

## Dangerous spiral: Sexual abuse and sexual harmful behaviors in a residential care institution

**First Step Cambodia simultaneously opened cases for a survivor of sexual abuse and boys displaying harmful behaviors. Plus, we delivered a specific workshop for the staff of the RCI and a ToT to the director of the center so he could train all the caregivers working in the center and put an end to this “dangerous spiral”.**

Lim Sovann is fifteen years old and lives in a residential care center with two older siblings. He is the youngest of his family. Sovann and his siblings were sent by their father into a residential care center since 2013 because the father was not able to fulfill their basic needs: nutrition, healthcare or access to schools.

At the beginning of 2019, Sovann was referred to First Step Cambodia after it was discovered that he has been sexually abused in November 2018 by one of his roommates with who he was sharing the room in the RCI. First Step Cambodia’s social worker opened cases for both the victim and the other boys displaying sexual harmful behaviors, providing all of them with an individual and specific support.

After he has been abused Sovann was less often playing football with his friends in the RCI; he kept enjoying skating when he had free time but sometimes, he was sited alone in silence. Sovann’s behavior at school became problematic: his appetite for studying turned very low and he expressed laziness going to school often faking to be sick. At school, he disturbed both classmates and teachers by displaying anger and aggressiveness without valid reason, his caregiver reported.

To deal with these problematic behaviors, FSC’s social worker had a large number of counselling session with Sovann. During the first sessions Sovann shared he would like to drop out school despite the fact he is only in grade 4. When asked the reasons why he would like to stop he gave short explanations such as “I cannot attend ... It is hard for me to focus ... I am not interested “. When asked if there were any activities, he would be interested in doing in the future he mentioned car repairing without too much conviction. Sovann often seemed tired as a result of frequent sleep disorders. He shared with our social worker that he is much less talkative than he used to be with his friends at school.

FSC’s social worker adopted various strategies to support Sovann. Firstly, the regular counselling sessions with Sovann which have proven to be very effective. One of the first element was to work on the narrative of Sovann’s abuse. Little by little, Sovann understood he had nothing to be blamed for. Once this became clear for Sovann, it turned to be easier to work on his anger management skills. Progressively and gaining more and more emotional stability Sovann became able to focus and perform well at school. He also became aware of the meaning of sexual abuse and its variety of forms. He is now aware of what is appropriate and what is not.

FSC's social worker hold regular in-person and online conversations with the RCI's manager and Sovann's caregiver to design the best service plan for Sovann and follow-up the situation in the center. Our social worker stayed informed of the situation of Sovann especially when schools were closed during the first outbreak of the global pandemic.



*Through the individual sessions Sovann has understood the different ways he can protect himself from sexual abuse or violence. He learnt to find in himself the resources to cope with the stress he has accumulated from his challenging past experiences.*

*Supporting Sovann during a visit at his hometown. The photo here does not represent the victim nor one of FSC client, the children is a model .*

During the final assessment, FSC's social worker noted that Sovann was socially engaged into plays with a large number of friends. By becoming aware of the reasons leading to his harmful behaviors, Sovann was able to change. He vetted his anger differently, became more confident and his natural kindness came back to the surface.

After nearly two years of counseling and support, Sovann has stopped all of his harmful behaviors. He has also been building back his confidence and self-esteem. People around him are spotting that he is much more stable emotionally. He is still studying at school and he is very active socially reporting that he "has a lot of friends". Without yet figuring out exactly what he will be doing, he is seeing the future with hope and confidence.

### **Working with children displaying sexual harmful behaviors**

Three children in the RCI were displaying sexual harmful behaviors for which First Step Cambodia opened three new cases. FSC's social worker worked with these children separately to help them to stop these behaviors. The first step was to understand what has triggered these behaviors in the first

place. The three children admitted they have been regularly watching online pornography outside the RCI on their way to school but also witnessed situations where many other teenagers were “doing the same”. When asked if they were aware of the danger of watching these materials, they responded negatively. The three teenagers admitted that watching those contents had awakened some inappropriate sexual behaviors that revealed to be -beyond their knowledge- problematic and harmful for other children.

The three children demonstrated a high level of receptivity to the social worker’s explanations that aims to distinguish appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in regards with the sexual developmental stage of a children or a teenager. The use of tools such as body-maps helped them to understand basic concepts of privacy, intimacy and private parts. If the exposure to pornography is a serious issue we need to tackle, the absence of any constructive dialogue on sexuality or sexual development in schools, families or residential care institutions does not help the prevention of these problematic and harmful sexual behaviors.

Another aspect covered by our social worker with these three boys is to conscientize them on their responsibility and inform them of their relation with the law for those displaying harmful behaviors.

### Changing the situation in the Residential Care Institution

First Step Cambodia has provided a specific training course on social work practice with children affected by sexual abuse in the RCI as well as an individual Training of Trainer to the manager of the RCI to build on the skills of the caregivers. Plus, First Step Cambodia also delivered a poster workshop for all children living in the RCI which aimed to raise awareness on the issue of sexual abuse. The staff of the RCI reported to have learnt a lot from the training course: now they have a deep understanding of what is sexual abuse, its risks and consequences.

They understand what are the actions to take in order to protect and prevent sexual abuse inside the center. They also have a greater awareness and knowledge on how to identify and respond to these potential cases using appropriate referrals pathways. Ultimately, they are able to detect sexual harmful behaviors displayed by children which helps to prevent further harm and abuse to other children.

The three children that used to display behaviors are not an issue anymore in this new environment where both children and caregivers have felt empowered to break the “dangerous spiral”.