



Family Tracing and Reunification

Children separated from their parents and families because of conflict, disaster or population displacement, or because of economic or social reasons, are at increased risk of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect in an emergency. Every child has the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents as recognised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, Article 7). The CRC also requires States, UN agencies and NGOs to work together to trace the parents or other family members of any separated refugee child in order to facilitate family reunification (Article 22).

Growing up in a safe family environment is essential for children's psychological, cognitive and physical development. In the best case, alternative care is only required as an interim measure while family tracing is carried out and until the time when children can be reunited with parents or family members.



Family separation is prevented and responded to, and unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) are cared for and protected according to their specific needs and their best interests.”

Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action
Standard 13: Unaccompanied and Separated Children

Key messages

- The **best interests of the child should guide any decision** regarding family tracing and reunification, paying particular attention to the wishes of the child.
- The **right to family unity** means every child has the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents. **Preventing separation** from occurring and understanding the reasons for separation is essential to protecting children.
- **Family tracing should start as soon as possible** after identification of UASC, including through community-based tracing methods. Separation can have a profound psychological impact on children, and children and parents should be kept informed on the progress of tracing.
- **Tracing and family reunification must not expose the child to risk** and should be conducted without disclosing the child's whereabouts or **the status of the child as an asylum-seeker or refugee**.
- **Coordination between all actors engaged in tracing and reunification, in particular the ICRC and the National Red Cross / Red Crescent Societies**, is essential to ensure effective referrals and timely tracing.
- **It is UNHCR's responsibility to ensure that tracing takes place for unaccompanied and separated children and to support tracing efforts wherever possible**, for example by supporting community-based tracing strategies and using proGres as a tracing tool.



As soon as an unaccompanied or separated child is taken into care, **all reasonable efforts should be made to trace his/her family and re-establish family ties**, when this is in the best interests of the child and would not endanger those involved.”

UN General Assembly, Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children: 24 February 2010



This briefing note has been produced by the Child Protection Unit, Division of International Protection, in order to guide field operations on key thematic child protection issues.

Key Steps

Coordination: Coordinate with all actors providing services for UASC. Establish specific procedures (documented in MoUs / SOPs) for FTR.

Identification: UASC should be proactively identified through UNHCR and partner processes (e.g. refugee registration, child friendly spaces), as well as community-based networks.

Documentation: Documentation of vital tracing information on circumstances of separation and family composition should happen as soon as possible.

Referral: All UASC should to be referred for care, protection and assistance services to meet assessed needs.

Tracing: Tracing should be initiated as soon as possible; Tracing can occur within or between camps/host communities and across borders.

Verification: If tracing is successful, the relationship between the parent/relative and the child must be verified using documentation, photos, or personal information.

Reunification: UNHCR and partners should consider preparation, transport, travel documents, and support. All children being reunified to their country of origin must be processed for voluntary repatriation, including the completion of the Voluntary Repatriation Form.

Follow-up: Reunified children should be followed up by a competent authority at least once post-reunification and may require support to avoid further separations.

Reunification Involving Return to the Country of Origin

Family reunification in the country of origin is not always in the best interests of the child. It should therefore not be pursued where there is a “reasonable risk” that such a return would lead to the violation of fundamental human rights of the child. Such risk is documented in the granting of refugee status, or in a decision of the competent authorities on the applicability of non-refoulement obligations.

Return to the country of origin should in principle only be arranged if such return is in the best interests of the child. Such a determination shall, inter alia, take into account:

- The safety, security and other conditions, including socio-economic conditions awaiting the child upon return;
- The availability of care arrangements for that particular child;
- The views of the child expressed in exercise of his or her right to do so (CRC Article 12) and those of his or her caretakers;
- The child’s level of integration in the host country and the duration of absence from the home country;
- The child’s right “to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations” (CRC Article 8).

UN General Assembly, Treatment of UASC Outside their Country of Origin: 1 September 2005.

Key Concepts and Definitions

FAMILY TRACING AND REUNIFICATION (“FTR”):

For children, tracing, is the process of searching for family members or primary legal or customary care-givers. The term also refers to the search for children whose parents are looking for them. The objective of tracing is reunification or re-establishing contact with parents or other close relatives, normally for the purpose of long-term care. FTR can take place within a refugee or IDP camp, between camps or between different areas in the country of asylum. Cross-border tracing occurs between different countries of asylum or between the country of asylum and the country of origin.

UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN (UAC):

Are children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.

SEPARATED CHILDREN (SC):

Are those separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary care-giver, but not necessarily from other relatives. Therefore this may include children accompanied by other adult family members.

CHILD-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS (CHH):

Are groups of children, often but not necessarily siblings, who live together as one household or family. All children in a child-headed household are considered unaccompanied.

ACCIDENTAL SEPARATIONS (involuntary separations):

Happen unintentionally and are usually an immediate, direct consequence of the emergency, for example when populations flee from armed conflict or are displaced in a flood. However they can also occur in a country of asylum – for example due to poorly organized evacuations, distributions or other assistance efforts.

DELIBERATE SEPARATIONS (voluntary separations):

Occur when parents, caregivers or children make a conscious decision to separate. Deliberate separation often occurs as a result of the extra stresses placed upon a family in the aftermath of an emergency. This could include a lack of food, shelter or access to education, or could be as a result of the loss of traditional support mechanisms. Separation can be part of a family’s coping strategy, for example sending their child to an orphanage to secure access to basic services. Children may also decide to leave the family to flee domestic violence or other forms of abuse, or in search of a better life.

Key Actions: What UNHCR and Partners can do

Legal & Policy Framework

- ➔ **Promote birth registration procedures** and other forms of identification documentation available to enable future repatriation and family reunification procedures for separated children, and to help facilitate reunification in cases of future separations.
- ➔ Ensure that **policies are in place to avoid institutionalization** of UASC in residential care facilities and advocate for changes or specific provisions for refugee children if necessary.
- ➔ Ensure **registration and Refugee Status Determination Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) prioritise UASC** as appropriate and detail referral pathways, including links to the best interests procedure and family tracing.

Knowledge & Data

- ➔ **Conduct assessment on causes and scope of separation.** Important to work out the causes of **accidental** and **deliberate** separations. Assessments should also consider the locations for likely separations and the scale of separations.
- ➔ **Utilise UNHCR's proGres database records** and other information management systems such as the Child Protection Information Management System (CPIMS), to search and trace for relatives in other camps, operations or countries.
- ➔ Ensure the **consent** of the caregiver and the child's views are sought and considered in assessing whether information sharing for the purpose of tracing is in the best interests of the child.

Coordination

- ➔ **Coordinate with ICRC** and National Red Cross / Red Crescent Societies to ensure clear roles and coordinated action on tracing and reunification activities and referral mechanisms.
- ➔ **Establish Standard Operating Procedures** for separated and unaccompanied children, including for family tracing and reunification. These should be interagency and detail the required actions for identification, documentation, care, tracing, verification, reunification and follow-up.

Human & Financial Capacity

- ➔ **Train registration, protection and other relevant partner and UNHCR staff** on identification of UASC (including a clear understanding of definitions), communication with children, accurate data collection on circumstances of separation and family composition, and on referral services for UASC.
- ➔ Ensure that **adequate human and financial resources** are taken into account in UNHCR and partner programmes to efficiently and effectively provide for

family tracing and reunification programmes. Consider staffing for child protection partners, UNHCR capacity and resources to support reunification.

- ➔ **Work with community leaders, mechanisms and children and youth groups** to help identify and protect UASC and support community-based tracing methods.

Prevention & Response

- ➔ **Ensure assistance provided to UASC is mainstreamed** with other assistance services to avoid stigmatization or perceived incentives for separation.
- ➔ **Ensure that case management systems are in place** to actively monitor care arrangements and ensure that all necessary actions with regard to protection, tracing and reunification are taken. Integrate case management for UASC with case management for all other children at risk. **Prioritise the most vulnerable** (e.g. children under 5, unaccompanied children, etc.) in situations where large numbers of children are separated.
- ➔ **Immediately establish procedures for the identification and prioritisation of UASC** at refugee registration, ideally with a child protection staff member present to facilitate immediate action. Ensure that identification is also occurring through community-based networks and other child protection and refugee services.
- ➔ **Start tracing efforts as soon as possible after identification of UASC.** Evidence has shown that the faster tracing efforts commence, the higher their chances of success. UNHCR should ensure that community-based tracing, database tracing, mass tracing and case-by-case tracing methods at a minimum are in place.
- ➔ **Ensure that the best interests procedures are in place** for family tracing and reunification. A Best Interests Assessment (BIA) must take place for girls and boys before undertaking tracing to ensure the child's participation and to identify any risks to the child or family, and before family reunification. The Best Interest procedure must be followed for all reunifications. Reunifications in the country of origin require a BID.
- ➔ **Ensure that procedures are in place to follow-up and monitor reunified UASC.** If UNHCR is not directly present in the area where the child is reunified, monitoring can be done by the government, another UN agency or NGO, or by community-based groups.

Advocacy & Awareness

- ➔ **Community awareness campaigns** on prevention of separation, particularly around reception, arrival sites and other areas where displaced populations are present.
- ➔ **Advocacy with service providers** to ensure that UASC and foster families, as well as other children at risk, are included in their beneficiaries or prioritised for services in a safe, non-stigmatising way.

UNHCR in Action:

Examples from the Field

Coordination with ICRC in Cameroon: In the regions of Cameroon accommodating refugees from the Central African Republic, ICRC, with the Cameroon Red Cross (CRC), has set up a Restoring Family Links (RFL) programme. In each refugee site, the ICRC and CRC have set up tents where refugees can lodge requests to locate their relatives. When UNHCR or partners identify UASC, they are immediately referred to the CRC on site. Equally, if a child is identified by the CRC, the child is referred to UNHCR and partners for assistance and protection. UNHCR and ICRC have agreed to coordinate on a regular basis to exchange information on cases registered and tracing results.

In-country tracing in Shire, Ethiopia: UNHCR in Shire receives several hundred UASC per month. Many of these children have parents or other family members in other camps. BIAs are done for children at the reception centre when they cross the border. If a child potentially has a family member in Ethiopia, UNHCR searches for that relative using the proGres database and through community leaders. If a match is found, the information is shared with the child protection partner for verification and subsequent reunification. Once the child is reunified, support and monitoring are provided.

Tracing Methods

Tracing is carried out in a number of ways using a range of different methods. The choice of the most appropriate method will involve weighing the potential risks to the child and resources available. In all tracing efforts, information should be sought without disclosing the child's whereabouts or the status of the child as an asylum-seeker or refugee.

- ➔ **Community-based tracing** – where families search for each other using a range of both modern (email, mobile phones) and traditional methods (clan or tribal networks).
- ➔ **Case-by-case tracing** – an active search on behalf of the child/parent by an organization responsible for tracing. Often involves searching in the last place the child and family were together, place of origin, or other location determined by the history of separation.
- ➔ **Mass tracing** – carried out on behalf of a number of children at the same time e.g. displaying lists of children's names or photographs on billboards in public places, announcements using a megaphone, or in meetings with a community group.
- ➔ **Cross-referencing/database tracing** – involves searching database records for the relatives of UASC and looking for a match, as well as searching for children reported as missing by caregivers. UNHCR's proGres can be used for this method.
- ➔ **Centre-based tracing** – Utilizing residential care centres to trace for family relatives. A potential problem with this method is that staff may not be motivated to carry out tracing where they depend on the continued existence of the centre for their livelihood
- ➔ **Web-based tracing** – While recognizing the real potential for Web-based tracing, UNHCR and the global IAWG-UASC are not currently able to support or promote Web-based tracing programmes, with the exception of the ICRC Family Links website.

ICRC – Restoring Family Links

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the National Red Cross and Red Crescent have a mandate to restore and maintain family links lost owing to separation caused by armed conflict or other situations of violence, detention, natural or man-made disasters, or migration. The ICRC and 188 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies together form the Family Links Network to restore family links across the world. In the refugee context, ICRC and UNHCR work closely to facilitate tracing and reunification where it is in the best interests of the child.

Restoring family links ("RFL") is a generic term used for a wide range of services aiming to prevent separations and disappearances, restore and maintain contact between families and clarify the fate of persons unaccounted for. These services may include:

- Exchange of family news through Red Cross Messages, or telephones, or the Family Links website (<http://familylinks.icrc.org>);
- Tracing of persons that are sought by their families;
- Registration and follow-up of unaccompanied and vulnerable separated children;
- Family reunifications;
- Transmission of official documents and issuance of ICRC travel documents;
- Support to the authorities for creating mechanisms to clarify the fate & whereabouts of persons unaccounted for;
- Material, legal, psychological/psychosocial or other support to the families of the persons unaccounted for;
- Support to forensic services and to the management of human remains.

For More Information:

- ➔ Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, ICRC (2004) <http://goo.gl/8UflZ9>
- ➔ ICRC, The need to know: Restoring links between dispersed family members (2011), available at: <http://goo.gl/HaRAhf>
- ➔ CPWG, Frequently Asked Questions on registration, family tracing and reunification of children separated from their families in emergency (2012), available at: <http://goo.gl/9IP0OI>
- ➔ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside their Country of Origin, (2005), available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/42dd174b4.html>
- ➔ Field Handbook and Toolkit on Unaccompanied and Separated Children. Interagency Working Group on Unaccompanied and Separated Children (2016)