



Save the Children

Photo credit: Anas Baba/Save the Children



SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN IN OUR COMMS & MEDIA WORK

Handbook for Save the Children's media & communications staff

INTRODUCTION

Save the Children has a presence in over 120 different countries, giving us a larger global reach than most global media and campaigning agencies. It also means we see and hear things from children that few others at the international level do. One of the most effective ways of creating change for children is to involve them as partners in our communications work, empowering them to share their stories, highlight their needs and create change.

Sharing these stories through the media can draw mass attention to natural disasters, human rights violations and abuses of power and can persuade governments to make important changes to improve children's lives.

Aside from our fundraising, media and advocacy strategies, we also have a duty to report what children tell us is important to them, to involve them in how we talk about crises affecting them, and to ensure their voices are heard.

Even though they experience unspeakable trauma and violence, children in many countries where we work rarely have access to professional counselling and psychosocial support services. Outside of their immediate family, media and communications staff members from Save the Children or other NGOs may therefore be the first people to speak to a child about an event in their lives (for example, an emergency).

*Save the Children's guiding principle for media & communications work is to **DO NO HARM**. The welfare of the child is paramount, and outweighs all other considerations, including the potential for a strong media or fundraising story.*

While it is not our job to replace professional services, particularly as we are not trained to do so, we can listen to children's stories with empathy and care, and help to empower them by sharing their experiences. We must also consider their emotional and physical safety, in line with our professional code of conduct and child safeguarding policies.

Involving children in decisions about how you depict the crisis is important. With the media's appetite for hard-hitting personal accounts, there is a risk of emotional harm if sensitive topics are covered without care. Save the Children works hard to mitigate these risks to children while also being true to our vision to 'be the voice for children'.

Wherever feasible, if you are gathering information about sensitive incidents, it is good practice to engage with parents instead of children, or to gather most of the information from adults.

Save the Children's guiding principle for media and communications work is to **DO NO HARM**. **The welfare of the child is paramount, and outweighs all other considerations**, including the potential for a strong media or fundraising story.

This guide outlines best practice when engaging children in our communications and media work, and provides guidance to help you prepare, plan and deliver sensitive, supportive and effective communications.

This handbook is divided into ten sections:

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HQ PREP

Training

Before you take part in communications work that involves children, try to ensure that all members of the team, including communications staff and translators, are appropriately trained and supported, and have the relevant background checks in place.

Training for staff arriving into a new country programme should include general Child Safeguarding training, and a brief on arrival (where possible) from the Child Protection team or Child Safeguarding Focal Point on context-specific risks and any challenges to informed consent. The Security Focal Point should also give you a brief. If you are a member of national staff, consider asking the Child Safeguarding Manager or Focal Point to give you any relevant new information regarding the risks to children.

Additional training for interviewers includes:

Psychological First Aid

The Safeguarding Children in Comms & Media Training that accompanies this handbook

This handbook is also applicable to third parties who engage with Save the Children's beneficiaries – for example partner organisations or VIPs who wish to meet with affected community members. A Save the Children staff member will accompany the VIP. If the subject matter is sensitive, consider opting for a focus group session instead.

If a journalist hosted by Save the Children is meeting a child, the media team will ensure they have been briefed on our guidelines and the importance of informed consent.

Planning

Before you embark on the process of collecting information from children for media purposes, talk to your manager, the Country Director or available equivalent (e.g. Emergency Team Leader, Operations Director) or a child safeguarding or child protection specialist and agree clear goals beforehand. Ensure that any request to speak directly to a child in the best interest of the child or children.

Our media, fundraising, campaigns and advocacy work should always be guided by what children tell us is important to them, or issues that are affecting their lives. Sometimes you might be asked to find different information or stories, depending on whether the content will be used by media, fundraising, campaigns or advocacy. Sometimes stories are needed to illustrate a certain issue or challenge facing children.

As far as possible, be confident beforehand that the information you are intending to gather will be used effectively. Even children who volunteer to be part of communications work can still find the process challenging. It may be difficult and confusing for a child to understand why plans change, or that their information or experience is not going to be shared with others after all.

When you are thinking of visiting a country office to interview children, one of the first things you should try to do is talk to the Child Protection staff or Child Safeguarding focal points in headquarters and in country. If the topics are sensitive, they can help you think through the process, and support you to conduct a risk assessment. If a decision is made to go ahead with interviewing a child, they will help you put in place any risk mitigation strategies that are necessary and help you plan for your visit. Try to do this before you arrive in-country, over the phone or skype.

Risk mitigation could include ensuring that you are accompanied by a local child protection specialist and that reaction protocols (which will help you know what to do if abuse is reported or needs disclosed) are agreed. Local staff can help you identify children who are willing to participate and will support you through the process of gaining informed consent from a child. They can help to explain the purpose of your meeting and what will be done with the information gathered.

Be aware that in some conflict settings, recording information by audio recorder or with a notepad could be interpreted as potential espionage – check this with your security manager before leaving. If you are not a national of that country, ask local staff about clothing and local cultural norms such as eye contact. In some cultures, it is considered rude to hold prolonged eye contact, in others it is preferred.

Before you head into the field, consult with local Save the Children staff and find out which other INGOs or media outlets have been there, reporting on children's stories or on a needs assessment. This could be other INGOs, news outlets or guests of INGOs, such as politicians or celebrities. If possible, double-check who they spoke to, and on what topics. This will help you avoid talking to the same child multiple times.

Preparation

As much as possible, inform yourself before leaving – look at relevant social media sites, read Save the Children and other agencies' situation reports, media reports and other online sources to make sure you know what to expect. If you have travelled to a country programme from the regional office or a member office, try to spend some time talking to local staff about the issues there.

It is also helpful to be aware of the preferred ways of working of your local colleagues and the community. Match your working style to theirs wherever possible – this may mean becoming comfortable with flexible timings (for example, you may plan to meet a family 'sometime after they've brought in the cattle' as opposed to 'at 15:00').



*Children line up to receive supplies from staff at a reception centre in Somalia.
Credit: Colin Crowley/Save the Children*

Translators

Work with local staff to decide whether it is most helpful to have a translator from the community, or a professional external translator. If you can, use translators that the country office is already familiar with, and who have been trained in child safeguarding. Consider whether a male or female translator would be most helpful, and whether the ethnicity of the translator may pose a challenge during the interview.

Beforehand, or on the way to the interview, spend some time going over your plan with your translator – make sure you both know to allow the child to guide the session as far as possible, what topics you expect to cover, and why they are important. Remember to highlight the need to remain flexible to what the child wants to tell you and to flag to the translator that the conversation is between yourself and the child - their role is to translate your words and those of the child and not to get involved in the discussion itself. When you go through the informed consent process with the child and family, ensure that you speak in short sentences, pausing frequently. This will allow the translator time to translate correctly, sentence by sentence.

During the interview, try to be aware of the body language of the children you are meeting with, and the emotions in their voice. Observe the behaviour of the translator and explain to them that they must be supportive and gentle with the child and parents, regardless of local customs towards children. For example, some cultures expect children to ‘speak only when spoken to’, and to be polite and concise when talking to adults. It is important to be aware of locally-held prejudices that you might accidentally strengthen.

Translators who talk over the child or parents must be challenged. From a technical point of view, this is also especially important if the child has agreed to be filmed. Explain that you are interested in whatever the child or parent wants to say, even if it seems irrelevant to the translator.

Do not be afraid to halt the interview and switch translators if it is not working well.

Map out a simple ‘reaction protocol’

Even if you have prepared carefully, and conducted a risk assessment before beginning, the interview process itself may bring up thoughts or emotions that the child might need further help in dealing with once you leave. Prior to conducting any interview, if not already in existence, try to work with local child protection staff and to map out a simple ‘reaction protocol’.

A reaction protocol will explain what to do if the child discloses abuse, becomes extremely distressed in the interview, or asks complex questions about Save the Children’s services in the area. For example, the reaction to a disclosure of abuse would be to report it to the Child Safeguarding or Child Protection Adviser, while the complex questions should be answered by a member of local staff who knows the answers. It can be reassuring to have this protocol mapped out before you go.

Many communities may have at least one or two people in ‘traditional caring positions’ such as the village chief or wife of the village chief or a well-respected elder. Other professionals such as a local midwife, nurse, or teacher may also be able to provide emotional support. The simplest way to understand who a child might turn to for support is to ask children themselves – if you are not local staff, ask them to do this before your visit to inform the reaction protocol.

If there are no government services, no local organisations able to provide counselling, no psychosocial support services in the local area, if Save the Children does not offer any similar help and there are no ‘caring’ adults who might be able to support the child, consider carefully whether to work with children in that area. It is not generally advisable to ask potentially sensitive questions if there are no sources of support available to that child.



Two schoolfriends at their school in Malawi, which is supported by Save the Children. Credit: Jonas Gratzner/Save the Children

FIELD PREP

Familiarise yourself first

If you are visiting a country programme from a Save the Children member or SCI Centre, on arrival in a new context, it's best not to expect to begin meeting and talking to children and families immediately, unless it is a rapid onset emergency and you have no choice. Try to allocate at least a day of your schedule to familiarise yourself with the context (including the political realities on the ground), the staff and the community before you begin directly working with children.

If a Child Friendly Space (CFS) visit is part of your work, it can be helpful to visit the CFS informally first, to meet the CFS staff, introduce yourself and your reason for being there, and invite questions. Children can then have some time to process your presence.

Try to be aware beforehand of locally-held prejudices. Avoid strengthening these wherever possible, by planning to engage with a range of children – including both sexes, different ages, children who are disabled and children who have any unique challenges in their lives, such as coping with Albinism or living with, or affected by, HIV.

Encouraging engagement with children

If you are planning to share children's stories in the media, it's often important for country staff, alongside input from Save the Children media teams, to invite children and families to take part and identify potential children's stories before the Communications or Media Manager arrives in country. When identifying children who wish to be involved, country staff should ensure their genuine consent, check that the child is resilient and able to talk about their own lives, and that the children who become involved have stories or experiences that they want to share.

Children shouldn't feel under pressure to meet with you and share their story.

In some situations, one way to ensure that children understand their involvement is wholly voluntary is to hold an open meeting with the local community (for example in a small village setting) where you explain your purpose and the topics you're hoping to highlight, and to ask if anyone wants to share their story. This is not possible in some situations (for example, fast-moving emergencies) and should not be used where the topic is sensitive (i.e. sexual violence).

Remember that wherever it is feasible to do so, if you are gathering information about upsetting incidents, it is good practice to gather most information from parents instead of children.

Informed consent

Ensure that you talk to the child and their family about how their account of their experiences is going to be shared, for example, if you are going to include many children in your work, the child may feel more comfortable in telling their story. However, if one child's account is likely to be shared in multiple materials, and those materials will focus only on their story, they also need to understand and agree to that. You will need to adhere to Save the Children's guidelines on gathering informed consent.

Remember that people sometimes answer questions they don't understand with a 'yes' instead of double-checking the question. You'll need to be alert to this, so you can ensure true informed consent is gathered.

Which location?

Somewhere the child feels safe to speak:

- ✓ Before the interview takes place, whenever possible, make sure the child has been asked where they would prefer to hold the interview. This should be somewhere that they feel safe and secure or where they feel they will not be overheard. Ideally this place will also be peaceful and relaxing for the child.
- ✓ Remember that you must never meet with a child alone, as per 'Children First', our Code of Behaviour
- ✓ Be aware that finding a safe, private place to speak with children can be very difficult. In some situations a crowd may gather immediately and will refuse to leave. If this happens, you might need to cancel the interview, and reschedule in a more private space
- ✓ Consider culture and gender norms carefully – if necessary (and not dangerous to the child) think about sitting somewhere within sight of others but out of earshot. This may help in cultures where it is unusual for a male media or comms staff member to be alone with a female child and their female guardian (e.g. mother) or vice versa.

Somewhere that is safe for you both:

- ✓ Ensure that you are also safe, and able to leave the space easily if needed. Avoid the being locked in.
- ✓ If you are in a conflict situation, wherever possible, consider any no-go areas, and do not encourage children to be anywhere that you believe could be considered a target
- ✓ Never encourage a child to remain (or move) anywhere that could be dangerous, for example close to piles of rubble, or bomb debris – this is exceptionally dangerous as there may be UXOs present (Unexploded Ordinance).

Voluntary participation

If you are not a national staff member, you will need to rely on national staff to introduce you to children and their families.

You and they will need to be consistent and clear with the children and families that taking part in communications work is voluntary, is not linked to the allocation of aid or selection of beneficiaries, and that they will not be rewarded financially or otherwise. This is very important, because our research has shown that children and families often believe the opposite, and are disappointed or angry when they are not compensated.

It is particularly important that they understand that agreeing to share their story does not mean that more aid will be allocated to them, their family or community. It is also important that you do not prevent a child or family member from accessing paid work, for example by scheduling a meeting at the same time they are due to work.



Moneer and Ibraheem*, used a piece of nylon to protect them from the storm in Gaza. Photo credit: Anas Baba/Save the Children*

Part of preventing this is good planning – try to ensure that you have enough time for everything involved in the meeting – for example travel time to the location and stopping for fuel, food or water on the way. Avoid being late for meetings with children and families, as this looks unprofessional, and can also cause lost wages for the families, as they might spend time waiting for you. Remember to dress appropriately, and avoid wearing expensive-looking jewelry, or using expensive phones wherever possible.

Avoiding fatigue

In some situations, one child who wishes to share their story is interviewed by multiple agencies who operate in the same area, or where different news crews are working (and hone in on the ‘strongest story’), where a child frequently volunteers to speak, or simply where a child’s story is so powerful and important that the local community or the child’s parents want it to be heard as many times as possible, and will introduce the child to different journalists or visitors.

Sometimes this happens simply because the child is very articulate and confident in telling their story. This is particularly likely when there has been an influx of visitors to a certain area, for example after an emergency. **Try to avoid asking a child to repeat a traumatic story multiple times**, as this heightens the risk of emotional harm. Be aware that emergency response needs assessment teams may also have spoken with the same child. Remember that it is best practice to do communications work with children who are already being supported by Save the Children.

Retelling a traumatic story is dangerous because:

- Children report that when this happens, they only feel ‘important’ when telling their story, and afterwards this can increase their feelings of sadness. If this happens inadvertently (i.e. you start talking to a child, only to realise that they have shared their story multiple times already), handle this by trying to show an interest in what is happening to the child in the present and future, as opposed to what has already happened to them.
- The experiences that children share are also affected by repeated re-telling. Whilst triangulating a story is essential, (and you may need to fact-check the story with the child or family) repeated, full accounts of the same incident can lead to the child embellishing the story, or skipping key aspects.
- It can also lead to the child feeling exploited – especially if they have repeatedly told their story to different organisations, who have not delivered the help the child was expecting (regardless of whether or not this was promised).
- If you are a local staff member, developing relationships with other organisations operating in the area can help limit the risk of re-interviewing with the same child multiple times, but the surest way to find out is simply to ask the child.

If they have already shared their story...

If they have already shared their experiences publicly, and have told their story multiple times, try not to begin the interview process unless the child and family are insistent on telling their story again. If you can, take some time to understand why they might want this to happen, e.g. do they believe that this might result in financial support? If this is the case, re-emphasise that you are not able to give additional support to that family or community.

DOING THE GROUND WORK

Engaging with children is different to engaging with adults. It sounds simple, but it's often forgotten – children are not simply mini adults. They absorb information and share experiences differently, and they react to experiences differently.

Find out as much as you can about the issues, crisis or theme before talking to children themselves, wherever possible. You can do this by talking to parents, counsellors, teachers and Save the Children national staff members who work in the crisis-affected area (e.g. Child Friendly Space animators or support staff). Use their insights to help you decide which children might enjoy or be best suited to be part of Save the Children's communications work.

Where possible, if you think adults may reference upsetting information, try to avoid talking to parents about the child's experience in front of the child. The child may not be aware of the information. This is also true when talking with parents about a more general event – for example the impact of a drought. The parents may try to share everything that they know with you, and some of it may be inappropriate for a child's ears.

At this point it can be helpful to check on the child's wellbeing with the parents. You can ask them how the child is doing and if they are worried about any new or changed behaviour. If anything worries you at this stage, do not go ahead with the interview.

Try to have a child protection specialist present if the interview is likely to cover sensitive topics.

If it is very sensitive, consider your risk assessment and the reaction protocol you've established - as you might want to ask a trained counsellor to attend. A child should always have one trusted adult present or within earshot. Consider carefully before automatically asking the parent to be that person – where possible ask the child first who they would prefer, and be led by them (if they have named an adult, not another child). In some cases, (especially in cases of past sexual exploitation) children might prefer not to discuss their experience in front of one of their parents, often because they are afraid of upsetting them. In other situations, a child's may tell a slight different version of events, for example in the presence of a school principal or elder.

They might prefer an older sibling, in which case you could ask a parent or caregiver to remain close by (e.g. just outside the tent) to provide support if needed.



Syrian refugees walk alongside train tracks that run from Serbia into Hungary Credit: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children

ESTABLISHING RAPPORT

Rapport is important for a successful conversation, and can improve the quality and quantity of information gathered. This is because it lessens anxiety - which improves the ability to remember key information, and encourages the child to talk freely about their experiences and feelings.

In the rapport-building stage, it is good to use open-ended, neutral questions – as these are the kind of questions you will be using throughout. These should be ‘easy’ and gentle questions, that they easily know the answer to.

Try to keep this stage relatively short with older children such as teenagers, as you don’t want to add to the overall time too much, or risk tiring the child. For younger children, you might need to take longer, or potentially have two separate sessions.

If the child is very keen to begin telling you their story, there is no need to ask general, neutral questions first, be led by the child and use your good judgement.

Remember that rapport-building begins in this stage, but continues throughout.

Be child-led

It is best practice to allow the child to ‘guide’ the meeting wherever possible. Children should have a say in how we are depicting them, and their lives. Ensure that you ask the child what the key issues are for them, and try to ensure your communications work reflects that.

Sometimes a child will want to share a story with you that is not directly relevant to the issue you are working on. In this case, do continue the conversation, if the child is keen to do so, otherwise you may disappoint them. It is always a good idea to encourage children and their parents to ask you questions too. Be prepared for questions about Save the Children’s work in the area, why more is not being done for their community and for personal questions too. Do not be dismissive of any question, but answer them honestly and succinctly, as long as this does not put you at any risk (i.e. questions about your religion, marital status, or where you are staying).

When working with children with disabilities, you may need to adapt the way you speak or interact, and support them to communicate effectively with you.

Open-ended questions should be used most often. They allow the child to give an unrestricted answer, and also to control which information they share. This style of questioning also minimises the risk that you will accidentally impose your view of an event, or series of events on the child, and ensures that the meeting is as child-led as possible.



Fred, 13 (left) and Clinton, 14, at their NGO-funded primary school. Fred is blind & is a resident at the school during term time. Photo credit: Jonas Gratzter/Save the Children

Wherever possible, work together to set ground rules for your conversation, including a signal they can use if they want to stop (e.g. holding their hands up) – especially if they are quite young and not likely to be able to articulate this fully. Re-iterate that they, or the trusted adult, can ask you to stop at any time, and they don't have to answer any questions at all.

It can work well to place an item (such as a red card if they are a football fan) on the table. When the child touches the card, everyone takes a break immediately. This means that the child does not need to verbalise their need to take a break, and it makes it easier to recognise and respect their needs.

Be age-appropriate

Try to consider what questions are appropriate for different ages. A younger child may not be able to recall chronological details about an incident, but might be able to tell you what they were doing when the flood started. In some cases, you might consider taking a longer account from the parents and a shorter account from the child, to avoid the child re-telling the story.

Once you have spent time putting the child at ease, try to keep to age-appropriate lengths when speaking with a child. Use your good judgement, observe the child's behaviour and engagement levels, and as a general rule, keep conversations to a maximum of thirty minutes for those under age 9, forty-five minutes for children between 10 and 14 and one hour for teens.

The conversation will need to ensure all language and concepts used (for example, talking about something being on 'social media') are explained in a way that the child can clearly understand. Depending on their age, some children may struggle to understand dates, times, length and frequency of events, and struggle to estimate ages, weights and heights. This means that triangulating stories with others (i.e. adults) is especially important. You can also cross-check using events or things known to them. For example – was he...as tall as your brother? Did the boat crossing last...as long as a football match? Or as long as a school day?

Things to remember when interviewing children

Try to respect their way of telling their own story, and their feelings about their experience – even if it's not what you expected. Children experience things in lots of different ways.

- Observe the child's body language. Consider what significant changes might mean – for example, if they become much quieter, or look bored, or begin to fidget more, it may be that they have had enough conversation with you for one day. If in doubt, ask the child if they'd like to stop.
- Try to ensure that the child and family members know that if you have misunderstood something they should feel free to point this out and correct you



Deng, 7, at his grandmother's home in South Sudan: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children*

- It's fine to pause after a child appears to have finished answering a question, as they may have more to say (so don't rush in) – but do not let the pause go on for too long, as this silence can then feel oppressive and demanding
- It is very normal for children to pretend to understand something when they do not. If their answer doesn't match up, try asking the question again in a different way. This is especially important when gathering consent. It's also common for people to try to present themselves or their family or community in the best possible light.
This must be particularly considered when discussing issues around conflict.
- Try not to ask questions that suggest the child was to blame for something, such as “why were you playing outside at that time of night?” or “why did you think it was a good idea to join the armed group?”
- Don't ask self-answering, leading or closed questions, like “were you scared?”
- Avoid using offensive or shaming language
- Avoid asking a child any questions designed to provoke a heightened emotional response from the child
- Don't make a child feel that they are in any way abnormal or unusual in their reactions, even if they are processing their experiences in a way that you've never seen before.
- Avoid using negative phrasing that implies their answer should be ‘no’, or leading questions – for example ‘you don't know where your parents went, do you?’
- Be careful when asking multiple questions in one go – for example ‘where were you, and who was with you?’ could be confusing to a younger child – try to stick to one question at a time.

When you shouldn't do an interview

It is normal for children to have emotional reactions to events in their lives. While most severe symptoms of emotional distress will often lessen a few weeks after the event, it is still unlikely you will know for sure whether a child you are planning to work with is severely distressed or traumatised, but there are some signs to watch out for (to prevent you from causing emotional harm to the child):

If they say they feel or are:

- Suicidal
- Very “close to the edge” or on the verge of a breakdown
- Self-harming

You should not interview them. If they mention these things, it can be dangerous for the child's mental health to do communications work with them. They may be suffering from trauma or severe depression and should have immediate help.



Credit: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children

Things to remember

- Do be consistently respectful, compassionate and sincere
- Do not ask questions of a child who says they feel suicidal, “close to the edge” or who is self-harming
- Do not interview a child who is severely distressed to a point that they are not able to engage in daily activities

Try to watch out for children who are overly compliant, for example seeking or giving affection to you in an unusually strong way. It is easy for someone unfamiliar with working with children to think that this is because they are ‘fine’, but it is more likely to be something called ‘appeasement behaviour’ which can be a typical response to feeling helpless. You must be careful not to inadvertently take advantage of overly-compliant behaviour, and you should be aware that this behaviour makes the child very susceptible to all forms of abuse.

Other ways children react to devastating life events

Other emotions to be aware of are ‘feeling empty’, that ‘it’s impossible to ever be happy again’, or having unusual difficult sleeping or withdrawing from friends and families. These are still concerning, but also commonplace for children to demonstrate their feelings this way. Sometimes they might be symptoms of depression. Be alert, use your informed judgement, ensure children are aware that engaging with you is voluntary, and be supportive. Try to be prepared for an emotional reaction, and do turn to a Child Protection staff member or other supportive adult for help if needed.

If a child is severely distressed to a point that they are unable to engage in daily activities, avoid interviewing them for communications work. Instead put them in touch with someone who can help.

Feelings of guilt are especially common amongst children over ten – this is often illogical, but nonetheless deeply felt – for example, they may feel guilt that their parent was hurt (perhaps after an argument) or that their school was damaged by a bomb on the day they had decided not to attend.

If a child raises these feelings, where possible, try to allow children to talk it through, rather than rushing to reassure them that it’s not their fault.

If these feelings surface in your conversation with the child, it may be that these have not already been discussed with parents. If that is the case, and if the child gives you permission to do so, consider sharing it with the parents afterwards and encourage them to discuss these feelings with their child. It will be far more effective if the parents reassure their child that they are not to blame for the event, rather than you.



Patrick, nine, was separated from his mother when violence broke out in South Sudan. Credit: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children*

Teenagers (and sometimes children) who have survived sexual assault or torture, or who have lost limbs, can be at a possible higher risk of suicide and can have strong feelings of shame, guilt and severe depression. **Be very careful if you are working with survivors on communications work.** Ensure that you are sensitive, supportive and non-judgemental, especially if they are struggling to adapt to a new disability. **Seek Child Protection approval before starting communications work with these types of survivors.**

If a child becomes upset during a conversation

Don't panic. Sometimes emotional reactions can be delayed for months or even years, and remember that it is a reaction to a past event they've survived and it is unlikely to be simply a result of their conversation with you. Try not to become upset yourself.

If a child becomes distressed, it is important that you do not immediately cease the conversation. This may send a signal that they have done something wrong in telling you their story. Instead, listen with empathy and be supportive, but do not ask any follow-up questions. Instead, calmly and gently explain to them that you didn't mean to upset them and that you can talk about different things – ask them if they would like to continue, or not.

If possible, it can also be helpful for the child if you:

- ✓ Verbally summarise what the child has said to you, but reframe, or dilute it slightly. This helps the child to feel that they have been heard
- ✓ Ask the child which adult they would normally go to when they feel upset or worried – encourage the child to speak to that person about their feelings
- ✓ Finish the conversation with the child feeling there are some positive things in their lives - for example you could ask where they play, who their best friend is, or even their favourite food. Highlight their resilience if you can.

Don't...

- Try to 'cheer the child up'. They might feel better later, but your task is to respect how they're feeling now and help them deal with it, not suppress it.
- Say things like, "I know just how you are feeling, just the same happened to me" – this can feel alienating, and shuts down the child telling the story
- Hurry them through their story. Try to let them have the time and space to recover in their own time, but be supportive and empathetic.

FREE NARRATIVE PHASE

Once you have built an initial rapport, you can move onto talking about the issues (although it's important to note that rapport should be continually built throughout the session). The best way to encourage a child to share their experiences is to use open-ended questions, where you can encourage the child to share their account in their own words. Try to use open prompts such as 'is there anything else you would like to tell me?' Where possible, try to give the child space and time to tell their own story, and do not rush in to fill any silences until it is clear the child has finished.

Some children might try to be helpful, telling you what you want to hear, rather than what is truthful. Others may be a little nervous, or see you as an authority figure. Try not to appear authoritative, but instead be compassionate, supportive and confident.

In some cases, especially around sensitive issues, children who may be keen to share their story will still find it difficult to do so.

If they seem certain that they wish to continue, and you are also as certain as possible that they have the capacity to do so, statements such as 'I know this must be really difficult for you, is there anything I can do to make it easier?' could help to reassure the child.

TOPIC DIVISION PHASE

Once you have heard about the experiences that the child is comfortable in sharing, you might like to get more information about a specific topic within that. Sometimes there will be several topics that you would like to explore further. For example, a 12-year-old child in Somalia during the food crisis might have stopped going to school, taken a potentially dangerous job to earn money, may have seen friends or siblings suffer from severe malnutrition, and may also have trouble sleeping due to lack of food. To accurately capture the child's experience at that time, you might need to ask questions about several of these elements. That way you can ensure their story and needs are correctly reflected in your communications work.

After checking that the child is OK to continue talking to you, take these one by one, but don't try and cover too many. It's generally not helpful to hop between subjects rapidly – it can be confusing and disorienting for the child. Instead, jot down the different aspects and talk about each one individually.

Start this with a headline flagging the topic such as 'you told me that you have stopped going to school, could you tell me a little more about that?' Use open ended questions and closed questions where appropriate, to gather all the relevant information that the child wishes to share.

Once one topic is 'closed' you can move onto another one, if the child still wishes to carry on. You should do this by clearly stating that you would like to talk about something else. For example – 'thank you for sharing that. I would now like to ask you about something else, would that be ok?' and then 'you also mentioned that you find it hard to sleep – could you explain a bit more about that?' This helps to prevent the child from becoming confused.

REPEATING THE STORY BACK

At the end of your conversation, where possible, try to briefly repeat the story back to the child, using slightly different language. Summarise it with sensitivity and care. If you are calm and non-judgemental, hearing their own story, repeated back to them, could help the child to process their own experience and empower them, and it also gives them (and the parent or guardian) the opportunity to check your accuracy.

If the child has not discussed their experience with others in their family, you can gently encourage them to do so, if safe to do so. For example, they might want to share their feelings with their parents, friends or teachers. This can help them receive the support they might need. This is especially true if the child discloses something unexpected (e.g. bullying at school) that will need support from a trusted adult.

Once you have completed a brief, careful and supportive summary of their account, try to bring the conversation back to the present. To help them, you could ask them questions that are likely to have positive answers, such as ‘what will you do this afternoon?’ or ‘who are your best friends here, what games do you play?’ This can help the child to realise that they are no

longer ‘in’ their past, but somewhere safe instead.

When your time together is complete, double check with both the child and the care-giver or guardian is still happy for the story to be shared publicly. Either can request the removal of any, or all, of the interview.

Saying thank you

Regardless of how the interview went, it is important that the child does not feel that they have ‘let you down’. Thank the child for their time and for sharing their story. Try not to make any promises you can’t keep – for example, do not promise that you will back to visit them, or that “the war will be over soon”.

If you can, ensure you send a copy of the media piece featuring their story, or a communications product that includes their photo back to them, via the Country Office. Many children don’t have a photo of themselves, and our research shows that they often cherish media coverage of their story too.



Raman, 1 year old, in the Philippines, after a tsunami destroyed her village. Photo credit: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children

TRIANGULATION

Try to double-check the information you receive from children. Where possible, double-check the details that children have shared with you with other people who had the same experience (for example, they were in the same place at the same time). Do this after the conversation with the child (not during), as you want to avoid the child thinking that you don't believe them.

Often children will not be accurate about dates and times, this is normal. Sometimes children also recount stories they have heard from others, or that they have seen on TV. Double-check that their account was of their own experience, but try to do this in a non-accusatory way.

Remember that memories can be fragmented and sometimes it may appear that the child is being inconsistent. If you paraphrase their story back to them, this can help them piece together the information and sometimes even come up with missing information.

Do cross-check the wider narrative with information sources such as other INGO's situation reports, news reports and UN data. In some cases, video footage of certain events will also exist (for example an earthquake).

FOLLOWING UP

It's best practice to leave the child and family with a way of contacting you, such as the Country Office main number. This way they can contact you if they want to withdraw consent at any time. In accordance with child safeguarding protocols, this must not be your personal number, email or Facebook address or other similar personal contact methods.

Be prepared for adults or children to change their minds about sharing their story or personal experiences. **If this happens, do not use their story at all.**

If you think a child needs extra support, and counselling or a local alternative is not available you might like to speak to the child's parents or guardians about how they can support their child. Some ways that parents or other adults can help distressed children include:

- ✓ Encouraging the child to share their feelings with others (where culturally appropriate) and talk them over
- ✓ Helping the child to return to normality by going to school (if available) or playing with friends again, and limiting the time they spend watching the news
- ✓ Supporting the child to return to their usual pleasurable activities – for example playing games or colouring in
- ✓ If possible, helping the child to have restful sleep by reading before bedtime rather than watching the news, TV or on social media
- ✓ Drawing anything on their mind or if they can, keep a written journal of feelings

Follow up with the Country Programme

Try to feedback any key concerns, patterns, or experiences to the Country Programme to ensure that these are considered in the emergency response plan or programmes. Ensure that you share children's stories, photographs, and insights with the Emergency Response Team (if you have deployed to an emergency) and the broader team wherever possible.

Not everyone in the Country or Field Office will spend time talking to children in the affected communities, so your insights can be invaluable. At the same time, you can triangulate the experiences that you've heard, and any inconsistencies can be flagged. You might also need to share details of any concerns with the relevant technical team – for example the Child Protection, Education or the Health teams.

In some cases, if you are not a national staff member who can do this yourself, you might like to ask a representative of the Country Programme to follow up with the child or children after a few days, to check they are OK and still give consent. Do let the child know if you are planning to do this. This doesn't need to happen every time, just if the issues shared were of a particularly sensitive nature.

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

The same passion and dedication which drives people to work for Save the Children can sometimes have a negative impact – we know that dedicated, passionate people are often empathetic and more likely to be affected by hearing stories of upsetting experiences.

Communications and media staff, and especially their translators, because of their regular empathetic engagement with children, can become vicariously traumatised from their work, or suffer from depression or burn out. There are ways to help to prevent this from happening.

- ✓ Be realistic about what you achieve from the start
- ✓ Take regular breaks between conversations with children to absorb and reflect on what you have heard
- ✓ Monitor your emotions and health – watch out for any significant changes and try to follow a healthy diet, exercise and sleep pattern (limit your alcohol intake)
- ✓ Talk to peers or supportive friends for support, or write a reflective journal or sketching/painting your experiences

Don't be afraid to ask for help – being impacted by emotional stories and working with distress children takes its toll, and you'll be better able to help children if you are well supported. Save the Children has a variety of Employee Assistance programmes which offer support, and some teams can access specialist psychological support too.

---ENDS---

Need more information, resources, or training on this topic?

Email Cat: C.Carter@savethechildren.org.uk