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## Enhancing Reading among the Runaway Children: A Field Experience

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## **Enhancing Reading among the Runaway Children: A Field Experience**

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## **Enhancing Reading among the Runaway Children: A Field Experience**

### **Abstract**

This paper recounts the field experience of a Read-Aloud session conducted at Children's Observation Home, Umerkhadi, Mumbai. Importance of reading for pleasure, with regards to runaway children, is enumerated. The status of runaway children in India and various initiatives to help them are discussed, with special reference to Children's Aid Society, an organization aided by Government of Maharashtra, and Committed Communities Development Trust, the organizers of the session. Objectives were to explain the benefits of reading to the children; to provide them a hands-on experience of specially selected story-books; to engage their attention with read-aloud; and to encourage them to participate in read-aloud. The process included selecting suitable books for the session; getting acquainted with the background of the children residing at the Shelter Home; designing a session that could hold their interest; and usage of various read-aloud techniques. The feedback to this session, by participants and organizers both, showed that such initiatives were greatly appreciated. Children displayed a marked interest in listening to stories; and many were motivated to try the read-aloud themselves. The main challenges perceived were behavioral changes in the children due to a difficult past, diminished effect of helpful initiatives due to short and uncertain stay of the children, and language barrier. However, the incessant and dedicated efforts to inculcate the reading habit can bring life-altering changes in children. It is suggested that librarians, as the experts of books and reading, should conduct such initiatives for the underprivileged to inspire and enhance reading habit.

### **Keywords**

Children's Aid Society, librarians, Mumbai, outreach activity, read-aloud, runaways, story-telling sessions

***“Education and reading are circular; the more a person has of one, the better the development of the other.”***

– Jeanne S. Chall (Psychologist & Educationist, Harvard)

## **Introduction**

Reading is an essential component of education and development of life skills. No educational text can be complete without a list of references and recommended reading. Similarly, no educational institution can be deemed as fully functional unless equipped with a library. The impact of reading however, surpasses the solely academic textbook-related reading. Pleasure reading holds an even bigger influence on the growth of intellectual, social, emotional and behavioral quotient of an individual. A child running away from the family is an alarming social issue that has multiple repercussions. Developing a reading habit may make a difference in these situations. This paper endeavors to gauge the impact of reading aloud on runaway children sheltered in an observation home in Mumbai.

## **Importance of pleasure reading**

As the term self-explains, pleasure reading means reading done to derive pleasure. It refers to reading that is done of one’s own free will, in anticipation of the satisfaction to be received from the act of reading. Various other terms synonymous to it are leisure reading, reading for enjoyment, voluntary reading, ludic reading, and recreational reading. This paper will use the term “pleasure reading” to encompass all those related terms. Clark and Rumbold (2006) identified several main areas which are benefitted by pleasure reading as – reading attainment and writing ability; text comprehension and grammar; breadth of vocabulary; positive reading attitudes; greater self-confidence as a reader; pleasure in reading in later life; general knowledge; a better understanding of other cultures; community participation; and a greater insight into human nature and decision-making.

Pleasure reading can also increase the library usage. Providing recommendations or “readers’ advisory service” can ensure readers’ continual connection to fiction/ non-fiction pleasure reads. Tarulli (2014) examined various definitions of “reader” and “pleasure reading” with analysis of the shortcomings and strengths of present tools in addressing different forms of

pleasure reading. She noted that a readers' advisor should possess keen listening skills and "deeper understanding for user's psyche" to better serve the reading needs of the patrons.

### **Read-aloud**

Read-aloud is an instructional practice where teachers, parents, and caregivers read texts out loud to children. During read-aloud, the reader incorporates variations in pitch, tone, pace, volume, pauses, eye contact, questions, and comments to produce a fluent and enjoyable delivery (McCormick, 1977, as cited in Morrison & Włodarczyk, 2009). Hahn (2002) opined, "[L]earning comes naturally during read-aloud because it comes by listening, questioning, speaking, and visualizing – the first ways a child acquires language and learns about stories." Children enjoy read-aloud sessions because there are no other participatory efforts expected from them but to listen.

As Trelease (2013, p. 86) very succinctly pointed out, "We read to children for all the same reasons we talk with children: to reassure, to entertain, to bond, to inform or explain, to arouse curiosity, and to inspire. But in reading aloud, we also build vocabulary, condition the child's brain to associate reading with pleasure, create background knowledge, provide a reading role model, and plant the desire to read."

The read-aloud process has enormous benefits to literacy learning. Reading aloud to children builds and supports their listening and speaking abilities and enhances their overall language development (Morrison & Włodarczyk, 2009). In fact, the theory of L-S-R-W states that the activities of Listening-Speaking-Reading-Writing are interconnected. The more one listens, the better one gets at speaking; and the more one reads, the better one gets at writing. Reading aloud to children enhances their listening skills and consequently, speaking as well.

### **Status of runaway children in India**

A runaway child is a minor (a person under eighteen years of age) who has voluntarily left their parents or legal guardians without permission. Approximately 47 million runaway and homeless adolescents have been estimated to be on the streets of India (Khurana et al. 2004, as cited in Raval, Raval & Raj, 2010). Although precise statistics are not available, boys from low socioeconomic groups are highly overrepresented on the streets compared to girls (Raval, Raval & Raj, 2010).

Literature on runaways in India shows that the main motives behind children running away from home are to find jobs, to get away from familial abuse, to get married against family disapproval of the romantic partners, or as a victim to human trafficking. An ethnographic study of runaway boys between 10 and 16 years of age in India indicated that domestic violence, alcohol misuse, and poverty precipitated the act of running away among boys (Raval, 2012). With respect to girls, “[t]he act of running away from their families by adolescent females from rural India represents a direct opposition of cultural norms that emphasize the significance of familial roles and duties for women” (Raval, Raval & Raj, 2010). Being a part of LGBTQ+ is another important reason. “[S]ome children in India do run away for reasons pertaining to gender or sexual self... On occasion, runaways join or seek transsexual or transgender communities, including *kothis* and, notably, *hijras*, who hold a special form of ritual power in a range of South Asian societies” (Steinberg, 2019, p. 71). Attraction of the big cities, film stars, and glamour is another significant factor especially related to fleeing to Mumbai.

According to ChildLine India Foundation (CIF), “There are many reasons that children run away from their homes or their caregivers. It could be to find work, escape ill-treatment at home, or simply follow the lights of the city with its promises of a better life. Girls are as likely as boys to run away from homes due to parental neglect or dysfunctional families. Many of them land on the country’s railway platforms where they beg, steal or do menial jobs to survive, such as sweeping trains. Very often they fall victim to child traffickers or become vulnerable to other forms of exploitation” (CIF, 2021).

### **Initiatives for help**

There are numerous initiatives implemented to help the children in need. A brief about the ones associated with current study is given here.

- **Children’s Aid Society (CAS)** was formed in March 1927. It is an umbrella organization with nine institutions under it, catering to the needs of a daily average population of over three thousand children. Since its inception, CAS institutions have been visited by eminent personalities and national leaders; and have invited the kind attention of many dignitaries and philanthropists from all over the world. Main aims of the Society are – planning for formal education and vocational training; and other child development programs. With its work funded by the Government of Maharashtra under grant in aid, the Society continues to implement novel

projects to ensure an all-around growth of the children under its care. CAS has organized multiple sessions on reading and has libraries in all nine branches accessible to the children in residence (CAS, 2021).

- **Children’s Observation Home, Umerkhadi** was the first institution to start under CAS in 1927. Under the provisions of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, 2000, around three thousand destitute, delinquent and victimized children from age 0 to 18 years are admitted here. At any given point of time, approximately three hundred and fifty boys and one hundred and fifty girls are in residence in the Shelter Home. Accrediting and building of self-confidence, encouragement and reassurance, emotional support, and reality orientation are some of the Case Work Practices that the trained staff of the Shelter Home consciously applies in the helping process. Games and recreational facilities are also engaged into to soothe the troubled minds. Regarded as the biggest Observation facility in Asia, the Shelter Home has catered to nearly 2.5 lakh children so far (CAS Branches, 2021).

- **Committed Communities Development Trust (CCDT)** was founded in Mumbai in 1990 and is a voluntary, secular trust registered under the Bombay Public Trust Act of 1950. Its vision is “A world where every child counts; a world of children living in dignity”. CCDT has been working with the most marginalized and vulnerable communities across Maharashtra; and has impacted the lives of more than two million individuals through its various programs and interventions. Child Protection, Maternal and Child Health and Nutrition, and Adolescent/ Youth Empowerment are the key focus areas of CCDT’s intervention programs. The organization works mainly with communities living in the slums, pavements and red light areas of Mumbai. Under the Program for Children in Contact with Railway Stations (PCCRS) project, the group meeting sessions for children in various shelter homes are conducted (CCDT, 2021)

### **Background of the study**

To enhance the liking for books and reading, a session on “Benefits of Reading” was arranged by CCDT for the runaway boys and girls then sheltered in Children’s Observation Home, Umerkhadi (henceforth noted as the Shelter Home). Supported by the guidance and various helpful suggestions by Prof. Dr. Kumbhar, the said session was conducted by Ms. Thakare on March 16, 2021. Based on that unique field work experience, the research paper was composed.

### **Objectives of the study**

This study aimed to fulfill following objectives –

1. To explain the benefits of reading to the children;
2. To provide the children a hands-on experience of specially selected story books;
3. To engage the children's attention with read-aloud;
4. To encourage the children to participate in read-aloud.

### **Preparation for the session**

The preparation was mainly two-fold. It firstly involved the discussion with the organizer of the session i.e. CCDT to know more about the children who would be attending the session. An informal conversation to that effect was carried out with the CCDT Director Ms. Hemangi Mhaprolkar and other concerned staff of CCDT. It was found that the Shelter Home provided residence to runaway boys and girls below the age of eighteen years who came to Mumbai from various parts of the country, or sometimes even from outside India. Some of the children, who had criminal offence charges, were registered as “children in conflict with the law”. Most of them were from poor families, with not much of a school education background. Many of them could not read well or could read only in their mother tongue which was the medium of their education. The Shelter Home ran a schooling facility for the children. These helpful initiatives, however, had diminished effect due to short and uncertain stay of the children; since there were constant efforts to find their families to send them back home. It was noted by the organizer that the maximum period a child would stay in the Shelter Home was four to six months. Even during the stay, the children with on-going court cases would have an inconsistent schedule due to their presence required at the court hearings. Overall, it was thought to be quite challenging to turn such children to reading and books. Reading aloud stories to them was deemed as a quick way to generate their interest in stories and thereby, in reading.

Second part of preparation was selection and purchase of appropriate books for the session. Keeping in mind the moderate level of education and comprehension of written language among the children attending the session, a careful selection of thirty-two titles was made with considerations for simplicity of the language suitable for younger children; variety of languages to include books in Marathi, Hindi and English; format of the books to contain more

of colorful pictures and less text; and interesting content of the book to include various fiction and non-fiction genres such as humor, adventure, history, travel, mystery, fairy tales, poetry, sports, and inspirational reads like biographies of people overcoming the adversities and finding success in life. Each of the selected thirty-two books was previewed all the way through for better understanding of the texts and choosing the suitable story-book for the session. These books were later donated to the Shelter Home's library for the continual reading access to the children.

### **Conducting the session**

The one-day session on 'Benefits of Reading' was conducted on March 16, 2021 at the Shelter Home. There were total eighty-four participants (girls – 33 and boys – 51) with ages ranging between twelve to eighteen years. Two separate sessions were conducted for girls and boys. Session for the girls was engaged in the morning from 11.15 am to 12.45 pm.; while the boys' was in the afternoon from 2.00 pm to 3.30 pm. Both the sessions were interactive and elicited a good response. Each session was commenced with encouraging the children to recite a Hindi poem that iterated importance of books (किताबें कुछ कहना चाहती है by सफदर हाशमी)<sup>1</sup>. After the poetry recitation, each participant introduced themselves with adding what kind of stories they liked to read and in which language. According to their preferences, the various story books brought were distributed among children. To draw the children's attention, a magic tale in Hindi (बिरजू और उड़ने वाला घोड़ा by दीपा अग्रवाल)<sup>2</sup> was read to them with voice modulation for different characters. This reading aloud of the story was immensely enjoyed by all. Next, the children were motivated to perform the read-aloud. This exercise was designed to help them develop comprehension and pronunciation skills, with overcoming the stage fear. It, too, was received with enthusiasm and many of the children came forward to read the stories aloud. Some expressed happiness that the books they handled in the session were donated to the Shelter Home's library and there will be chances to read those again. To underline the importance of books and reading, the session was concluded with an apt saying in Hindi "आज किताबोंको हाथ में पकड़ लो, ताकि कल किसी के पैर पकड़ने की जरूरत ना पड़े। (Meaning: Hold the books in your hands today, so that tomorrow you need not have hold someone's feet i.e. beg to someone for anything in the future).

## **Findings**

It was observed that the children had a marked interest in listening to stories, and many were motivated to try the read-aloud themselves. Most were eager to handle the books and wanted to see the pictures in them. A few of them had none or very less schooling and did not understand Hindi or Marathi. The girls were more attentive than boys during the sessions.

Two individual experiences were very encouraging. Chanda\*, a girl of fifteen from Bangladesh, was sitting aside with an expressionless face and showed no interest in even picking up any of the books that were distributed for session. When asked about her disinterest, other girls relayed the fact that she could not understand or speak any language but her mother tongue Bengali. In an effort to engage her, the researcher called her to sit next and sang a few lines of a popular Bengali song. Chanda smiled, shyly sang along, and was very involved in the session after that. She volunteered herself to even collect back the distributed books. The other eye-opening experience was of that of Munna\*, a fourteen year old boy from Jharkhand. Munna did not speak much during the boys' session, but was hoarding five or six books in his hands. He was constantly going through the pages of each of those books. At the end of the session, he approached the researcher asking for those books to be taken back to his room for reading. However, as per their policy, the books could be read only in the library of the Shelter Home. Munna's dejected expression was speaking for itself. To find a way, he was asked to wait at the gate of the boys' residence while a special permission was sought from the Shelter Home Supervisor. The process took nearly twenty minutes, but Munna was waiting at the same spot, full of hope and diligence. The elation on his face when he got the book was priceless.

However, these were the exceptions. Inculcating any new good habit among the residents of the Shelter Home was riddled with challenges. The main challenges perceived were behavioral changes in the children due to a difficult past, diminished effect of helpful initiatives due to short and uncertain stay of the children, and language barrier. The staff members of the Shelter Home continued to do what they could to help. There is a schooling facility and many other regular sessions are held to keep the children engaged physically, mentally and intellectually. A kind and understanding approach, a lot of patience, and perseverance is needed when dealing with the children from the Shelter Home. (\*Names are changed to ensure privacy.)

## **Feedback from participants and organizers**

Overall, this session was quite a rewarding and fulfilling experience. The feedback to this session by participants and organizers both showed that such initiatives were greatly appreciated. The participating children, especially the girls, came forward at the end to request another such session of story-reading to be conducted weekly. The Supervisor of the Shelter Home, Mr. Rahul Kanthikar, inquired in detail about the experience, was appreciative of the session, and expressed his gratitude for the books donated by giving a thanking letter. The Director of CCDT, Ms. Hemangi Mhaprolkar, wrote an eloquent letter to articulate her views. She noted, “Significance of reading and engaging in the good practice of reading in the long run will prove beneficial to the children... There is a thing about reading, it lets [the reader] travel without moving [the] feet; and you have just begun a happy journey in the lives of many... Books are uniquely portable magic that you have given to our children and we will cherish it” (H. Mhaprolkar, personal communication, March 19, 2021). These appreciative words were truly an encouragement and inspiration to continue with such work.

### **Conclusion and suggestions**

It can be concluded that reading is, without a doubt, extremely important to the overall personality development of any individual. It holds an additional emphasis for the underprivileged children who had run away from abusive families or for the better prospects. Read-aloud of the story books is one of the quickest and surest ways to grab their interest. The incessant and dedicated efforts to inculcate the reading habit can bring life-altering changes in each and every one of these children. It is suggested that librarians, as the experts of books and reading, should conduct such initiatives for the disadvantaged to inspire and enhance reading habit.

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