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Nurturing Care for China's Orphaned Children

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Janice N. Cotton, Carolyn Pope Edwards,
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Nurturing Care for China's Orphaned Children



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All the children who are held and loved will know how to love others. . . . Spread these virtues in the world. Nothing more need be done.

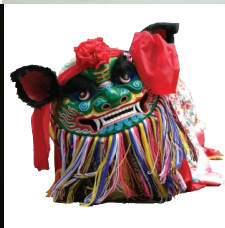
— Meng Zi, c. 300 BC

As the number of children orphaned or abandoned worldwide rises, we worry about their rights and welfare. Children without parents or loving guardians are vulnerable to neglect, poor health care, and diminished education. Many come to live in institutions where they may experience a host of long-term problems, including malnutrition, growth retardation, sensory processing difficulties, behavioral and attachment disorders, and cognitive and language delays (e.g., Rutter, Quinton, & Hill 1990; Judge 1999; Zeanah 2000; Beckett et al. 2002). Yet, people are finding helpful solutions.

Half the Sky Foundation (HTS) conducts infant nurture and preschool enrichment programs that dramatically enhance the quality of life and the development of orphaned children living in Chinese state-run institutions. Launched as two small pilots in 2000 by founder Jenny Bowen and a group of American adoptive parents, Half the Sky (www.halfthesky.org) operates today in partnership with the Chinese government in 34 state-run welfare institutions in 12 municipalities and provinces. The foundation serves over 3,500 children and adolescents, without regard to gender or disability, with funding from individual, foundation, and corporate donors worldwide. More than 12,000 children have benefited already from HTS programs. This article describes the programs for the youngest children: infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.



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The Infant Nurture Program

In China's social welfare institutions, one caregiver may be responsible for feeding, bathing, and diapering 10 to 15 children in addition to carrying out many household chores. The children assigned to a caregiver may vary from day to day, making a bond between child and caregiver impossible. Children spend most days lying in cribs or propped in wooden chairs, with little opportunity for stimulation or interaction.

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Primary caregivers

Half the Sky's Infant Nurture Program begins with the premise that children's needs for care and stimulation must be consistently met in the context of a close, caring relationship. HTS carefully selects and hires women from the community to serve as primary caregivers or *zumu* (Chinese word roughly meaning *granny* or *grannies*). Zumu lovingly provide care and education to a consistent group of two to four children at least seven hours a day, six days a week, until the children move on to preschool or are adopted.



Zumu preparation. Each HTS zumu participates in a six-day training program in the theory and practice of relationship-based care (Edwards & Raikes 2002; Honig 2002). They digest ideas from international research on brain development, child development, and the importance of responsive caregiving (see "Professional Development Program for Infant Caregivers," p. 3).

Because adult control is an essential part of Chinese education and socialization (Ho 1988), zumu are comfortable with traditional Chinese forms of childrearing that reinforce interactions in which the child follows the adult. During HTS training, they discuss and practice combining traditional care with new concepts. Zumu hone their observation skills to focus on the child's interests and on responding in ways that follow the child's lead. They discuss how this new style still leaves them in charge, but in ways that better address a child's developmental needs. For example, zumu knew the value of playing games and talking with babies, but they believed adults should plan the activities and set the pace without individualizing for each child. In HTS training, they discuss how to promote development not only by leading but also by responding to the child's vocal and physical

Zumu hone their observation skills to focus on the child's interests and on responding in ways that follow the child's lead.

signals of interest, pleasure, or discomfort. Each zumu surrounds herself with her children and puts her learning into practice. You might see one zumu holding and talking softly to an upset child, another repeating a baby's babbling, and still another encouraging a baby to crawl by dangling a toy just out of reach. An on-site supervisor and field supervisors who visit regularly support the zumu's work.

Changes in the children

Children who once lay in beds all day with dull expressions now jump with joy when they see their zumu arrive in the morning. They reach for toys to explore, and they babble and laugh. Zumu document their babies' progress in anecdotal notes and photographs that become part of the children's memory books. The memory books go with the children when they transition to preschool or to new homes, if adopted, and serve as a precious source of autobiographical information, identity, and fond memories.

Dramatic changes are especially noticeable in children with disabilities. Many zumu believe that children with cerebral palsy are hopelessly handicapped. Perceptions change as they work with the children, lose their fear, and develop confidence.

For example, MeiLing, a child with cerebral palsy, progressed from being nonreactive, nonspeaking, and nonwalking at 20 months, when introduced to her

signals of interest, pleasure, or discomfort.

Putting training into action. The zumu work in playrooms with large, open spaces for crawling and walking, low shelves for storing developmental toys, and long safety mirrors with grab bars



Zumu document their babies' progress in anecdotal notes and photographs that become part of the children's memory books.



Professional Development Program for Infant Caregivers

A team of Chinese and international early childhood educators and physicians provides six days of initial training for Half the Sky infant caregivers. The teacher educators discuss current practices and thinking in attachment-based early care and education with the caregivers, exploring how to successfully blend new and familiar methods.

Infant caregivers (zumu) are typically selected for their interest, character, and emotional characteristics, and for their capacity to bond with and nurture the development of very young children. Most zumu come to the program without formal training in early childhood education or infant development.

Broad topics covered in the initial training

Responsive caregiving and infant attachment

- Definition and importance
- How caregivers can provide responsive care

Brain development

Child temperament

- Identification of traits
- Strategies for supporting different traits of infants

Child growth and development

- Typical developmental characteristics
- How to promote development

Health and safety

- Practices for keeping children and caregivers healthy
- Creating and maintaining a safe environment

Observing and documenting growth and development

- Writing anecdotal notes and taking photographs
- Creating memory books

Training methods

- Small- and large-group discussion
- Lecture
- Direct work with children

- Observation of children and other adults working with children
- Problem solving
- Case study analysis
- Individual and small-group reflection

Other professional development opportunities

The activities that follow expand on the course's basic information and give students opportunities to explore new areas. Field supervisors visit each site regularly, serving as mentors and coaches for the zumu and the on-site zumu supervisors. Zumu learning communities meet regularly with on-site zumu supervisors to focus on team problem solving and explore new topics about promoting children's development.

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- Supervisors share with zumu individual training modules, prepared by the program director and a team of international educators, that expand on the information in the initial training or present new information.
- National and international physicians and physical and occupational therapists provide on-site training in working with children with special needs in large or small-group settings, according to a program's needs.
- The program director regularly sends resource materials to program sites for individual and group study, discussion, and reflection.
- Supervisors meet annually to share success stories, solve problems, learn new information, and be inspired for another year of work.

Adapted from *For the Children: Half the Sky Foundation's Guide to Infant Nurture and Preschool Education in China's Social Welfare Institutions*, ed. K. Evans (Berkeley, CA: Half the Sky Foundation, 2003), 34



zumu, to smiling, crawling, and standing with support at 28 months and speaking at 29 months. When she reached 32 months, her zumu wrote,

It is now a year from the time I first met MeiLing. She can walk about 10 meters and stand on her own for one minute. She trusts the other caregivers and will play holding anyone's hands. She understands my instructions. She is no longer the shy girl who shut herself off from others but is instead a happy and cheerful little angel who helps adults and younger children. I now believe these special children can have happy and color-filled lives, just like the healthy children.

This example shows how much catch-up development and learning can occur in infants and toddlers in institutional group care once they receive individualized, stimulating attention organized on a primary attachment model of responsive caregiving.

The Preschool Enrichment Program

Half the Sky's preschool enrichment and intervention program serves children two to seven years old. Children in multiage or same-age groups of 10 to 12 take part (five days a week, about five hours a day) in specially designed classrooms. The classrooms are equipped with furniture painted in soothing and harmonious colors and are stocked with art and constructive materials, toys, and role-play props matching the children's developmental levels and interests.

Teachers and blended practices

The preschool curriculum is based on the Chinese national educational guidelines and infused with elements inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach as well as by devel-

opmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple 1997; Evans 2003; Rinaldi 2006).

For example, according to the 2001 Chinese Guidelines for Kindergarten Education, *laoshi* (the Chinese term for teacher or teachers) are required to develop plans to promote musical appreciation and creativity. In China, repetition is the primary method for teaching young children songs and dances. In the HTS classroom, however, learning a song may be part of a larger project involving observation, art, movement, drama, and dance.

The goal of blending educational philosophies and practices is to bring together the educational wisdom of different countries and provide vulnerable children with a better chance to reach their potentials in China, a society undergoing rapid social, economic, and educational change (Hulbert 2007). The society needs workers and leaders with different skills and dispositions from those looked for in the past. The entire educational system has entered a period of rapid growth and innovation accompanied by a struggle to forge an identity that bridges "colonial and communist pasts with a promising and yet uncertain future" (Hseuh, Tobin, & Karasawa 2004, 1).

Learning a song may be part of a larger project involving observation, art, movement, drama, and dance.

Teacher training.

HTS *laoshi* participate in a three-week training course in which they learn to apply the HTS curriculum within the welfare institutions where the HTS classrooms are located. Preparation and ongoing support are critical components of the success of the program.

Through theory and direct work with children, *laoshi* begin a transformative process of professional and personal change (Zhao et al. 2003; Zhao 2007). They learn strategies adapted from the Reggio Emilia approach for fostering children's intellectual development by focusing on group belonging, project learning, and expressing the self through multiple symbolic languages, including drawing, painting, speaking, singing, dancing, and dramatic play (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1998). Their practice covers skills of observing, curriculum planning, instruction, and documentation through anecdotal notes, memory books, and project panels (see "Professional Development Program for Preschool Teachers," p. 5).

Putting theory into action. HTS *laoshi* receive ongoing supervision and professional development through regular site visits by field supervisors, by communicating about work issues on an HTS Web site, and



Professional Development Program for Preschool Teachers



Candidates for preschool teacher (laoshi) are selected for their interest in the Half the Sky (HTS) program and their desire to be part of it. They have a preschool teaching certificate, or other early childhood training, and teaching experience. Thus, they come to the program with professional knowledge and skills that provide the foundation for learning about HTS methods. A Chinese early childhood educator with advanced degrees from the United States teaches the initial three-week course.

Classroom instruction and discussion (weeks 1 and 2)

- Introduction to Half the Sky programs
- Introduction to the preschool program as relationship-based education inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach
- Characteristics of children living in institutions
- Attachment theory
- Brain development
- Providing an enriched environment and relationship-based education for children who are abandoned, orphaned, and/or institutionalized: What are the similarities and differences between relationship-based education and the laoshi's previous learning about early childhood teaching practices? How can a laoshi appropriately and constructively blend familiar and new approaches to practice?
- The laoshi's role in the HTS classroom
- Facilitating children's development and learning: the laoshi's role
- Improving the learning and socialization environment of the children—the laoshi's role
- The relationship between the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children
- Observation strategies for responsive teaching practice
- Documentation of teaching and learning for both children and adults

Hands-on practice with children (weeks 1 and 2)

- Building a relationship with an individual child
- Writing a daily child observation
- Planning an activity to conduct with the child
- Implementing the activity plan with the child
- Grouping the children of the various trainees together and beginning to plan child-centered group activities

- Implementing teaching plans with the group of children
- Documenting the progress of children engaged in the activities
- Planning teaching for the next day based on children's engagement in the present day's activities

Reflection (weeks 1 and 2)

- Discussion of the day's experiences working with the child/ren
- Discussion about improving the quality of teacher observation
- Review of laoshi-child interactions using videotapes and photos
- Review of the anecdotal notes and consideration about turning them into finished documentation that makes visible the children's and adults' learning processes
- Discussion and self-evaluation in small groups; evaluating and sharing ideas for improvement of documentation (in the large group)
- Studying and discussing the laoshi's experiences with their individual children

Practicum (week 3)

- Mornings: Teaching practice with children
- Afternoons: Reflection, planning, and documentation

Follow-up professional development opportunities

- Frequent field visits by field supervisors to provide professional support and help for each HTS teacher
- Weekly journal entries, shared with the program director and field supervisors
- Weekly online professional discussion of specific topics, generated by either teachers from different sites or the program director, based on the issues raised in the weekly journals
- Teachers' Web site as a daily Internet learning opportunity for all HTS teachers across China
- Biweekly online professional development for HTS preschool field supervisors
- Annual HTS conference to exchange and enhance professional experiences and networking for HTS preschool staff across China

Adapted from *For the Children: Half the Sky Foundation's Guide to Infant Nurture and Preschool Education in China's Social Welfare Institutions*, ed. K. Evans (Berkeley, CA: Half the Sky Foundation, 2003), 67–144.



by sharing weekly professional journals with their peers and other HTS staff. These experiences help them manage the most difficult challenge in their teaching practice—dealing with new educational concepts that are culturally and philosophically foreign to them.

In Chinese education, a clear *shicheng* (teacher-student) boundary is accepted; the typical classroom emphasizes adult authority and structured delivery of lessons to a large group of children. HTS laoshi bravely embrace the challenge of a blended practice by providing opportunities every day for children to voice their thoughts

and make decisions; but they also encourage a familiar collectivism, harmony, and order in the classroom. Laoshi build skills in reflecting on their practice and become self-directed learners. One wrote, “I like to think more now by asking more questions when I watch a child playing. I often ask myself, how can I make the activity more creative and rich with materials for the children; how can I make children happier when they learn? It makes me to want to read and explore more.”

A Project on Love

A preschool class of four- to six-year-olds at the Xinyang welfare institution celebrates a classmate’s birthday with a cake and gifts—a new experience for the children. In discussing why they might honor a classmate in this way, the children are at a loss. They say only that it’s great to get presents and that birthday cake tastes good. When asked to create pictures showing friendship, the children draw cakes, presents, hearts, and such. They know the symbols for love and friendship but have little personal experience in the emotions or understanding of the concepts.

As part of a long-term project to learn more about love and friendship, the laoshi guides the children in friendship-oriented activities, discussions, and art projects. The laoshi models thoughtful, caring behaviors and encourages children to express openly their feelings for one another. Gradually, the children begin to use words and actions to communicate positive feelings and share perspectives with one another.

At the end of the school year, three classmates, Ming-Ming, Aili, and Futian, are leaving Xinyang, with its HTS preschool, to go back to their hometown institutions and start primary school. At the goodbye party, the other children are glum. They are even reluctant to eat the beautiful cake. Instead, many cry, telling the three departing children how much they will miss them. MingMing has taken great care in preparing a book about his time with his friends as a goodbye gift for them. BaoBao gives her favorite stuffed animal to Aili. Others also give the departing children special gifts. From their behavior, the laoshi knows that the children are grasping the meaning of love and friendship.



Changes in the children

When the children first enter Half the Sky preschool programs, they often show the affects, behaviors, and learning impairments well documented in children living in institutions (e.g., Rutter, Quinton, & Hill 1990; Zeanah 2000). Laoshi track children’s growth through physical and cognitive assessments, observation and anecdotal notes, and behavioral outcomes, including the transition to elementary school (Dole et

al. 2003; Zhao et al. 2003; Zhao 2007). After spending time in the program, the children begin to smile, show interest in toys and materials, show attachment to their laoshi, and pore over the displays of photos and children’s artwork on the classroom walls and in the pages of their own and their classmates’ memory books. They engage eagerly in projects that follow their interests, stimulate complex and constructive play, and foster strong relationships with peers.

For children whose lives and experience have suffered severe fragmentation and disorganization, project work helps create threads of connection in thinking and planning (Hundeide 1991). In one example, children ages four to six in an HTS preschool program conducted a long-term project on the meaning of love and friendship. When the project began, the children showed little ability to share, cooperate, play together, or show affection to one another. Much later, it was clear to the laoshi that the children not only grasped the concepts of love and friendship but were experiencing the emotions (see “A Project on Love”).

Conclusions

Can listless infants and toddlers in institutions begin to thrive simply from intervention by loving caregivers who encourage attachment and provide attention that follows the babies’ interests and initiatives? Can preschoolers with



the behavioral and developmental issues typical of children who have lived for several years in an institution respond to and benefit from an enrichment program providing child-centered play and activities? Can the Reggio Emilia approach be culturally translated to make good sense in welfare institutions in China? Can it be applied to enhance relationships with children at risk for attachment difficulties, making them secure enough to reenergize their learning and development? Can intervention programs be taken to scale and sustained over time?



The answer to all these questions turns out to be a resounding yes. Half the Sky Foundation's programs in China spark catch-up in the development of young children living in social welfare institutions. They do so through the partnership of caring people who continually reexamine their goals and negotiate perspectives on behalf of a concept that is essentially integrative, holistic, and humanistic.

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