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THE ABORIGINAL CHILD IN THE MODERN WORLD*

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How can one describe him? Cheeky, shy, mischievous, intelligent. He is all of these. He also has a great sense of humour and great powers of observation and hearing. Sometimes I've found his sense of humour rather weird, but I've found it's because he cannot express himself in words, so he laughs at things, even someone else's misfortunes.

Since working with them I have found there is a difference between the urban child and the humpy child.

Urban children grow up in an ordinary urban situation like any other child. Their best friend could be the European kid next door and they can be welcome in each other's homes at any time. They are very much integrated and can be found with a mixed group of any nationality. Their ideas are much the same: to grow up and get a job - an apprenticeship if a boy, or a truck driver. The girls think teaching or typing would be nice. These children feel pretty secure, especially if they have parents who are either Christians or non-drinkers.

Both urban and humpy children have strong family ties and become terribly lonely if away from familiar surroundings. Little children are protected by other people even when deserted by their own mothers. I found, if I have them home to stay with me for a weekend, the children usually want to stay longer and when they return to the family they usually go up in the rest of the family's estimation. They are very interested in all you do in the home - from cooking a meal to washing and cleaning. They want to know why you do this, that or the other, and they follow you around, watching. They like to help you do things and you can end up having quite a hilarious time in the kitchen.

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Talking to the urban child about school, he has the same problems as any other child coping with his school work; hates school but he goes because of parental pressure. His mother takes her turn behind the counter in the school tuckshop and dad is interested in the activities of the school. But children from problem homes just stop going. If told by their parents to go to school, they refuse because they just don't want to go. Most parents won't push their children. They will join in the gambling with the rest of the family and won't budge if told to go. They know they won't be made to go. They know they won't get any sympathy at school - teachers just don't understand or even begin to understand what sort of a night these children have had.

One school has a good idea - the vice-principal, once a month, visits the parents of all the children whether it be humpy or urban, and she invites the parents up to visit the school and see the children at work and to have morning tea. This is working well - children are encouraged, teachers realise what conditions the children live in and are more sympathetic, and mothers have some idea of what mysterious things the children do at school all day. This encourages the parents to send their children off each day.

The kids say they can't get interested or excited about some of the subjects taught at school - history and all that stuff. I'm afraid I sympathise with them. I've found they are intelligent, quick to grasp things that interest them. If they are shown how to do something practical and they are interested, they can usually do it themselves right off, no problems.

The child from the humpy or camp environment (or who has urban parents who drink and gamble) feels insecure and does not seem to want to think about the day he will actually grow up. He takes each day as it comes. He will want to be what his father is - be it stockman or council worker, but he usually doesn't think too much about it. He is more inclined to stick to his own race or even have little gangs. These little gangs, who get around together, usually end up in trouble with the police. They can be from six years old upwards. Breaking and entering, vandalism and shop-lifting seem to follow. Shop-lifting is not a crime as they view it - it's just taking something that they like and if caught they are quite happy to put it back and carry on as if nothing untoward has happened. When asked why it was taken, the answer is usually, "Because I liked it."

It worries him that his parents drink, and he often says he wished they didn't. A lot of times he tries to ignore it as he has seen it all his life. He will complain he is kept awake at night if

parents or families are fighting, and he is so tired next day that he stays home from school. A lot of times he says he can't go to school as there is no food for breakfast. Once he starts to fall behind at school he hates going, as he never seems to catch up. If he is picked on by an unsympathetic teacher he won't go at all and plays the wag, usually with half a dozen others.

Teachers are not always sympathetic to the problems of the Aboriginal or Islander child. Because he is inattentive in class he is passed off as dull, stupid, can't be taught. Some children cannot hear what is being taught, partially because of perforated ear drums and being deaf. On the other hand, I also know teachers who, because a child is bright, give him lots of encouragement at school and help him as much as possible - and I am not speaking of sports.

A lot of times a bright child is not recognised as such at home. The parents feel threatened by the bright kid - he talks about things they are not familiar with. If he is a High School student and is bright, this is quite noticeable - they boast about him and you can see the pride in their eyes and hear it in their voices - but there is also fear, because he will be lost to that other world outside.

They don't really worry over much about colour problems, but get a little envious when they go to the white mates' places and see all the material things they have, such as fridges full of food, freezers, stereos, BM-X bikes, and swimming pools. But this works both ways, as the white mates envy the way they can just go off with their friends swimming in the nearest water hole, or pile into a car and travel hundreds of miles to visit relations, even on school days. So they really don't worry too much about colour problems. They don't have any problems in shops or cafes where they always seem to have heaps of money to spend.

They still believe in ghosts, and I have often been told of hair-raising experiences. Old myths are still part of their lives but hunting has become motorised. To have to walk is "not on". Bush foods are ignored for the shop in town, but often they will go fishing or hunting if a car is available or if it's not too far to walk. Taxis are used a lot by parents to go visiting or to town, so they don't do as much walking these days as they used to. Bicycles don't last very long, once they break down they are ignored and left to rust. Material things don't mean a lot at all, but the things they really count are family ties, relationships, a belonging to a place, friendship, sharing of each other's homes, food and clothes. These mean everything to them and this is what they've taught me. My life has been the richer for having known them.