



Going home



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Going Home: Children's reintegration in Mexico, Moldova and Nepal

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The report from Mexico was written by Dr Anita Schrader McMillan, social psychologist, consultant and Associate Research Fellow at Warwick University Medical School and Dr Elsa Herrera, sociologist and researcher for JUCONI Mexico.



Summary

This report summarises research on children's reintegration that took place in Mexico, Moldova and Nepal from 2011 to 2014. The purpose of this research was to explore the experience and process of reintegration of separated boys and girls in a variety of contexts, speaking to children, their families and other stakeholders at different stages of the reintegration process. In total, 83 children were spoken to across the three contexts. These children included those in institutional care (Moldova), those living in small-scale residential care following street living (Mexico), and child domestic workers (Nepal). While children's experiences varied greatly, the research identified five common findings on children's reintegration.

1. Most children and families who live apart from each other want to live together again.
2. Children need to feel safe, loved and wanted in order for reintegration to work.
3. Whether or not a child wants or is able to return home depends in large part on whether the original causes of their separation have been addressed.
4. Reintegration needs to be tailored to the context and to the specific needs and circumstances of the child.
5. Reintegration is a process that requires preparation, planning, time and holistic, coordinated support.

These findings led to five key policy recommendations.

1. Allow sufficient time and resources for reintegration. Sustainable reintegration takes time and resources to be set up, implemented and monitored. The individual needs of the child and the context in which he or she lives should determine how this process unfolds. Fixed timelines imposed by external actors or unilaterally imposed by the child or parents/caregivers can be harmful because they may place undue pressure on

an already challenging undertaking.

- 2. Develop individual plans for child and family.** Each child and family has different sets of needs for sustainable reintegration, and children and families benefit from having a clear idea of the reintegration process and the support they will receive. Children and parents/caregivers need support to share their anxieties and expectations about reintegration and to develop a plan together for how they are going to make the process work.
- 3. Address the root causes of separation.** The sustainability of reintegration is contingent upon the acknowledgement and resolution of the problems and circumstances that led to family separation in the first place. These are multi-factorial and must be addressed in holistic ways.
- 4. Ensure children and families have access to social protection.** Social protection is critical to sustainable reintegration as poverty is one of the biggest impediments to children's reintegration. These protective measures should be linked to other forms of support.
- 5. Provide other forms of support too.** Financial and material support for reintegration is important but on its own is not enough. One of the most important indicators of the possibility of successful reintegration is the overall quality of relationships within the family, and support is needed to nurture these relationships. Support is also needed to ensure integration into schools and wider communities.

Ultimately, as with all child rights, the state is responsible for ensuring that children can return to their families if it is in their best interests to do so. However, the state may delegate responsibility to national NGOs who often have valuable expertise in the reintegration of children. The state must ensure proper coordination between all service providers, and quality control.

Introduction

This report summarises research on children's reintegration that took place in Mexico, Moldova and Nepal from 2011 to 2014. The purpose of this research was to explore the experience and process of reintegration of separated boys and girls in a variety of contexts, speaking to children, their families and other stakeholders at different stages.

- **Phase 1 – before reintegration:** examining why children were living apart from their families, if and why they wanted to return home, their expectations regarding the reintegration process and life at home, and the preparations they and others had made for their return and reintegration.
- **Phase 2 – immediately after reintegration:** examining children's, families', and others' perspectives and experiences of the successes and challenges of the process, within one month after children had returned home.

- **Phases 3 and 4 – several months after reintegration:** examining the views of children, families and their communities about the experience and process of reintegration at two points: 6-18 months after returning home, with a focus on home, community and school life.

The research was overseen by Family for Every Child and carried out by national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) JUCONI (Mexico), CWISH (Nepal) and Partnerships for Every Child (Moldova). In-depth details of each phase in Mexico, Moldova and Nepal are available in individual country reports.¹ The focus of this summary report is to explore key findings across the three different contexts in order to identify general strategies and processes to ensure the sustainable reintegration of children without parental care.

Defining 'reintegration', 'home' and 'reunification'

This study employed the following definitions.

'Reintegration': the process of a child without parental care making what is expected to be a permanent transition back to his or her immediate or extended family and community (usually of origin), or, where this is not possible, to another form of family-based care that is intended to be permanent.²

'Home': the place where a reintegrated child has gone to live. Although in most cases a child will return to his or her family house, in some cases he or she may go to live with a family member(s) in a house and/or location where he or she has not previously lived.

'Reunification': the moment a child is returned to his or her family. The term is used to deliberately mark a moment in the reintegration process from which follow-up study will take place.

1. These reports are available online: <http://www.familyforeverychild.org/knowledge-centre>

2. In nearly all cases, children who participated in this research were returning to their own families as opposed to entering alternative care. The focus of this study is therefore on family reintegration as opposed to entry into alternative care.

The contexts of the research

The research for this study was undertaken in three very different contexts with children in very different circumstances.

In **Mexico**, the research was undertaken by JUCONI (*Junto con los Niños – Together with the Children*), a national NGO based in Puebla with a mission to develop, implement and share effective solutions for marginalised children, young people and families affected by violence. The boys who participated in this study had been living in a temporary residential facility run by JUCONI for children living on the street.³ Experiences of violence, drug-taking, family separation and involvement with the police were common among these boys, all of whom came from households characterised by high levels of poverty, social exclusion and violence. All residents of JUCONI House engage in an in-depth, long-term therapeutic process alongside their parents/caregivers and other family members.⁴ This process of working together to understand one's own and each other's traumatic experiences and consequent behaviour can take many years; a shared commitment to doing so is considered an essential precondition before reintegration is even considered, planned for, or implemented. The study took place over 15 months with boys and young men between the ages of 11 and 20. Because of the duration of the reintegration process, the same boys were not followed through each of the four phases outlined above. Instead, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 different boys at separate moments in time.

In **Moldova**, the study was carried out by Partnerships for Every Child, a national NGO that has worked extensively on the de-institutionalisation of children, a government-led process that has been formally under way since

2007. The children who took part in this research were those who had been living in large-scale residential facilities that were being closed down as part of this reform process. At the beginning of the study, the children interviewed were between 12 and 16 years old. All but one had spent between four and seven years apart from their families, for a variety of reasons, including high levels of household poverty; parental migration; violence and abuse at home; lack of access to quality education and health care; and a widely shared mentality that the state was better positioned than families to care for children. Separation could usually be attributed to more than one of these causes. Partnerships for Every Child has worked with children, families, schools and communities to support the reintegration process. The study took place with 43 children over 22 months.

In **Nepal**, the research was carried out by CWISH, a national NGO that works to support the improved working and living conditions of child domestic workers and to assist in their family reintegration. The majority of these children are girls who typically come from rural areas, usually far from Kathmandu; most belong to marginalised ethnic groups. CWISH's work includes education, income generation and psychosocial support for reintegration, alongside work with employers and parents to encourage withdrawal from domestic work. CWISH also works with public authorities to prosecute child labour exploitation. The girls and boys who participated in this study were those who had indicated to CWISH their desire to return home. Most were between the ages of 10 and 14, and had been working as domestic workers for, on average, one to three years. The majority came from two-parent families with two or three siblings. Their parents and caregivers mainly

³ Over two decades, fewer than ten girls have been identified by the JUCONI street outreach team; these individuals have been referred to partner agencies. This research was thus carried out exclusively with boys.

⁴ JUCONI's theoretical framework and its therapeutic model have built on several sources, including the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust, London, and the Sanctuary Model developed by psychiatrist Sandra Bloom (JUCONI is part of the Sanctuary Network).

worked in agriculture, as physical labourers or in other informal work, such as domestic work, shop keeping or in catering. The research took place with 30 children over six to nine months.

The diversity of perspectives and experiences provided by these three case studies is both rich and challenging to work with. As with most programmatic and policy work in support of children and families, context is everything. The reasons why children become separated from their families, the strategies they and their families employ to manage this separation, and the experiences each has of family reintegration, are not the same everywhere. Findings in

settings such as Mexico, Moldova and Nepal are in many ways unique to these contexts but they are not exclusively so: when it comes to the process of reintegration and those strategies that support the sustainable return of a child to his or her home, this research revealed a number of shared elements that cut across context. In this way, the research findings from the three countries both deepen understanding of the different realities in which reintegration takes place and also highlight several ways to effectively support the process in any number of settings.

Research methodology

Aim of the research

The overall aim of this research was to identify successful elements in strategies to ensure the sustainable reintegration of children without parental care by examining the reintegration process from its initial preparatory stages all the way through to some time after children have returned home. Doing so involves identifying learning and good practice that contribute to the holistic support of children and families through this entire process.

Research process, questions and data collection methods

In each of the three case study countries, local level research was carried out by national NGOs: JUCONI in Mexico, Partnerships for Every Child in Moldova and CWISH in Nepal. Each organisation established country research teams and was supported by a consultant to develop the parameters of the study, to refine a set of guide questions, to design appropriate research methods, and to undertake data collection and analysis. While the research populations and the sample sizes differed in each country, the phased approach to collecting information and perspectives on the experience of reintegration was consistently employed.

The guide questions developed in each context were specific to the different stages in the reintegration process, so that research teams could explore with child respondents their

experiences before and since leaving home, their expectations about the process of reintegration, and the 'good' and 'bad' things about being back at home, at various points in time.⁵ Similar questions were investigated with a host of additional stakeholders. Data were collected using individual, semi-structured interviews with separated/reintegrated children, siblings, parents/caregivers, employers, teachers, social workers and others. Focus group discussions were also used to get a sense of the experience of 'categories' of people involved in the reintegration process, such as community members, children's classmates and the staff of organisations working to promote and support reintegration. Participatory tools such as timelines and drawings were also employed with some, but not all, children.⁶ When data from all three case study countries had been collected, an analysis workshop was held to examine and compare findings and to articulate cross-cutting themes.

Sample

The table below shows the number of children and parents/caregivers interviewed in each phase in each of the three case study countries, with a total of 83 children going through the reintegration process interviewed (sample sizes are discussed further on p.10). The views of additional respondents were also sought, as outlined above. For the purposes of clarity, the numbers in this latter group are included in the line item 'other'.

⁵ The guide questions for each phase of each country study are available in the individual interim country research reports. Please contact Emily.Delap@familyforeverychild.org to request copies.

⁶ In Mexico, for example, where child respondents were older adolescents, researchers found that one-on-one interviews worked as well or better than participatory tools, in part, perhaps, because of the extensive previous support these children had been provided with by JUCONI in articulating their views and experiences. Further details on the research methods used in each country are included in the individual country reports.

Children and parents/caregivers interviewed in each phase

	Respondents	Pre-reintegration	1 month post-reunification	Several months post-reintegration (Point 1)	Several months post-reintegration (Point 2)	Not reintegrated	Total
Mexico	Boys	4	2	2	6	6	20
	Parents/caregivers	4	2	2	6	/	14
	Other ⁸	10	/	/	10	/	20
Nepal ⁷	Boys	7	4	3		2	16
	Girls	23	15	10		2	50
	Parents/extended family	15	17	11	/	/	43
	Other ⁹	17	45	45	/	/	107
Moldova	Boys	25	/	27	25	/	77
	Girls	18	/	25	19	/	62
	Parents/extended family/foster carers	29	/	51	28	/	108
	Other ¹⁰	52	/	123	106	/	281

⁷ In Nepal, data were collected in three, rather than four, phases.

⁸ Key workers (the Family Team and other key staff) who were interviewed one-on-one and in two focus groups, at the beginning and end of the data collection phase.

⁹ Employers, teachers, children's friends, political representatives, community members, journalists, specialists involved in the reintegration process (NGO workers, social workers, government officials).

¹⁰ Siblings, members of the gatekeeping commission (an independent body which decides upon the best care choices for children) assessment team, community social workers, teachers, Department of Social Assistance and Family Protection, classmates, classmates, parents of classmates.

Ethical issues, consent and confidentiality

Family for Every Child's Standards for Consultation and Research with Children provided the ethical framework for the research in each of the case study countries. These standards lay out the requisite ethical principles that must underlie work of this kind, including clearly articulating the purpose and intended outputs of the research; ensuring confidentiality; obtaining informed consent from children and parents/caregivers/guardians (where possible); using methods that participants are comfortable with; and having strategies in place to support children or adults who may become upset or distressed as a result of the research.¹¹

Some of the ethical issues that researchers confronted in this study included overcoming challenges related to providing child respondents with safe, quiet and private spaces where they could speak freely, without the fear of retribution or of garnering unwanted attention towards themselves and their circumstances; being careful not to single children out within their residential settings, workplaces, or communities; protecting the safety and integrity of researchers in threatening circumstances; and supporting children to talk about their lives in institutional care or about the reasons why they were separated from their families without becoming highly distressed.

Limitations of the overall study

A number of challenges were faced in course of this research, including the following.

- **Research staff turnover.** In some settings, it was difficult to maintain researcher continuity across the phases of the study. This instability may have led in some cases to inconsistencies in data collection and data capturing. It may also have impacted negatively on the establishment of trust and understanding between researchers and child respondents and their families. To mitigate these risks,

in-depth training, information about previous phases of the study and support were provided to study team members, regardless of the point at which they joined the research.

- **Sampling.** While every effort was made to follow the reintegration process for each child through all three or four phases of the study, it was not always possible to do so, despite sample sizes being relatively small (see table opposite). In Moldova, for example, some child respondents only participated in Phases 1 and 2; others were added in Phases 3 and 4. In Nepal, one-third of the children who had expressed a desire to be reintegrated in Phase 1 later decided not to return home, did not stay home for long, or became untraceable. These challenges resulted in changes in cohort composition (in Moldova) and a reduced sample from one phase to the next (in Nepal). To accommodate these complications, the research scope expanded to include an investigation of why reintegration did not always work for some children. Moreover, the fact that there were no notable differences in the responses given by 'new' children suggests that the small changes in sample populations that took place over the course of the study did not affect the validity of its findings.
- **Some stakeholders were reluctant to participate in the study.** Topics covered in the interviews were at times sensitive and difficult for respondents, who may have wanted to protect themselves by avoiding talking about distressing issues. As well, some children and parents feared that their responses would not be kept confidential, and that they might suffer negative consequences from those understood to be more powerful – employers, parents, caregivers in institutions, teachers – as a result of the things they might say. Every effort was made to reassure potential respondents and address their concerns. All were reminded that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that there would be no negative ramifications for those who declined to be involved.

¹¹ For a copy of these standards, please contact Emily.Delap@familyforeverychild.org

- **Uneven quality of responses at times.**

Interviews with specialists – such as social workers, teachers, therapists and others – tended to produce more in-depth and analytical information than those with other stakeholders, although this situation diminished over time. In the initial phases of the research, particularly in Moldova and Nepal, information provided by children and parents/caregivers was sometimes incomplete and therefore difficult to interpret and piece together. These problems may have been a result of individuals' lack of experience as research respondents, and with being asked questions by people unknown to them. It may also have reflected inadequate time within the interview framework to discuss all issues in depth; the inexperience of some researchers; difficulties in finding the right probing questions to encourage

respondents' to elaborate on earlier answers; and the fact that most parents/caregivers and children may not have been accustomed to having their opinions sought or to talking about the often sensitive and painful issues raised in the interviews. While these problems were at times challenging to address, the quality of the data gathered in each of the three country case studies was nonetheless rich and robust.

- **Difficulties in triangulation.** While the study teams tried to acquire information from as many different sources as possible, it was not always possible to triangulate children's and others' statements. This was particularly the case when there was high mobility within the household and when there were significant differences in parents'/caregivers' and children's perspectives.

Main findings to emerge across all contexts

The emphasis of this section is on presenting the compiled research evidence from all three countries to achieve the aim of identifying successful elements in strategies to ensure the sustainable reintegration of children without parental care in both the short and longer term. The following findings were consistent across all three research settings. They also align with those outlined in a global literature review on children's reintegration, carried out in 2013 by Family for Every Child on behalf of the inter-agency reintegration group.¹² The detailed findings from each of the Mexico, Moldova and Nepal case studies are elaborated in the individual country reports, including more exhaustive breakdowns of respondents' views on context-specific issues not discussed in depth in this report.

Finding 1: Most children and families who live apart from each other want to live together again

Despite the very different circumstances of the children who participated in this research, and the distinctive situations in which they live, the vast majority of separated boys and girls in all three countries were clear in their desire to live with their families. Children often spoke of wanting the love, nurture and attention of their parents, siblings and other family members.

"I feel very bad being a domestic worker as I am deprived of family love and care." (Girl, Nepal)

Feelings like these were particularly acute for those who were living in especially difficult circumstances, for example where they were experiencing violence at the hands of their employers (Nepal) or where they felt trapped by the lack of freedoms and the rigid routines of institutional care (Moldova).

"I wake up at 6.30 in the morning and sleep at 11 or 12 at night. I have to clean the bathroom, wash dishes and prepare tea at my workplace. I go to school at 9.30am after the morning meal. I come home from school and work at home. The kitchen work is over at 8-9pm and I study for some hours before I sleep." (Girl, Nepal)

"The teachers from the boarding school were bad; they used to hit us on the head with a ladle. I like living at home." (Boy, Moldova)

Even for those separated boys and girls who were living in decent circumstances, residing with supportive adults and children, this same desire to return home to be with loved ones was strongly felt.

Similar sentiments were expressed by a 13-year-old boy living at JUCONI House in Mexico. He felt well-cared for, but said that he wanted to return to live with his father – who was often aggressive, violent and whose behaviour could be out of control – even though the thought of doing so made him anxious.

Girl, Nepal: *"Working is not difficult but I want to live with my family again."*

Interviewer: *"Everything is good? There is nothing that you dislike, but you want to return home?"*

Girl: *"Yes [nods]."*

This tension between knowing that home was not always a safe place, yet nonetheless wanting to return there more than anything, was commonly experienced by the children who participated in this study. Likewise, even when they knew that living away from home might provide them with long-term benefits, such as the ability to complete schooling, or to live in an environment where all their material needs were met, nearly all boys and girls wanted to return

¹² The inter-agency reintegration group is a group of NGOs and UN agencies working to promote the better reintegration of a range of separated children. Having completed this literature review, the group is currently working on the development of inter-agency guidelines on children's reintegration. See the review: www.familyforeverychild.org/knowledge-centre/reaching-home

home. While some parents/caregivers were initially ambivalent about their child returning to live with them, in large part because they felt he or she was benefiting from some aspects of their experience away from home, such as being able to attend school (Nepal), learning self-discipline and self-regulation at JUCONI House (Mexico), or being given specialist learning support (Moldova), the vast majority wanted the separation to cease.

"I feel very bad to send her away." (Mother, Nepal)

It was also striking how caregivers were happy to have their children back home, despite the fact that many could barely make ends meet.

Grandmother, Moldova: *"I often woke up and crying during the night... It is much better [since my grandchildren came home]. They are my consolation, they always help me. It is very interesting to live with them."*

Interviewer: *"Did your life not become more difficult with them?"*

Grandmother: *"No, it is better, more joyful."*

Even those boys and girls who were unrelated to those who were being reintegrated articulated the fundamental supportive and nurturing role that family can and should play for children. In Moldova, for example, this was expressed by the classmates of reintegrated children.

"These children are closer to their parents; they used to meet less frequently when at the boarding school. They know that they are not alone anymore." (Girl)

"They were not with their parents: they were lonely." (Girl)

The idea that children and families should live together because both parties need the love, comfort and sense of belonging that comes with strong family relationships was widely shared by respondents in all three case study countries. While people of all ages recognised that there are some circumstances in which family reintegration is not possible or not in the child's or family's best interests, it was nonetheless felt by the vast majority that family separation was

undesirable and that reintegration should occur, whenever possible.

"I feel very happy. Who doesn't feel good when a child is returning to their own home?" (Mother of female child domestic worker, Nepal)

Finding 2: Children need to feel safe, loved and wanted in order for reintegration to work

Nearly all of those children in Mexico, Moldova and Nepal who did not want to return home or who expressed misgivings about doing so were those who felt that they would be unsafe or treated unkindly or unfairly in their homes or communities of origin. In the Mexican cohort, all boys had experienced family violence of some kind. The intensive therapeutic programme that each underwent at JUCONI House was designed to help them deal with and acknowledge the pain of their past, and to support them to develop the requisite skills to communicate, re-establish relationships and ultimately move ahead with their lives. This intensive work with each boy was carried out over a period of many months, both individually and alongside their family, who also received high levels of support over extended periods of time. One of the main goals of these interventions was to ensure that violence of all kinds had been eliminated from these relationships, in individuals' behaviour, and in the family environment more generally. Until this prerequisite could be guaranteed, reintegration was not seen as a safe or viable option for children. In some cases, when risks were posed to the minimum security of the child, reintegration efforts for affected boys were halted and boys returned to JUCONI House, from where they could continue to work alongside their families to improve relations, but from a place of safety. It was from this secure base that educators encouraged the 13-year-old boy mentioned on p11 to work to build a relationship with his father, who was also undergoing a therapeutic process. The elimination of violence is an essential ingredient in the creation of an environment conducive to the reintegration of boys in this context.

In Moldova, boys' and girls' concerns about reintegration were less about the unsuitability or insecurity of their family environment and more about how they would be treated in school and in the community more generally, where they worried they would be seen as stupid or looked down upon. Family separation for these children was not motivated by violence *per se*, but rather by poverty, parental migration and the perception that these boys and girls had special educational needs that required them to be cared for in an institution.¹³ Family violence was a problem for a small number of children, and social workers and other specialists were put in place to evaluate home placements and to monitor the appropriateness of reintegration. These concerns about a lack of safety in the domestic sphere for boys and girls co-existed alongside the anxieties of nearly all children about how they would be treated in the public sphere. Specialists responsible for organising children's reintegration recognised this reality and spent time supporting teachers and others to better understand the circumstances and needs of returning boys and girls. The result was a high level of acceptance among teachers and peers of the challenges that reintegrated children face, and significant efforts on the part of both groups to support children as necessary.

Nepali children's concerns about reintegration were in some ways similar to those of the boys and girls who were reintegrated from institutional care in Moldova. Some boys and girls in this context feared maltreatment, particularly at the hands of step-parents, and the challenges of living with parents who quarrel a great deal and/or abuse alcohol. However, the major preoccupation of returning children was the dread of stigmatisation and social exclusion by neighbours and others in the community as a result of their having worked as child domestic workers, a job with very low social status. In all three case study countries, boys and girls emphasised this need to feel secure both inside and outside their homes, in the schools and

communities where they would live, study, work and play. These aspects of reintegration were said to be much more important than was the need to have their material needs met. Children in Nepal, for example, were well aware of the constrained circumstances to which they were returning.

"I will help my mother when I have free time. [My wishes] may not get fulfilled due to work. I have to bring grass from the forest. After that, I have to cook. I go to school. And I have to work at home too. In the evening, one [person] stays at home and cooks dinner. The other one will go to work. There is lots of work. I will not be able to complete homework from school. We don't have enough time." (Girl, Nepal)

This is not to say that material conditions are irrelevant, and indeed in Mexico a good home environment, and the move from chaos and dirty living conditions to families being able to keep the home clean, was seen as one positive indication of wider change in families. However, here it was felt that the importance of these conditions should not be over-emphasised and that improvements in material conditions could also happen after the child returned home.

"[Sometimes] you think a family has to be doing really well before a boy can go back, but then you understand that the family can work on improvements when the boy is at home." (JUCONI staff member, Mexico)

While poverty was a reality for nearly all families who participated in this study, and parents/caregivers sought financial and material assistance whenever possible and/or appropriate (see below), most recognised the key importance of acceptance, love and security for reintegrated children, as expressed by a mother living in rural Nepal.

"I feel very good and I am happy about her return home. She is safe here." (Mother of girl, Kavre)

¹³ In reality, very few children had such specialised needs that they required institutional care.

Finding 3: Whether or not a child wants or is able to return home depends to a large extent on whether the original causes of their separation have been addressed

Despite the fact that nearly all children and families involved in this research did not want to live apart from each other, reintegration was not in every instance desirable, possible or in a child's best interest. Whether or not a child wants or is able to return home depends to a large extent on why he or she left in the first place, and whether the factors which motivated children to leave had been addressed. In the Moldova case study, children were separated from their families because of a widespread government policy of institutionalisation. When this policy changed and family care was prioritised, plans were put in place for each child to return to his or her family or to find a permanent alternative family placement. While many children and their families recognised that separation had provided some 'advantages' – reduced financial pressures, for example, or free care and housing for children of migrant workers – the vast majority would have preferred to have stayed together. In cases such as these, reintegration was the resolution of a problem that had been created by the state (and taken advantage of by certain parents and social service providers). Concerns about children's safety and the quality of parental care were not usually in question. Boys and girls were sad about leaving their friends and some were fearful about their new life, but all wanted to be reintegrated.

"I wanted to go home because I was missing my parents. But at home I do not have friends." (Boy, Moldova)

The situation was not so straightforward for children in the Nepal and Mexico case studies, many of whom had left home for very specific personal and familial reasons. Some of these motives included the desire to earn money to send back to their families (Nepal); to access schooling or schooling of a better quality

(Nepal); to escape violence, quarrels and difficult relationships in the home (Mexico, Nepal); to reduce the financial burden on the family (Nepal); to have greater independence (Mexico); to get away from a discriminatory community (Nepal); to engage in activities disapproved of by family members (Mexico); and to seek a better life in the city (Nepal). Once away from home, separation was maintained by additional factors such as parents being unwilling to accept a child back (Mexico, Nepal); unfinished schooling (Nepal); fears of early marriage (Nepal); and controlling relationships with employers or others (Mexico, Nepal).

Boys and girls and parents/caregivers in these two countries were clear that the decision for a child to live apart from his or her family was complex and based on a constellation of factors. Sometimes these choices were made by parents or other family members.

"I felt very bad but I thought that it was better for her to be out of [the] home where she was always yelled at. [I thought she] would be safe and get the opportunity to study." (Mother of girl, Sindhupalchok, Nepal)

At other times, children made the decision to leave or shared the decision making with their parents. More than half of the child respondents in Nepal said that they had actively wanted to become domestic workers and had themselves chosen to take on this work.

Girl, Nepal: *"I asked my mother [to go to Kathmandu]. She said if you want to go you can, or don't go and you can stay here and study. I told her that they will educate me there so I will go. I discussed with my mother."*

Interviewer: *"If you hadn't come here, was it possible for you to stay home and study?"*

Girl: *"Yes, it was possible."*

Likewise, in Mexico, boys often made their own decision to leave their families because they could no longer tolerate the violence to which they were exposed, or because of deteriorating relationships with their parents or step-parents.

"Throughout Santi's mother's relationship with

his stepfather (the father of his mother's two younger children) Santi had witnessed many violent situations. He wanted to leave, especially when he saw his mother being beaten. He was also harassed in his neighbourhood, bullied by other children.” (JUCONI therapist)

In addition to their participation in the decision to live apart from their families, children also played a critical role in choosing whether or not to reintegrate. Nearly all children in Nepal took the decision to return home, independent of their parents/caregivers. In only three cases did families take the initiative in asking children to come back. For reintegration to take place in Mexico, boys in JUCONI House needed their families to want them back, a sentiment parents and others expressed after an extensive therapeutic process in which they had begun to reflect and work on their own emotional issues and had come to understand the reasons for their child's behaviour. Just as important, however, was a boy's own decision to make this move. Evidence from all three case studies strongly suggests that children have considered views about whether it is in their interests to reintegrate and, if so, when and how reintegration should take place. These decisions cannot be made unilaterally: boys' and girls' participation is critical to the success and sustainability of the process.

Finding 4: Reintegration needs to be tailored to context and to the specific needs and circumstances of the child

Given the numerous and complex reasons for family separation, reintegration must be tailored to the specific needs of individual children and the context in which they live. Boys in Mexico, separated because of deeply entrenched violence in the home, needed intensive support to deal with the impact of this violence, whereas many of the children in Moldova and Nepal, separated for other reasons, had different sets of needs and required different levels of support from varied sources. Depending as well on their individual circumstances, and their experiences

before and since separation, some boys and girls needed more specialised and intensive support than others. This was found, for example, among four girls in the Nepal cohort, who were aged between 14 and 18 and had become eligible for marriage while living apart from their families in Kathmandu. Not wanting to return home for fear of becoming a wife before they were ready, some did not seek reintegration. The role of supporting agencies in instances such as these is to work with girls, their families and communities to share perspectives and to try to bring all parties to a mutually agreed upon position.

Evidence from Mexico and Moldova also highlights the importance of conducting individual assessments with separated children and their families in advance of reintegration. Doing so can provide important information not only about the child and his or her needs and circumstances, but also about their families and their relationships with parents/caregivers and siblings. In Moldova, the majority of boys and girls expressed some frustration about this process, the purpose of which they felt was unclear and inadequately explained. Many said that reintegration was presented as just changing schools rather than being about leaving residential care or moving to live with parent(s), extended family or into foster care. Moreover, the assessment process itself was described as unsatisfactory by some.

“The social assistance people came and told us that the school will be closed. We were also visited by some ladies at school who asked us where we would like to go, what we would like to do, but I do not know where they were from. They had papers and asked us to read them. They interrogated us. They asked me why I did not want to go to the community school and where I wanted to go. Those questions irritated me.” (Girl, Călărași, Moldova)

These sentiments were not shared by boys in the Mexican cohort, perhaps because the reintegration process was far more prolonged for these individuals and the assessment process took place slowly over a period of many months or, in some cases, years. JUCONI educators use

a therapeutic process to support children and parents to gain insights into their experiences, to improve self-esteem and emotional well-being, and to build healthy relationships. The availability of human and financial resources to support this sustained work was far greater in JUCONI's work in Mexico than with the national organisations working in Moldova, and especially so compared to Nepal, where CWISH staff time and funds were extremely limited.

A crucial component of the individualised assessment process involves supporting children and families to openly acknowledge their fears and anxieties about reintegration. Different parties can have markedly different views on how the experience will and should unfold. When these opinions are discussed and mutually agreed upon in advance of reunification and in the early stages of reintegration, individuals' worries can be dealt with and any unrealistic expectations can be managed. Negotiating this tricky process was central to the pre-reintegration process in Mexico where, for example, educators encouraged mothers to maintain as ordinary a home environment as possible by not providing their sons with their favourite meal every time the child came for a visit.¹⁴ Children's achievements while in JUCONI House were also placed in context for parents in order to avoid situations such as that faced by one boy whose parents expected him to quickly finish secondary school because he had learned to read and write while he was away from home.

The social, emotional and material expectations that children and families have of one another are unique in every case. Evidence from Mexico suggests that when external actors, such as

JUCONI educators, support households and families to create a personalised family plan, the reintegration process can be custom-designed to meet the specific needs and circumstances of each returning child. By articulating a range of objectives, from personal care (nutrition, dental health, medical check-ups) to economic goals (additional income generating ideas, efforts to access government support) to family functioning (roles and responsibilities, acceptable forms of discipline, decision-making authority), individualised 'programmes' can be set up and implemented by each family member. The structure these plans give not only provides a focus for children and families in the initial settling-in period, but the exercise of developing them can promote communication and mutual understanding. Referring to these plans on a regular basis also provides an effective mechanism for 'checking in' on how the reintegration process is working for everyone. Findings from the case studies in Moldova and Nepal suggest that these personalised family plans would also work well in these contexts, where children's and families' expectations regarding reintegration are sometimes different and clarity is needed, and where individual or familial circumstances may or may not have changed in the period of separation. Returning children may have had experiences of violence and abuse while living away from home, as was common for one-fifth of respondents in Nepal and in Moldova.

"There is nothing good in that house. I don't like beatings, scoldings, and not letting me go out. They also give me lots of work." (Boy, Sindhupalchok, Nepal, describing his treatment as a domestic worker)

¹⁴ Home visits are a key component of the pre-reunification process for boys at JUCONI House. Initial visits are short and, over time, take place with greater frequency and for a longer duration. Visits of this kind were not a part of the reintegration work that took place in Moldova or Nepal, most likely because of the scale of the de-institutionalisation process (Moldova) and cost (Nepal).

Finding 5: Reintegration is a process that requires preparation, planning, time and holistic, coordinated support

Research in Mexico, Moldova and Nepal demonstrates that in order for reintegration to be sustainable, it needs to be understood not as a one-off event but as a process that requires thorough preparation, planning, time and resources. In addition to the importance of individual assessment and the development of reintegration plans for each child and family (discussed above), the Mexico case study highlights the positive outcomes for all involved when reintegration is allowed to take place gradually. The emphasis of the JUCONI programme on the child and family spending increasingly longer periods of time together before reintegration provides everyone with the opportunity to get to know and get used to one another again, thereby promoting mutual understanding and acceptance.

“When [family-team staff] come [for weekly visits] they get us involved in games, we work in teams and we have seen that we can play with them [children]. We have changed; they have helped us a lot. When Esteban visits, he plays with my children, they talk together.” (Sister (primary caregiver) of Esteban, 15)

This process-oriented approach to reintegration continues even after a boy has returned to live with his family. Such a move is not considered the end of the exercise, rather a part of a long-term process of change that is underway. Interviews with boys and families highlighted the anxieties and stresses that often accompany the personal and familial adjustments required in the first few months of reintegration. JUCONI calls this period ‘protected time’ and evidence from this study suggests that often a good deal of support is required at this stage.

Despite the differences in context, and the reasons for family separation and reintegration, the types of support needed by children and families in Mexico were similar to those required in Moldova and Nepal. These included emotional

and relationship support for children and parents/caregivers.

“In my case it was the headteacher of my class. After lessons, she talked to me to ask about my relationships with colleagues, if they do not offend me; she used to give me useful advice, what to do, what not to do, how to overcome jokes, how not to pay attention to children who were bullying me.” (Girl, Falesti, Moldova)

“We feel the [social workers’] support; they encourage us to keep going. It’s really nice to feel that somebody is concerned with your problems.” (Girl, Falesti, Moldova)

“It is difficult without a social worker. With a social worker it is much easier to do things. I am not talking only about money. It is more about emotional and moral support. She knows better what rights we have.” (Mother, Falesti, Moldova)

“I don’t like (in my community) when my friends tease me: ‘You are in a low class’, because I went to Kathmandu and I lost my studying. My friends reached a higher class during that time and I feel sad.” (Girl, 15 years old, Sindhupalchok, Nepal)

Academic support for children and assistance with material requirements for school also played an important role in ensuring the sustainability of reintegration for some boys and girls.

“We work with these children after they come back from school. We help them with homework. It is quite difficult for these children; the national general curriculum is quite complicated for them. There is quite a big difference between the curricula they used to study and the present one. These children always complain that they have to do too much homework.” (Educator at a community centre, Călărași, Moldova)

“It is very difficult for them. I would like somebody to help them with mathematics, physics, chemistry and even Russian.”¹⁵ (Mother, Ungheni, Moldova)

Interviewer, Nepal: *“What are the things they can help you with, so that your child can stay with you and study?”*

Mother of girl: *“For education, things like exercise books, pens, fees, and school uniform. It is difficult for us to manage that. So if we get help from outside to cover that, it will be easier for her to study. If my child gets help, it is helpful for us too.”*

The level of satisfaction that children and parents in Moldova and Nepal had with the provision of this support was variable. In Moldova, the enormous caseload of social workers forced them to prioritise the most needy despite knowing that many others required their help and advice. In focus group discussions, these specialists revealed their struggles with knowing how to support children and families for whom there was insufficient help available. In Nepal, the costs of transporting a child home to an often distant location was one of many financial costs incurred by CWISH and others involved in reintegration, though parents and employers did sometimes contribute to transport costs. In both of these countries, the lack of resources – both human and financial – to support families through the reintegration process was considered by all respondents to be a significant problem, particularly considering the high levels of poverty in which most lived.¹⁵ Money was the number one resource that children and caregivers said would help, a sentiment echoed by a whole host of specialists, agency staff and social workers in both countries.

Most forms of support required by children and families are interdependent, and the wide range of stakeholders involved in the reintegration process requires a high level of coordination and collaboration. The importance of smooth communication and the clear division of roles and tasks is essential. All stakeholders need to know how the process of reintegration is going to unfold. In Moldova, parents/caregivers and children expressed frustration that they often did not know what support was going to

be provided to them, or when and why. The complicated nature of the social aid system made it difficult to understand who made the decision to provide or decline support and what the process was to receive this support. This need for transparency in the system was very important to families and children in this context, but also to those in Mexico and Nepal, where the majority of services and supports were provided not by the state but by NGOs and communities. Detailing this support was a fundamental component of JUCONI’s programme, underscored by the view that families and children required clarity in order to minimise their already significant anxieties. In Nepal, however, long distances between Kathmandu and children’s home communities presented challenges to ongoing communication of this kind. This situation was particularly common in places where CWISH was relying on partners to provide systematic follow up.

Part of ensuring that appropriate support is available to reintegrated children and families is working with a whole host of others to understand their needs and circumstances. In Moldova, for example, involving teachers and school administrators from the very early stages helped to create a positive, non-discriminatory attitude towards returning children. When given information about the reasons why children had been placed in institutions – not usually because of special educational needs but more frequently as a result of poverty – educators were able to set aside their misconceptions and create with their students a positive classroom and school environment. So too were peers, who proved open to learning about and understanding reintegrated children’s circumstances. The phased approach to data collection undertaken in this research revealed how children’s early concerns about fitting into community schools dissipated after an initial period of adjustment of up to six to nine months, with some children taking more time to feel settled than others.

¹⁵ These subjects are a part of the national curriculum but were not taught at the residential schools previously attended by reintegrated children where a simplified curriculum was taught.

¹⁶ For example in Moldova, even when children received access to social care, their caregivers often lacked basic needs such as firewood, an insulated home, food and clothes. Many of the rural families to which most children returned in Nepal lived in absolute poverty.

“The first day was really difficult. I did not speak to anybody and I was very nervous. At the beginning, my classmates did not talk to me, but after a while we became friends.” (Girl, Moldova)

Evidence from Nepal also demonstrates that the acceptance of reintegrated boys and girls is enhanced when members of the wider community are prepared in advance of their return, including health workers, teachers, neighbours, and others. The benefits of this work are not necessarily immediately evident (i.e. when the child first arrives in the community – as seen above), but may take time to reveal themselves. By investigating the different stages of the reintegration process, this research was able to document the changed attitudes of

children, parents/caregivers, families and others over time. The perspectives shared in the later stages of reintegration (between 6 to 18 months after reunification) were markedly more positive than those expressed before and immediately after the reintegration process had begun. In all three countries, the study revealed that after an initial period of settling in, nearly all of the children’s fears about familial acceptance and social integration were not realised. These features of children’s experience are essential, but so too are their financial needs and those of their families. With poverty a driving force in family separation, it remains to be seen if reintegration will be sustainable in the longer term in the absence of these basic requirements.

Recommendations

Children's reintegration takes place in an imperfect world. It is a complicated process that needs to account for the specific needs of each individual child in a world of risk. Widespread consultation is necessary – especially with children – in order to make extremely challenging judgments about things like whether a child should remain in a risky and harmful work environment or be reintegrated, without support, to a potentially abusive family, possibly only to leave again. Some key policy recommendations for ensuring sustainable, individualised reintegration in the context of these complexities include the following.

1. Allow sufficient time and resources for reintegration. Sustainable reintegration takes time and resources to be set up, implemented and monitored. The individual needs of the child and the context in which he or she lives should determine how this process unfolds. Fixed timelines imposed by external actors or unilaterally imposed by the child or parents/caregivers can be harmful because they may place undue pressure on an already challenging undertaking.

2. Develop individual plans for child and family. Each child and family has different sets of needs for sustainable reintegration, and children and families benefit from having a clear idea of the reintegration process and the support they will receive. Children and parents/caregivers need support to share their anxieties and expectations about reintegration and to develop a plan together for how they are going to make the process work.

3. Address the root causes of separation.

The sustainability of reintegration is contingent upon the acknowledgement and resolution of the problems and circumstances that led to family separation in the first place. These are multi-factorial and must be addressed in holistic ways.

4. Ensure children and families have access to social protection. Social protection is critical to sustainable reintegration as poverty is one of the biggest impediments to children's reintegration. These protective measures should be linked to other forms of support.

5. Provide other forms of support too.

Financial and material support for reintegration is important but on its own is not enough. One of the most important indicators of the possibility of successful reintegration is the overall quality of relationships within the family, and support is needed to nurture these relationships. Support is also needed to ensure integration into schools and wider communities.

Ultimately, as with all child rights, the state is responsible for ensuring that children can return to their families if it is in their best interests to do so. However, the state may delegate responsibility to national NGOs who often have valuable expertise in the reintegration of children. The state must ensure proper coordination between all service providers, and quality control.

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