# IMPACT OF SEPARATION[[1]](#footnote-1)

## DEVELOPMENTAL IMPACT

Across countries, there are significant cultural variations on how children are reared, reflecting different patterns of childcare and different ways in which children become attached to their families. The impact of separation on a child depends heavily on these factors, as well as a child’s age, level of intellectual development, emotional maturity, and level of personal resilience. The nature and duration of a separation, and how rapidly appropriate care and opportunities for developmental activities are provided, will also have a significant effect on how a child deals with separation.

Research evidence suggests that the period from birth to about three years, (and especially the period between four months to three years) is particularly important for the formation of bonds and the development of attachment behaviour, and that separation during this period has the greatest distress reaction. Young children may have a very limited sense of time, meaning that a separated child will have no concept of interim care lasting only a few days, weeks or months. It is not unusual for young children to regress to baby behaviour during separation. They may be more fearful at night, speak less clearly, refuse food, become more fearful of strangers, and relinquish bladder and bowel control.

School-aged children also have reactions that often exhibit themselves as negative behaviours. Denial, depression, increased aggression, sleep disturbances and/or physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomach-aches and shortness of breath, are all common reactions among school-aged children, particularly when a separation is prolonged.

Adolescents tend to have a greater control over grief and have acquired cognitive capacities to understand more about what is happening to them. There is, however, some evidence that separation during adolescence has a more profound long-term effect than separation experienced by younger children. One of the reasons for this may be that separation can disrupt the young person’s sense of self and her or his emerging sense of identity.

## EMOTIONAL IMPACT

Separation does not occur in isolation from other events. A separated child may have witnessed frightening and violent events, and may have experienced loss of parents and family, of home, relatives, friends, school, and the security that comes from a familiar environment. Many are suffering the shock of dislocation from their family and environment, and a great deal of depression and despair. Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups may also have been forced to participate in violence.

UASC may be exhausted and overwhelmed by the practicalities of fleeing their homes and arriving in an unfamiliar location and/or alien culture, particularly when they are unable to speak the language or express their views. They are also likely to be anxious about what has happened to family members and what will happen to them, especially in situations of armed conflict or other disasters, where the very survival of unaccompanied and separated children is often threatened.

The emotional toll that separation takes on a child can be devastating. Those working with UASC must ensure that these pressures are not further exacerbated by poorly planned interventions or insensitive practices. Examples of actions that might increase fear and anxiety among UASC include:

* registration interviews conducted by poorly trained people who inappropriately pressure children to disclose distressing events, leaving them even more distressed
* medical examinations conducted without prior information or consent from the child
* the movement of UASC to different locations and placements without prior explanation or preparation.

## FURTHER RISKS: VULNERABILITY TO ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION

Many UASC are, by the very nature of being separated, extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Principally, these children are without adult protection. There is no one to send them into safety and, at a physical level, they cannot resist as well as adults. Not only are they deprived of the care normally provided by parents or other customary caregivers, but separation often implies that they are forced to fend for themselves. Without early identification, care and protection, they can experience an accumulation of risks, including but not limited to:

* loss of identity, especially for children younger than five years old
* physical harm and ill health
* severe emotional and/or psychosocial distress
* poverty and hunger
* sexual exploitation and abuse
* early marriage
* abduction for trafficking or labour
* recruitment by armed groups or armed forces
* institutionalisation
* living and/or working on the street
* dropping out of education

UASC need attention and their care must be monitored closely to ensure that they do not suffer from abuse or exploitation. Even during interim care, the possibility of abuse and/or exploitation is an ever-present reality, and adequate monitoring and follow-up must be provided. Experience has shown that children who are not biological children of the family are often not treated in the same way as the biological children. They are sometimes the ones who are assigned the household chores and other tasks, such as fetching water and firewood, herding cattle or looking after younger children, tasks which could result in not attending school or being exposed to protection risks.

UASC are particularly exposed to sexual and gender-based violence, often requiring specific attention and tailored protection measures. While awareness of that risk for girls in situations of armed conflict has grown, boys, especially when on the move, have endured similar violations.

Usually, though not always, the closer the kinship between adult and child, the more protected a child is. Thus, children living with less closely related adults, including unaccompanied children and children in child-headed households, tend to be the most vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Girls are more at risk of abuse and neglect, whether they are with close relatives or not, particularly with regards to sexual abuse. As a rule, these children require the most attention and monitoring, because they are more at risk.

Despite all the risks and hardship, for some children the experience of separation may not be wholly negative. Those children, who make a deliberate decision to leave home during an emergency, perhaps fleeing abuse, or neglect, or to access services or opportunities, may feel that their changed situation is an improvement. It is important not to assume that the best option for all UASC is family reunification. A sensitive assessment of vulnerability is needed in order to identify the best course of action for (and in line with the best interests of) each individual child and is also important in prioritising cases where there are limited resources available. In addition, while acknowledging the risks associated with separation, it is also important to recognise children’s opinions, wishes and resilience and seek to support their own capacity to protect themselves rather than focusing on their vulnerability. *(see also chapter seven for assessment of vulnerability)*

1. Adapted from ARC Module 6 Separated Children Study Material [↑](#footnote-ref-1)