

# Because they're worth it

**The children at Kids Company – some of them escaping drugs or abuse at home – are finding refuge in aromatherapy and acupuncture. Now hope is arriving from another unlikely source: Vogue's beauty director**

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Some of the children at Kids Company who will benefit from Kathy Phillip's aromatherapy range. Photograph: Karen Robinson

In a brightly painted room in Camberwell, south London, two 11-year-old girls are lying with their eyes closed, receiving a head massage. The expressions on their faces suggest they are about to drift happily off to sleep as Penny, the masseuse, continues her slow, rhythmic strokes. Perched on the end of the bed, nine-year-old Morgan and her friend are proudly showing me their newly painted fingernails - silver shooting stars drawn on little nails bitten down to the quick - and chatting about whether they prefer facials to manicures.

While middle-class parents try to lure their pre-teen daughters away from nail polish and lipstick, fearing their little girls are growing up too fast, for some of these disadvantaged children the few hours they spend in the beauty therapy room at Kids Company's drop-in centre is a rare chance to be in a calm environment. It is also probably their only experience of being touched gently and lovingly or of being the focus of an adult's attention in a positive way. These children know all too well what it means to grow up too fast. The majority of the young people who knock on the door of the Kids Company centre

asking for help do not have a functioning adult at home. Many of the parents are rendered incapable by drugs, some are abusing the children or permitting them to be abused in return for money or drugs. Some of the children appear in states of severe malnutrition and steal because they are starving. Most are not registered with doctors or dentists. From the excited faces of the younger children gathered here, you wouldn't guess that such bleakness framed their lives, a testament to the positive impact of Kids Company. It's also the last place you would expect to find the designer-clad figure of Kathy Phillips. Sylph-like in her tailored jacket and immaculate hair, Phillips is international beauty director of Vogue magazine. She's here to celebrate a most unlikely partnership: a range of aromatherapy products that she's created to raise money for the disadvantaged and damaged children who are helped by Kids Company. Kathy Phillips and Camila Batmanghelidjh, founder of Kids Company, make a wonderfully incongruous double act - Batmanghelidjh is a riot of colour in

her turbans and flowing dresses - but their alliance will be invaluable to thousands of children.

'The starting point was that Boots approached me about doing a mass-market range because they wanted something that was proper aromatherapy,' says Phillips, who already produces This Works, an award-winning range of aromatherapy products. 'I decided to call it Good Works, because it was going to be green and sustainable and because of the connection with This Works. Then I felt if we were going to use that name we really should be doing something good with it.'

She could have chosen from any number of causes, but she had a friend who'd been working as a volunteer for Kids Company. 'I thought about what Camila was achieving here and I liked the fact that it was an unsexy cause,' she explains. 'People worry about donkey sanctuaries and children in Sri Lanka, when there are children here on their doorstep who need help.'

Phillips initially didn't realise how well her idea would tie in with Kids Company's pioneering work in the use of massage therapies to treat disturbed children. First, she had to persuade Boots and the intermediary packaging and supply companies to take a hit in profits to fund the percentage given to charity - £2 from every £8 product, an unusually generous slice in the world of charity endorsements. So she didn't tell Batmanghelidjh of her plans until the infrastructure was almost complete, and it was only then she discovered the happy coincidence that massage was a central part of Kids Company's therapeutic programme. Now Batmanghelidjh takes over the story.

'We'd have these boys lining up for massage, but some of them are so traumatised they won't allow anyone to touch them, so sometimes the therapist would have to do it over their Nike caps,' she says. She goes on to explain that all the complementary therapists who work at Kids Company (the centre offers massage, reflexology, cranial osteopathy and acupuncture, alongside psychotherapy) are supervised once a week by a psychotherapist. 'It's when the children are lying down that you see the cigarette burns, the belt marks. The massage therapists have to be prepared for this. And we tend to keep the appointments quite loose. If a child starts speaking or needs to fall asleep, we don't want to interrupt that. Many of them use it as an impromptu therapy session and for most of them it's their first experience of kind touch.'

But raising money to pay for the therapeutic programme has proved difficult. Batmanghelidjh spends much of her time fundraising among City companies, many of which are generous, but

occasionally she encounters prejudice. Every fresh newspaper story about a teenage knifing makes it that much more difficult to encourage firms to channel money in the direction of 'thugs'.

Batmanghelidjh explains: 'One major organisation told me: "Your kind of children don't look good on our annual report." And it's very hard to find funding for something like this programme, because it's not a building or an object that people can put a plaque on and say: "We provided this." So when Kathy came along with this project I couldn't believe it.'

Her struggle for funding is understandable; middle-market newspaper columnists would explode in indignation if government money were used to fund 'massages for muggers'. But those who would sneer at this project do so from an ignorance not just of the youngsters involved but also of the efficacy of complementary therapies, believe Phillips and Batmanghelidjh.

'As a beauty editor you know that there's a percentage of people who think the whole thing's very superficial, very commercial, very empty-headed,' says Phillips, who is also a qualified yoga teacher. 'But further down the line you see how people are feeling better about themselves and how their performance has improved.'

Batmanghelidjh is also aware of how the programme may be perceived by people who judge vulnerable children only by reports of their behaviour. To this end, Kids Company is collaborating on research with a number of university and medical schools into the effects of extreme neglect and abuse on the brain development of children.

Batmanghelidjh shows me two MRI scans. In one of them there are large areas of empty space at the front of the skull. 'If no one interacts with you, the brain doesn't develop properly,' she says. 'So the brain of a three-year-old who has been severely neglected is smaller than the brain of a normal three-year-old.'

'The part of the brain that governs emotion and behaviour is underdeveloped, so these children can't calm themselves down. And they release vast amounts of adrenaline because they're terrified for long periods of time, so they're wired for emergency, they're like pressure cookers. They use cannabis to calm themselves, so we're looking at other ways of helping them do that. One of the most moving things is when you ask these boys: "Do you feel calm when you hurt people?", they'll say: "My God, how did you know?" Then you show them the brain pictures. I've had thugs cry - because for the first time someone has shown them what is happening to

them and explained this thing that they've had no words for. So it's about equipping the children to take responsibility for balancing their energy and their emotions out, rather than just saying, "Calm down."

Batmanghelidjh set up Kids Company in 1996 to combat the fallout from a system that was failing vulnerable children at an early age, leaving them prey to drug dealers and then blaming them when they ended up committing crimes. She estimates more than 500,000 young people ought to be on the Child Protection Register, 'and there is only capacity for 30,700. So at street level the drug dealers are perversely solving the social-care problems of these children. These are the things that we're not facing. We allow ourselves to describe children who present disturbed behaviour as "young offenders", then we can say: "They made a poor moral choice." But if your brain chemistry is adapted for violence because of neglect or abuse, you don't have much of a choice. By labelling them criminals, we say the flawed morality is the child's and the rest of us get away with not facing our flawed morality in failing to help them. In my experience of working with these children for 11 years, none of them wants to be a criminal.'

The good news, Batmanghelidjh continues, is that the damage to the developing brain can be repaired to a large extent by loving care, relationships of trust and the calming effects of the therapies. The results of the academic studies will be known in three years, and Batmanghelidjh hopes the science will change the way people view these vulnerable children and lend further support to her approach of 'robust love'. 'I want to be part of the solution rather than lock myself in a gated community and point from behind the bars saying, "There goes the criminal!'"

In the meantime, the children tell me they can't wait to see the products on the shelves. 'They're really looking forward to going into Boots and seeing "their" products,' Batmanghelidjh says, beaming. 'It's a real source of pride that they can own this and feel that civil society is doing something to help them.'

'I was surprised and very pleased about that,' adds Phillips, 'because I was afraid the children would feel patronised by the idea. But they've told Camila they'd really like their own spa.'

• Good Works will be available from Boots from September. Prices start at £6

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