

No more penalties for Pablo: Kicking off a violent past

Since he was only two years old, Pablo da Rosa Felizardo has lived with violence every day of his life. He was at home with his family in Cantagalo*, in Rio de Janeiro, when drug dealers invaded their home, shooting and killing his father who worked for a rival drug-dealing faction. Six years later, he saw the same thing happen to his mother. Living amid poverty and drug-dealing is all Pablo, now 12, has ever known.



After his parents' murders, Pablo had no older siblings to take care of him so he was taken in by an aunt. By now a rebellious child, he eventually ran away to live on the streets, returning to his aunt's home only from time to time. Pablo learned to juggle as a way of earning a living, entertaining drivers at traffic lights in downtown Rio de Janeiro. Last year, however, he was run over by a car. He returned to his aunt who cared for him until he recovered.

Recent research published in Brazil highlights the severity and magnitude of the violence affecting children and adolescents in favelas (shanties) dominated by drug factions. The recruitment of adolescents as so-called 'soldiers' was also recognized. Comparisons with armed conflict are also drawn. For example, from December 1987 to November 2001 one example is especially stark: 3,937 minors were killed in Rio de Janeiro city by small arms fire while for the same period the conflict in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory killed 467 children.

According to UNESCO's bi-annual Map of Violence of Brazilian Youth published in 2002, the highest homicide rates for the 15 - 24 age group were in Rio de Janeiro with 131 per 100,000 compared with 56.5 per 100,000 for the general population.

Children, like Pablo, who live in the slums, have limited access to good education, recreational activities and health facilities. Thus, unless they have alternatives, they spend much of their time on the streets exposed to violence.

Ten months ago, some of Pablo's friends told him about a centre called Child Hope Space and invited him to go there. He visited the centre a few times always keeping a wary distance and never joining wholeheartedly in the activities. He was aggressive and used to punch and kick the other children.



The teachers at Child Hope Space slowly began working with him until, eventually, the soccer coach succeeded in interesting Pablo in playing. Once soccer had won Pablo over, he gradually lost his reserve and started to play in more soccer matches and join in the other activities provided by the centre. Teachers at the centre are trained by local NGO, Viva Rio, to talk to children about their problems and monitor their progress across the range of activities provided at the centre.



UNICEF support for Child Hope Space helps to provide a programme combining cultural and sporting activities with accelerated learning to improve children's and adolescents' self-esteem and life chances in poor and violent neighbourhoods. However, much of UNICEF's advocacy is focused on prevention by addressing the challenge of protecting the 85 per cent of children who are exposed but not directly involved in perpetrating violence. In addition, UNICEF, working through local implementing partners, tries to persuade the remaining 15 per cent of children to give up violent lifestyles by offering attractive alternatives to the spoils of drug-dealing.

The success to date demonstrates that when young people are involved in sports, have a variety of recreational and esteem-building activities and family support, they can be diverted from a life of crime.

UNICEF funds and supports the work of Child Hope Space, in partnership with the government and Viva Rio, and is helping to expand and upgrade current activities to protect children's enjoyment of their rights. UNICEF technical input is key in the current development of baseline data and in prioritizing activities offered to the young people at the centre. There is another Child Hope Space in São Paulo and there are plans to open another two in Belo Horizonte and Salvador.

Slowly but surely, Pablo's behaviour began to change as punches and kicks were converted into smiles and affection. However, in spite of the progress Pablo was making, the terrible events of his young life had created emotional problems affecting his learning ability, which prevented him from going to a state school. Instead, he had some basic schooling at the Child Hope Space. Today, however, Pablo can be seen helping the monitors at the centre and participating in a host of activities. He is also back in regular school at grade two level.

A visiting legal worker at Child Hope Space, who specializes in child and adolescent issues, has helped Pablo's aunt to legally adopt him.

Pablo's life has been transformed. "We keep clear here," he says, a slang expression that people from the shantytown use to explain that they stay away from drug-dealing and violence. "Now I'm a soccer player, but when I become an adult I'll be a soccer coach," says Pablo with a smile.

* Cantagalo is a large old slum between the Copacabana and Ipanema neighbourhoods

By UNICEF Brazil

Pictures by UNICEF Brazil/Coe