part of our show. She is so lonely sitting there by herself.”

Teacher: “That’s a great idea, Xiaohang! What part do you think Luwen can play?”

Xiaogang: “She can play the role of a dog. I am sure she can do well.”

Having experienced being cared for and nurtured with special attention from teachers, the children have developed a sense of caring for other people. The example above demonstrates the children’s emerging empathy and compassion toward their peers. Frequent hugs, gentle touches, joyful and trusting looks from the teacher add to the feedback from peers to boost the children’s pride in their own worthiness. When children realize that what they did elicits a positive response from the environment, they are encouraged to do it again; when they get help or support from their peers, they begin to develop a sense of belonging and friendship. With the assistance of the teacher who tries to take advantage of ordinary moments, they begin to develop positive expectations and trust in others and to believe in the value of cooperation and sharing. As they

become more aware of their relationships with peers, teachers facilitate more in-depth learning to enhance children's positive emotions toward people in general.

**A project to explore the meaning of “love.”** Children in HTS preschools have explored many long term projects on diverse topics that promote their understanding of the world around them, and of the emotional world inside each of them. The following is a long term project to study the meaning of love and friendship that involved children aged 4 to 6 years in the Little Sisters program at Hefei Social Welfare institution. Teachers started this project when they felt the children had the need to explore relationships more deeply, but they did not know how far this inquiry could go. As the project evolved, children (and teachers) became ever more intrigued.

First discussion: This discussion started with questions raised by the teachers to the children after saying good bye to college student volunteers.

Teacher: “Do you love these big brothers and sisters? Do you think these big brothers and big sisters also love you?”

Children: “Yes. They gave me candies, fruits, and books. I want to play with them.”

Children then drew pictures to express how they and the college students liked one another.

Xiaoying: “I drew a big sister kissing me. That’s how she shows she loves me.” **(LSP Photo 1)**

Zidong: “I drew a big brother pushing me on the swing because he loves me.” **(LSP Photo 2)**

Wenan: “I drew a big brother holding my hand. That’s called love.” **(LSP Photo 3)**

This first conversation and the drawings lead the teachers to reflect on the emotional level of these children. They felt that the children had limited skills to communicate their experience and express the meaning of love. The drawing encouraged the children's thinking because at first they just talked about receiving candy, fruit, and books from the students, but in drawing they portrayed actions that got closer to the emotion of love (kissing the child, pushing the child on the swing, and holding the child's hand). The teachers tried to think about ways to help children go even farther in understanding the feelings of loving others and being loved: How can we teachers help children appreciate and conceptualize the sensation of being loved and to love others?

Second discussion:

Teacher: “Let’s talk about how it makes us feel when we feel loved. For example, when the big brothers and big sisters come to visit us, what does it made you feel like?”

Children: “I feel happy; full of joy; I feel sweet like eating a candy; I have a smile on my face.”

This conversation excited the teachers because it showed them that the children had the ability to remember their own feelings of love in a certain moment. But how could the teachers build on that? In what direction could the project evolve? Teachers were thinking and looking for opportunities as they followed children's interest while interacting with others. The next day, an individual conversation between a child and teacher took the whole project in a new direction.

Third discussion:

Zidong: "Teacher, I know how to make a love heart." He used his both hands to form a heart. This attracted other children and they started to continue the topic of love among themselves.

Wenan: "Look, I can make a shape of love like that, too."

XiaYing: "I don't know how, would you please help me do it, Zidong?"

Qiuxiang: "Wenan, do you think what I made is like the love heart shape?" **(LSP Photo 4)**

These children's play raised a new question for the teachers: Do the children really understand the meaning of the heart shape of love? How can we teachers facilitate the meaning of love at the children's developmental level?

Fourth discussion:

Teacher (holding the heart shape): "Boys and girls, let's talk about this shape that you know."

Children: "It means love. The big brothers and big sisters have this shape because they gave us stuff and play with us."

Teacher: "How about you?"

Children: "Yes, we have one. It is right here." (They pointed to their hearts.)

Xiaying: "Teacher, I want to give it to you." (He pretends to take his heart out and give it to the teacher. Other children followed Xiaying's action.)

Teacher: "Wow, thank you so much! I have so many love hearts, and I will take them home with me. I will sleep with all these love hearts by me, and I will think of all of you at night. Here is my love heart for you." (She pretends to hand out her heart to all the children).

Yuandong: "I will take my teacher's love heart home."

What began as a group discussion turned spontaneously into dramatic play that not only enhanced the children's imagination but also served as a breakthrough to a new understanding of love. The new meaning went beyond receiving candy and presents and was about having deep and caring feelings for another person. The teachers' capacity to draw out the children and let them express their ideas in their own active way opened the door to this breakthrough.

After the discussion, children made different heart shapes, shared with each other what they had made, and hung them in the classroom to express that their classroom was full of love.

Children also spent many days practicing writing the Chinese character of love, and then they carefully wrote each love in Chinese on the heart shapes (**LSP Photos 5 – 8**). When they were satisfied with how they had filled their classroom with heart shapes of love, they invited children from other classrooms to come visit their creation of love (**LPS Photo 9**).

These series of activities built a strong sense of belonging and ownership in their classroom, appreciation of one another's work, and pride. The children became very responsible and cooperative in taking care of their classroom and things they made. Yet the project was not over. What had happened so far raised a new questions for the teachers: Given the progress that the children have made in understanding what love means within their own experience and with people they know, how can we the teachers go father with them and help them to expand their scope of love to people they know only indirectly?

Fifth discussion:

Teacher: "Boys and girls, who do you think loves you?"

Children: "The big brothers, big sisters, my 'mom' and 'dad' (HTS foster parents), and our teachers. They have many love hearts for us."

Teacher: "Well, you are right. But there are more people love you. They built you the classroom and helped you come to school everyday."

Xiaying: "I know. Those are 'uncles' and 'aunts' from foreign countries. They have many love hearts for us, too."

Teacher: "How about you all?"

Children: "We have many love hearts for all these people who love us, too. We have very many." (They used their fingers to represent the many love hearts.).

Teacher: "How can you show your love to other people?"

Children: "We will draw pictures, sing songs, dance, and help doing things for these who gave their love to us."

Teacher: "What about the 'uncles' and 'aunts' from foreign counties?"

Wenan: "I can draw a house and make a house for them."

Zidong: "I will make a card and write letters to them."

Xiaoying: "I will give them my candies."

Yuandong: "I will take a train to visit them."

Dongyu: "I will sing for them."

Xiuxiang: "I will make a love heart for them."

Eventually, the children decided to express how much they loved the helpful 'uncles' and 'aunts' from foreign countries in the following ways: paying them a visit; drawing pictures to send; making a holiday card to send good wishes; sending an e-mail note; and writing a letter.

Teachers and children then worked on these different plans to see which one would offer the best



result for expressing their love. The children immediately realized that paying a visit was unrealistic and they decided to wait until they were older. In preparing drawings, children first shared with each other their thoughts about their own picture (**LSP Photo 10**). Then they combined everyone's thoughts in order to work together on a group art project (**LSP Photos 11**). They created holiday cards and went to the post office to mail them (**LSP Photos 12-13**). They also sent emails to tell how much they loved these people they can't meet (**LSP Photo 14**). Finally, the children wrote a very moving letter with drawings next to some of the words. They tried to write it themselves, but realized they needed a teacher's help. So she did the writing as they talked in a group. The teacher facilitated it to make sure each child could say something in the letter. The children then came up with the idea of drawing some of the words. They talked about it and figured out who among them could do these drawings for their letter. Here is a translation of their letter, signed by all the children themselves. They were very satisfied with it:

Dear Uncles (drawing) and Aunts (drawing) around the world who care about us,

We are the children living in Hefei Children Welfare institution (drawing) in China. We are having a happy life now (drawing). We love our school and we often sing and dance (drawing) at school. We do lots of fun things at school. We visited markets, local streets and the zoo to study different things (drawing). We love to play games outside together with friends and teachers.

Our teachers told us that you love us a lot and helped us build our school and that everything in the school is from your kind hearts (heart shape drawing). We have come to understand that when we are capable of doing things, we can share our love with those who love us. We want to help the elderly and give our love to them. We think it is called love if we return what we have borrowed from others. It is also called love if we don't litter the ground and the street and keep the trash in the trash can. (**LSP Photo 15**)

We never met you before. We heard you are far away from us (drawing of the American flag). We also know that you are going to have Christmas holidays soon. We discussed together and decided to do something special for you (drawing). Xia Ying said, "I want to take an airplane to visit you and say thank you to you" (drawing of an airplane). Chun said, "I want to make cards for you (drawing) and you will see my love heart shape in the card; you will be very happy to see the cards made all by myself." Wen An said, "I will take a bus to visit you (drawing a bus). I will build a beautiful house for you (drawing a house), Uncles and Aunts, you can live inside." Dongyu said, "It is going to be the New Year and we should sing Happy New Year song to you. I will sing it for you" (drawing of a singing face). Xiaying said, "I want to celebrate your birthdays for you. I will make a beautiful cake with clay" (drawing). Yuan dong said, "If Uncles and Aunts get sick, I will take good care of them and make them happy." We hope you are as happy as we are and we love you all (drawing). [Translated by Wen Zhao] (**LSP Photo 16**)

**A project to explore the meaning of “community.”** The next year, the Hefei children and the teachers took another leap forward. Based on their interest in the wider community, they started a long-term project that lasted for over half a year called, “How can I find my way next year when I go to primary school (outside the orphanage)?” The teachers began with the children’s interest in maps. The children studied the paths and roads of their orphanage and drew a large map that included familiar places like their living quarters and preschool, and then was extended to include places outside the orphanage. The children went outside the gates and visited all of the various places that they would pass on their way to their local primary school. They studied different signs in the streets and the bus stops, stores, hospitals, and office buildings. They finally visited the school that they would attend and interviewed the children there. Then, back in their dramatic play area, they created a model school room just like the ones they had seen in their local primary school and used it to think about what that environment felt like. The children had already drawn maps of the orphanage and community, and now they went on to use different media, including constructions with blocks and other materials, taking photos of the places for the maps, and using mud (an excellent substitute for clay since clay is not easily available) to build a three-dimensional map to demonstrate how they could get to their new school. As a culmination for the project, the children made a giant painting of the route from the orphanage to their new school. This painting started in the hallway on the first floor of their building and continued all the way up to the fourth floor, transforming the whole building. In this grand work, the children illustrated in clear and vivid ways, often with words painted next to the images, the various buildings, traffic lights, bus stops and numbered bus routes, cross walks, and trees on the way, coming finally to the destination, their new school. No longer were they simply children “in” an institution, but instead, they had begun to transform the look and feel of their place, to the delight of their teachers and also of the very supportive administrators. Painting the

map to the school on the walls of their institution shows that emotionally they had integrated their two worlds: their “inside” one of the present, and their “outside” one of the future (Zhao, 2003).

**The changes in children.** After six years in operation, the children who graduate from HTS Little Sisters program are reported as active learners and competent in social relationships at the local public schools they are attending. For example, when the Hefei children go on to primary school outside the institution, they astonish their new teachers by showing better school readiness skills than some of the community children who lived in regular families. In the past, the orphanage children had floundered or failed in the primary setting.

Furthermore, there are many individual stories to share about how the children have changed. Each child has a story, and each of them has shown substantial growth and development as evidenced by the quantitative and qualitative measures used to document the changes in each child. For example, there is a girl named Zhen Lan at the Nanchang site. She was four years old when she joined the program. At the beginning, she didn’t have any language ability, nor did she have the social skills to communicate and she never smiled. She tended to rock herself no matter where she was, and if disturbed to throw herself on the floor, kick and scream, and bang her head. She had few self-control or self-help skills and ate insatiably, feeding herself until she threw up and then eating some more. After six months in the program, she was playing with her peers, saying “Mama” to her teachers and the institution caregiver who cared for her the most, joining group activities with other children, smiling and laughing, greeting people, and no longer rocking herself. The director of Nanchang institution stated, “I just can’t believe what has happened to Zhen Lan. She has changed totally to another child--a happy one. I don’t think it would have happened to Zhen Lan if there had not been a Little Sisters program here.”

HTS is working together with the International Adoption Clinic at the University of Minnesota to assess the quality of its program. Children in the initial two programs were administered the Bayley and Battelle developmental assessments in April and July, 2000, before the program began, and again in February, 2001. The longitudinal results indicated a significant

improvement in developmental outcomes (Johnson, 2003). In August, 2000, HTS preschool children were also tested using Beijing Normal University's Developmental Scale of Chinese Children. Before the program began, all but one child scored at or below the 5th percentile. In December, 2000, these children were re-tested and every one scored between the 35th and 40th percentiles. (One child was an exception; she initially scored at the 35th percentile, and at re-testing she scored at the 77th.) Although these results were preliminary, they strongly suggest the need for further outcome studies to measure the effects of a culturally integrated, relationship based approach for at-risk children in Chinese welfare institutions.

### **Conclusions**

Children without parents or loving guardians are vulnerable to behavioral, learning, and emotional problems, but they can benefit enormously from interventions that address their needs comprehensively and foster their emotional intelligence as well as cognitive and language skills. Half the Sky's infant nurture and preschool enrichment programs are built on a coherent blend of cultural practices that seems to spark the developmental resilience of young children as well as the dedication of their nannies and teachers. Just as environmentalists and conservationists have discovered that nature education must begin with a love and wonder of the outdoors ("you must love the earth in order to want to save it"), so the world peace movement recognizes that peace education must begin during early childhood with love and caring for self and others. Blending educational and organizational practices across cultural and language traditions takes patience, respect, and careful listening—the very qualities that are the foundation of peace education.

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