

Civic Education – 9-11 years

Teacher Resources



Alone in the world

Nicole is seven years old. She is alone, terribly alone, in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the Burange refugee camp in Rwanda. Some refugees are busy pitching their tents, others come and go fetching water or food. But Nicole stands motionless, speechless. She doesn't even cry.

Nicole is blind. She was struck in the head with a machete and lost her eyesight. The last thing she saw was her father and mother being butchered by madmen in Burundi.

Kind neighbors took Nicole along with them as they fled and helped her to cross the river between Burundi and Rwanda. But in the darkness of night she then lost them, too.

Nicole's case is not unique.

Half of the more than 20 million refugees and displaced people in the world who are of concern to UNHCR are children. Nobody knows exactly how many are without their parents or a close relative, because most of them are spontaneously taken in by generous families in the camps. Thousands of children have been separated from their families by war. It is estimated that unaccompanied children account for 2 to 5 percent of the refugee population in camps.

"For a child, it is a terrifying experience in itself to have to flee to an unknown land, having been abruptly wrenched away, under bombing or gunfire, from home, school, friends, everything that was comforting, that gave meaning to life, and confidence in the future," said Anne Skatvedt, UNHCR's senior coordinator for refugee children. "If the child also loses his or her parents - the only remaining reassuring link - and is left alone, it is absolutely atrocious."

These children have not only experienced events that will scar them for life - many have witnessed savage murders and other atrocities - but they also must overcome the trauma of separation.

"These children are the most vulnerable of all. They are totally destitute. They require, more than anyone else, protection and physical and also psychological help," said Nemia Temporal, of UNHCR social services.

Naturally, UNHCR's priority is to locate these children's parents. But that can be a



lengthy and difficult task that may take years, especially when the children come from areas still at war. In the interim, UNHCR's objective is to re-introduce these children to a family structure in the refugee camps. Indeed, experience shows that a family environment can provide not only the physical needs of a child but also soothe some of the psychological distress of separation. In a family circle, particularly if it comes from the same background, culture and region, a child will most rapidly regain his or her balance.

"We have a program, we have a structure, we have a policy, but we do not have adequate resources," Skatvedt said. "There is still an enormous amount to be done. Family tracing and reunification is time consuming and labor intensive."

At the Burange camp in Rwanda, there are hundreds of children like Nicole, the little blind girl. Children who roam aimlessly in the camp, or hide in the corner of a tent waiting for someone to help, to bring them food or care. The nurse stops from time to time to visit Nicole. But what more can be done? There are so many people and so few doctors and nurses to care for them.

More social and community workers are needed in the field to cater for the physical as well as psychological needs of these children, to prevent abuses and to ensure that the foster families are aware of what they are committing themselves to.

The search for lost families should begin from the very first moments of a refugee crisis, at registration. But in the initial stages of such a crisis, UNHCR's resources usually only cover the refugees' most urgent needs - food, water, medical care and shelter - and registration of foster children may not get done until later. "Refugee families who have taken in a foster child would usually not hesitate to report it upon arrival in a camp," Skatvedt said. "But after the child has lived with them for some months and has become a member of the family, they may not bother to report it."

Because it is the best solution, UNHCR relies heavily on the kindness and ability of refugee families to take in unaccompanied children. In most cases, it works well. "You cannot necessarily conclude though, that the care is appropriate," cautioned Marie Lobo, UNHCR's senior social services officer. "It is a fact, as certain studies have revealed, that some of these children are not given as much attention or the same care as other members of the foster family."

In other cases, when the foster families are repatriated, they leave behind the unaccompanied child they had been looking after while in exile. "It's one thing to offer a child shelter under one's tent in a refugee camp and to see that he gets his food ration," Lobo said. "But it is quite a different thing to take on a financial obligation to care for a child, especially when returning to a poor, war-torn country, with nothing to go back to. We would like to be in a position to help these families make that commitment."

Most often, children are separated from their families during flight. Battles are not

announced in advance. They break out anywhere at any time, taking everyone by surprise. "The first riots broke out in Burundi last October in broad daylight," recalled Filippo Grandi, who led one of the UNHCR emergency relief teams sent to the area at the beginning of the biggest outflow of refugees since the Kurdish exodus in the wake of the Gulf War. "The children who were at school at the time fled in one direction, the mothers left home in another, and the fathers from work in a third. Entire villages in Burundi were thus deserted by their inhabitants in a matter of hours, with people escaping in every direction; towards Rwanda, Tanzania and Zaire." The result: more than 20 percent of the 60,000 Burundi refugees in Tanzania are unaccompanied children.

Sometimes, it only takes a moment's carelessness for a child to become separated from his family. But it can take years before they are reunited.

It is difficult to forget the image of the 6-year-old boy who, in front of television cameras, fell off the back of a truck carrying him from Srebrenica to Tuzla in Bosnia-Herzegovina in February 1993. The boy was left alone and sobbing as he saw the convoy continuing down the road without him. Fortunately, a military officer from the opposing side picked up the little boy and put him back on the truck with his parents.

But other children in that situation were not as lucky. Weeks went by before some families were reunited, even though they were evacuated to a town in the same country only 80 km away from their home.

Children are sometimes separated from their families because they are kidnapped by soldiers.

In Kenya, Kakuma camp provides shelter for some 11,000 Sudanese boys, some as young as four. Many were abducted from their families at a very early age by Sudanese rebel forces looking for replacements and for cannon fodder to send through mine fields. The boys are among the worst cases ever seen by UNHCR. Many of them suffer from deep depression, refusing to play, to go to school or even to get out of bed in the morning. They spend their days doing nothing. A UNHCR specialist working with the boys says the terror they have experienced is deeply engraved in their subconscious and has resurfaced now that they are safe. Over a period of five years, the boys marched thousands of kilometers across Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya. They have witnessed the worst atrocities, and have seen their friends die of starvation. Some drowned during their long exodus, and some were eaten by lions.

Art is used as part of their therapy. First, the boys are asked to draw an animal or other ordinary objects. Gradually, they draw more personal things - their village, their family, what they have been through. Through art, they express the helplessness and horror they cannot put into words as an adult would.

Other unaccompanied minors include children who are purposely sent abroad while their parents stay behind. These would include the Vietnamese boat children who

turned up in Hong Kong, the Philippines, Indonesia and elsewhere in South East Asia in the 1980s. About 960 of these children remain in camps in the region. Those who do not qualify for refugee status will sooner or later have to go home. Their return will not be easy - for them or their parents. Some of the children feel they have failed their parents, who wanted them to make a new life in another country. Many of the children have spent years in closed camps, where some have been abused. The children have changed a great deal since they last saw their parents. A delicate period of readjustment will have to take place.

"It is a difficult dilemma," UNHCR's Skatvedt said of the boat children and other children sent away alone by their parents. "The parents' despair must have been great for them to send their children out to brave the pirate-infested waters of the South China Sea. And it's not hard to understand a Bosnian mother who would like to evacuate her child, because she is convinced she will see him again. It's either that or you keep him behind, where he risks being killed by a sniper's bullet."

But UNHCR knows it is in the child's best interest to remain with his or her family because once separated, it can be extremely difficult to bring them back together.

"I will never forget a little 8-year-old boy who clung to his father's trouser leg in a Zagreb gymnasium where thousands of refugees were staying," Skatvedt said. "He wouldn't let go of his father for anything in the world. His father was all he had left on earth. His mother and sister had been killed. To tear this child away from his father would have destroyed him for life."

Children who are evacuated alone often prove to be among the most difficult cases. They have witnessed too much horror, and being alone in a totally alien land is a shock many of them cannot handle. Experience has shown that children who have stayed with their parents, even in the middle of a conflict, may be better off in the long term, than children who have been evacuated alone to a foreign country. When children do need to be evacuated, as in medical evacuations from the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, for example, UNHCR insists that one of the parents go along as well.

However great the psychological and physical support may be, whatever the number of schools, sports centers and other facilities provided for unaccompanied children to reduce their distress, nothing can replace what they really need - a goodnight kiss from those who love them most.

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