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Children: the Future of the World

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MAKING children laugh—especially children who haven't much to laugh about—isn't the world's easiest job. If you further complicate the task by trying to get them to laugh in 17 languages, you are faced with what might look like an insurmountable problem.

But if the trials of my chosen work are difficult, the rewards of achievement—seeing tiny faces, drawn with hunger, twisted with pain, or wasted with illness, suddenly break into laughter—make it worthwhile.

One thing I've discovered while traveling 100,000 miles and visiting 32 countries is that there are only two expressions which are the same in every language —"ouch!" and "ha! ha! ha!"

Maybe I'd better explain myself a little more. For the past three years I have been operating as a sort of roving ambassador for an organization called the United Nations Children's Fund—known as UNICEF. This is a highly nonpolitical branch of the UN with one very simple aim—that of emancipating from sickness and hunger all the children of the world.

My job is primarily to call world attention to the work being done by UNICEF by visiting and then telling about their installations in all parts of the globe. At these installations, UNICEF does its medical magic to stop kids from saying "ouch!" or its equivalent, and I found myself doing what I could to get them to saying "ha! ha! ha!" again.

I have made five trips abroad for UNICEF in the past three years on this sort of assignment. On my last trip, thru Britain, France, Spain, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Israel, Morocco, and Nigeria, I was accompanied by a crew of CBS camera and sound technicians filming a special 90-minute "See It Now" broadcast for Edward R. Murrow and co-producer Fred W. Friendly. This meant that not only must I communicate with children who didn't speak my language, but I must be equally understandable to millions of TV viewers.

I don't know what kind of an ambassador I make. I know little about diplomacy and even less about protocol. But I do get along pretty well with kids. That's because I follow one cardinal rule. If you want to communicate with a child, put yourself on a child's level. Become a child with him. Sing his songs, dance his dances, play his games. There's a lot of child in every adult. If an adult can allow that child in him to escape in his meetings with children, he'll find it remarkably easy to communicate.

Frequently, I find it helps to allow the child to teach something to *you*. In Italy, I communicated with a group of young polio convalescents thru the medium of a Neapolitan folk song, which *they* taught *me*. They roared with laughter over my attempts to master the Italian phrases, such as *cantare la canzone*, which I insisted on pronouncing, "cansone la cantara." To a child, this was excruciatingly funny.

In Spain, I got my message across by impersonating a flamenco dancer whose knee buckles under him the first time he stamps his foot on the stage. In Israel I did a pantomime of an American cowboy movie. In Nigeria, I hopped into the midst of a native dance and added a little of the Lindy Hop to their rituals.

On my trips, I have visited with the President of Turkey, the Prime Minister of Great Britian, the President of France, President Gronchi of Italy, the King and Queen of Greece, Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia, Prime Minister Ben Gurion of Israel, and the Sultan of Morocco.

It would be hard to imagine more varied political beliefs than are reflected by these persons, yet each one said almost exactly the same thing—that children represent the future of the world, and unless the adults of the world assume the responsibility for providing these children with the opportunity to grow into useful maturity, there will be no world in years to come. # #

Mr. Kaye is an internationally known star of stage, screen, and television.