

SOUL BUDDYZ: A Children's Rights Mass Media Campaign in South Africa

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There are 12.5 million children between the ages of five and 18 in South Africa.¹ These children face enormous challenges, many of them inherited from the apartheid-era government. South Africa has an under-five mortality rate of 83 per 1000, much higher than would be expected from a lower- to middle-income country (GNP = US\$3210). Costa Rica, for example, has a lower per capita GNP (\$2680), but its under-five mortality rate is 16 per 1000. Internationally, and within South Africa, the shift of health resources toward problems caused by chronic diseases among adults and the elderly is contributing to increasing inequities in the health of children.

There is a strong commitment in South Africa to human rights and in particular to the rights of children.

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Child rights are enshrined in the South African constitution, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (to which South Africa became a signatory in 1996), and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.²

There are, however, great challenges in making these rights a reality for the children of South Africa. The huge equity gap in the country means that the majority of children live in poverty and in unsafe environments, which make them particularly vulnerable to trauma and to ill health. Many children become disabled, or are born with disabilities. This occurs more frequently if they come from a poor environment, and is related to lack of accessible services, poor nutrition, and lack of information.³ Many children with disabilities do not even have their most basic rights fulfilled. Most are not in schools, and are not encouraged to reach their full potential.⁴

Because of the AIDS epidemic in South Africa, where the prevalence rate is 24.5%, many children are denied their rights in relation to a family environment (as their parents are dying) and to schooling (as they often have to look after younger siblings or sick relatives).⁵ Children living in poverty are also more vulnerable to rape and sexual exploitation.⁶

Realizing the health rights of children in South Africa depends on a number of factors. One of these is that children must know their rights in a concrete way and become empowered to demand those rights, both as children and then as adults later in life.

The Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication, a South African nongovernmental organization (NGO), has developed the *Soul Buddyz* project, targeted specifically at children 8 to 12 years old and their caregivers, to address concretely a number of children's rights and health issues. The project utilizes the "edu-tainment" methodology, which integrates health education and social issues into popular mass media entertainment. The *Soul Buddyz* series consists of a mix of television, radio, and print components operating synergistically for mutual reinforcement.

The Edu-tainment Methodology

South Africa has a highly developed mass media infrastructure, with over 98% access to radio, 65% to television, and 40% to print. Media access by South African children in particular is increasing rapidly and is often greater than that of their elders, as many children have access through friends, schools, and community centers. According to UNICEF, South Africans have 314 radio sets and 101 television sets per 1000 people.⁷

Electronic mass media can be used to great advantage in educating both children and adults. When used in conjunction with interactive print materials, it can impact significantly on skills development. Edu-tainment is gaining increasing currency internationally as a powerful educational tool. Unlike didactic educational programs, which are unable to attract large audiences, the integration of educational issues into entertainment formats allows health promoters to secure prime-time slots in the mass media. The ability to attract advertising revenue allows for partnerships of mutual benefit to develop between national broadcasters and health promoters.

The power of edu-tainment also rests in its ability to role-model positive attitudes and behaviors through characters with whom audiences develop strong emotional bonds. The characters come to play an integral part in the lives of the audiences, who experience their life lessons vicariously.⁸

The Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication also produces the *Soul City* series. Aimed at the broader public, *Soul City* has become a household name in South Africa. Independent evaluations have shown the effectiveness of the *Soul City* project to impact on a variety of health issues by conveying information, by increasing debate and interpersonal interaction, and by changing attitudes, practices, and social norms.⁹ The series reaches 16.2 million South Africans and is currently being broadcast in a number of other African countries. The *Soul Buddyz* series is undergoing a similar evaluation. Preliminary results show the television series has attained

the highest ratings ever for a children's show in South Africa, reaching over 2 million viewers each broadcast. The organization has also been inundated with letters of support and appreciation from parents and children. *Soul Buddyz 2*, the second series, is currently in production for implementation in 2002.

Television

The television component is a 26-part half-hour television drama focusing principally on child characters (the "Soul Buddyz") as they address issues that confront them in their everyday life. At the end of each episode, real children from all over the country are filmed commenting on the issues raised.

Radio

The radio component is a 26-part half-hour radio magazine program, incorporating drama segments with child protagonists, information segments for adults and children, and a phone-in talk show with young presenters and expert guests.

Print Material

Life Skills Material for Children

A colorful book is distributed to pupils in grade 7 of every primary school in South Africa. The materials, illustrated with the popular *Soul Buddyz* characters, cover language development, the human sciences, and life skills by linking them to the topics on the television series. The material is interactive, with true-life stories, group activities, and educators' notes. An outcomes-based teaching methodology is used. Three posters accompany the book, one of which is a game related to rights in which children assess whether their rights have been infringed upon (or whether they are infringing upon somebody else's rights) and then make choices to deal with the situation.

Parenting Booklet

A user-friendly parenting booklet accompanying the *Soul Buddyz* series covers issues such as communication,

discipline, conflict, single parenthood, and how to build children's self-esteem, and provides basic information on how to deal with injuries. It also advises on ways to talk to children about sexuality, AIDS, death and loss, and issues of disability. The booklet is distributed through the Sunday newspaper with the largest national circulation (600,000 copies). It is also distributed through NGOs.

Media Developed within a Child Rights Framework

The *Soul Buddyz* project is based on the South African constitution, the CRC, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Through the materials developed, children learn their rights and responsibilities concretely, in a way that has meaning in their own life experiences.

The South African government has signed and ratified the CRC, which states that the child has the right to the highest attainable standard of health and medical care. It also obligates states to place special emphasis on the provision of primary and preventive health care, public health education, and the reduction of infant mortality. In addition, the CRC defines the aims of child education as developing the child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to the fullest extent. It further states that education should prepare the child for an active adult life in a free society and foster respect for the child's parents.

Article 17 of the CRC recognizes the role of mass media in education as follows:

States parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.

The South African government has concretized the goals of the CRC through its National Programme of Action for Children. An inter-ministerial steering committee is responsible for its implementation. This National Programme of

Action for Children outlines the policy priorities for children as:

- Nutrition
- Health
- Water and sanitation
- Early childhood development
- Social welfare development
- Leisure and cultural activities
- Child protection measures¹⁰

Soul Buddyz has been designed to deal with a range of these issues over time. Individual episodes are written to draw attention to specific issues. The first series of the project deals with HIV/AIDS and sexuality, trauma and disability.

HIV/AIDS

States parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. (CRC, Article 24)

A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the state. (CRC, Article 20)

South Africa has the fastest-growing HIV/AIDS epidemic in the world. One in ten South Africans is estimated to be infected.¹¹ By 2015, it is estimated that there will be 3.6–4.8 million orphans under age 16 in South Africa, or 9–12% of the total population.¹²

The implications of the AIDS epidemic for children are threefold. First, under-five mortality related to AIDS has already risen, and there will be increasing numbers of HIV-positive children. Second, the future sexual behavior of young people is being influenced by interactions with peers and by the media, among other social influences. This affords a good opportunity to persuade children who are not yet sexually active to delay the onset of sex and to have safer sex when they do begin. Third, increasing responsibilities

are being thrust upon children when one or both of their parents dies. Apart from the emotional and economic trauma, children also face discrimination in school and among their peers. The increasing number of child-headed households is interfering with education and other rights necessary for the survival and development of the child.¹³

The *Soul Buddyz* series tells HIV/AIDS stories from three different perspectives. First, there is a story about a young boy who discovers that his single mother is HIV-positive. He realizes that he and his friends know very little about HIV/AIDS, and he sets out on a road to discovery, on the way encountering discrimination and ignorance from both adults and children. Toward the end of the drama series, his mother dies, and his uncle and friends show how to support someone, both practically and emotionally, who has lost a loved one.

The second angle is a love story between two young teenagers. The story deals with the awkwardness of first romance and the importance of communication about sex, as well as illustrating the role peer pressure plays in these decisions. The young couple are confused, and the rest of the *Soul Buddyz* are even more so. A kindly nurse at the local clinic sits them down to talk about sex and plays them an animated sex education video to help clarify the facts. In a landmark event, this six-minute video was broadcast as part of the weekly episode on national TV at 6:30 in the evening and received high child audience ratings.

The third AIDS story is about gender equality. A young girl character, Zandi, wants to be a pilot when she grows up. She faces great opposition from her friends, who tell her she'll never get a boyfriend if she gets a job like that, and from all the adults around her. Eventually the first black woman pilot in South Africa comes to see her mother and persuades her to allow Zandi to pursue her dream.

Trauma

States parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation including sexual abuse. . . . (CRC, Article 19)

Trauma is the leading cause of death in children between eight and 12 years of age. Common types of trauma include poisonings, drownings, traffic collisions, and violence. Children in this age group are also subject to emotional and sexual abuse. A study of trauma in the Cape Metropolitan area in 1990 showed rates of fatal and non-fatal injuries of 77 per 1000 in children under 14 years old and 114 per 1000 in adolescents 15–19 years old.¹⁴ In general, South Africa's childhood injury mortality rates are three times higher than in the USA.¹⁵

The origins of childhood injury are complex, and the high rates are symptomatic of poor standards of health, housing, childcare, and economic status. In this context, preventive education and advocacy to deal with dangerous environments is essential. The Soul Buddyz children learn to deal with different kinds of trauma—for example, how to behave at the scene of a collision when one of their friends is run over by a hit-and-run driver. They learn what to do when a person is drowning: on a visit to a rural area, they stop to swim in a small dam and one of the children jumps in even though he can't swim. The children also find ways to reduce traffic accidents such as advocating for the installation of speed bumps on certain roads, forming a student patrol at their school and starting a reflector campaign to increase the visibility of children.

Disability

States parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance, and facilitate the child's active participation in the community. (CRC, Article 23)

Between six and ten percent of South Africans are disabled.¹⁶ The link between poverty and disability is well documented. Poverty-related factors lead to many preventable impairments (e.g., malnutrition may lead to stunting) and the social disadvantages associated with poverty may augment that impairment (e.g., it is almost impossible for an impoverished child with lower limb paralysis to get access to education). This perpetuates the cycle of poverty. *Soul Buddyz* focuses on breaking down physical and attitudinal barriers that discriminate against people with disabilities. In

three stories, the series makes disability visible and emphasizes the idea that “children have impairments—society disables them.”

In one story, a child becomes paraplegic after being run down in a hit-and-run incident. We follow him through his anger and pain and then through the unfairness of finding that the world does not have many facilities for children with disabilities. The Soul Buddyz fight for his right to go back to his old school and win, along with ensuring creative ways to make the school wheelchair-friendly.

The second story deals with a child with disabilities who is hidden away because of the discrimination his mother had previously experienced. The *Soul Buddyz* befriend the child and take him out to the park to play. The third story features a child who has an epileptic seizure. The Soul Buddyz learn all about epilepsy in this episode.

The Rights of Children

While each topic covered in the show relates to a specific right in the CRC, the Soul Buddyz series is characterized by the following overarching principles:

- Children are unique—we are all different and special in our own way. All people deserve respect irrespective of age, gender, religion, race, or state of health or impairment.
- Children have choices and have a right to say no to things they think or feel are wrong or harmful.
- Children have rights. These rights are enshrined in our Constitution and in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Children also have responsibilities. It is important to serve the community to which one belongs and to recognize that one’s actions or lack of actions influence and affect others.

The Soul Buddyz enter a competition that requires them to create three projects to improve the rights of children in their area. They eventually go to an international meeting where they meet other children from all over the world who are also fighting for their rights.

Giving Children a Voice

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds. . . . (CRC, Article 13)

The *Soul Buddyz* project is unique in a number of ways. It is one of the first mass media projects to consult children in its development and interpretation. Children were asked what was important to them, and their beliefs and attitudes were explored to help determine the direction and content of the series. Children influenced every episode of *Soul Buddyz* through an extensive workshopping and role-playing process.

At the end of each television episode, real children get an opportunity to voice their feelings in relation to the issue at hand on television and radio in the language of their choice.

Additionally, in South Africa, where much of the mass media programming is imported from outside the country, it is very unusual for children to see themselves reflected and to hear their own languages being used by children as they deal with important, substantive issues. Finally, it is also the first non-music-focused radio program for this age group in South Africa.

Conclusion

Children and the public at large need to be made aware of the rights of children as stipulated by both local and international documents. Moreover, tools are needed to translate these lofty ideals into concrete actions in people's everyday lives. It is with this in mind that the Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication has developed the *Soul Buddyz* project—as an innovative mass media vehicle to bring the issue of children's rights into the homes of millions of South African children and their caregivers.

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