

## **Institutionalized Child Care**

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The early times saw social issues being addressed through media and the big screen was one of the most effective ways to address a social concern. Whether it was the rehabilitation of dacoits, a widow's plight or the unattended child, the media covered it all. My first exposure as a child to institutionalized children was the famous Shammi Kapoor movie 'Brahamchari' where the protagonist very affectionately nurtures the dozen or more children of various age groups, who live with him in the Home, along with a caretaker. The children were shown to grow in an environment, similar to the home, where they could fight, laugh, demand, eat, play and sleep with the same freedom as they would do with their biological parents. So loving was the portrayal that every child who watched the movie wanted to be a part of the home created by Shammi Kapoor. Unfortunately things are not the same in reality. For instance, the Apna Ghar, Rohtak Home, and the Umeed Aman Ghar, Mehrauli, the homes giving shelter to the deprived and homeless children were in news lately for wrong reasons. While Apna Ghar was reported to have indulged in sexual exploitation, physical and mental torture of its inmates, the investigations at Umeed Ghar found evidence of sexual abuse of minor boys within the Ghar.

These cases cannot be taken lightly as research has shown that depriving children of normal family life adversely affects their physical and emotional well being. This is because feelings of worth and dignity can flourish in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes tolerated, communication is open, freedom of speech and expression prevails, the kind of atmosphere that is found in a nurturing family. Thus, while family is the best for the child's growth and development, institutionalized care in the form of Children's Homes should come as the last resort.

Children's homes also known as the residential homes, is an arrangement made for the children of the parents who cannot take care of their children or whose whereabouts are unknown. They are the children in need of care and protection under the Juvenile Justice Act 2000. The children stay in these homes till they are 18 years of age, the age which is very crucial for their growth and development. To comply with this basic requirement of the children, the institutions have certain basic minimum guidelines to be followed regarding food, clothing, education and training of the children staying in the homes. There is need for appropriate vocational training to not only channelize the energy in the right direction but also to capacitate the children. Since the children homes deal with a very vulnerable group the staff has to be well trained and oriented with child behavior.

Unfortunately this is missing and very often it is seen that the institutional life does not prepare the child well for life outside an institution. Most of the children in care have nowhere to go once discharged from their institutions. They are unable to sustain themselves as the nature of training received by them is in conventional vocations which do not cater to the market. There are also practical difficulties of implementation of a training programme like computers. Gender

divisions regarding vocational training continue to exist implying that the girls learn stitching and boys get training in electrical fitting. There are complaints of unwanted behavior from the staff towards the children. The caretakers are not sensitive enough to the child's needs and perform for duty rather than with emotional bonding. Absence of the opposite sex in form of friend or sibling also leaves a gap and does not adequately prepare the child for a life outside the institution. Also despite provision for regular schooling most of the children pass from the National Open School.

It is thus important that effort be made to restore the institutionalized child to the parents wherever it is possible. In case the home and surrounding is not congenial enough, regular visits of the parents to meet the child in the institution should be encouraged. In case of financial constraints the parents can be networked with the available government schemes for livelihood purpose. In case of absence of parents, responsible relatives need to be identified who are willing to take care of the child, but this needs to be done under proper monitoring of the concerned authority. Foster care and adoption are other mechanisms of restoring a good life to the child.

Hopefully the Integrated Child Protection Scheme which is based on 'protection of child rights' and 'best interest of the child', will free the institutions from these unwanted practices and strengthen the system to meet the laid objectives.