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Begging for a Future: How to help street kids

Posted 11th November 2016 in [News](#)

Hands outstretched, tattered clothes, small, vulnerable, hopeless. It can be hard to say no to a begging child. Hard to say no because you so desperately want to help. Hard to say no because with a few dollars, you feel you can at least alleviate some distress in their own desperate moment.

In a country where most people either live below the poverty line or hover just above it, this is a situation played out repeatedly in Cambodia. It's a situation travelers and visitors can find particularly confronting, and it's a situation you need to be prepared for – and know the best way to respond to.

Giving in these circumstances is a largely counterproductive exercise – as it inadvertently supports unsafe behaviors and a cycle that keeps children out of school and on the street. It makes begging a viable means of income generation for families, and so children are kept out of school and spend late nights begging in high-risk environments when they should be home in bed. For as long as people give to child beggars, child beggars will be sent out to find them.

And the 'workaround' solutions many attempt (such as buying the child some food and drink) have the exact same affect and teach at-risk children that unknown tourists are to be trusted for gifts, which puts them at a huge risk of abuse and exploitation. Just as "orphanage" numbers rise to meet the flow of orphanage tourist/voluntourist dollars, so does the number of child beggars to meet the flow of giving in tourist areas.

So, how to REALLY help? Short answer – smile and say a gentle "sorry, no" to the begging child, and instead donate to organisations which provide services to children and families in need. CCT's Senior Social Worker Samnang takes us through this issue and shows us how by instead supporting local organisations that work with these families, you can ensure your dollar has a meaningful impact.

Samnang has been with CCT since it started in 2007, and in that time has worked with many street children and their families to better their situations by providing tailored and comprehensive support which addresses the root causes of their problems.

"Normally NGOs do not give money directly to beggars. Instead, they provide support services to the family, enabling the children to go to school, which supports them to develop life skills, and lets the children play and study so when they grow up, they can get the skills and knowledge for their future," he said.

He also explains how when CCT works with these families, they offer training and workshops to explain the cyclic effect of begging – how it can wind up contributing to their children having limited career choices down the line.

“We explain to them and discuss topics such as what is the importance of education? What is harmful about begging? I have found that the begging children living in the slums are now very few here, because we explain to them the implications for when they become adults.”

When Samnang does encounter a vulnerable child in a situation like this, he works with their families to ensure they have access to the services they need – including addressing immediate issues such as food and shelter – while also tailoring a plan for that family to enable independence and making sure the child’s rights are protected.

“For the begging children living with their parents in the slums, we ask them to stop begging by instead offering support through CCT’s programs. Parents need to send their children to engage with our programs as part of this. We will help support them with things like food and study supplies.”

Once a child is enrolled in CCT’s services, they will continue to access social, health and education support through our community youth centres and preschool, while our social workers also continue to work with the wider family. This means the family can escape the intergenerational cycle of poverty together – a holistic approach offers a long-term solution to a complex problem.

It can be extremely hard to say no to a child in desperate circumstances, but remember that each time you give in this way you become part of the reason the child is there begging in the first place. Redirecting your support from directly giving to children to local community development organisations will help ensure that child will have access to more of a comprehensive support system – but there’s one more thing to be aware of.

Many children in Cambodia are institutionalized unnecessarily and will grow up in orphanages, despite the fact that 80% of them have at least one biological parent. It’s a trend that’s driven by donor support, and it’s a trend that’s proven to be harmful for children by decades of international research. When finding local organisations to support, it’s important to look to ones that keep families together, and out of institutions.

Please see our resource page [here](#) for recommended questions to ask before you support a children’s organisation, as well as further information on what’s driving the orphanage boom and how to be part of the solution. You can also visit ChildSafe’s website [here](#) for more excellent travel advice, and if you see a child at risk, call local hotlines:

National Police Hotline Cambodia: 1288 / 023 997 919

ChildSafe Hotline Cambodia: 092 911 115

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