

# CHILDREN USE ART, PUPPETRY TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES

*“Train up a boy in the way he should go; even when he is old, he will not swerve from it.”*

— Proverbs 22:6

Children are resilient. For those of you who have participated in medical mission trips or other programs where you have traveled to low- and middle-income countries, you most likely have noted or commented upon the children you encounter. I often hear, “They’re so happy!”



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I often have wondered where that perception comes from — and could it be true? How do the children manage to look happy, especially if they have lived through war, death, destruction, a disaster, displacement, or they have seen violence and atrocities? Under the smiling façade, what’s really going on? And how are we called to respond as a community of caregivers committed to continuing Jesus’ mission of love and healing?

Pope Francis, in 2013, offered guidance: “[We] gather in prayer and in a spirit of penance, invoking God’s great gift upon the beloved nation of Syria and upon each situation of conflict and violence around the world. Humanity needs to see these gestures of peace and to hear words of hope.”

In his words, we see our activities, our health clinics and mission programs offering “words of hope” in places of violence and disaster.

During the building of the St. Francis de Sales Hospital in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, an undertaking overseen by Catholic Relief Services with funding from Catholic Health Association members, I met Robin Contino, LCSW-C, who works for CRS. When we first met, she was a project manager on the building of the hospital. In getting to know her, I learned about another project she works with and is undeniably passionate about — the CRS partnership with U.K.-based No Strings International, a program that uses puppetry for children among refugee populations in Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq, in a variety of conflict and disaster contexts. The idea is to promote

peace-building and to address the trauma these children have experienced.

CRS is the official international humanitarian agency of the Catholic community in the United States, and the official overseas relief and development agency of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, as well as a member of Caritas International and the National Catholic Development Conference.

Contino now serves as technical adviser for psychosocial support and well-being in CRS’ humanitarian response department. She told me more about the No Strings program, and I offer the information to you as a sign of how we are serving our brothers and sisters in a war-torn part of the world.

## PROGRAMMING WITH PUPPETS

Since 2013, CRS has partnered with No Strings International to produce tools for child-friendly programming in its ongoing response to the protracted crisis in the Middle East, Contino explained. To address the trauma Syrian and Iraqi children have experienced because of war and the displacement of their families, CRS uses two films, “Red Top, Blue Top” and “Out of the Shadows,” with an accompanying puppet-based methodology to increase well-being and enhance social integration among children who have experienced psychosocial distress.

The films are unique and show a world that is imaginary but similar to the culture in which the children live. Each film tells a story and tackles difficult and sensitive topics. Because only a trained and certified facilitator can show the film, the children who view it are helped to participate in a forum that develops and strengthens social connections and delivers key messages about ac-

cepting those who are different (“Red Top, Blue Top”) and facing or overcoming fears (“Out of the Shadows”), among others. After children see the films, they take part in creative activities using puppets to reinforce the films’ messages. The children interact with the puppets to express ideas and feelings, and then they create their own puppets. The primary target group for No Strings is conflict-affected boys and girls ages 6 to 12 years.

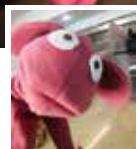
The films were created to ensure a high level of relevance to the intended audience, drawing on field-level consultations regarding the key messages, scenery design, props, scripts and the puppet names, costumes and appearance. In addition, the films are produced in the local language, and the stories are built on local knowledge and coping mechanisms.

As part of the program, CRS and partners are training hundreds of teachers, counselors, community workers and animators in this innovative puppetry method designed to help thousands of violence-affected children improve their resiliency. The No Strings methodology seeks to normalize children’s feelings; enable children to recognize and understand different emotions; and provide a forum for engaging with others and feeling empowered.

Key activities include:

- Training for key stakeholders on identifying and responding to the psychosocial needs of children through puppetry and other tools
- Supporting trained stakeholders through the implementation of action plans in their schools, community-based organizations or child-friendly spaces
- Monitoring the use of the puppetry methodology and providing additional support as necessary and on a case-by-case basis

CRS has evaluated the program and found participation in No Strings resulted in a range of positive changes in children. The qualitative data shows that children, parents and animators



Children use art and puppetry to express their perceptions of the film “Out of the Shadows.”

Catherine Cowley CAFOD

noted positive outcomes in children, ranging from less fear to less aggressiveness with other children and stronger social relationships.

This program is so important, said Contino.

“The children have experienced atrocities we can’t imagine and continue to live in uncertainty day after day. Families fled their homes and support systems with the dream of one day returning home or creating a better life for their families, though the reality of living in a context of extreme conflict is volatile and difficult,” she said. “Families are struggling economically and emotionally. Stress is high, and outlets for release of that stress are slim to none.”

People who do not live in this type of environment might not understand that access to adequate education,

sustainable employment and safe accommodation are constant challenges, Contino pointed out. Refugees are not guaranteed basic needs and human rights. Bullying and tension in the host community is a daily struggle for many, and their economic distress increases the risk of children dropping out of school to try to earn extra money for the family. No Strings and related activities provide much-needed support for the protection and future of the children and their families.

As a counselor, Contino reminds us that children are constantly learning, forming and growing — they absorb and emulate what they see and hear. Living in an environment where social cohesion is compromised has a significant effect on their development of a worldview, of trust, of meaning and purpose, of peace, of good and evil. Such stressful conditions affect a child’s beliefs and actions, creating a space in which the waters get muddy — not an easy place to thrive.

CRS and No Strings International are helping children where the waters have been muddied. And to associates in Catholic health care, Contino emphasized the need for them to care and to continue prayers and donations to programs such as this.

“Kids everywhere are kids just like our daughters and sons,” she said. “They want to play, deserve to play and to have boundless opportunity to make their lives and our world better. We share the same air, time of life, history and hope for the future. We need your members to care and act to effect change in the lives of these faraway children, because it’s our world, our future and our challenge. If we don’t care -- who will?”

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