

Breakthroughs for children

Transforming expectations for children who get separated from their families in emergencies

In the 1980s we dramatically improved the prospects of children who get separated from their families when there is a natural disaster or war. Save the Children has reunited hundreds of thousands of children with their families, and led the way for others to follow. We have done this by introducing a more systematic approach to family tracing and improving coordination between agencies. It has radically changed what is expected and is the norm for children caught up in emergencies.

Children are particularly vulnerable in emergencies. In the chaos that follows a natural disaster or outbreak of conflict, many children get separated from their families. People are forced to flee, homes are destroyed, and no one knows if people who are missing are alive or dead. In these situations, there is a real danger that children who get separated from their families will never find them again. In a large-scale emergency, we are talking about many thousands of children.

Until the 1980s, emergency agencies simply weren't geared up to dealing effectively with separated children. Efforts tended to be chaotic, slow and unsystematic, with a lack of co-ordination between agencies. Many children ended up in institutional care, permanently cut off from their families.

Save the Children transformed this situation. During the 1983-85 famine in Ethiopia, 2,500 children were left on their own in feeding centres with no idea where their families were. The standard response at that time would have been to put these children in children's homes. Save the Children wasn't happy with that approach - children are nearly always better off in their families. So, staff carefully tracked down the extended families of these separated children and resettled into those families. In the end, 90 per cent of children were reunited.

Save the Children was ambitious to build on this success. We reunited hundreds of thousands of children in subsequent emergencies. For example, after the Rwandan genocide in 1994, we were the lead agency in dealing with the 45,000 separated children. Almost all of them were reunited with their families.

We found creative ways to help children on the ground. We set up community meetings where we use lists of names and photos to trace children and families. We hold public reunions of children with their families in order to encourage the rest of the local community to feel involved in a child's future and welfare. We have developed systems to standardise and match information gathered on thousands of children and families. Other agencies have now adopted our approaches, and our guides on family tracing are widely used. We helped set up an interagency group on separated children to improve the way organisations treat children in emergencies and to improve co-ordination between agencies.