

Family Tracing for Children without Adequate Documentation

VIDEO SUMMARY

In some contexts, particularly where there are high numbers of unregistered residential care institutions or weak regulation and oversight, admission of children into residential care settings may be 'irregular'. Due process may not have been followed and children's files may not contain adequate or accurate information about the child's identity or the identity and whereabouts of their family. In this environment, it is possible to come across instances where children's names and identities have been intentionally changed by orphanage directors or child recruiters. Typical reasons include absence of birth certificates, religious motivations or more nefarious reasons such as child trafficking and exploitation. Where admission is irregular and documentation is lacking or unreliable, family tracing efforts become more complex.

In this video, Dy Noeut and Kim Malin discuss their experience of conducting family tracing as a part of reintegration efforts in the context of an unregistered orphanage where children's files contained missing and inaccurate information. Noeut and Malin share their key learning about how to determine what information in a child's file might be factual and non-factual, how to approach tracing where parents' real names are unknown, what information typically provides the most reliable clues and how to engage other stakeholders to source information and pursue leads.

DISCUSSION TOPIC

Risks to children

In this video, Noeut raises the issue of risks to children associated with reintegration in cases where their identities or the identities of their parents are unknown. During the tracing process, NSO uncovered indicators of trafficking, including falsified birth certificates, and Noeut discusses the risks to children, including the risk of alerting child finders who may seek to disrupt the process or reclaim the children and further exploit them. He discusses the ways that NSO social workers verify a parent's identity, including through cross checking information sourced from records, documents and the testimonies of neighbours and community leaders.

In your context:

-  What are the risks to children associated with family tracing and reunification?

-  What does child protection and safeguarding look like in the context of family tracing and reunification in light of these risks? How does this or should this inform or influence your strategy or approach?

-  What means of verification exist and how can you ensure information is crosschecked and triangulated before reunification takes place?

-  What, if any, changes to your tracing and reunification processes do you think should be made in light of your discussion and the learning shared in this video?



DISCUSSION TOPIC

Key sources of information

In this video, Noeut lists the key sources of information, which include documents such as birth certificates or child files, local authorities, community members, other organisations, donors, child finders and children themselves. He explains that different sources have access to different types of information and are therefore useful for different reasons. Malin explains that the information you need to trace a family is unlikely to come from one source. It's a process of piecing together little bits of information from many sources until the point where it leads you to find the family. As such, you have to cast a wide net and tap into your networks rather than relying only on formal identification processes such as birth records.

In your context:

- Who are the gatekeepers of information and what type of information might they have about children or their families for family tracing purposes?
- What are the formal and informal channels and networks that you can access to locate information and trace families?
- What obstacles and challenges would you expect to encounter and what strategies can you employ to overcome those obstacles?



CASE STUDY

Finding Tola's Family

Tola was a 10-year-old boy who had grown up in institutional care. He had no recollection of his life before the institution and had been told by the former director that he had no living family. His child file contained very little information. No intake form or child history form had been completed, and the only document on file was a yellow slip of paper from the hospital with a record of his birth. It listed the name of his parents and their commune of origin but did not list Tola's real name nor his parents' former address. Using the information on the hospital slip, social workers contacted the commune leader and inquired after his parents. The commune chief had no knowledge or record of them. The social workers explained Tola's situation, and afterwards the commune leader agreed to ask around to see if anyone knew Tola's parents. After a week, no progress had been made. The social worker pleaded with the commune leader to continue asking. They offered to cover the cost of a moto taxi to take him from house to house to see if anyone had any recollection of them and their son. They found a family who knew them and said they had moved to a different province many years ago. The village leader asked them to try to contact Tola's family, however this was not easy as they had moved several times since then. After some time, the social worker received a call from a woman claiming to be Tola's mother. She had received the social worker's contact details from the village chief, who told them an NGO in Phnom Penh was looking for her. The woman told the story of how she placed her son in an

orphanage in one province when he was very small as her husband, who was in the army, had been sent to the border during the conflict with Thailand and she didn't have the means to care for him. When her husband returned, she went back to find her son, however the orphanage was closed, and her son was gone. No one knew of his exact whereabouts but said the children were taken to orphanages in Phnom Penh. Tola's parents searched for months, asking for lists of all orphanages in the city and contacting them one by one. NSO was not registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY), which oversees residential care institutions in Cambodia, and was therefore not on any official lists.

Tola's parents made arrangements to travel to Phnom Penh to meet with social workers and to see Tola. The social workers, in turn, visited Tola's parents' community to conduct assessments and verify their story. They were able to cross check the yellow slip of paper they had in Tola's file with the parents' records and match this to their other identification documents such as ID cards and their family book. Tola's parents also produced photos of Tola when he was a young child that could be matched with photos NSO donors had given the social workers of Tola when he was younger and first brought to the orphanage. The social workers were also able to check his mother's story by identifying the original orphanage Tola was taken to and discovered that the director had died, and the children had been sent to other orphanages. A child finder had brought Tola to NSO at that time.

After the verification was completed, family reconnection commenced and shortly after, Tola was reunited with his parents.