

Working with child and family to recover from abuse

In 2017, a seven-year-old girl reported being sexually abused by her teenage cousin. First Step Cambodia stepped in to support both children and family on their road to recovery.

In 2017, Nich was seven years old when the Cambodian Crisis Centre and the Child Protection Unit referred her to the hospital for emergency medical care. Medical examination and early-response social work confirmed that Nich had been sexually abused.

Living with her family in a rural village in Siem Reap province, Nich was abused twice by her cousin Rith before she found the courage to disclose what had happened to her. Being fourteen years old at that time, Rith was found guilty in court and sentenced to two years and six months in prison. Rith's parents and grandparents quickly started blaming Nich's family for breaking "the family circle" and reporting to the authorities; family ties between both families were cut off. Nich's family was now facing different forms of discrimination in the community, while struggling with the mental and physical problems as a result of the abuse. In 2018, First Step Cambodia (FSC) was informed of the situation and started to provide support.



During our first meeting with Nich's parents, several concerns were raised about Nich's behavior. Unable to cope with the trauma and family conflict, Nich was experiencing high levels of anxiety, feeling scared and having recurrent nightmares. She was having difficulty engaging with other children, especially boys. Feeling ashamed and afraid that her story would spread in the community and school, she started to miss classes and stay at home.

Based on the initial assessment, our social worker was able to identify that some of Nich's behaviors were a result of the sexual abuse, while others could be attributed to a lack of knowledge and skills of the parents in supporting children affected by sexual abuse or trauma. The assessment also showed that Nich was exposed to emotional and physical punishments from her parents. Immediately, our social workers opened cases for, and started regular sessions with, both the child and the parents.

Our social worker started providing psychological and emotional support to Nich. Through the use of a range of therapeutic techniques, Nich started to process the trauma and improve her understanding of what happened. Learning about sexual abuse causes, risks and impacts, she improved her

understanding of the issues, reducing the self-blaming feelings or feelings of shame. She learned how to protect herself by learning how to detect grooming techniques, identify safe places and supportive people as well as reporting mechanism.

“I am very thankful for First Step Cambodia’s support. It makes me feel much safer and more able to deal with my emotional and physical pain. I’ve learned a lot about abuse and violence and now I feel confident to protect myself in the future. I hope I will achieve my goal to become a teacher” Nich (10 years old)

With Nich’s parents, our social workers worked on improving their supervision and parenting skills, especially focusing on their harmful parenting style and punishment. Increasing their knowledge of the long-lasting impact and risks of sexual abuse, Nich’s parents started to understand the needs of their child to recover from her traumatic experiences. In addition, to reduce the stress levels in the family and ensure a safe environment for Nich, material support was offered in order to cover the costs for school materials and contributing to the improvement of their house and toilet.

After the sessions, Nich’s parents feel empowered and fully aware of the best interests of their children and the role they have to play in order to protect their children. They understood how the needs of children differ based on their age and their developmental stages. They started to engage dialogue systematically instead of using physical violence as educative methods to their children. They also made themselves available to check on their children’s performance at schools but also keep their children under surveillance during their free time, knowing well their circle of friends and in which neighbor houses they could be at any time. Little by little Nich’s parents realized how responsible they are for the protection of their children.

“Through the session and discussion with First Step Cambodia, I learnt to be a better mother take better care of my children. Before this I also wanted my children to be happy and protected but I did not know to make it happen. All parents in the community should receive these kinds of counselling and support” Sreyna, Nich’s mother

During that time, FSC also engaged with Rith, who not only was dealing with his sexually harmful behavior, but also had become traumatized from the court proceedings and imprisonment. In cooperation with the Department of Social Affairs (DoSVY) and the Women and Children Consultative Committee, FSC social workers started providing regular counseling in prison during one-and-a-half years, helping Rith understand the impact of his behavior and the implications of the law, change his behavior and deal with his trauma.

After 12 months of support, Nich has regained her confidence and stopped blaming herself as she has come to understand that the responsibility for the sexual abuse lies with the perpetrator. Having a positive attitude, she is engaging in meaningful relations with other children and performing well at school.

Nich's mother has changed her behavior significantly, showing a positive and supportive attitude towards Nich and improving the supervision of her children, even helping with their homework the best she can.

Applying their newly-acquired positive parenting skills, Nich's parents are committed to reducing the use of physical and emotional punishment, encourage Nich in her studies and have generally become supportive to their children.

Today, Nich is living with her parents and going to school every day with a positive mindset. Her parents have lost all contact with Rith's side of the family but are no longer isolated in the community. Rich is joining a vocational training program inside the prison, preparing him for his release at the end of 2020. He plans to leave the village find an employment in Siem Reap.

