



Unaccompanied Minors

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Saleh M. Al Salehi

Introduction

Unaccompanied minors are children below the age of 18 years who are separated from their parents, caretaker, or legal guardian. Children constitute at least 25% of most communities and will be affected when disasters strike, regardless of the type or location of a disaster. They will need proper help and support both during and after the event. Since children are expected to be away from their families at day care or school during the week, this may add to the concerns of possible separation, making them more vulnerable. This is especially true in countries with poor infrastructure which may also lack community or school disaster plans. When children are escaping from the potential danger of a disaster they easily become lost. Parents may be harmed during the emergency and be unable to initiate the search for their children.

Unaccompanied minors in disaster situations are likely to be frightened and fragile. Their basic needs may be unmet; they may be subject to abuse, or even taken by human traffickers to another community or country. They may suffer physical injuries and/or be psychologically traumatized. Unaccompanied children and adolescents found in refugee camps are likely to suffer discrimination and neglect. Some may be attempting to care for younger siblings.

When children are separated from parents but accompanied by another family member, they are called separated children. Separated children are expected to be in safe hands and receiving proper care, unlike unaccompanied children.

A plan to provide care for unaccompanied minors is of utmost importance. Children's rights are guaranteed by international conventions which must be observed particularly when dealing with unaccompanied children. These conventions include the right to: [1–3].

S. M. Al Salehi (✉)
Princes Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
e-mail: salsalhi@kaauh.edu.sa

- A name, legal identity, and birth registration.
- Physical and legal protection.
- Not to be separated from their parents.
- Provision for their basic needs.
- Care and assistance appropriate to their age and developmental needs.

These rights must always be faithfully observed and especially highlighted during disasters. Where unaccompanied minors are involved, the risk of neglect or abuse is greatest. Discussions about these rights should be culturally sensitive and should involve leaders in the refugee community.

Risk and Vulnerability

Although all unaccompanied minors are vulnerable to dangers brought on by disasters, very young children, girls, and the disabled are at greatest risk. Risks include direct effects of the humanitarian crises such as physical injuries, being trapped in wreckage or buildings, confusion, panic, fear, and becoming lost while running from danger. Consequences of disasters also include lack of food, destruction of homes, and death of caregivers or family. These vulnerable children may suffer anxiety, depression, forced relocation, or multiple types of abuse. They may even be abducted for purposes of human trafficking.

Helping Unaccompanied Minors

The following measures shall be undertaken for unaccompanied minors:

- Immediate protection and care for those at highest risk:
 - Children under 5 years.
 - Girls.
 - Disabled children.
 - Minority children in the community.
- Relief workers should inquire about systems to care for unaccompanied minors:
 - designated shelters,
 - safety precautions,
 - food and water,
 - clothing,
 - medical care,
 - education and play spaces,
 - reunification efforts,
 - vetting of interim caretakers.
- Medical Relief workers should give priority to unaccompanied minors in their clinical work.

Documentation and Confidentiality

The entire process of helping separated or unaccompanied children must be documented, including:

- Each child's identity: name, age, sex, body characteristics—including photos.
- Known details of parents, caregivers, or legal guardians.
- The child's sources of food, clothing, and housing.
- The child's health condition at first encounter.
- Any attempts to reunify children with family.
- Any accidents, injuries, neglect, or abuse including actions taken.
- Any communication inside a country or across borders.
- Foster family and adoption efforts.
- Death, including cause and where the child is buried.

Confidentiality is a basic right for unaccompanied children; their dignity must be preserved.

Children should not be exposed to media. Their personal information must not be leaked to any organization that may harm them or to persons who recruit child soldiers, beggars, or children for sex trafficking.

Tracing and Family Reunification

In humanitarian emergencies, responsibility for tracing and reunification of families lies with the International Committee of the Red Cross [4].

The best treatment for a lost and anxious child is feeling the arms of parents; all efforts must be made to reunify children with their families as soon as possible. All systems and policies must make this goal a priority. At any stage of the crisis, once parents verify a child's identification, and the child recognizes parents, they should be reunited.

When disasters occur, parents will go to the school or daycare to fetch their children. If families are unable to reach a school or daycare in time, it may be necessary to move children from under responsibility of school officials to unify them with parents following these steps:

- Most children will recognize their parents or family members from a distance.
- Verification must be carried out for every child.
- Verification is critically important for every child making sure he/she is in the right hands.
- It is necessary to follow local government laws or policies in line with children's rights.
- Reunification will be with one or both parents. If this is not possible, the child should be placed with other family members willing to take responsibility.

Identity of and relationship with other family members must also be verified and duly documented.

- The local community will help significantly in the verification process.
- Tracing of the family for an unaccompanied child should start as soon as possible using available resources and following international guidelines [5].
- Tracing may involve a great deal of collaboration between local agencies, NGOs, and countries.
- When tracing is successful, an assessment should verify that family reunification is in the best interests of the child. In cases where there are serious concerns, it may be necessary to involve the appropriate local authorities, existing welfare systems, other agencies and local communities for any further action or future support required.
- When early reunification is not possible, children must be allowed to communicate with their parents or family members as much as possible. When direct communication is impossible, Red Cross services should be requested.
- When unaccompanied children have been involved in armed violence against their own community, reunification of these children must consider the need to shield them against persecution, discrimination, targeted attacks, and further recruitment.
- The International Committee of the Red Cross, the National Red Cross, and the Red Crescent Society all have a mandate to trace across international borders. Nongovernmental agencies and any other implementing partners should therefore coordinate all cross-border tracing with these organizations, and work through UNHCR in the case of refugees.
- When parents or legal guardians cannot be found, children will need to stay for long periods of time in shelters, or be placed in foster families for interim care.
- Foster families can be utilized in compliance with a very strong legal framework.
- Adoption is not allowed during the acute phase of disasters. When considered at later stages it must follow the international law and conventions of children rights.

Follow-up:

- It is critical to keep track of children who are unified with their families.
- Community support for families in need is important.
- Health follow-up for reunified children is important, especially for those with chronic medical problems or disabilities.
- When children are given to foster or adoptive families, follow-up is essential and must continue as long as it takes to make sure that children are well cared for and happy.

Measures to Prevent Separation of Children from Families

It is important that children be in the minds and hearts of officials and professionals when planning disaster management. Care for unaccompanied minors must be included in disaster management plans of all community systems including schools, government agencies, health systems, and child protection organizations. At the same time, families should be encouraged to have their own disaster plan that includes a means of communication and a reunification process.

A “ready-to-go” bag for infants should be available in all homes in anticipation of disasters or the need for emergency evacuation. This bag should include milk, diapers, clothes, identification, and communication means.

Disabled minors must receive proper attention either at home, at intervention centers, or other residential homes. Their diagnosis, essential medications, and caregiver information must be clearly identified in special tags. At the same time, governments and NGOs should have plans to shelter and provide proper care for them when disasters strike. Their staff should be trained to guide children to safe assembly areas or shelters in a timely manner.

All efforts should be made to keep children with their caretakers. School children must be handed over to their parents as soon as possible, or kept safe in a designated space with proper identification measures made to avoid confusion during disasters. They should be under direct adult supervision with escorts whenever they move until they are handed to their families.

Government agencies and NGOs must incorporate separation prevention strategies in their disaster plans. They must monitor their guidelines to comply with a child’s right not to be separated from their family, and the importance of early family reunification when they have been separated. Staff must be trained to handle this issue with sensitivity and vigilance. Government agencies should communicate their national disaster plans with the community and conduct solid awareness campaigns at all societal levels. It is of critical importance that all government and NGO policies do not include any statement that may lead to a child’s separation from their family.

Evacuation Situations

If these evacuation activities are not well-planned, chaos may ensue and the most vulnerable will be affected negatively, either by direct injuries or by getting lost or abducted. While evacuating children in emergency situations the following should be observed:

- Properly educate and *inform* all children, according to developmental age, in a reassuring tone and describe what should be happening and where they are being taken. Also, children must be given the chance to call family and notify them.

- Proper *identification* of all children by names and other means; this should include who oversees them and how and by whom they are transported. Children must be tagged with ID's that are clear and visible.
- Take note of and provide care for *high-risk* groups during evacuation; identify those at risk to people managing the evacuation in order to assure special arrangements for their care during and after transport to the receiving venue.
- Care during *transport* is very important since children may be lost or board the wrong vehicle. There should be frequent counting and children should be calmed as much as possible.
- Receiving *shelters* should be ready and organized in a way that will provide safety and security to all children, taking into account age and sex while allocating space to children. Also, the shelter should be accessible for the disabled and have resources for their care. Managing the shelter is of critical importance to preserve children's rights and provide optimal care until they are reunited with their legal guardians.

Management

Reunification

- The best therapy any lost child can be given is to be reunited with family, and all efforts should be made to find a parent or family member of the unaccompanied child to comfort him and improve his mental well-being.
- Post names of separated children in places where they might be recognized, and network with others (NGO's, government agencies, and health centers).
- Establish or adopt guidelines to deal with unaccompanied children. It is of great importance to systemize work and insure proper implementation of child-friendly practices.
- Keep a secure comprehensive database containing children's names, pictures, and status. This is a key element to increase the likelihood of reunification.

Healthcare

Unaccompanied children may need urgent or typical medical care, which will depend on an initial assessment of each child's situation. There should be a focus on life-threatening treatable conditions such as dehydration or infection.

- *Assessment* should include but not be limited to the following:
 - Basic identification information (name, age, school level, family address, known medical conditions, medication, allergy, etc.)
 - Vital signs: look for signs of dehydration, fever, or respiratory problems.
 - Weight, height, and head circumference: look for signs of malnutrition.

- Scan skin for fresh or old scars that may signify acute injury or maltreatment.
 - Psychosocial: observe the child's state of mind, level of resiliency, and coping abilities. Also learn about the child's family status (names, address, phone, last known location, and if their condition/situation is known).
 - Note any mental or behavioral disturbances and the level of severity.
- *Treatment:*
- Children's health must be maintained during evacuation, to include continuing treatment for physical injuries, dehydration, respiratory or gastrointestinal problems, and care for children with chronic conditions such as diabetes or asthma.
 - Follow best infection control practices to reduce cross infections and prevent disease outbreaks as much as possible, especially in shelters and refugee camps.
 - Nutritional needs must be provided since most unaccompanied children will suffer from lack of food and may be intimidated by larger children who take their food.
 - Psychosocial support for evacuated children is of great importance; relief workers should have skills in reassurance and comfort care for unaccompanied minors. Treatment of panic attacks, severe anxiety, depression or PTSD should be provided by trained and experienced professionals.
 - Reinstate positive routines such as school and playtime as soon as possible after safe shelter is allocated.

Summary

Unaccompanied children are to be expected after any humanitarian emergency. The physical and mental effects on these children will vary depending on both the severity of the disaster and the pre-disaster infrastructure in the community. Ideally, communities should have policies and plans to care for unaccompanied minors prior to a disaster, including plans for shelter, food, water, schooling, and health services.

Allocating teams or agencies to deal with unaccompanied children is of great importance. These teams will establish a functional network of help and support for, and a solid communication system with, other care providers, government and international agencies.

Finally, providing a secure, supportive environment, such as school routines, is critical for the general well-being of unaccompanied children, and reuniting these children with their families should be the highest priority of all.

References

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Saleh M. Al Salehi, MD is an Assistant Professor, Consultant in developmental and behavioral pediatrics and the Associate Medical Director of Child Development Center at King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz University Hospital (KAAUH), Princess Nourah University, Saudi Arabia. He also is a CBAHI Surveyor, the Chairman of the National Scientific Committee for Developmental Disorders at Saudi Health Council, the Chairman of the Scientific Committee for National Autism Registry at Saudi Health Council, and the Chairman of the National Scientific Committee for autism Accreditation Program at CBAHI.