

Helping At-Risk Children:

One Partnership's Focus on Russian Orphans

BY ELIZABETH D. SCHULMAN

Although most of the Russian people have been adversely affected by the economic hardships resulting from their country's transition from a command to a market economy, children have been particularly vulnerable to its consequences. Between 1989 and 1997, the number of infants up to 3 years old living in Russian orphanages has increased by 64 percent, despite a 34 percent decline in birth rate. It is estimated that there are currently over 600,000 children residing in public care and that approximately 90 percent of these children are 'social' orphans, meaning they have at least one living parent.

Like much of Russia, the Lazo Region in Khabarovsk Krai—the site of the Lexington/Khabarovsk partnership—has experienced an increase in the number of its at-risk children. There are currently three orphanages in this area, one of which—Internat #9—cares for approximately 180 children between the ages of 4 and 18 who have been diagnosed with compromised educational potentials and learning problems. These children attend academic and vocational classes housed within the orphanage, meaning their integration into the community is quite limited. Each of the other two orphanages cares for about 80 children who have normal learning abilities and therefore attend public school. The second of these orphanages just opened in November 1999, due to overcrowding at the first and the growing number of regional children being referred for institutional care. In addition, there are groups of 25-30 primary-school-aged, at-

risk children in each of six rural school districts that qualify for extended school days. Some of these children reside at their educational facility during the week because their parents are severely impoverished or otherwise unable to provide adequate care.



Scenes from the Lexington Children's Art Festival. Craft items created by children at the orphanages in Khabarovsk are seen in the lower image.

There is also a residential kindergarten in Pereyaslavka, the capital of the Lazo Region, that temporarily houses about 50 children, three months and older, whose parents have active tuberculosis.

This article discusses the steps taken by the Khabarovsk/Lexington partnership to address the needs of at-risk orphans in Khabarovsk Krai.

Background and Rationale

The community-based primary health care partnership between the University of Kentucky in Lexington and the Khabarovsk Krai Health Department and Pereyaslavka Rayon Hospital and Polyclinic in Khabarovsk, Russia began in June 1999, with partnership activities centered in the Lazo Region. This is a rural, agricultural

area, with a population of 60,000 located approximately 40 kilometers south of Khabarovsk in Far Eastern Russia. After a community assessment, SWOT analysis, and discussions between US and Russian partners, several priorities were identified. From the beginning, we decided to expand the definition of health to include the emotional and social well-being of community members in addition to their physical well-being. We also wanted to address the needs of the most vulnerable, or at-risk,



Photos courtesy of Beth Schulman.

populations in our partnership region, who were identified as children residing at orphanages or with families in crisis.

In an effort to identify the priorities and needs of these children, we visited each of the orphanages discussed above and spoke with administrators and staff. We also spoke with regional personnel who oversee educational programs that target at-risk youth. As a result, several initiatives were discussed and implemented.

It was determined that the first and most important task was to educate all of

the people who work with these children—as well as the community-at-large—about the unique needs of this vulnerable group. Under the former Soviet regime, a widespread cultural perception existed that orphans and other special needs children should be raised by either a relative or the State. As ingrained perceptions are notoriously difficult to change, this belief and its resulting systems have persisted in post-Soviet Russia. Historically, the segregation and care of these children in state-run institutions was viewed as an appropriate solution, but assigning complete responsibility for the care of abandoned and physically, mentally, and emotionally handicapped children to the State hampered the development of local infrastructures to proactively prevent or address the problems of children at-risk. Since most of these children will eventually leave the orphanages at 18 years of age, in turn becoming residents and neighbors of the local community, it behooves the community to begin implementing initiatives that will facilitate their integration and acceptance at an early age into the society.

A Community-based Initiatives Conference

Our most ambitious effort to date involved the sponsorship of a conference entitled “Helping Children-at-risk Through Community-based Initiatives,” held in Pereyaslavka from August 14-16, 2000. The purpose of the conference was to promote and enhance the developmental well-being of at-risk children through community-based initiatives. The target audience was orphanage administrators and staff, as well as educators, medical professionals, psychologists, social workers, government officials, law enforcement officers, the clergy, and other community advocates. Professionals

from the United States and Russia presented timely, relevant, and practical information on:

- profiles of at-risk children in Russia;
- social and emotional developmental ages and stages;
- community identification of behavior problems, sources, and solutions;
- the critical role of attachment and its lifelong implications;
- recognizing child abuse and neglect, and appropriate community responses;
- the theory and application of behavior management;
- families at-risk and models of surrogate care;
- community-based initiatives and resource development; and
- intergenerational programs.

Over 200 participants attended the conference, including representatives from six other AIHA partnerships. One of the most important results of this meeting was a recognized need to develop local, multi-disciplinary task forces to address the needs of these children on an on-going basis—indeed, there were many requests to make this an annual event. During the conference it became apparent that a community assumption of responsibility and the necessity of collaboration and coordination among various disciplines are required to most effectively help these children develop into well-adjusted and contributing adult members of society.

Intergenerational Pilot Program

In an effort to meet the social and emotional needs of the two most marginalized populations in Russia, namely the orphaned children and the elderly, we plan to initiate a pilot program in March 2001 that will bring together elderly persons residing at the Veteran’s Home in Pereyaslavka with

children residing at Internat #9 on a regular basis. Elderly volunteers who have an interest in nurturing and spending time with children will visit the orphanage once a week and partake in activities such as story-telling, reading, playing, walking, and eating together. The staff of the orphanage will assist and facilitate these activities. We see this pilot program as having the potential to provide benefits for both marginalized populations: The elderly will perform an important and needed service that makes them feel appreciated, and the children will receive individual attention and form healthy attachments that will help them to develop socially and emotionally. Most elderly people have nurturing experience and can use their parental expertise to provide these children with additional social interactions that are founded on concern, interest, and a desire to help.

Model Playground

As mentioned above, a partnership goal is to find ways to integrate the children from the orphanages into the community, where they are likely to reside in the future. One way we hope to achieve this is through the construction of a model playground at one of the orphanages. As one conference speaker emphasized, play is children’s work and is necessary for a child’s developmental well-being. A safely-constructed, well-planned playground complex will provide recreational opportunities for all the children, will promote their physical and social growth, and may provide opportunities for community interaction. A primary objective of this project is to encourage children from the greater community to come and play on the equipment and thereby begin to socially integrate with the children from the orphanages. Unfortunately, as in many countries, there continues to be a stigma attached to being an orphan and efforts to counteract

this separatist perception between children living in the community and those living in an orphanage need to be encouraged in and out of school, in both formal and informal settings. Universally, children have more similarities than differences, and these similarities should be recognized and nurtured so that acceptance and understanding can become the norm instead of the exception.

Increasing Awareness in US Communities

The adverse effects of Russia's economic instability are compounded by the government's decreased ability to fund its social programs. Government social service programs, financed by payroll taxes, are inadequately funded and unable to meet the increased demand for assistance resulting from significant decreases in economic productivity and commensurate increases in unemployment rates. Consequently, responsibility for welfare assistance programs has been transferred from the federal to local governments, whose economic capabilities vary widely. Furthermore, areas with the greatest social service needs often have

the highest rates of unemployment and, therefore, fewer financial resources to allocate to assistance programs.

Unemployment in the Lazo Region is very high, creating the hardships for families that often result in "social" orphans, as well as limited resources to fund social assistance programs. The orphanages have experienced a decrease in their operating budgets, while, at the same time, experiencing an increase in the number of children whom they serve. And while budgetary funds basically cover board, lodging, and personnel expenses, there is a dire need for necessities such as clothing, shoes, and personal items.

In response to this need, The Children's Forget-Me-Not Foundation was established by professors and students at the University of Kentucky as a charitable, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of life for children residing in Russian orphanages. Several fund-raising activities have been sponsored by the Foundation with all proceeds going toward the purchase of items needed by the children. Interestingly, as a result

of these efforts we have found a way to both increase the Lexington community's involvement with the partnership, and to teach the orphans in Lazo about self-worth. Here is how we are doing that.

When US partners visited the orphanages during the winter of 1999, the children gave us many beautiful pieces of art that they had made including paintings, pottery, and crafts made from wood, yarn, and fabric. We then created a traveling display of these crafts, accompanied by pictures of the children and literature about the Foundation, which was displayed at the Lexington Public Library, the Lexington Children's Museum, and the Lexington Children's Theater. Additionally, on June 1, 2000, the College of Allied Health Professions at the University of Kentucky celebrated Children's Day, a traditional celebration held every year in Russia, where the children's art was displayed and faculty and staff wrote short messages in an album later delivered to the orphanages. In early July, we then held an open house for the Foundation at the Children's Museum, which included Russian music, food, videos, and discussions, in addition to the display. And in late July, a benefit concert was held to raise additional funds for the children. Finally, in late September the Foundation participated in the annual Children's Art Festival, where arts and crafts made and donated by the children from the orphanages were sold to raise money. All of these efforts helped to promote a connection between the Lexington and Lazo communities.

As stated above, it is the intention of this project not only to raise awareness and funds for Russian orphans, but—perhaps more importantly—to help build the self-esteem of these children by showing them that their work is appreciated, has value, and contributes to the welfare of their own orphanage community. To further the idea of empowering children, we enlisted the help of the public schools in Lexington under a program we call "Children Helping Children." Through *Continued on page 52*



Children from the orphanages in Khabarovsk show off the new clothes they were able to purchase with the proceeds of their artwork sales.



Photos courtesy of Beth Schulman.

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this program, Lexington students created and donated artwork sold at the Art Festival, with proceeds going to the Children's Forget-Me-Not Foundation.

Looking Toward the Future

Our partnership is very encouraged by the progress we have made thus far. However, there is still much that can be done to improve the well-being of children living in Russian orphanages. We hope that all of these efforts—of the partnership, the Lexington community, and the Lazo Region orphans and elderly—will provide an incentive to other communities in the Lazo Region to initiate public activities and encourage volunteerism, which is currently an undeveloped, but potentially rich, source of local assistance and support. Additionally, we are interested in hearing from other partnerships who have experienced success in working with at-risk children or who would like to learn more about our efforts. Working in these partnerships, it becomes even clearer that we can accomplish so

much more when we share our ideas, experiences, challenges, and successes.

Elizabeth D. Schulman, PhD, is assistant professor of Health Services Management at the University of Kentucky in Lexington; eschulm@pop.uky.edu.