

# What is Life Like for the New Zealand Child in 2009?

By Sean Pawson

## Are Kiwi Children still an Endangered Species?

**O**ur neighbours Robyn and Pete and their heavy metal mates were partying hard again. The mounting pile of Lion Red cans and bottles on the front lawn and the sweet smelling smoke drifting on the breeze were evidence of the brain addling fuel they were running on. As evening arrived *Guns N' Roses* got wound up a notch or three on the stereo. By the time Gill and I tucked our own children under their duvets the conversations next door had got sharp and brutal. My skin prickled and crawled with the mounting tension.

### Snarling like pit bulls

Suddenly the evening air was shattered by violent shouts. Screams erupted, followed by the smash of breaking glass. "Robyn's children are in there", I thought to myself. I ran outside, jumped the fence and crunched my way over bloody pieces of a shattered window lying on the back steps. Pete and another testosterone-charged male were in the living room standing nose to nose snarling like a couple of pit bulls. Pete had blood pouring from a nasty deep wound in his hand. A group of other adults were hauling on their limbs and clothes, trying to prise them apart.

They paused in sudden surprise and stared at me with hostile gazes as I entered the carnage. The adrenalin was pumping through my body but



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my mind was calm. "Where are the children, Robyn?" I asked. Recognising me, she pointed to a bedroom door. "I think it would be better if I took them over to our house", I said. She nodded, so I stepped over and turned the handle.

Three sets of terror stricken eyes peered out at me from a huddle of trembling bodies and entwined limbs. Stevie, Bobby and Michelle were there cowering and clutching each other in fear in the corner of the room. The protagonists, oblivious to their trauma, continued to rant and tear at each other in the other room.

I approached the children slowly, crouched and spoke what I hoped would be reassuring words. Stevie unravelled himself and climbed up into my arms. Bobby and Michelle grabbed my clothing. We shuffled out of the chaos and over to our home. Gill plucked Stevie from my hands and cuddled him with tearful eyes as we pulled the sliding door shut and blocked out the worst of the noise. We gave them something to eat and drink and tucked them up on

the couch. Tension slowly ebbed out of their bodies and they began to spill a few words and smiles.

Later I slipped into our own children's bedroom. I stood and listened to their slow breathing and watched them cuddling their teddies. The peace in the room was as palpable as the fear that I had encountered in the house next door. I wondered how Stevie and Bobby and Michelle would sleep that night. I wondered too about all the other kids in the street...

### A provocative book

A few years before we launched our evening rescue Lesley Max, a New Zealand mother, journalist and teacher researched and explored the social conditions in which Kiwi kids were growing up. In 1990 she published her findings in a provocative book called *Children: Endangered Species*. Among other things she observed that "the lives of a startling number of our children are poor, nasty, brutish and short". She concluded that Godzone was "bad territory for many children".<sup>1</sup>

Eighteen years have passed since Lesley Max published her findings and many of us are wondering if the social conditions in which children are now growing up in are any better? What will life be like for a Kiwi Kid on the good ship *Aotearoa New Zealand* in 2009?

Life on board for many will continue to improve. They'll curl up happy at night with their teddies, ipods and cell phones; well respected, well valued and well loved. Many committed parents will continue to work hard to provide and nurture their children.

How will people respond to the fear-filled eyes and wounded cries of our nation's most needy children?

Government policies such as *Working for Families* will help keep many above the poverty line. Charitable organisations such as Lesley Max's *Great Potentials Foundation* will continue to implement schemes that raise the educational levels of struggling kids and empower them to achieve. Agencies such as *Parents Inc* will continue to equip parents to love their kids better. Churches such as my own Baptist will continue to provide valuable moral and spiritual guidance to parents and children.

Good and honest endeavour will continue, but I predict there will be more Stevies, Bobbys and Michelles cowering in the corners of their rooms in 2009 than there were in 1990. Recently the NZ Police announced that more than 1300 assaults on children under 14 were recorded in the year to June 2008, up from less than 1000 the previous year.

Figures released by NZ Statistics over the last two decades reveal that in recent years onboard conditions for children have dramatically deteriorated. They show big increases in children living in

poverty, domestic violence, assaults against children, abortion, divorce, teenage pregnancies, absent fathers, blended families and single parent households. Misconduct, truancy, drug taking and violence in schools have also become more common. Media for children has become more violent, sexualised, profane and pervasive.

### How will people respond?

As the waves and anti-shocks of global recession continue to batter our tiny economy conditions will worsen and more children will suffer. Wombs, homes and schools will become increasingly difficult and dangerous places for many children.

How will people respond to the fear-filled eyes and wounded cries of our nation's most needy children? Sadly some conspiracy theorists, fear-mongering preachers and end-times obsessives will shut their ears and lick their lips. They will feel reinforced in their prejudices and justified in their judgements.

Some politicians will tweak the data and stories to provide emotive leverage for their agendas. Some pessimists will throw up their hands in despair and withdraw into their own dark worlds. Some citizens deluded by the myth of the self-made woman will tell the parents and kids to pull themselves out of it.

Some parents will collapse under the weight of their own failures and flaws.

Many however will put their sonar into the ocean of human need and feel the heartbeat of the Creator rising up from its depths. A number won't recognise the source of their compassion but they will feel the pain of the children and climb all kinds of fences to make a difference in their lives. Others will find themselves drawn by Jesus to descend into greatness. They will back-climb the ecclesiastical and corporate ladders and give themselves to the service of children and families.

In 2009 we will still hear the cries of the children on the evening breezes in our neighbourhoods. I hope and pray however that there will be more hearts that are stirred and feet that are moved to provide help, healing and hope.

1. Lesley Max, *Children: Endangered Species*, Penguin, 1996, back cover quote.

This article was originally published in *Daystar* magazine, December 2008, and is reprinted with permission. Sean Pawson, a father of five, was formerly Children's Ministry consultant for the Baptist Churches of New Zealand. He has also coordinated CAFF, a network of national and regional personnel from various Christian organisations and denominations who work with children and families. He has been a team leader for the *Cycling with the Poor* Project, in partnership with World Vision.



The Pawson Family, from left: Isaac, Elizabeth, Gill, Anna, Ben, Bethany and Sean.