

Vida Plena, Paraguay

Report from a volunteer

Benita and Silverio Gavilán live in the verdant dormitory town of Fernando de la Mora, just outside Asunción. From here they have been implementing child-centred projects since 1997.

This was the backdrop to my family's visit to them in early November. It was springtime and blooming and hot—daytime temperatures reached 38°, much warmer than in Montevideo where we are currently living. The warmth of the welcome extended to us by the Gavilán family was also outstanding, and we were just as impressed by their generosity and friendliness as by the unaccustomed heat!

Just a few kilometres from their home lies Asunción's *Mercado de Abasto* (Gross Market) where the Gaviláns' project, the Vida Plena Foundation, runs a day centre for children between the ages of 3 and 14 whose parents are absent—either working abroad (mostly Argentina or Brazil) or at work all day. The children are often from single-parent families, and many are looked after by grandparents or other relatives. In the daytime, when they are not at school, which is either in the morning or in the afternoon, these children have nowhere to go.

The day centre provides them with breakfast or an afternoon snack and help with their homework. The children also have access to games and can do other activities with the day centre director and staff, two of whom, Benita and Daily, were trained by Lailah Armstrong in the International Child Development Programme (ICDP) methodology in 2001. The other staff members are receiving ongoing training in weekly sessions. "The aim is to offer these children more learning opportunities than they get at their homes and at school, as standards in Paraguayan public schools are extremely poor, especially concerning human relations," explains Benita.

ICDP is central to Vida Plena's philosophy and way of working. The Foundation has been using the programme for the past 7 years, and one of the ways in which the project would like to develop right now is to carry out ICDP training with the carers of the market children. Although there are a couple of children who live with their parents in the market itself—in one of the warehouses used to store fruit and vegetables, right next to the day centre warehouse—in general the children's carers are quite hard to reach. Outreach to the children's carers may thus prove time-consuming and difficult, but to Benita it should be an essential part of the programme, a way of ensuring the care the children receive at the centre is integrated more fully into their lives.

Vida Plena's work does not stop at the Abasto, however. The association is member of the Paraguayan Child Protection Network, and as such participated in the civil society report to the

Committee of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2008. Benita told me that she contributed on the fact that since 1990 (when Paraguay signed the Convention) different governments have done nothing to improve early-years care for children(1), nor to ban physical punishment from popular child-raising traditions ... and that Paraguay has one of the lowest percentages of social investment for children (health care, education) in the whole Latin American Region!

And for the past three months, the project has been helping implement a pilot programme run by the National Government's Department for Children and Teenagers (Secretaría Nacional de la Niñez y la Adolescencia) whose aim is to help several children's homes in Paraguay comply with the laws around child protection and child development. Since 2002, Paraguay actually has some very progressive legislation on child care/protection, based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and drawn up with the help of NGOs and other civil organizations, but unfortunately the law is not always properly enforced.

There are many children's homes in Paraguay which have been established by foreign organizations, often North-American, and often run by evangelical Christian groups. Some of these institutions do not comply with Paraguayan child care/protection law and some violate basic rights of the children in their care. In April this year, the Department for Children and Teenagers carried out a comprehensive survey in order to evaluate children's homes throughout the country. The result was that several were closed down for not reaching basic standards of infrastructure, hygiene or other criteria. Others have agreed to receive support from organizations like Vida Plena in order to help them improve their practice and comply more fully with the law.

Vida Plena, already known to the government through its ICDP work for the Education Ministry, was invited to take part in this pilot, which will be evaluated early next year. What distinguishes the work of Vida Plena from that of its peers participating in the pilot, is that Benita and Silverio insisted on being able to carry out ICDP training with the children's home staff as an integral and essential part of the programme. Only by doing this would they be able to ensure that the children living in the homes would get adequate care and attention.

Vida Plena is accompanying 3 institutions in this process. With a team of seven (coordinator, lawyer, social worker, 2 psychologists, nutritionist, ICDP promoter), each institution is evaluated and assisted in several areas. Apart from the ICDP training with the staff, the families of the children are visited where possible, in order to evaluate the children's backgrounds, their nutrition is checked, a psychological evaluation is made of each child, and the lawyers check on the legal situation not only of the institution, but also of the children, who do not always have a birth certificate or any other document.

The project is working hard to coordinate these efforts, and to provide detailed monthly progress

reports and financial reports. However, the potential success of this pilot programme, and in particular the ICDP component, will give even greater credibility to Vida Plena, and the chance to be able influence government policy and action on child care, protection and development in the future.

¹ This negligence is especially obvious in the maltreatment of women in general, and of pregnant women and parturients in public health care institutions; in scarce information on the benefits of and little support for breastfeeding, the failure of follow-up to mothers and new-borns and with babies and small children in general; all responsibilities of the public health care system.