# CAUSES OF SEPARATION

The separations that occur during times of conflict, natural disaster or other emergencies include both accidental and deliberate separations. “It is important to recognise that separation can result from a variety of causes. Children can accidentally become separated during flight to safety, during an attack or during a population movement. They may have been entrusted by a parent to someone else, separated during provision of health services to themselves or their caregiver, picked up by another family or aid worker after having been left by a parent looking for survival resources, abandoned, abducted, or orphaned. They may also have run away. The basic assumption, until tracing efforts demonstrate otherwise, should be that a child has someone with whom he or she can be reunited. Absolutely avoid referring to these children as ‘orphans’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is important to understand the nature of separation as the prevention of, and response to, accidental and deliberate separation requires different methods and approaches.

**Accidental separations** - These separations are not planned or anticipated, and they occur against the will of either parent/caregiver or child/ren. They generally occur when communities are under attack or forced to flee from danger. The causes of accidental separation include the following:

* Family members are split up or lose one another during the chaos of flight; children are left behind or can’t keep up.
* Children with disabilities are unable to keep up with other members of the family during population movements.
* Family members are in different locations when the event strikes and are unable to locate one another e.g. children are at school, parents are at work.
* Family members responsible for a child are injured, killed, captured, kidnapped, abducted, arrested or detained.
* Children are abducted for various reasons, including but not limited to ransom, trafficking, recruitment into armed forces or armed groups, and labour.
* Children becoming separated in transit sites or refugee/IDP camps or sites
* Children living in refugee or IDP camps unable to find family after going in search of food, firewood etc.
* Children getting lost/ separated during distribution of food or humanitarian aid

**‘Deliberate’ separations** occur when parents, caregivers, or children themselves make a conscious decision to separate and are often the result of the extra stresses placed upon a family related to the emergency. They arise out of a deliberate act such as handing over a child to another’s care out of dire poverty, for evacuation or other reasons. Deliberate separation can also occur after the immediate emergency phase which may be referred to as ‘secondary separation’. ‘Deliberate’ separations do not always have a negative impact on children (in some cases children can be placed in a more beneficial situation) but they can increase children’s vulnerability in some circumstances. ‘Deliberate’ separation does not infer the separation is intended to be prolonged or permanent; however, this can sometimes happen even where this was not the original intent. The causes of deliberate separations include the following:

* Families under stress (caused for example, by poverty or the death or disability of parents) giving up their children i.e. to residential care. These may be strategic decisions, (often taken by parents without the involvement of the child) to separate in order to increase their chances of survival, for example in famine situations;
* Children with disabilities can sometimes be given up by families e.g. to residential care or left behind as families flee;
* Social and economic collapse: the collapse of informal welfare and extended family structures and community level child protection systems;
* Families sending children away from areas of insecurity;
* Families handing responsibility for children to others e.g. neighbour for what is initially thought to be a temporary period;
* Children left behind by their foster carers (for example during repatriation);
* Children ‘deliberately’ leaving their family, with or without family’s consent (following abuse or for other reasons);
* Children ‘volunteer’ to join armed forces or armed groups. It should be noted that the conditions under which a child might ‘volunteer’ to join an armed force usually involve some form of coercion or economic necessity;
* Coping mechanisms such as economic migration can also create separation or place children at increased risk of separation.

Family separation can also occur as a consequence of the humanitarian response (sometimes referred to as agency-induced separation), for example:

* The provision/promotion of residential care particularly where this is seen to provide benefits not available to other children in the same community or area, can encourage separation;
* Relief agencies providing food and shelter in ways that do not keep families together or that target UASC can encourage “false claims” of separation;
* Moving children who appear to be alone to another location without adequately investigating their circumstances or keeping records can create separations if family remain in the locality;
* Medical treatment, healthcare or therapeutic feeding programmes for parents or children that do not take account of the need to *either* keep parties together (ensuring all children in the family are cared for) *or* ensure contact can be maintained during/following the intervention can create separation;
* Distribution of humanitarian assistance: either as a result of poor crowd control during distribution resulting in children becoming separated or because criteria set to obtain food or non-food items encourages children to attach themselves to an adult in order to benefit;
* Poorly organised relocation population movements which don’t follow protocols.
* Evacuation of persons to a place of safety or for medical care without following agreed procedures and guidelines relating to evacuation and the return of evacuated children;[[2]](#footnote-2)
* Adoption of children which does not follow guiding principles/comply with legislation on adoption;
* Children being admitted to residential care (e.g., psychiatric institution, orphanage, alternative care centre) by police, NGOs, health authorities etc. without proper record keeping.

In some emergencies, media coverage of large numbers of ‘orphaned’ children, can create an environment where pressure to identify quick and visible solutions, such as residential care in institutions and the adoption of children, may cause separations. Engagement and education of local and international media and donors is important in raising awareness of the risks of inappropriate actions.

**Secondary separation** occurs after the immediate emergency and is usually a consequence of the impact of the emergency on the economic circumstances and the capacity of families and communities to protect children. This term is sometimes used specifically to refer to the separation of children from foster carers or other interim caregivers i.e. the carers they were placed with following separation from family. Secondary separation may also be linked to ‘agency induced separation’[[3]](#footnote-3) e.g. the provision of residential care facilities and services rather than supporting family based care.

1. CPWG (2012) *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action,* CPWG p.117 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For guidelines relating to evacuation see: ICRC, IRC, Save the Children UK, UNICEF, UNHCR, World Vision (2004)*The Interagency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children,* ICRC*,* Geneva, P.24; UNICEF/UNHCR, *Evacuation of children from conflict areas – Considerations and Guidelines* UNICEF, UNHCR,1992 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ICRC generally use the term secondary separation in relation to “agency-induced separation” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)