



Children's Reintegration



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Strategies to ensure the sustainable reintegration of children without parental care: JUCONI, Mexico

[Family for Every Child](#) is a diverse, global network of hands-on national organisations with over 300 years' combined experience. We work with the millions of children in extended family care, in institutions, in detention, on the streets, as well as those without adequate care within their own families. We are a catalyst for global and local change. Our network provides a platform for sharing and amplifying the expertise of our members. We work with others who share our vision to enable significantly more children to grow up in secure families and access temporary, quality alternative care when needed.

[JUCONI](#) works in Mexico tackling the social exclusion of children and families from poor and violent homes. JUCONI's unique psycho-social intervention achieves permanent positive change that creates productive families that are free of violence and street involvement. This eco-systemic intervention focuses on helping all family members recover from the damage caused by violent relationships, providing children with strengthened families, opportunities for academic achievement, economic opportunities for older children as well as positive relationships with society

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Acronyms

DIF	Department for the Integral Development of the Family (Social Services)
FGD	Focus group discussion
JUCONI	Junto con los Niños – Together with the Children
NGO	Non-governmental organisation

Executive summary

This paper reports on the Mexican arm of Family for Every Child's three-country study on strategies to ensure the sustainable reintegration of children without parental care. It set out to address the question: "What are successful elements in strategies to ensure the sustainable reintegration of children without parental care?", as identified from a 15-month study on work on family reintegration with boys who have lived on the streets (or been at identifiably high risk of doing so), and their families, in Puebla, Mexico.

The JUCONI Foundation (JUCONI: Junto con los Niños – Together with the Children) has worked with boys who live on the street, and with both boys and girls who work on the street, and their families, for over 20 years. Its work with street-living boys and their families has three stages: (i) contact, befriending and motivation (ii) intensive change: for boys, this involves one to three years in an open door residential programme and bi-monthly home visits to families; for families, a weekly home visit providing therapeutic and welfare support (iii) 'follow on', a series of further home visits to boys and their families over a period of one to three years after a boy has returned home. Although JUCONI's goal is family reunification, where this is not viable boys have the option of staying on in a Youth House to prepare for independent living. Even when boys are staying in the Youth House, relationships with families are built and sustained.

Research methods: The study involved semi-structured interviews at one to three time points with 14 boys who had returned to their families or were in the process of doing so, and with their families, over a period of 14 months. Six more boys who did not return to their families, but had developed relationships with their families, were also interviewed. Project staff were also interviewed one-on-one or in focus group discussions.

JUCONI's methodological framework:

From the early 2000s, JUCONI's work took on an explicitly psychotherapeutic orientation to complement and strengthen the educational and social focus of its early work, as it became increasingly aware of the depth and complexity of experiences of violence and loss in the lives of the children and families with which it worked. Increasingly, research is showing the effect of exposure to violence (even witnessing violence) in childhood on mental health problems, physical health and even on social capital in later life. JUCONI came to the conclusion that for other, e.g. educational, gains to be sustained, it is essential first to heal the effects of trauma. This led on to the development of a therapeutic orientation in addition to its core educational work.

Preparation and intensive family work – foundations of successful reintegration:

In order to understand 'what works' in reunification, this paper describes in some detail the 'intensive change' phase of life (before even beginning to work on reintegration) in an open door community, for boys, and home visits for families.

Theoretical foundation: This paper begins by providing a brief overview of JUCONI's theoretical foundation, which is built on attachment theory (incorporating the Dynamic Maturational Model of attachment relationships), a psychodynamic understanding of behaviour, and trauma theory.

Operational strategy: In line with Dr Sandra Bloom's Sanctuary Model, this involves four core components: (i) creation of an experience of safety for children and families (ii) providing children and families with strategies to recognise and manage their emotions (iii) enabling trauma to be processed and destructive coping patterns to be replaced with more beneficial coping strategies (iv) enabling the child and family to make more positive choices for the future.

JUCONI creates a safe environment through, among other things (i) modelling – providing the child (and parents and other family members) with the experience of permanent and positive relationships (ii) having clearly planned routines and a clearly defined system of structures and procedures to help containment of potential violence (iii) creating a common language for talking about trauma, with staff, children, youth and families (iv) having a clear educational-therapeutic goal for every intervention (v) personalised child and family life plans (vi) ensuring that residential settings are pleasant and that children participate actively in the day-to-day running of these spaces. At the same time, JUCONI uses therapeutic interventions, responses and strategies which help children and parents gain insights into their experiences, develop self-esteem and emotional well-being, and build healthy relationships enabling them to readjust their responses to stress and replace damaging coping strategies with more effective choices.

Results: The following issues were considered essential (by staff, boys and/or families) in order to achieve reintegration: (i) there is no violence in the family (ii) children and adults alike considered that the capacity to ‘reason’, ‘communicate’ and resolve conflict is needed: as JUCONI educators and some of the boys interviewed explained, unilateral changes do not work (iii) parents are able to assume their responsibilities to nurture and to establish boundaries/limits (iv) the child’s return is supported by all family members including siblings and, where relevant, extended family members – the family must really want the child back (v) reintegration is phased gradually, with the child and family becoming ‘acclimatised’ to each other. JUCONI uses some key tools, including a nine-item scale, to assess as objectively as possible whether families are ready for reintegration.

The following is a summary of lessons learned about managing the early weeks of reintegration: (i) it is necessary to identify and deal with adults’ and children’s anxieties about reintegration; JUCONI has developed the term ‘protected time’ for the first three months in order to reduce the anxieties of children and adults who felt they were being tested (ii) it is necessary to ensure again that the family really wants the child back (iii) it is also

necessary to ensure again that the child is not exposed to danger, including witnessing domestic violence or more subtle emotional attacks (iv) parents and children need to have realistic expectations of life together. Conditions for return need not be ideal (e.g. physical infrastructure may still need work) as educators will continue to work with the family through intensive home visits. The return of the boy to the family is part of the process of change that is being worked on; it is not the end of the process. The role of educators in the ‘follow-on’ period – for a year or more after reintegration – is therefore of enormous importance.

Although experience has shown that these can be overcome, problems can and usually do surface during and after ‘protected time’. In this particular cohort, difficulties arose around the following issues: (i) violence in families had not wholly ceased (ii) boys’ need for more involvement and supervision than their (working) parents could actually offer them – expressed in challenging behaviour (iii) disappointments for both boys and their families, arising from unrealistic expectations of what daily life would be like. Where difficulties between parents and children arose, these were exacerbated by the absence of space for exercise and sports in the neighbourhoods to which children returned. These factors corroborate the need for follow-on work with the child and family after the child has returned. In a final focus group discussion, JUCONI educators identified the need for more work with extended families and communities in order to strengthen protective networks around the family to support the child’s reintegration.

Conclusions: The study shows that satisfying family reintegration is possible even for boys who have had histories of violence and loss in the context of social exclusion, and in families with transgenerational failures of attachment. However, the ‘elements’ of successful reintegration cannot be introduced without understanding JUCONI’s theoretical foundation. A key recommendation of this study for organisations that work with comparable populations is to explore this foundation, since it could enable them to adapt and develop strategies that are appropriate to their own context.

1. Introduction

Family for Every Child is a global network of civil society organisations working to ensure more children can grow up safe and protected in families and be provided with quality, appropriate temporary alternative care, if needed. A prime aim of this work is to enable children to live within their own families, either by preventing loss of parental care or by reintegrating children who have become separated. In January 2011, Family for Every Child commissioned desk-based research on reintegration, which examined the evidence on reintegration from literature on child protection in emergencies, children in care, and child exploitation, and provided definitions, principles for good practice, and guidance on specific stages of reintegration. Through interviews with experts, the research also identified the work of other agencies on reintegration, gaps in knowledge and understanding, and the needs of partners and country programmes. One such gap was the need for more longitudinal research on reintegration, and Family for Every Child then commissioned such research in Moldova, Nepal and Mexico. This report provides findings from Mexico.

The research is based on the following definition of reintegration: *“The process of a child without parental care making a move to their biological parent/s and usually their community of origin or, where this is not possible, to another form of family-based care that is intended to be permanent.”*¹

Broadly, the research aims to answer the following question: *“What are successful elements in strategies to ensure the sustainable reintegration of children without parental care?”*

1.1 The JUCONI Foundation, Puebla, Mexico

JUCONI (Junto con los Niños – Together with the Children) is a Mexican non-governmental organisation (NGO) founded in 1989. Its mission is to develop, implement and share effective solutions for children, adolescents and families who are both poor and affected by violence. It combines programmes for three core populations: (i) street-living boys (ii) street-working boys and girls and (iii) boys and girls who work in markets, as well as their families. It also provides a range of training and support services for other organisations that work with populations affected by family violence, poverty and inequality, including a diploma course on working with marginalised populations affected by violence. JUCONI is based in the city of Puebla (population two million), a provincial capital close to Mexico City. In 2011, when this research project began, Juconi had 76 staff. At the time, it was working directly with 351 children (this includes the siblings of children who live or work on the streets) who were part of 116 families.

Direct services to children and families

JUCONI has three programmes for children with street connections: (i) for boys who have lived on the street or are at high risk of doing so, and for their families (ii) for girls and boys who work on the street, and their families and (iii) for girls and boys who work in Puebla’s main market, and their families. Each includes preventive services for siblings at particularly high risk of taking to the street, and each involves family-based work to address the root causes of intergenerational cycles of neglect and abuse.

1. Definition developed in the desk-based research commissioned by Family for Every Child. This does not encompass adoption processes.

Each programme is divided into three stages (Table 1). For children living on the streets and separated from their families (the subject of this study), the programme includes one-three years

in small group residential care and home-based services for their families, followed by a further two-three years of home-based services once the child has been reintegrated.

Table 1: Sub-programmes and stages

	Street-living boys Parents/caregivers extended family where possible Siblings	Children who work on the street Parents/caregivers extended family where possible Siblings	Children who work in and around the central market Parents/caregivers extended family where possible Siblings
MEETING AND MOTIVATING 'Operation Friendship'	Meeting children on the street; referrals from Social Services Contact with child's family Encouraging children to choose 'intensive engagement'	Meeting children on the street Contact with child's family Encouraging children to choose 'intensive engagement'	Families refer themselves or are referred to JUCONI Centre by schools or by other parents
THERAPEUTIC AND EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT Intensive change	1–3 years Residential (children) Home based (family)	1–3 years home-based activities	1– 2 years home-based and day centre-based activities
CONSOLIDATING CHANGE Follow on	2–3 years home-based services	1–3 years home-based services	1–2 years home and centre-based services

This study focuses only on boys who have lived on the street or been at high risk of doing so. Over two decades, less than ten girls have been identified by the street outreach team, as there are few girls living on the streets in Puebla; these girls have been referred to partner agencies. JUCONI does not therefore have experience in working with girls without parental care, something that will need to be borne in mind when reflecting on the conclusions of this study.

1.2 JUCONI's theoretical framework

In addition to poverty and inequality, most of the children and families with whom JUCONI works

have experienced painful losses, neglect, and engagement in family violence in a mixture of roles – as victims, perpetrators and witnesses. In most cases, their experiences have not been processed adequately and have left scars which are evident in their behaviour. Common symptoms observed include: self-exposure to dangerous situations without awareness of internal or external limits; difficulties in forming relationships; harm to self and others; difficulty in managing emotions or talking about feelings; difficulty in dealing with change; difficulty in controlling impulses; regression and immature behaviour for their age; alarming levels of attention-seeking behaviour; difficulty in learning and maintaining values; substance abuse; disorientation and difficulty in accounting

for time; lack of memory; nightmares or night terrors.

Over time, since JUCONI was founded, it became clear that these behavioural problems were an expression of serious underlying problems and that to achieve sustainable change in other, e.g. cognitive and social, domains, it would be necessary to address the root causes of these behaviours. In 1997, JUCONI began working with Gianna Williams from the Tavistock Clinic in London, UK and, as a result of introducing a psychodynamic approach to case analysis, came to see that the unresolved trauma caused by loss and violence in the family was the underlying cause of these behavioural

issues which then led to other (multiple) forms of violence throughout the life course. JUCONI came to the conclusion that for other, e.g. educational, gains to be sustained, it is essential first to heal the effects of trauma and that this requires a therapeutic process.² As a result, the organisation's work took on an explicitly therapeutic orientation in parallel with core educational work.

The following brief summary illustrates the forms of violence and loss experienced by many children with 'street connections' (Thomas de Benitez 2007, 2011) in JUCONI's programmes. It will probably resonate with the experience of practitioners elsewhere.

Case study: Santiago, 13, pre-reunification – interview with Monica, Family Team

Throughout Santi's mother's relationship with his stepfather (the father of her two younger children) Santi had witnessed many violent situations. He wanted to leave, especially when he saw his mother being beaten. He was also harassed by other children in his neighbourhood. One positive aspect of their lives was the presence of grandparents who were very involved with the children. When his mother, Doña Ana, left her partner, and Santi's grandfather moved out at the same time, according to Santi himself: "Everything went out of control." Santi began to spend a lot of time away from home, became more rebellious, stopped obeying his mother, and was challenging; when he left the house, he would say to his mother: "Catch me!" In despair she sought out Social Services, and even contacted the penitentiary. Social Services then contacted JUCONI.

While Dr Gianna Williams from the Tavistock Clinic had provided JUCONI with an understanding of attachment theory and psychodynamic thinking, in the early 2000s JUCONI was introduced to trauma theory as articulated by Dr Sandra Bloom (1997).³ Trauma theory provides an account of the experience of children who lack attachment security and who are also exposed to high levels of violence and abuse.⁴ In this context, 'trauma' has a specific meaning which should not be confused with other uses of the term: it refers to the effect of

chronic violence and transgenerational failures of attachment on children's physical, psychological and social functioning.

A substantial and growing body of research that bridges neurobiology and attachment theory has shown the effect of violence and neglect on children's brain development (see for example Repetti et al. 2002). Exposure to actual or perceived danger generates the release of stress hormones in the cerebral cortex; when children are continuously in this condition, the

2 See Safe Families Safe Children. Breaking the cycle of violence – building a future for the most excluded, for a full description of JUCONI's understanding of the impact of violence on behaviour and life outcome. <http://www.theict.org/files/SFSC-web.pdf>

3 Introduced to JUCONI by Dr Sandra Bloom.

4 See Appendix 1 for a brief introduction to attachment theory

development of other functions of the brain (cognition, affect regulation) are compromised (Luecken and Lemery 2004; Edwards et al. 2005). Increasingly, research is showing the

effect of exposure to violence (even witnessing violence) in childhood on mental health, physical health and even on social capital in later life.⁵ See diagram below:⁶



Although there is a growing body of evidence that shows the relationship between family violence and children’s engagement with street life (Thomas de Benitez 2007) there is little guidance as to how that trauma can be resolved, especially in the context of low income countries or transitional economies. Furthermore, few organisations working with street-living children pay much attention to children’s families, in spite of the fact that the children at highest risk of developing street connections are siblings of street-connected children. They, after all, come from the same background and face the same risk factors.

JUCONI’s therapeutic work builds on several sources, but owes important debts to the Tavistock Clinic and to the Sanctuary Model (JUCONI is part of the Sanctuary Network).⁷ A key premise of both the Tavistock’s approach and the Sanctuary Model is that **to attend and resolve the effects of trauma, a person first needs to experience safety in the form of a positive, permanent relationship with a reliable, responsive and caring person.** The Sanctuary Model neatly expresses the

necessary elements for healing trauma using the acronym ‘SELF’.

- **S**ecurity – this involves strategies which create a safe environment. The most crucial element of this involves stable, caring relationships in which the child’s behaviour is understood as a language which communicates what the child finds too painful and confusing to able to put into words. These relationships help establish internal and external limits to behaviour which – together with a well-designed daily routine – create a predictable and stable environment. These relationships also create a support network which provides containment and helps the child to develop an understanding of the consequences of violent acts for oneself and for others.
- **E**motions – the use of strategies which help the traumatised child to name, recognise and interpret his or her own emotions. The focus of these strategies is to help the child manage and express emotions appropriately.

5 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study <http://www.cdc.gov/ace/>; United Nations General Secretary’s Study on Violence Against Children (2006) <http://www.unviolencestudy.org/>; see also Anda (2006).

6 From Safe Families Safe Children manual: <http://www.theict.org/files/SFSC-web.pdf>

7 <http://www.sanctuaryweb.com/organizational-change.php> JUCONI Ecuador had a key role in setting the groundwork and developing this contact.

- **L**oss – essentially allowing the child to reflect on the suffering caused by traumatic experiences and to mourn the losses she/he has experienced, including the loss of his or her childhood. This stage is vital to ensure that trauma is processed and destructive coping strategies are replaced with more beneficial coping strategies, empowering the child to look to the future..
- **F**uture – strategies to help the child imagine and plan where he/she will be in the medium and long term and build his/her capacity to hope for a good future and work towards achieving it.

As JUCONI Director Alison Lane observes:

“We recognise that not all children living on the street have been equally affected by violence and loss. But we think this is largely true of street-involved children in Latin America... Not all street-connected children will need a programme of this nature. But our experience has shown that for those who have been compromised by chronic violence, loss and poverty, something like this is necessary.”

1.3 Development of a therapeutic environment and culture⁸

Since 2000, in order to develop an environment in which children and families experience security, JUCONI has adopted an organisation-wide cultural shift that has involved the creation of shared values, culture and language. In practice, this means that all staff members, including administrative and support staff, develop within the organisation as a whole a commitment to non-violence and the adoption of a common language with which to deal with conflict. Even finance and administration staff receive training on the impact of violence and the way in which JUCONI works with children and families affected by violence. The engagement of every member of staff is important to sustain

a culture of non-violence within an organisation. Research in other contexts – for example, in schools – has repeatedly shown the critical importance of ‘organisation wide’ or ‘whole system’ approaches to violence prevention.⁹

The creation of a SAFE environment involves several integrated elements.

i) **Modelling – providing the child (and parents and other family members) with the experience of permanent and positive relationships.**

Providing this relationship is the cornerstone of JUCONI’s therapeutic work. It is based on the understanding that parents did not receive the care and affection they needed from their own parents and are therefore unable to be ‘good enough’ parents themselves because they do not have appropriate experiences and strategies to draw on. They need to experience being held in mind, cared for and unconditionally accepted themselves before they are able to provide this level of care for their own children. Educators/therapists work from a strengths-based approach and have to learn the delicate balance of unconditionally accepting the child/parent while setting limits on their behaviours. The relationship is non-judgemental and empathic; educators must be perceived as reliable, even-handed and fair etc. As one staff member explained: *“Many parents have badly abused and neglected their children ... but they too have been ‘punished’ and abused in life and we have needed to learn to work alongside them.”* (Jorge Villar, former Director of Methodology, JUCONI).

ii) **Having a clearly defined structure, clearly planned routines, systems and procedures**

that are intended to create a sense of structure, order and predictability and therefore of safety. (See SELF stages, above). Each child or adult engaged with JUCONI takes part in scheduled activities. Families have copies of the planned routines and are encouraged to display them.

⁸ This section derives from an evaluation by Anita Schrader McMillan of JUCONI’s therapeutic, sports and recreational programmes undertaken for UBS-Optimus in 2009 and an EC-funded project.

⁹ See for example, <http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/MentalWellbeingChildrenSystematicReview.pdf>; http://www.dataprevproject.net/Educational_Settings.

In JUCONI House and JUCONI Centre, timetables are prominently displayed, so that each person knows the times of activities in which s/he is engaged and staff can monitor all activities. Schedules are the most detailed in JUCONI House, where street-living children engage in school, learning activities, sports, recreational time and therapeutic activities, as well as daily chores and routine house meetings. While boys are doing different things (because their schedules are personalised) they all know what their activities are.

JUCONI educators work to create physical reminders of reliable environments and steps to avoid violence within children's family environments. Families are encouraged to display schedules and 'thermometers' and each participant and family has their own 'safety plan'. Educators often stick the results of group work up on the wall (in one case, 'a shield' that depicted the families' strengths); and stick up a schedule that shows when educators will be visiting again; in this same case, this was stuck on the fridge door. The timetable helped remind the family of the commitment they had made together with

the educator, while the image provided an attractive reminder of their family's strengths and qualities.

iii) Having a clear therapeutic goal to every intervention. Therapeutic intent is crucial to providing for the child or parent a different quality of relationship and experience to the ones they have so far experienced and one which will help them learn something about themselves and enable them to shift their perspective on life. Part of the creation of a therapeutic environment involves understanding the effect of even small interactions and routine activities. It also involves all staff being aligned both methodologically and in knowing the objectives and treatment plan for each child and family and using all interactions to work towards these. Hiking and camping trips (see below) are fun, but also opportunities to learn how to relate and work in a group in exacting conditions, how to manage frustration (rage!) and other emotions in new settings and more positively, how to set and achieve goals. Camp leaders/educators work with individuals and with the group.



Illustration 1: JUCONI House hiking trip. This is recreation – with multiple therapeutic and educational functions as well.

As JUCONI staff reiterated: “Activities are the means, and not an end in themselves, and it is the intent behind activities which gives them meaning and defines the impact they will – or will not – have.” For example, the key objective of a maths class in JUCONI House is for the child to experience positive interaction with the educator and other group members. Learning to add or subtract is a secondary objective which cannot be achieved until the first is in place. Activities such as celebrating each child’s birthday are used to signal the child’s individuality and importance.

iv) Personalised child and family treatment plans. When children and families agree to take part in the programme, educators work with them to create a personalised

plan. This plan has objectives which range from personal care, (nutrition, dental health, medical check-ups etc.), economic goals (e.g. access to government support for families in extreme poverty), to family functioning (alternatives to hitting children, roles, decision making etc.). These individualised plans are evaluated every three to six months by child and educators or family and educators together. Activities in which the child or family engages are designed to enable them to achieve their personalised objectives. The plan is developed by both educator and family in a way that models respect and empathy. The actions expected from each party are clearly outlined. JUCONI educators contact the members of a child and family’s personal support network, visiting schools, extended family members and recreational facilities.



Illustration 2: This photograph is of a girl who is involved in JUCONI’s programme for children who work in markets. She is holding a copy of the ‘thermometer’, one of several tools used by children, families and staff to build awareness of emotional states. If emotions feel comfortable and well-managed they are ‘green’ on the thermometer or between 0 and 3. If they threaten to escalate beyond what is manageable, they may be described as ‘yellow’ or even ‘red’. When emotions start to become hard to manage, it is time to turn to one’s personal safety plan.

Staff and children carry with them a small, laminated card with their personal safety plan (one of the strategies inherent in the Sanctuary Model). When emotions are escalating, the idea is to do something to calm or sooth yourself. These are ranked from 1 (managing slightly heightened emotions) to 5 (emotions that are spiralling out of control). It may be enough to do step one – e.g. breathing deeply, counting to 10, stepping outdoors. Stronger emotions could require the help of someone else, or the chance to talk to a trusted person. As this is an organisation-wide approach, all staff members (including administrative, finance and other staff with limited contact with children) learn about the use of these tools.



Illustration 3: A Family Team member engages in an activity during a home visit. He is wearing his personal safety plan on a cord round his neck. He is showing the family picture cards depicting faces with a variety of expressions. The children and their mother discuss the feelings these cards represent and the sorts of events that can lead to these feelings and learn to identify their own emotions.

v) Strategies to prevent and manage

violence. The definition of violence used in JUCONI is very broad. It includes name calling, being rude, using bad language, deliberately damaging property, excluding someone from an activity, or not speaking to someone, as well as physical violence. The group or community meeting which starts and ends every family session, every day in JUCONI House, or sessions in the Day Centre, is designed to promote stability and emphasise our responsibility not only to keep ourselves safe, but to help keep others – the community – safe. Boys/family sit in a circle and can share feelings, discuss and plan issues of interest and take turns to coordinate the discussion (with the observation and oversight of a key educator).

Daily community meetings form the template for emergency meetings, which any child or adult in JUCONI House can convene, in order to discuss a problem: e.g. an act of violence by another child. Meetings begin in the same way – with each participant saying his or her name and describing how they are feeling and how well they are managing those feelings. This helps participants engage in reflection on their internal states – a key to learning management of heightened emotions. Reflection often involves use of the **‘thermometer’**, a metaphor for emotional arousal. As emergency community meetings follow the same format as routine ones, children learn how to resolve disputes democratically and transparently when they occur. These meetings provide an even higher level of containment when a crisis arises. For example, one of the risks inherent in residential programmes for street-living children (most of whom will have had some sexual experience, usually abusive, before entering the programme) is sexual abuse between children. This is openly discussed and children know what steps to follow if they, or another child, is threatened or engages in sexualised behaviour. They also draw on their personal safety plan (see illustration 2).

A third strategy, used routinely within JUCONI Centre and JUCONI House, is **the register of violent incidents**. Every act of physical, emotional, social or moral violence is recorded in order to heighten awareness of violence and measure levels of violence. The number of ‘violent acts’ committed in a month is posted on a board (although no details are made public) in order to remind the community as a whole of their shared goal: to reduce the occurrence of such incidents.

The **Ladder of Achievement** is a motivational tool used in JUCONI House to emphasise the link between behaviour and consequences. The ladder is displayed on a wall as a series of steps each representing a different set of challenges and rewards, with photographs of children next to where they are on the ladder. As children become more mature and demonstrate their ability to keep themselves and others safe, they move up the ladder. ‘Rewards’ are not material – they correspond to the amount of responsibility, trust and freedom given to the child i.e. computer time, bed times, going out alone etc. Children on the ‘top rung’ are almost ready for graduation and have a considerable amount of autonomy. It is also possible to lose rewards and move down a step on the ladder.

The **Family Safety Plan**¹⁰ differs from an individual safety plan in that it is designed for use in families where there is a high level of danger and until a more permanent solution can be found. Ideally, all members of the family, including the perpetrator(s), participate in a session in which the danger is clearly named and the people at risk are identified along with all the tell-tale signs of imminent danger. All possible means of averting the danger and of keeping those at risk safe are explored, including the roles and actions each family member needs to take. It is particularly important to explore with the perpetrator – wherever possible – what measures he or she can take to avoid becoming violent. Often neighbours and teachers are involved

¹⁰ Developed by JUCONI Ecuador

to help provide a safe haven when necessary. Families who need this safety plan are visited several times a week and telephoned daily where possible.

vi) **Creating a common language for talking about trauma and attachment with staff, children, youth and families.**

Trauma theory and attachment theory, and the tools that JUCONI is developing, have helped create a shared understanding (among staff, families and children) of the effect of violence and loss. This involves finding non-threatening, age-appropriate ways to help children and families understand how violence affects our functioning.¹¹ Educators explained how in addition to developing their own understanding of how trauma affects a child's behaviour they also devise means of helping the child to understand the impact of violent experiences on human functioning, and what is physically happening when they are aroused. Understanding and being able to visualise what is happening when they are hyper-aroused can help them assume more responsibility for their behaviour. For instance, adolescents aged 13+ in JUCONI House and JUCONI Centre participate in workshops that explore the way in which exposure to violence, particularly family violence, can compromise a young person's response to stress. Films are useful in that they help to enable youngsters to talk about painful experiences in the third person until they are ready to talk directly about themselves. A movie called Antwone Fisher demonstrates night terrors, flashbacks and the compulsion to repeat unresolved trauma; Dumbo can be used to discuss the way in which loss can lead to depression.

vii) **Ensuring that physical spaces are attractive and welcoming.**

JUCONI House and JUCONI Centre are also designed to feel pleasant and inclusive. They are physically well-ordered and designed with bright colours, and differentiated spaces

create different moods – for study, relaxation, reflection.

“On my one previous visit (in 2003) I admired a mural in the common room of JUCONI House, a piece of art painted (as a donation) by a professional. This has since been superseded by a less sophisticated mural painted by children themselves, in order to encourage children's sense of ownership.”
(Anita Schrader McMillan, field notes, 2009).

This is an example (of which there are many) of ways in which the boys are encouraged to feel that this is 'their' place through actively participating and having a voice in the running of the house.

1.4 Therapeutic strategies

Within this **safe environment**, educators are trained to manage one-to-one and group relationships as well as **therapeutic interventions**. Other therapeutic processes are used which specifically aim to help children and parents gain insights into their experiences, develop self-esteem and emotional well-being, and build healthy relationships, all of which will enable them to readjust their responses to stress and replace damaging coping strategies with more effective ones.

These strategies include: 'Special Time' (a child-led therapeutic process designed by the Tavistock Clinic); forms of expressive therapy (such as play therapy using the 'sand box' technique illustrated below);¹² group work and family work. JUCONI has also recently introduced Video Interaction Guidance (VIG).¹³

The success of work with families and children depends primarily on the quality, capacity and long-term retention of staff. This is in turn underpinned by good leadership, management and the ability to raise funds for core work (See Appendix 2).

¹¹ These ideas and tools are derived from work by Dr Sandra Bloom and the Sanctuary Model team.

¹² For an introduction to this technique see http://www.gilcenter.com/images/Sand_Therapy_for_website.pdf

¹³ For an introduction to this technique see <http://www.videointeractionguidance.net/>



Illustration 4: A child and therapist in a therapy session, using the sand box technique pioneered by Eliana Gil.

2. Research methods

The following strategies were agreed by the research team and key JUCONI staff in March 2012. Further details on the research process are available from Anita Schrader McMillan.¹⁴

2.1 Participants

This study took place over 15 months. The sample has been divided into different cohorts:

- (i) 13 boys and youth preparing for reintegration or reintegrated with their families
 - Four boys who are preparing for reintegration, and their primary carers. These four include boys adopted by non-family members when they were infants (see table 3).
 - Two boys in 'protected time' (a three-month trial period for reintegration), and their primary carers (see table 3).
 - Seven boys living for six months or more with their primary carers (see table 2).
- (ii) Six youth who are in the Youth House or have moved on from the Youth House to independent living. These boys/young men have not returned to live with their families, but visit and have good relationships with family members.

Table 2: Boys interviewed who have been reintegrated for more than a year¹⁵

Name	Age when started street life	Age when came to JH	Age when reintegrated	Current age	Phase
Jonatan	12	13	14	19	Reintegrated a year ago
Guillermo	10	12	13	14	Reintegrated more than a year
Manuel	10	12	14	16	Reintegrated more than a year
Gregorio	11	12	14	17	Reintegrated more than a year
Francisco	7	9	15	19	Reintegrated more than a year
Edwin	11	13	14	20	Reintegrated more than a year
Jesus	8	10	13	16	Reintegrated more than a year

¹⁴ Further details on the research process and methods are available from the lead consultant: S.A.Schrader-McMillan@warwick.ac.uk.

¹⁵ All names and some identifying details have been changed.

Table 3: Boys interviewed who are preparing for reintegration or in the first stage of reintegration ('protected time')

Name	Age when started street life	Age when came to JH	Age when left JH	Current age	Stage
Santiago	11	11	13	13	JUCONI House, pre-reintegration
Esteban	11	12	15	15	JUCONI House, pre-reintegration
Eusebio	10	10	11	11	JUCONI House, pre-reintegration
Julio		6	13	13	JUCONI House, pre-reintegration
Abel	11	12	16	16	Protected time
Leonardo	12	13	14	14	Protected time

Boys and families were interviewed at different time points. Thus for example, children who were in 'protected time' early on in the project were interviewed at periodic intervals (every four months), while boys who have been reintegrated for over a year were interviewed at one point only. These timings were also applied to research with boys who did not return to live with their families. In addition, key workers (the Family Team and other key staff) were interviewed one-on-one and in two focus groups, at the beginning and end of the data collection phase.

Interview data was transcribed in Spanish, and both members of the research team read through data noting recurring themes that

emerged in interviews with parents, children and other family members. This enabled the creation of data sets based on recurrent themes that emerged from interviews and focus group discussion (FGDs).

Findings have been organised into three sections: (i) preparation (ii) managing the first three months and (iii) sustaining reintegration. Section 4 focuses on boys who have not been able to return to their biological families, but who maintain what we have termed 'emotional reintegration' – the capacity to sustain a relationship with family members while developing an independent life

3. Elements of success: emerging findings

3.1 Preparation: what appears to be essential for reunification to begin?

To recapitulate: boys in the street-living child programme are contacted by JUCONI educators and motivated to take part in the programme. In cases where the child still has some contact with their family or has not been away from the family for long, every effort is made to work with the child and family in their homes, with residential care as a last resort. Increasingly, the initial approach to JUCONI is made by extended family members who are worried about the boy's behaviour – his violence, drug taking, time on the streets, truancy, trouble with the police. Children are sometimes taken into state institutions by Social Services, which then contact JUCONI. Where a child has regular contact with his family, both are invited to visit JUCONI House and take part in some activities (sports, games, and meals) before they make a decision about whether or not a child should live for a time in JUCONI House. In the case of families that live far away from JUCONI and would find it difficult to visit, educators show photograph albums so the family can have an idea of the environment in which the boy will live.

Boys then move into JUCONI House, currently a community of 20 youngsters and eight staff. It is an 'open door' community where children come and go to school and other activities in accordance with their age and circumstances and with the knowledge and permission of educators – much as in a family. Everyday life is structured around routines, schooling, sports, art and creative activities etc.; within this structured environment, children have a time for therapy (Special Time/play therapy) every week. There is a shared language and a series of shared and understood strategies to help individual children and the community as a whole to

manage problems (conflict, depression) as they arise. Boys in JUCONI House are looked after by a rotating team of educators, who are also trained as therapists, but one-on-one therapy is managed by staff who do not work in the house itself to avoid confusion between the therapeutic process and everyday life. There are no guards. Staff and boy create an individualised personal plan, setting and revising goals which the boy wants to achieve and the strategies he will use. These range from issues like anger management to the development of skills and interests.

If a boy has been separated from his family for a while, JUCONI seeks them out and starts to build a relationship as soon as possible. As will be seen the concept of family is highly elastic, and can include biological family, extended kin, stepparents, godparents or families who have informally 'adopted' the child. The Family Team sends two people to begin weekly home visits.¹⁶ JUCONI stresses that the children 'at highest risk' of street life are the siblings of street-engaged children, since they share the same context and environment as the sibling who left to live on the street. Home visits are highly structured. A family care plan is made in conjunction with all family members. Just like the boy's care plan, the family plan involves setting goals for what the family wants to achieve. It encompasses the emotional, social/economic, physical and educational/cognitive domains. Here too the same strategies (thermometer, personal and family safety plan etc., and others) are used to help manage strong emotions. This phase – children and families living apart, but (ideally) preparing to live together again, on a different footing – takes on average one to three years. Keeping contact between boy and family is essential for both since separation is a source of anxiety. If for some reason (e.g. a parent's alcoholism) it is not desirable for the boy to go to his home then his parents come to

¹⁶ See the Safe families Safe Children manual for an outline of the stages of work with parents and siblings.

JUCONI House to visit him. There is a purpose-built space for this with its own entrance so that family visits do not cause distress to boys who may not yet be in contact with their families or whose families are not yet able to come and visit for whatever reason.

Where possible, children visit their families with educators from JUCONI House, either fortnightly or monthly, and progress to more frequent visits and overnight stays to which they come and go alone, although (as will be seen) these have support and input from JUCONI educators and the Family Team. This prepares the way for reintegration.

This trajectory represents the **ideal**. But – as will be seen – there are complex challenges around reunification. There are situations where it works well for a few months but then breaks down, the boy returns to JUCONI, and preparation for reintegration has to start again. In quite a few cases, the child and family want to live together again, although educators believe that they are not really ready yet (JUCONI staff refer to this as ‘forced pace reunification’. In some cases, boys return to their mother’s house, and after a while, move in with relatives – generally because they dislike their mothers’ partner. In some cases (as will be seen) the boy contemplates his options and decides he does not want to go back, or the family present risks and dangers. In these cases, it is often still possible (and very important) to build a relationship, ideally with periodic visits, that can continue into adult life, even as boys move to much greater independence in the Youth House and independent life. A minority of boys have no close family members, but in almost every case it is possible to find distant kin with whom a relationship can be built.

The following elements have been identified by children, parents and JUCONI staff as important to have in place for reunification to be possible.

The family (really) wants the child back.

Families frequently begin from a position of not wanting the child to live in the family home.

“In some cases families don’t want the child back because they are angry. They believe they have

been good families and the child has not [i.e. the child has broken ranks, failed them]. These are families that still need a lot of help before reintegration can be considered.” (Family Team FGD)

Obviously, the intention is to change this, but this takes time. Often, parents may begin to speak about wanting the child’s return and apparently work towards it, but start to sabotage the process when the time comes. Other children in the household may do this too – and are profoundly affected by parents’ attitudes in this respect.

“There are some families who never give up on the child’s return – these are the families that expect the boy to return, who have that idea in mind, although the process can take years. In contrast there are some families who never ask about the boy – or they might ask about him, but never behave as though he is going to return.” (Family Team FGD)

It was clear from focus group discussions with educators that they were alert to many signs that a family does want the boy back and is not just going through the motions.

“There are boys who go on their monthly visits but always sit with us. Others get up, explore the house.” (Family Team FGD)

Photographs of the absent child, and special efforts – like cooking his favourite food when he visits – are positive signs. This was the case with successfully reintegrated Jesus, now 16:

*“During visits, Jesus took nice things and his mother always made him tasty food. You could see the look of happiness on Jesus’ face, when he ate with his family, something that his mother had prepared. The lady liked to see Jesus: I remember her saying – her vocabulary was limited: “What f***** amazing stuff your brother brings us.” [“Que cosas tan chingonas trae tu hermano!”] Far from being meant as an obscenity, I realised how much pleasure she was expressing... We worked with her to help her find a wider range of words to express her feelings, though! When a family becomes able*

to keep the child in mind, we consider that it is a family to which the child could return. They talk about him within the family. He is a member of the family and has a presence in the family. The child himself feels connected as well.” (Albino, coordinator of the Youth House)

As will be seen below, siblings can either welcome a child or sabotage plans for his return and staff have to be alert to this.

Children and adults have developed the capacity to ‘reason’, ‘communicate’ and resolve conflict.

Regardless of the route by which children in this sample reached JUCONI, all manifested challenging behaviours. In every account, by both parents and children, boys’ ability to manage themselves, reflect and communicate, were the single most important feature of successful (or potentially successful) reintegration. The **strategies developed by children to understand and manage their emotions while in JUCONI House are therefore of critical importance, but only become sustainable habits once underlying trauma has been resolved.**

Some spoke of being ‘part of a community’ that cared about them.

“It was as if the other kids [in JUCONI House] were my four siblings; educators were my mum. It was the same; I did the same at home when I got back. I listened to them, and my mum listened to me.” (Gregorio, now 17, reunified for more than a year)

In this community they had learned to live together (and also to have fun, engage in sports, learn to use free time constructively – to have pleasure). These were transferrable skills that could be used at home too.

Children’s willingness to accept boundaries and limits is a function of their own development; they have lived in an ‘open door’ community where ground rules for living together were clear; greater independence is acquired as a result of showing greater responsibility and evidence of their ability to consistently keep themselves and others safe. Some interviews show how much children desire

limits and seek them. One teenager did not want to go to the Youth House because of the independence and autonomy of youth there; he equates ‘rules’ with being cared for and freedom as signifying that there isn’t anyone who cares enough to set rules. He has returned to his family

Cessation of violence.

Of critical importance to reunification is the cessation of physical as well as emotional violence. As the following accounts show, this will tend to be ‘work in progress’: family members may relapse into conflict and aggression, but it is essential that parents commit to not hitting children and to encouraging a family culture of consideration and communication.

No matter how imminent reintegration is, if something presents a risk to a boy’s minimum security, the process has to halt. This includes obvious risks, like addiction, violence towards the boy’s mother, or the engagement of one or more family members in crime. In one case, there were reasons to suppose that one boy’s family was engaged in a child trafficking network. **But threats to a child’s recently-gained emotional stability can be more subtle**, and could include sabotage by siblings, or a ‘concerned’ stepfather who still subtly scapegoats the child. It is crucial that the boy himself feels confident that there is little risk of violence.

The relationship with stepparents is critical.

Several of the boys interviewed stated that **the presence of a loathed, generally but not always violent stepfather (or a succession of ‘stepfathers’) was one of the reasons why they left their homes in the first place.** Alberto started to sleep on the streets when he was seven years old because of this. In spite of JUCONI’s work with the family over a number of years, it appears that in Alberto’s opinion, his stepfather is still violent towards his sisters and (although he does not spell this out) towards his mother. Alberto deplores, but accepts, his mother’s decision to stay with this man. There are also cases in which boys have returned to families that include an apparently

'concerned' stepfather who they still do not like, and decided to move in with relatives instead. (In one case, a stepfather expressed an interest in his stepson, participated in family visits and visited JUCONI house, but continued subtly blaming the boy for causing stress in the family). Sometimes boys have returned to their biological families, then something has not worked out, and they have (with support from educators) chosen another alternative, like moving in with an aunt.

There are also cases in which a pragmatic compromise has been reached: fathers or mothers have decided to continue their relationship with their partner, but not share the same family home. His stepmother means very little to 19-year-old Andrés (who will be more fully introduced in Section 4, and who is currently in the Youth House). His decision not to move back home is for other reasons and has little to do with her opaque presence in his life. She arrived a while after he had gone. As JUCONI Director Alison Lane has observed: *"'Family' reunification can certainly involve extended family ... it is essential to keep several options open and respond flexibly to each situation."*

It is important to emphasise that relationships with stepparents can be positive and actually aid reintegration. This was the case with Francisco, whose parents separated abruptly and without explanation when he was small; he was alone much of the time and beaten by his father at other times. When he was seven he moved into his aunt's house. When she died his other relatives no longer treated him with affection and began to hit him, so he started to hang out in the street and with older people. When he was nine his stepmother introduced him to JUCONI staff.

Francisco has successfully settled back with his father, Don Aurelio and his stepmother Doña Chela – whom he calls his 'mum'. According to educators, Doña Chela has made an even bigger effort than Francisco's father to become a nurturing and actively engaged parent and to treat Francisco with affection. Francisco in turn,

is now able to put himself in his parents' shoes: *"They have been patient with me, so I should be patient with them too."*

Another contentedly reintegrated boy, Jesus was an intelligent child who came to JUCONI House when he was nine. Before that he lived with his mother and brothers and his mother's partners but ran away for days, sometimes weeks, on end:

"...because I didn't like living with my stepfather, an aggressive, violent man. My mother lived in one room with him and I lived with my stepbrother – the son of this man – in another room 20 metres away." (Jesus, now 16)

JUCONI educators remember Jesus' frequent displays of fury: *"You can't imagine how he raged, sometimes throwing things around for half an hour. I remember one outburst that was sparked off after he dropped a cold drink."*

Jesus' mother has since met and married another man,¹⁷ who has been peaceful and gets on well with her children. Jesus reports no difficulties in living with his family again; he feels that they interact better, that the quality of daily life is much better [*la convivencia mejoró mucho*] – something he attributes to changes within himself, to the fact that he thinks before he acts, and that he stopped rebelling constantly. There was no need for prolonged visiting from educators, who came from time to time just to check things were going well.

Parents are able to assume their responsibility to nurture and to establish boundaries/limits.

JUCONI defines the roles of parents as *providing nurture and setting limits*. But **parents overwhelmed with their own unmet needs do not provide children with the nurture they need, or provide nurture inconsistently**. JUCONI therapists understand that their work involves 'reparenting the parent' – or 'mothering the mother' – so that adults can internalise the experience of being cared for and can then draw on that to be able to understand

17. A key objective of work with women who have had traumatic experiences is that they are able to identify and choose partners who are not violent.

and take on the responsibilities of parenting. Although in 13-year-old Santi's case, educators were not convinced that the family was ready for reunification, Santi's mother Doña Ana feels that she has become more responsible. She is firmer, she is able to set some limits, although sometimes it is an effort, and she tries to control herself and no longer hits her children; instead, she says: "Stop that because I don't want to hit you." As she says: *"Before I just didn't consider my children; now, I make an effort, I don't leave them alone, I take my three kids with me."*

Adult behaviour needs to change just as much as children's.

A feature of most interviews to date has been a certain focus (in both adults' and children's accounts) on change in children's behaviours. Yet **boys show an astute awareness of the need for adults to change in order for their own gains to be sustained and for reintegration to be possible** (i.e. to support and sustain the positive changes they have made themselves).

Eleven-year-old Eusebio told interviewers that he ran away because he felt 'suffocated' at home and because his parents hit him.

"My parents yelled and told me off, they hit me. I have a scar from a burn where my father burnt me because I took 10 pesos. Now they are more tranquil, they don't fight, they tell me off sometimes but they say: 'Behave properly so we don't tell you off.'" (Eusebio, 11, pre-reunification)

The decision that Eusebio should move back home after less than a year at JUCONI House was because of the evident commitment of his parents. Family Team members explained: *"His parents engaged quickly and worked hard."* Eusebio's parents committed not to hit him (although when interviewed pre-integration, their tone still sounded rather authoritarian). One indication that they are able to consider and understand him is reflected in lateral thinking about how to make positive use of his love of mechanical devices. Eusebio used to skip off school and spend time in games arcades, where he was picked up by Social Services workers. His parents arranged for Eusebio to start an

apprenticeship with a family friend who is a mechanic. Nonetheless, as will be seen below, Eusebio's return has not been easy either; he misses the one-to-one support that he had in JUCONI House and which his two working parents cannot give him.

Boys who have returned would not have stayed had they not seen real effort on the part of other family members, especially their primary carers.

"I think if both sides had not worked at it, it would have been no use, my being there ... Maybe I could change, but my parents' way of thinking and acting would not have, so I would do the same stuff again. Then everything I had learned would be useless [No iba a servir de nada]."
(Francisco, 19, reintegrated for three years)

JUCONI educators interviewed have stressed: **unilateral changes do not work.** Children and families need to be engaged in the programme from the very beginning. This (as will be seen next) includes siblings and other relatives where possible.

Siblings and extended family members: kin that can be motivated to actively support the return of the child.

The attitude of siblings (or young relatives) towards the returning boy is of critical importance, but their behaviour and attitudes can be heavily influenced by parents. According to the Family Team educators, two situations are common: one in which the absent boy is seen as an example – based on his visits home, his achievements in JUCONI House – and one in which he continues to be represented as the bad kid who abandoned the family and is used as the family scapegoat.

"Siblings always pull one way or the other – they are a very, very important influence. At the moment we are working with one child who is in the final years of high school. His siblings are delighted, they take care of him – they try and create a quiet atmosphere (where he can study). His siblings are protective; they talk with him a lot." (Family Team FGD)

“Siblings can be a help or a stressor. ... They can drop little bombs. That was the case with Paco and his sister Liliana. The girl had become the only child after he came to JUCONI House. Liliana tried to behave well during the visits but was also attacking him quietly, asking: “Where would he sleep?” Their mother behaved in much the same way, actually, sabotaged. They were scared, they were not ready.” (Family Team FGD)

The degree to which the **overall quality of relationships within the family has improved**, and the expectations of younger children, are important indicators of the possibility of successful reintegration. In many cases families do not spend any time, or do anything, together; some families have never eaten together. One of the goals of working with families includes developing routines and opportunities for everyone to have fun together. This is very important, as pleasant shared experiences begin to form a ‘bank’ of memories on which families can draw and as a result, families start to think of themselves in a different way (“we are a family who have fun”). This starts to change what could be termed the culture of the family. During home visits, the Family Team often engage in group activities as well as working separately with adults and with children.

“Before I would lose it [me desesperaba], my husband was like me too, he would lose it, I screamed at them. We have learned to live with our children, interact with them [convivir con ellos]¹⁸ ... all the family took part in the sessions.” (Rosa, sister/primary carer of Esteban, 15)

Parents or caregivers who are more likely to welcome the boy back are parents who have reached a point in their own healing and development where they are able to think about and respond to their children’s needs and are actively involved in their children’s lives, listening to them, playing with them, supervising homework, etc.

“When [Family Team staff] come [for weekly visits] they get us involved in games, we work in teams and we have seen that we can play with them [children]. We have changed; they have helped us a lot. When Esteban visits, he plays with my children, they talk together...” (Rosa, sister/primary carer of Esteban, 15)

The fact that JUCONI has used the same techniques with parents and children (e.g. ‘thermometer’, safety plans etc.) is of enormous importance because it provides a way in which people can understand each other’s emotions and behaviours, which is fundamental in preparing the family for reintegration. In addition to providing a shared language and strategies which everyone knows how to use, it also provides evidence for the family that everyone needs to participate, no one person is being singled out or blamed, and everyone needs to assume responsibility for their part in making the family a healthy and caring one.

Realistic expectations.

It is essential that both parents and children have realistic expectations of each other and of the life they will share.

“Parents and children’s expectations can get out of hand... Sometimes, say, a boy learns to read and write – I remember ‘Bear’ (Oso): he had learned to read and write and his family expected him to quickly finish secondary education. Poor little Bear. So some families have social expectations that are too high and we need to work to reduce those.” (Efrain, Family Team)

Parents’ unrealistic expectations of what their children can and should do have significantly contributed to children’s anger and frustration. Samuel came to JUCONI when he was 11 after JUCONI was contacted by a group of local taxi drivers who observed him wandering aimlessly near their terminal. Samuel, who had undiagnosed learning difficulties, had been adopted by a very poor family after his mother disappeared. His adoptive family worked a

¹⁸ A key objective of work with women who have had traumatic experiences is that they are able to identify and choose partners who are not violent.

market stall where Samuel was expected to help. When pressured into doing things of which he was incapable, Samuel lashed out in furious outbursts and eventually started to spend more and more time away from his family. Samuel did not have a birth certificate and had never been enrolled in a school where his problem would have been identified. It was essential for his family to understand his condition in order to help him.

Boys can also develop unrealistic expectations of everyday life in their family home. For example, more than one mother was hurt by the fact her son made nasty comments about the quality of food at home after his return. One explained: “I cooked him his favourite dishes when he came on visits... and I think he thought it was going to be like that every day.” Educators may need to address these issues in the follow-on period.

For many parents, improved material conditions and the creation of physical space for the returning child are important prerequisites for return.

JUCONI staff recognise that at times they have been over concerned about the need for a better home environment – a cleaner, calmer place with improved material conditions. Staff are influenced by their personal expectations: they live and work in clean, tidy and pleasant spaces, but in contrast some (by no means all) of the homes they visit are extremely chaotic, dirty and smell bad. Other homes are clean – a heroic achievement in poor areas with chronic water shortages and limited rubbish collection – but cramped. Improvements in the home environment are often an indicator that something more fundamental has improved: educators observe that families are unable to look after their environment until a fundamental shift has been achieved in the way they think and feel about themselves. In some situations parents have made considerable efforts to create space for the boy: for example, constructing a new bedroom, so that the boy can have privacy, or demarcating physical space so that

the nuclear family (father and son) are separate from extended family members. In most boys’ accounts, the family’s material condition is a minor concern compared to feeling welcome and wanted. But (as will be seen) where home life is very chaotic (to the point where boys find it hard to sleep and to study), they can find it difficult to adjust and may decide to return to JUCONI House until the environment improves.

“Sometimes you think a family has to be doing really well before a boy can go back, but then you understand that the family can work on improvements when the boy is at home.” (Moni, Family Team educator)

The challenge for educators is to know when the environment is ‘good enough’ for the child and family, and to not allow their own expectations to get in the way of children’s return. A validated, nine item measure, the Family Functioning Scale (Espejel 1997) is used to help them make an objective assessment.¹⁹ Work on the physical environment, as on other aspects of the family’s well-being, can continue during the follow-on period. Indeed, it must continue in order for the family to adjust to the return of the ‘new’ family member.

3.2 Managing the first three months

Reintegration begins – ideally – when all concerned agree that they are ready. Objectively, the boy and the family will have achieved objectives set out in an individualised plan. Children are aware that they are reaching targets with reference to the ‘Ladder of Achievement’ described above. By the time a boy reaches the top rung, he is expected to have good habits of hygiene and health, be able to manage his emotions in an appropriate way, do well enough at school, comply with house rules, respect those who are in authority, and be able to use his own authority respectfully, communicate and resolve problems. In families, the Family Scale is intended to identify and show strengths

19. The scale measures: parental supervision; parental authority; parental control; sense of support; communication; expressions of affection; external resources available to the family; children’s disruptive behaviour; negative expressions of emotion. The scale is used with the whole family present and takes about 1.5 hours to apply.

and areas for improvement in an objective and transparent way. Indicators include but are not limited to: adequate and defined roles of family members and ability to solve conflicts without violence.

However, it was evident from the focus group discussions that experienced staff develop a certain ‘peripheral vision’. They are alert to small signs that the boy is wanted and the family is ready, or, alternatively, that problems may arise. Educators share concerns with other team members in weekly case review meetings. **The period following reintegration is usually stressful and challenging**, even in the best of circumstances, and there are many variables which influence whether the positive changes achieved by the child and family prior to the child’s return will be sustained. **It is important to communicate to children that reunification is not a reward: it is the natural outcome of a series of changes in their lives and those of their families.** Ideally, the boy and family should go through a trial period of reinsertion – easing back into the family again (‘protected time’ – see below). This should last two-three months. The child’s return does not take place at a set time. The process is gradual, in order to respond to the achievements of each family – or to the setbacks that may arise.

The following is a summary of lessons learned about managing the early weeks of reintegration.

The importance of ‘testing the waters’ – visiting and staying over in the family home before reintegration. While children are at JUCONI House, they go on regular visits to their families wherever possible. These visits vary in frequency. At first, these visits always take place in the company of educators. If this is successful, short visits evolve into weekends or short holidays. This provides an opportunity to ‘trial’ new ways of interacting and to see if they are working for all involved.

Although the boy’s visits to his family may be infrequent in the early stages, boys know that Family Team educators are visiting their homes on a weekly basis. It is important for educators

to be transparent about this and to give the child regular updates on their family in order to foster trust in the Family Team and crucially, to reduce anxiety about their families. Often this provides a good opportunity to send messages, letters and drawings – the first point of contact – and a way to begin rehearsing new ways of interacting.

“Maintaining contact with his family was very important. At the beginning it wasn’t that frequent. He knew what his family felt when he visited and his family knew what he felt when he told them about what he had done: “We went here, we did this, we talked about that etc.” If he hadn’t visited his family he would have felt bad. Every 15 days JUCONI educators Sarita and Moni visited the house and we’d get together and talk. “Did you go? Were they there? What did they say, or do?” (Francisco, 19, reintegrated for three years)

Importantly, this also provides a powerful experience of being held in mind. As the Family Team liaise between the family and the child, they show that they are thinking continuously about both and this gives the boy and family a sense of being cared for which is fundamental to the therapeutic process.

One of the learning points raised by the Family Team is the **importance of good communication/coordination between staff** who are working with the boy (in JUCONI House) and those who work with the family. In several interviews there is recognition that it is very important to maintain communication between the boy and his family (not only through visits, but also through messages that the Family Team can take from boy to family and vice versa, for example through letters and drawings, to encourage and develop the capacity to hold the other in mind). Communication is essential in order to ensure that the process of working with the family and that of JUCONI House are aligned.

A key role for the educator during visits by the boy to his family is to detect where support is needed early on. For example, one educator describes issues that arise when children bring presents to their families.

“[While they are in JUCONI House and go on home visits, children] tend to take stuff, at the beginning. It is a way to show the family that they are there, and to maintain a connection. ... Gifts represent emotional needs and we try to model some aspects of these emotional exchanges within sessions with the family. For instance, sometimes we would take food and eat it outside the house with the child, before we went in, because we knew he wouldn’t be offered anything to eat. But they would be offered a pair of sneakers. So we began to bring a roast chicken, and they would produce something else [to eat], like salad. We modelled things. Giving nourishment, rather than buying stuff.” (Family Team FGD)

As boy and family work towards the point where integration is possible, the boy should be able to stay with his family for longer – for a day or for the weekend. When they are ready and it is safe for them to do so, children travel to and from their family home alone. The criteria for this are included in the Ladder of Achievement.

Particularly in the early stages, **it is advisable to help the whole family plan their activities during home visits.**

“We work with them to make a plan for the weekend, on how they are going to use their time, so that they don’t fill it up with fights.” (Ale, Family Team)

Many of the techniques trialled in family visits (thermometer, community meeting, etc.) are the same ones that are used in JUCONI House and in family work.

“They have a family meeting at the beginning, middle and end of each day. Everybody takes part.” (Ale, Family Team)

Without question there is a certain adaptation to the structures of life in JUCONI House and its pleasant environment. Children recognise the need to adjust again to what may be a materially poorer and more crowded home environment. For example, Gregorio found sleeping over at his family’s house difficult because he was accustomed to the rhythm of life in JUCONI

House, and so going back gradually seemed a good thing.

“Two years are two years, and I needed to adapt gradually. There was a period of adaptation. When I came to JUCONI House I had to adapt too. At first I cried because I missed my mother [although Gregorio had decided to come to JUCONI House] and another boy suggested that I write letters to my mother and family, telling them what I felt.”
(Gregorio, 17, successfully reintegrated)

Adults’ and children’s anxiety about reintegration is acknowledged and addressed.

When a boy and family have achieved the goals set out in the family scale and reintegration is on the horizon, problems can emerge: for instance, it is not uncommon for children to run away (to their homes) weeks or even days before they are formally due to return. The approaching reintegration evokes anxiety in children and in families. Anxiety is generally to do with fear of failure – what if it doesn’t work out?

“Weird stuff can happen when you start to talk about the child going back to his family. Sabotage is a way of ensuring that we will go on working with them, accompanying them. They have ambivalent feelings. They are afraid that things will go back to being like they were before.” (Family Team FGD)

Parents also feel conflicting emotions about their children being in JUCONI House and some worry about their children’s return.

“There are families who from the beginning are asking when the boy is coming back. But when it becomes real, they start creating some obstacles, so that we know that they are not really ready.” (Family Team FGD)

One of the issues that needed to be clarified with children and families is that ‘reintegration’ is a right – when both parties are ready – not a reward. In the past, JUCONI educators have unwittingly played into this, by describing the first two or three times as a ‘test’ (*tiempo de prueba*). To calm their anxieties the term ‘protected time’

was introduced to talk about the two-month period of reinsertion – adjustment back to the family of origin. The term ‘protected time’ helps children and families feel safer and assures them that educators are looking after them; they are not going to be abandoned by JUCONI, and that they can return to JUCONI House if they want to and that the option of the Youth House is open to them.

“I feel that since we introduced ‘protected time’ these problems have diminished. We used to talk about how ‘you are going to leave so you have to stay on level three (i.e. you have to sustain prosocial behaviour). Our message was too rigid – ‘you have to achieve this’ – the children couldn’t stand it.” (Family Team FGD)

3.3 Sustaining reintegration: the importance of follow-on work

Everything that has gone on before has led up to reintegration and has provided a kind of dress rehearsal for living together. **But problems generally surface after the ‘honeymoon period’** – particularly when the child and family want reunification before they are really ready for it (educators refer to this as ‘forced reunification’).

Occasionally, families need very little support, as was the case with Jesus, introduced in section 3.1. This has also been the case with Esteban, 15, whose reintegration with his sister and her family has gone seamlessly. When interviewed, he had come back from his job at a glass-cutter, and while tired, had had a good day. It is hard work but he likes it and is training as a glassworker while finishing his education at evening classes. Esteban gets on well with his family and likes to hang out with his older brothers. His family support him; a relative helped him get the job. He misses some aspects of life at JUCONI House – especially the excursions – and hasn’t made friends locally as teenage boys in his neighbourhood tend to drink and fight in their leisure time. Esteban is capable of making decisions that are good for him and has gone back to a family that has welcomed him, building a room for him. His siblings missed him and wanted him back.

Esteban says while at JUCONI House he was at school and at an apprenticeship. Not only did he learn to manage his emotions, relate to other people and look after younger children, but he also developed skills in managing time and creating routines for himself. There could be problems later and JUCONI will be visiting Esteban and his family for a while, but visits will become less frequent and may not go on for more than a year.

Of the other children reintegrated in the course of the study, Santi (aged 13, and introduced in section 2.3) has returned to JUCONI house, while Eusebio, Abel and Julio and their families will need a couple of years of follow-on support. Problems that can emerge after a child has been reinserted in his family include the following.

Violence has not really ceased.

During protected time, Santi (who had run away in the first place because of domestic violence) once again witnessed his stepfather hitting his mother. Santi called the police, and his stepfather threw the boy out of the house. Interviews with Santi’s mother showed a great willingness to do well by her son, but she is still living with a volatile man. Family Team members suspected his potential for violence and did not believe that the time was ripe for Santi to return; the issue of ‘forced reunification’ is discussed below.

Before Santi came back to JUCONI House, it was necessary to help him reflect on what had happened, and to accept and process his situation. Educators continue to work with the family, but Santi will not go back until – and only if – domestic violence ends.

Parents are unable to provide the kind of structure that their children need; therefore children’s behaviour becomes challenging and ‘hard to manage’.

In early 2013, Eusebio (15), Julio (13) and their families were interviewed again. By this time both boys had been with their families for more than six months. In both cases, there have been unexpected and challenging problems. Eusebio misses the amount of personal support

he had from JUCONI House staff as well as things like help with his homework. He has been acting out and getting into trouble at school. He appears to want more supervision and time with his parents, but this is hard for them, as they both work full time. Another problem that his parents complain about is Eusebio's incapacity to handle criticism or harsh treatment – he cries if they tell him off, and left an apprenticeship with a mechanic because his boss treated him harshly. According to Eusebio's father: *“He needs to live with it, all bosses shout at you.”* Eusebio says he likes living with his family – he has more free time, goes to bed later, and doesn't at all miss JUCONI House since there were boys who annoyed him there and with whom he fought. Physical violence is a thing of the past: instead of hitting him for not doing his homework, his father and an aunt work to help him. Eusebio's parents have also had a lot of support from their families and kin and organise activities that are fun, like outings, on the weekends.

In contrast, Julio (who had come to JUCONI aged six and had been sexually abused) has said he wants to go back to JUCONI House and move on to the Youth House. Educators want him to persevere at home. Not long after returning to his family, Julio was expelled from school because of his aggressive behaviour and truancy. His father, Don Mario, was not clear about limits and routines to begin with, and when problems got out of hand, started to shout at Julio. Julio observes:

“When I began to tell lies I began to fall, I was expelled from school and forfeited a lot of things, permission to go out, to do things. [The educator] says that I shout at my father, that I don't treat him with courtesy, but he also shouts at me and says stuff and then I shut up.”

The situation is hard for the adults in Julio's small family. Julio's father Don Mario, Julio's grandmother and his aunt appear to be more isolated than Eusebio's big extended family. Don Mario still feels great guilt because he was not able to raise Julio. It is possible that this is undermining his sense of authority. It would appear that the positive changes

achieved by some of these boys have not been **matched by changes within the family**, simply because JUCONI is able to work much more intensively – round the clock – with boys than it is able to work in weekly or fortnightly visits to the family, even though these take place over two to three years. Families are extremely complex systems and therefore it is more difficult to achieve change.

Challenges returning to a difficult and congested home environment.

For some boys, it is very difficult to return to a comparatively disordered, congested home environment after the order of JUCONI House, especially if they have been at JUCONI for some years. The physical environment (separate bedrooms, tidier spaces, routines) can express more profound changes and commitments by the family – and boys are alert to these signs. This was the case with Gregorio, who found the physical conditions of his home so difficult that he went back to JUCONI House after a short effort at reintegration. He explains:

“I found it hard to sleep at home because I was used to the JUCONI House routine of getting home, having dinner, a shower, and sleep. At home sometimes I would go out to play sports and come back very late and sleep late. I lost my routines and couldn't really manage the greater freedom I had there. I hung out with different friends, whereas in JUCONI House I lived always with the same boys.” (Gregorio, 17)

Gregorio wanted to go back and live with his family – who persevered and prevailed on him to return – but he was holding out for something better. He went back to JUCONI House and the process of preparation for reunification had to start over again. This difficult but assertive step seems to have been necessary to ensure more profound and lasting changes in the family along with the redoubled efforts of the Family Team working with Gregorio's parents. The house became tidier and life more structured; the personal appearance of family members improved; the family prepared for family sessions; and the older boys began to earn some money so that their mother did not have to work every day. Gregorio's mother made an

effort to send the younger children to school every day and she started to go to the school to see how they were getting on.

Physical improvements show that adults in the family are able to get and hold down work, assume responsibility for providing for younger children, and create a more stable and pleasant environment. A new bedroom for the returning child can signify the family's desire and commitment to drawing the child in. An improved environment can also show that parents have increased self-esteem. Before, Gregorio's family lived in a shack made of cardboard, but now their house is made of breezeblocks.

"I really don't know how I did it, but I built my two little rooms and what is most important, a bathroom. We didn't have a bathroom before." (Doña Laura, mother of Gregorio, 17)

Several boys – both those who returned and those who stayed on in the Youth House – have remarked that their material conditions in JUCONI House were better than they were at home *'but there was not the love of my mother.'* It must be hard for mothers who live on a small income to hear their son make nostalgic references to things she cannot afford – cookies, milk, camping, and sport. Family Team educators need to help family members recognise and deal openly with these issues, identifying practical solutions where possible.

There is nothing to suggest that boys want to return to JUCONI House because of its better **recreation facilities (sports, outdoor excursions etc.)**. *"Children are not looking for treats, outings etc., they want an affectionate relationship with their families and that decides things one way or another."* (Jorge Villar, former Director of Methodology). But where tensions exist, the **absence of a safety valve – sports, exercise, green space – aggravates a difficult situation**. Most boys interviewed in this study describe how much they enjoyed camping, sports and hiking; but in Puebla, good sports facilities are usually in private hands. Mexico's growing cities lack public spaces for play and recreation – something that is in itself a wider problem, given the well-documented

relationship between the physical environment and mental well-being and health of children (and adults) (Schrader McMillan and Barlow 2008).

It may be that the Youth House is a better option for Santi and possibly for Julio as well. Either way, what is important is that educators continue to visit and work with the boy and family and with others (e.g. school teachers) as well.

Problems such as these highlight the crucial importance of extensive follow-on support. JUCONI staff anticipate that difficulties will usually arise after the 'honeymoon period' and plan to work with families for at least two years after the child goes back. A further year is often needed for the Family Team to withdraw slowly, so that the family does not feel abandoned. As earlier case studies showed, in almost all situations, families have been helped to manage difficulties as they arise on a decreasing number of visits. As was the case with Gregorio, who needed a more ordered environment in which to study and sleep, some boys need to return to JUCONI House for a while until their 'conditions' are met. This may be the case with Santi, whose mother made significant advances in many areas, but who continues in a relationship with a volatile man. Santi's decision to return to JUCONI House can be seen as a sign of his growing resilience.

The frequency and intensity of home visits varies and in some cases only a very 'light touch' is required. This was the situation, for instance, with Esteban and his sister's family, with Samuel (who had learning difficulties), and with Jesus (now 16), introduced earlier. In his case, his violent former stepfather had left; the family had changed; communication had improved; and Jesus attributes much of the change to his own capacity to manage his emotions and get on with others. But these are exceptional cases: for most families, **the months after a child returns are a phase in the process of reintegration, not the end**.

3.4 What happens when children/families ‘force the pace?’

There have been many **situations in which the child and/or family have insisted on starting the reintegration process before JUCONI staff thought they were ready.**

Edwin (aged 20) has been reintegrated for three years. He was initially involved in the centre-based programme for children who work in the market, but when he was 16 his grandmother was found to have cancer and Edwin’s mother needed to look after the grandmother. Edwin and another sibling looked after their younger brothers and sisters. Edwin’s father was both rigidly authoritarian and a poor example – using drugs, taking his son to share the company of heavily drinking adults in billiard halls. Edwin began to spend time on the streets and the family sought help. Edwin could not manage anxiety and had no one who could provide any emotional containment.

Edwin’s time at JUCONI House was brief in spite of the fact that he seemed to like it – he reported that he was well treated, enjoyed working in teams, liked the excursions, and he was responsible and tidy. He ran back to his family three or four times, because he was worried about his grandmother. The fourth time he left he refused to go back. His family was ambivalent about his being in JUCONI House and would deny that he was with them when educators came round. After his grandmother died, staff would come at appointed times but find no one in the house, so eventually, the home visits ceased. A couple of years after he went home he started: “...to lose it [*empezó mi relajo*]. I started to hang out in gaming parlours, I started to like drugs, to steal, I was in and out of institutions, and my bosses couldn’t manage me and referred me to institutions.” Now, finally, he appears to have settled down and is working in a tortilla stand. At 20, he has a partner and a baby. Educators would have liked to work with the family but they did not have much choice once Edwin and his parents lost interest.

3.5 Supporting educators who work with families.

All families are complex systems, but work with families such as those described here can be particularly challenging – and draining. Experiences such as that described with Edwin’s family, where staff have been needed by the family to deal with an immediate crisis, but where they were unable to make a measurable difference, mean staff can feel disappointed and demoralised. It is important therefore to have organisational supports in place for staff. Staff need to feel that the organisation has their well-being in mind in much the same way as they need to keep their families in mind. Regular, planned team meetings, case study review and supervision are intended to provide a containing environment for staff.

One of the challenges identified early on was to help staff manage their emotional engagement with family members. The model relies on educators developing an unconditionally supportive relationship with individual family members. Educators need to become, for a short time, the person closest to the child or parent. This can be seductive for staff and if it is not explicitly understood and well managed, it can be difficult to handle the ‘handover’ of this relationship to the parent or caregiver and other family members – the people who must become the most significant for the child.

3.6 Final reflections by the staff: gaps in their current approach

In June 2013 the research team facilitated a focus group discussion with the Family Team. The main themes to emerge from this study were shared with the group. On the whole, emerging findings resonated with what they already knew and there were no big surprises. But the discussion gave the team a chance to reflect on how they might approach some problem areas: for instance, on how they could become more alert to warning signs around false expectations. For example, they had missed seeing that it was not a good idea for children to have festive meals at every visit; meals would be much simpler in

daily life. During the FGD, the team identified two areas of weakness in their work: (i) **the need to build stronger networks within the community, with extended family and with schools,** and (ii) **the need to identify sports and recreational possibilities in a boy's home environment.** As they explained:

"In the past we built networks with the extended family, with the school, etc., but we have been doing that less recently as we have been focusing on therapeutic support, but I think we need to go back to working with community networks in order to support children's adaptation to their home environment." (Paco, Family Team leader)

Puebla lacks public sports facilities and even parks where young people can play. The team realised that they needed to make a greater effort to identify opportunities for sports in this context.

"Boys when they go home know that they won't be able to do certain things, like play tennis, and that can cause a conflict; we need to work with parents to see what opportunities exist and work with them and the child to access resources that are available in their context." (Family Team FGD)

4. Boys who did not return to their families: re-forging relationships from a distance

Not all boys can, or want to, return to live with their families. This section touches on the very important but rarely explored issue of **how emotional bonds may be (re)forged and sustained with families of boys who will never return to live with their families.**

Six boys who are in the Youth House or have moved on to independent living after being in the Youth House were interviewed. In some cases a boy himself decides that he does not want to return to a family that is lukewarm about having him back or to an environment where he perceives there might be danger and/or where it will be impossible to continue his education. In almost every case, it has been possible to build a relationship that is sustained by visits and holidays. In some cases (as with Pepe, see below) the relationship is tenuous and formal, but it exists.

In interviews with boys who decided to stay in the Youth House – having had the option of returning to their families – the following issues emerged.

- In four out of six cases, boys had come to JUCONI aged nine or under.
- Violence (specifically, stepfathers' violence towards boys' mothers) has not ceased – two cases.
- Unwillingness to live with stepfathers – two cases.
- Ambition: boys believe that they would be stuck in poverty and would not be able to continue their training/apprenticeships – three cases.

In some cases, these issues are connected. For instance, 19-year-old Alberto visits his family a couple of times a year and has a reasonable relationship with his stepfather. They can talk, they can be respectful to each other, and

violence in his family has diminished but has not wholly ceased. His family lacks many things, for as he says: “*There is no money.*” But the main issue is that Alberto thinks his stepfather is still violent.

“Why do some children not go back? Because the minimum conditions for reintegration do not exist; the rupture was not repaired. For instance, Alberto wrote a letter about his situation which said: ‘My mother chose my stepfather: my poor mother. That was the point at which I decided: I have nothing left here, I lost.’ Alberto tried to go back: he wanted to be part of the group. It is their blood, but when they go back and see again what they left and relive it once more, [including] the reasons why they ran away in the first place, they realise that they can’t live there anymore.”

Alberto’s father abandoned his family when Alberto was a toddler; the man was an alcoholic and went to live in a house in the same village as his former wife and children. Alberto explained: ‘My father abandoned me and my mother and my brother; my mother had to make a living as best she could and she left me and my brother alone. My brother was sometimes a bastard and sometimes protected me.’ This is what Alberto understood parenting to be. He and his brother were left alone all day and they started to run away, to hang out on the street whenever they could. Then his mother met another man. She preferred the stepfather, which really upset the boys; they started hanging out more and more on the street, taking drugs. The brother died of an overdose and they all blamed Alberto (aged seven) for this. So you see he has had a double deprivation: he grows up in a bad environment and then some horrible events occur for which he is somehow ‘to blame’.

What happens when a stepfather shuts the doors, literally and figuratively? There are so many things that have to be in place for things to work out OK for the boy. Obviously we spend all the time working with the boys, but much less with families, and sometimes we are not able to make that much of a difference with families.” (Jorge Villar, former Director of Methodology)

In an interview, Alberto speaks enthusiastically about his training as a tennis coach. While talking about the possibility of returning to live with his family, he envisages a problematic scenario: that sooner or later his stepfather would hit his mother or sisters, he would punch his stepfather; the stepfather would leave; and Alberto would then have to provide for the women. If he did this, he would have to return to work in the fields, could not complete his training and his future would be compromised. Some underlying problems were not resolved, in spite of the fact that Alberto’s family background is not hugely different from that of other children in JUCONI. He comes from a rural area with limited opportunities for work and study.

In most of the cases included in this research, boys who do not return were separated from their parents when they were very young. For instance 19-year-old **Basilio’s mother went to prison when he was five. From then on some girls looked after him but he was alone for most of the time.** Wandering round the streets he met a boy who lived in the Youth House, and some neighbours who knew about JUCONI asked him if he would like to live there. Basilio’s adaptation was easy because, as he says, he is a peaceful person.

For Basilio it has been **very important over the years to develop a stable relationship with his mother and siblings.** He thinks he would have been ‘embittered’ without this. He says a family is not something you leave behind because: “Your family is your foundation, it is you.” He thinks that without the therapeutic work – the talks by the Family Team (i.e. work with his mother) – his relationships would not be so friendly. Although he does not live with his mother he visits his family once or twice a month, “and we have a nice time, we get on

well.” Basilio can’t talk much about changes in his mum since JUCONI staff started working with her because he only got to know her when he came to JUCONI, but thinks that he notices she is more responsible and is more proactive in looking after her children (*“iniciativa para preocuparse por sus hijos”*).

After many years in JUCONI House, Basilio had got used to living with order and cleanliness, and he was concerned that he and his mother had different ‘rhythms of life’ – **expectations of how everyday life should be lived.** Under ‘normal’ circumstances JUCONI would have been able to work with his mother on these issues, but the mother’s imprisonment made this very difficult. Here again, one gets the impression that Basilio would have made the effort to adjust but that he was not prepared to live with a stepfather.

In contrast, Andrés came to JUCONI House when he was 14 and moved to the Youth House when he was 16. His parents separated when he was a child and he lived with a father “*who had no ambition... we had no shoes, nothing.*” Andrés is bright and is currently doing an apprenticeship at a manufacturer of car parts with which JUCONI has an agreement. Good apprentices get offered jobs at the company. He explains that he never wanted to live with his family because he wanted to study and he knew that with them he wouldn’t have the chance: he would have to work only and could not escape “**from a mediocre life.**” When we ask how his mother reacted to his decision to move into the Youth House he says he doesn’t know, as he never asked her. He has a friendly relationship with her and with his stepfather but says he neither receives nor expects anything from his biological father.

Teófilo, a quiet, reserved young man of indigenous background, is 19, and lived on the street from the time he was 12. Prior to coming to JUCONI House he stayed in four other state and private institutions and he says he decided to stay in JUCONI because of lack of violence, the care provided by staff and opportunities for personal development. Teófilo reflects:

"It took me some time to get used to living with other people because I am so private ... but I lacked focus. JUCONI House helped me to define some things. I learned things in every place [institution] I lived. I was taught to meditate by a psychologist at the DIF [Social Services children's home] ... [My life was like] a jigsaw puzzle, I started acquiring new pieces and putting it together, to simplify things."

Teófilo did not find therapy particularly helpful compared to learning to work:

"For me, Special Time didn't really work, I prefer to forget things in my own way. My girlfriend asks me questions about myself and I tell her that I had a hard childhood, haven't studied much, books were no use to me, I prefer practice to books, theory doesn't work for me. I have learned to make chocolates, pastry, to bake, without having gone to college. I've learned that we can't do everything, but we do what we can. I will do what I do the best I can and the rest doesn't matter."

Teófilo visits his mother two or three times a month, and has a cordial relationship with her, but is not close. *"I help my brother have the things he needs, my sister has her children, I've assumed my responsibilities (as an older brother). My mother has a new baby."*

Like other boys who moved on to the Youth House, Teófilo has suffered greatly but is carving a new life for himself. He has the capacity to reflect on his life and to trace the direction he wants to take. He is making sound choices while recognising his own limits.

"I think that boys who come to the Youth House and stay there have achieved integration. JUCONI has been reliable, consistent. There are problems of all kinds but the security that the boys experience helps them manage these problems. You can tell they have made it when they say: "I have a father to whom this and that happened"; integration has begun. "My father was a real bastard, but my poor dad, he had no one to look after him." They have experienced pain, but no longer suffer because of what has happened to them. They can contemplate

other options." (Jorge Villar, former Director of Methodology)

Although the subject of participation has not been discussed in detail in this paper, it will be obvious that boys participated according to their evolving capacity in decision making at every point of the way and that this has been essential to their development of resilience and confidence in being able to make their own decisions. They work with educators to create and evaluate life plans, take part in the running of JUCONI House and assume increasing responsibility for it, and all this contributes to increasing their trust in their own judgement.

Vinicio is 21 and lives with his wife and four-year-old child, with a baby on the way. He too is working in a plant that manufactures car parts and plans to start his own business. He came to JUCONI when he was nine, after living on the streets for two years because as he succinctly puts it: *"There was never food to eat and my father beat my mother... so I got used to life on the street, where I had everything I needed."* He remembers being welcomed to JUCONI House with banners, a chance to bathe and have dinner and a tour of the house, and that he 'felt good'. Vinicio was one of eight children, *"each of whom went their own way... I rarely see them."* When asked why he didn't want to return to his family, he says that he *"got used to living without them"* and that he wanted the formal education and training he got through JUCONI; but he also hints that his father's violence never really ceased. Although he does maintain contact with his parents, his family life is focused on his wife and children.

Pepe, now aged 19, also came to JUCONI House after sleeping on the streets and having run-ins with the police when he was nine years old. He never envisaged returning to live with his father and his family, although he visits them and has a good relationship with his large extended family. But he describes his father as 'disastrous' and says that **he never felt safe enough to return or confident that things would work out**. Although at the time we meet him Pepe hasn't seen his relatives for a while, he knows that he can visit when he has the free time. Like

Vinicio and Andrés, he is absorbed in his work in the motor industry and, like Andrés, reflects on what his life will be with a partner and children. After all, they are now young men.

All six boys interviewed appear to be thriving, although they were never reintegrated with their families. Although their decisions were influenced by pragmatic choices (training etc.) relationship issues are paramount. The development of these boys could also be explored with reference to the literature on resilience in developmental psychology, which consistently draws attention to (i) the presence of at least one unconditionally supportive primary carer, and/or a committed mentor, who enables the child to establish (or re-establish) a secure attachment, and (ii) opportunities to develop a sense of competence by doing something well in a real life setting – leading on to the real, tangible achievement of success in apprenticeship schemes (Newman and Blackburn 2002; Barker 2005; Luthar 2006; Schrader McMillan and Paul 2012). While positive

attachment experiences, in this case with staff, (re)create a template for ways to behave in future relationships, opportunities to do well in day-by-day life in JUCONI House, school, apprenticeships etc., create the expectation of future success. But the apprenticeship schemes would not have worked out without first resolving the underlying emotional, and consequently behavioural, problems that led boys to be on the street in the first place.

The boys interviewed appear to have developed a functioning, and sometimes warm, relationship with members of their families precisely because they don't have to cope with latent conflict, and in some cases, actual violence. **For some children and young people an arrangement like this may be the best compromise between permanent separation, and a troubled integration into a family that cannot meet their basic emotional needs and developmental aspirations.**

5. Conclusion: What are successful elements in strategies to ensure the sustainable reintegration of children without parental care?

Although violence is a consistent theme in much of the recent literature on children with street connections, we have no evidence to show what proportion of street-connected children have experienced violence and abuse from primary carers against the wider background of extreme inequality and exclusion (Berckmans et al. 2012; Thomas de Benitez 2007). In some countries boys in particular are socialised to work on the street from a very early age and have not been affected by violence in the family, whatever their experience from other adults on the street (Thomas de Benitez 2011).

This study is therefore likely to be of greatest relevance to organisations that work with children with backgrounds similar to those of the boys in this sample: children who have experienced violence and erratic care from primary carers (in most cases, their parents): the very people tasked with care, nurture, and the creation of safe limits. There are few resources available for these families, who are poor and have weak or problematic social support. When the source of danger is the carer (typically a maltreating parent) “children’s attachment behaviour becomes increasingly incoherent and disorganised, showing a mixture of avoidance, anger, disorientation and inertia” (Howe et al. 1999, p.29). In most cases the boys with whom JUCONI works have experienced other significant losses, such as bereavement or the unexplained loss of a parent. Overwhelming, traumatic events, with which children have not been able to cope, can affect other aspects of their development, in particular their ability to cope with stress.

At the same time, work with parents shows that they have often experienced violence and loss as severe as that of their children, in most cases against a background of even greater material hardship. These are families that Barudy (1998) calls ‘*transgeneracionalmente perturbadas*’/‘transgenerationally perturbed’, with a tendency to disorganised attachment over several generations (in this case almost invariably in the context of great poverty, inequality and insecurity). Such families are often socially isolated even where community networks and organisations exist.

But as Bowlby (1951, p.84) observed: “If a community values its children it must cherish their parents.” **Work with families is an essential, non-negotiable component of successful reintegration and there are no short cuts to achieving this.** It involves identifying the family – whatever the family’s relationship with or link to the child – and building trust and exploring and assessing the experience of each family member through a therapeutic process that aims at creating healthier attachment patterns. Changes must be achieved in the family through the development of a shared language and understanding of emotions, relationships and conflict resolution. This will enable the creation of an environment where children can be protected and the development of all family members is guaranteed. As this study has shown, it is important to create times and spaces in which the child can have a gradual re-encounter with his (or her) family, which also ensures that the expectations of different family members match reality. It is as important to design activities which involve all family members as to have individual therapeutic sessions with individuals.

Parents and carers should be equipped to raise children without violence of any kind, and they should be able to nurture and set limits.

Most reputable programmes (see review of evidence in Berckmans et al. 2012) consciously aim to provide a safe space, where children are free from revictimisation from other children, staff or visitors and so (often intuitively) have addressed the first need of children (or adults) who have experienced violence: a place that is safe. JUCONI (and increasingly, other organisations working with adults or children impacted by chronic violence) have found the Sanctuary Model (briefly mentioned in the introduction to this study) a useful foundation for developing their own work. Central to the model is an ‘organisation wide’ or whole system approach that has been proved essential to creating a safe environment and to reduce violence and bullying in many contexts (see Adi et al. 2007). In practice, this involves creating a culture of ‘non-violence’, a shared language and tools that help resolve and defuse conflict when it arises. JUCONI House is structured to provide a predictable environment, and visits to families are consistent. The creation of safety involves training staff and ensuring staff retention, as staff turnover can evoke pain in children and families who have already experienced significant loss.

Creation of a safe environment requires close and constant attention to what children themselves identify as threats (Kudrati et al. 2007), hence the importance, in JUCONI, of rituals such as daily meetings (which always follow the same format) and emergency meetings that are intended to contain violent events.

Within this safe environment, it is possible to engage in therapeutic work that helps children or adults overcome the damaging effects of past experiences. The literature on street children stresses the need to listen to children and for individualised attention (Berckmans et al. 2012). JUCONI develops a plan with and for every child and family that identifies strengths and areas in which work is needed. However, a therapeutic approach, by implication, goes well beyond this. Staff need

the skill to interpret and respond to what the child tells them and they need to help promote the child’s capacity for reflection. Everyday activities need to have a therapeutic intention that provides the context for healing.

Not all children identify therapy as such as useful: for some boys, learning skills, work, apprenticeships or achievements were of much greater significance than one-to-one or Special Time. However, as noted earlier, every activity (work, recreation, sport, and reflection on apprenticeships, etc.) can have an educational and therapeutic intent.

In addition to a therapeutic approach, other components that all agencies working on reintegration should consider is assessment, preparation, the creation of individual and family plans, monitoring and evaluation and follow-on visits for at least two years. The Family Team identified the need to strengthen links with local communities in order to create a stronger protective environment around children who are returning to their families. The decision was made to focus more explicitly on drawing in extended family, schools, and other networks where these exist. This again is congruent with review level findings on ‘what works for street children’ (Berckmans et al. 2012).

But while the task at the outset of this study was to identify the elements that contribute to successful reintegration, in reality ‘elements of success’ cannot really be isolated. Some ‘elements of success’ have of course been described. For instance, reintegration requires certain conditions (safety, child’s capacity to reason, adults capacity to provide nurture and boundaries, communication, willingness of both family and child, involvement of relatives and siblings, absence of conflictive stepparents, ability to resolve conflict on both sides, improvement in secure routines for children); strategies that are needed to achieve this (the healing of traumatic experiences, careful preparation, development of a shared language to resolve conflict, development of routines, phased return, ‘protected time’ etc.); and the key (and only) way to ensure that problems are resolved: follow-on visits for one to three years

after the child has returned, with a phased-out withdrawal by the organisation. Many organisations may find it useful to introduce some of these elements to their programmes. But the rationale behind the use of these tools and strategies needs to be understood, so that they are used intentionally and consistently. It is also important to understand the relationship between management and therapeutic goals – something briefly discussed in Appendix 2.

Rather than isolating ‘successful elements’

we would recommend the value to other organisations who work with children who have been separated from their families as a result of family conflict, violence and neglect, of exploring **the theoretical foundation on which JUCONI is based.** This theoretical framework is being adjusted and integrated into different social and cultural contexts. For example, the theoretical framework can be applied to the design of school-based violence prevention (see Sanctuary Model website for details). Other organisations working with children and families who have been affected by violence may find this a useful starting point, as every other aspect

of work flows from this source. This foundation is introduced in the Safe Families Safe Children publication online.²⁰

JUCONI does not claim to work with hundreds of street-living children, although it serves a much larger population of children who work and live with their families, as well as working with schools to prevent violence and providing training to other organisations. Work with families and children with severe and deep-rooted difficulties takes time and experienced staff and it cannot be rushed. But as this study shows, if this is done with care, positive, sustained changes can be achieved – in most, but not all, cases – with children who have lived on the street because of the unbearable conditions in their families, and within families themselves. It is a sign of great hope that boys who took to the streets, typically, as Vinicio explains, *“because there was never food to eat and my father beat my mother”* can have a stable, positive relationship with their family of origin, can derive satisfaction from work and trust themselves to be capable – in time – of cherishing their own children.

20 <http://www.theict.org/files/SFSC-web.pdf>

Appendix 1 - Attachment theory

From an attachment perspective, a child “constructs, at an early age, a model that best fits the reality that he or she experiences as the child grows older” (Baumrind 1994). An infant who experiences a cold, detached response from a primary carer (for example, when crying for help) may develop an attachment style that shuns making demands or intimacy. When the source of danger is the carer (typically a maltreating parent) “children’s attachment behaviour becomes increasingly incoherent and disorganised, showing a mixture of avoidance, anger, disorientation and inertia” (Howe et al. 1999). There is compelling empirical evidence that insecure attachment is replicated down generations. Research by Peter Fonagy (Fonagy et al. 1995) has shown strong associations between parents’ history of secure attachment and secure attachment in their children, and the obverse, vivid evidence of the cycles of deprivation. As Baumrind (1994, p.361) stresses, parents will have difficulties in bonding if they have been insecurely attached, and will find it difficult to tolerate the same needs in their own children: “...as a result of their own neediness and immaturity, maltreating parents are *in competition* with their children for care and attention” (our emphasis).

Research in Venezuela illustrates the way that parents’ unmet needs increase with poverty and the way that this affects attachment (CENDIF 1999). Low levels of mother-child interaction and emotional well-being have been consistently reported in low-income urban neighbourhoods in Caracas (Mori and Leighton 1990). Moreover, ‘working models’ are influenced by children’s *overall* physical, as well as emotional, context: experiences that are incoherent or inconsistent can affect the ability to forge affective bonds (Barudy 1998, p57).

The consequences of insecure attachment in infancy are not irremediable in adult life, as long as those who have experienced it have the

capacity (and the opportunity) for what Fonagy et al. (1995) termed reflexive self-functioning – the opportunity to stand back from difficulties and talk freely about them and, above all, to construct other significant relationships that alter representational models (see also Howe et al. 1999). This is usually achieved with greater difficulty in later life. However, “new social experiences always have the capacity to alter one’s social representations and expectations of the worthiness of self and availability of others”.

Based on their observations of mothers and infants, Main and Hesse (1990) identified a series of actively hostile, frightening and frightened behaviours by mothers that they called ‘atypical’ or ‘Fr-behaviour’. These behaviours can be subtle (for example, periods of being dazed and unresponsive) or more overt (deliberately frightening children). Several instruments have been developed to measure parent’s engagement in these behaviours. A coding system introduced by Main and Hesse to assess ‘Fr’ behaviour has been developed by others, and has shown strong association between Fr-behaviour and maternal unresolved loss. This research suggests that ‘Fr’ behaviours are distinct from neglect and express a distorted image of the child which is the consequence of the mothers’ unresolved trauma and losses (Jacobvitz et al. 1997). It is important to note that unresolved trauma and loss can be expressed in different ways, e.g. as fear for and over-protectiveness of a loved child.

The central aim of attachment-based interventions is to improve the sensitivity of the parent to the emotional needs of the child, and in particular to their need for a secure and reliable base. Attachment-based interventions are diverse because the aim of improving maternal sensitivity can be incorporated within very different models of intervention.

Appendix 2 - The relationship between management and therapeutic goals

The importance of strong, trusting relationships between children and any programme staff are emphasised in much of the literature on street-connected children in both ‘developing’ and industrialised countries (Berckmans et al. 2012). Mutual trust means respecting the child in his/her vulnerability and having an ability to communicate feelings that s/he is accepted, lovable and worth listening to. And this in turn depends on the quality of staff and the resources they have to do their very difficult work. *“It takes a lot of effort to train and support a team so that they can be this reliable and consistent ... that is why you ensure that staff are all on the same page, that everyone knows their role, to train them, and maintain relationships.”* (Jorge Villar, Former Director of Methodology)

Management, training, monitoring/evaluation and fundraising are inseparable from the overall achievement of educational and therapeutic goals. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain the relationship between management and therapeutic work, but it must be stressed that stability is paramount in an organisation that aims to create a secure environment for children who have *“left a system where everything collapsed”* (Jorge Villar).

Since relationships with staff are central to this, recruitment, training and long-term retention of good staff is critical. Staff are motivated by seeing success in the families with which they work and the movement towards success (or otherwise) should be visible through monitoring and evaluation. For the JUCONI House and Family Teams, monthly monitoring involves recording simple data, like number of families visited, the activities carried out and events organised. Six-monthly evaluations go into much more detail, applying standardised evaluation tools to look at a host of indicators in areas such as emotional well-being, education, social

participation, work and family functioning. One of the key processes involves exploring the gains by each child and family against a treatment plan which children themselves help create and review. Monitoring and evaluation are therefore not just about securing good baseline information by the organisation: they are central to the achievement of therapeutic and educational objectives and staff motivation. Staff are also motivated by their own developing professional expertise; completion of accredited training modules improves their own professional prospects should they leave – but staff tend to stay where they are valued and successful and receive continuous personal and professional development opportunities.

One way to ensure that staff are supported and motivated (and ensure better decision making) has been through weekly case review meetings. This helps educators not only unburden themselves and avoid burnout, but also helps give direction to their individual plans. Experienced educators who are being trained as therapists find this a particularly important time, and a source of learning and solidarity.

Although wages are relatively modest in comparison with other sectors, all staff receive the legally required benefits which include dues to Mexico’s Social Services Fund – this ensures their health care, pension, and access to a housing fund. This is mandated by law, but organisations that are not required to do this should consider what is necessary to help frontline staff to attend to their own challenging work without constant anxiety about money. In JUCONI’s case this is in turn the result of careful fundraising and the gradual development, over two decades, of a diversified donor base. But practice and fundraising are linked, in that donors are attracted to quantifiable, honest results, and this is in turn one of the consequences of strong monitoring and evaluation systems.

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