

Guidelines for Restoring Family Links for Unaccompanied and Separated Children

International Family Tracing (IFT)

September 2025

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1. Our Policy

The International Family Tracing (IFT) service of the British Red Cross works to restore contact between family members who have been separated by armed conflict, disaster, migration or other situations requiring a humanitarian response. Through this service, the British Red Cross has regular contact with unaccompanied and separated children who wish to find their family overseas or within the UK, and these guidelines have been developed to ensure that other agencies working in this field are aware of our policies and services.

IFT is unable to undertake tracing enquiries on behalf of third parties (social workers, solicitors, other authorities, agencies, etc) and will thus only accept tracing requests directly from children. Third parties can make referrals to the British Red Cross IFT teams who will then follow up directly with the child.

Social workers will be notified throughout the family tracing process. This includes notifications when a child is referred to the service—whether through a self-referral or a referral from another organisation—and continues through to the delivery of an outcome.

Only trained British Red Cross personnel who have successfully completed an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check will conduct interviews with unaccompanied and separated children. Furthermore, this policy mandates that two adults must be present during meetings with children. For children 15 years old and younger, a trusted adult of their choice must accompany them into the appointments.

2. Our Guiding Principles

- > The British Red Cross is an autonomous humanitarian organisation, one of whose traditional aims is helping to restore contact between members of families separated by conflict, disaster or migration.
- > While the British Red Cross will always use its best endeavours to restore family contact, it has no wish to become involved in any capacity in legal or other official proceedings, for example, those aimed at resolving immigration or asylum status.
- > Nor does the British Red Cross wish to see its humanitarian endeavours and any relevant findings relied on in such official proceedings (for example, by being afforded any official status or evidentiary weight), whether by individuals or government organisations.

> While members of the British Red Cross subject to the jurisdiction of relevant courts of the United Kingdom will naturally comply with any judicial directions affecting them, the British Red Cross wishes to make it clear that its tracing function is wholly separate from official procedures, including the UK asylum process, and is carried out in accordance with its own long-standing principles and practice.

British Red Cross does not intend any information concerning our tracing service or specific related cases to have any formal standing or evidentiary weight, as covered by the current disclaimer appearing on our tracing materials:

In the view of the British Red Cross, the fact that a Tracing Request is or is not opened should not be considered as evidence that the sought person is/is not missing, or indeed that the person does/does not exist. Neither should the opening of a Tracing Request be considered as credible evidence of efforts to contact family members, nor should the decision not to open such a Tracing Request be seen as absence of such credible evidence. In the same way, a request to transmit a Red Cross Message, or a failure to so request, should not be considered as evidence of the relationship between the sender and the addressee, or of the status of the sender or addressee.

3. Our goal

Our aim is to ensure that all those who require tracing services are able to access it in a safe, supportive and confidential environment. We recognise that many of the children have anxieties about starting an enquiry with us, fearing that it may have implications for their family's security. We also recognise that they may have the impression that the initiating of, or result from, an enquiry may influence the outcome of their asylum application. The Red Cross cannot give guarantees about the outcomes of tracing enquiries. Indeed, a failure to trace a sought person does not necessarily mean that the person is dead or otherwise untraceable – rather it means that the person was untraceable at the particular period of time with the information that was provided by the enquirer. Our goal therefore is to ensure that unaccompanied and separated children are able to make independent and informed decisions on whether or not to start an international tracing enquiry with us.

4. Our Procedures

To ensure that our procedures adhere to the trauma-informed practices when working with children, we have provided a comprehensive breakdown of our approach. This detailed overview outlines the steps and considerations we take to support and protect the well-being of children throughout our interactions:

Step 1: Initial meeting

During the initial meeting, which will always include two adults, the local British Red Cross Area Office staff will discuss the following points with the child:

- > **Confidentiality and Child Protection** – the child will be told that discussions during the initial meeting, and any subsequent meetings will be confidential to the British Red Cross tracing teams. However, if at any stage of the process, the child discloses information that causes the interviewer to believe that they or another child may be at risk of harm, it is the duty and responsibility of the British Red Cross personnel to implement the British Red Cross policy and procedures in relation to children and young people's safeguarding.
- > **Trusted Adult** – A trusted adult is a person that the child or young person identifies as someone they feel safe around and can rely upon, with whom there are clear boundaries, and who will listen to their needs and wants without judgement, bias, or expectation. An appropriate trusted adult does not have to be someone specifically assigned to the young person, unless the child chooses that person. This also applies in situations where a child is unable to identify a suitable trusted adult to accompany them throughout the process.
- > For children under the age of 11, this **should be the foster carer or social worker**.
- > If the child is between 11 to 15 years old, they must be accompanied by a trusted adult during the meeting.
- > If the child is 16 years old or older, they are encouraged to bring a trusted adult for support both before and after the meeting.
- > **Informed consent** – must be given by the child to proceed with the tracing enquiry. In order to ensure this the child will be given detailed and reliable information about the process in a language which they understand. The child should not be showing signs of trauma or distress at the time that they provide consent, and the volunteer or member of staff must be satisfied that the child has not been coerced, incentivised or threatened into agreeing to undertake the trace.
- > **Information needed** – an explanation of what kind of information is required and what type of forms will be used in order to carry out tracing/message requests will be given to the child.
- > **Process** – the child will be informed that the information provided by the child and subsequently contained in the tracing/message form will be shared with our National tracing team and then forwarded overseas to our colleagues at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), other Red Cross/Red Crescent National Societies or statutory authorities in the UK.
- > The role of overseas Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers will be explained to the child. The child will be told that these overseas colleagues may, as part of the tracing and message process, visit the last known address given and any addresses of other contacts given in the tracing form. The various consent options related to who can and cannot be contacted to assist with the tracing enquiry will be discussed with

the child, along with the specific risks. If the tracing enquiry proceeds, any specific concerns the child may have will be noted and shared with our Red Cross/Red Crescent partners overseas (for example, security concerns for their family).

- > **Outcome** – The child will be encouraged to have a trusted adult accompany them to the meeting where the outcome will be shared. This meeting will occur after the social worker has been informed of the outcome. It is important to ensure that the child has a support system in place to help them cope with the news that will be given to them, especially pertinent in the case of news of death though we recognise that support should be in place for any outcome, i.e. no trace, family traced etc. This is because the child may be plunged into a highly emotive state regardless of the outcome of the trace. Following the meeting, we will pass on any contact details of family member(s) or people that can provide information about the child's family to the Social Worker directly. This applies whether the contacts are in the UK or abroad.

It will be explained that there is no time limit on any enquiry and that it may take a long time, but the result of an enquiry will always be communicated to the child directly.

- > **Period of reflection** – At the end of the first meeting, the child will be given the opportunity to ask questions or express any concerns and then consider whether they wish to pursue the tracing request. The child may benefit from a period of reflection before proceeding with an enquiry or withdrawing from the process. They may also need to consider whether they are consenting to the tracing enquiry taking place or whether they are responding to the requests of third parties. If the child wishes to proceed with the enquiry, they will be invited to attend an in person, phone or video tracing meeting (with an interpreter, if necessary) in order to complete the tracing/message forms. It may be necessary for the child to attend more than one tracing meeting.

Step 2: Tracing interview

If the child wishes to proceed with the enquiry, a tracing interview will be arranged in order to complete the tracing/message forms. There will always be two adults present, whether in person or virtually.

During this meeting the child will be asked to provide the information that is necessary to pursue the tracing enquiry. For example, the names of the sought person, their contacts, last or previous addresses, current or previous employment or schooling (as appropriate) and indeed any other information that may assist in locating the whereabouts of the sought person.

The nature of this meeting may present some emotional challenges for the child. They may need support in preparing for the meeting, concerning both their emotional wellbeing and with the practicalities of attending. They may also need the support of external agencies or trusted adults to help them deal with the issues raised by the meeting.

If an interpreter is required, some notice will need to be given in order to arrange. Similar notice is required if an appointment is going to be cancelled, so as not to incur costs.

Step 3: Outcome of enquiry

- > When there is an outcome on an enquiry, the child's social worker will first be notified, before the details of the outcome are shared with the child. Any contact details of family member(s) or people that can provide information, will also be given to the Social Worker directly following the meeting with the child in order for Social Services to safeguard the child and facilitate contact.
- > If a family member(s) is found, then the child will possibly receive a Red Cross Message from their family member overseas. Depending on the circumstances, and the countries concerned, the child can either continue to maintain contact through Red Cross Messages or independently by telephone or other means, as appropriate.
- > It is important to note that the failure to trace a family member does not mean that the family member is no longer alive or cannot be traced through other channels: this outcome can only be interpreted as evidence that the family member cannot be traced by the British Red Cross, ICRC or other Red Cross/Red Crescent National Societies, which can be for any number of reasons.

For further information and details on our International Family Tracing service, please visit www.redcross.org.uk/trace