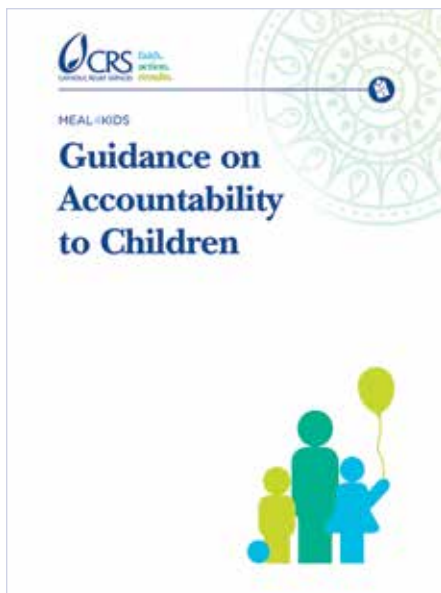




MEAL4KIDS

Guidance on Accountability to Children





This guidance gives an overview of the basic principles and practices of beneficiary accountability in child-centered programs. It aims to support program and MEAL (monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning) staff to design and implement accountability systems that take into account the specific needs and sensitivities of child beneficiaries.

More guidance from the MEAL4KIDS series:



Acknowledgments

To all those who generously shared time, expertise and wisdom. In particular, EMECA Core Team members and country program MEAL officers including: Nichole Bohl (technical advisor, child protection), Velida Dzino-Siladjic (technical advisor, MEAL) Michelle Ryan (project manager), Melissa Tucker (technical advisor, psychosocial support), Fida Safieddine, Merit Ramses, Eman Aboul Saad, Darko Majstovoric, Tanja Menicanin, Nafsika Waggar, Marion Abboud, Karam Fatayri, Mustafa Alloush, Sonia Esquibel, Nissren Ayob, Marie Miano, Jessica Howell, Veronica Muoio, Anwar Mitri, Lana Snobar, and Mohammad Shaath.

Others whose contributions were essential are Dominique Morel and Jennifer George Poidatz.

Authors

Nicole Bohl
Velida Dzino-Siladjic
Michelle Ryan

Technical reviewers

Clara Hagens
Nell Bolton
Lucy Steinitz



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228 West Lexington Street
Baltimore, MD 21201-3443 USA
1.888.277.7575
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Introduction

Overview

This guidance note gives an overview of the basic principles and practices of beneficiary accountability in child-centered programs. It aims to support program and MEAL (monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning) staff to design and implement accountability systems that take into account the specific needs and sensitivities of child beneficiaries.

This document should be used together with the CRS *Standards for Child Participation in MEAL*, which includes cross-cutting considerations and instructions for engaging children in all MEAL activities in a meaningful, appropriate, safe and ethical way. It also provides an explanation of the importance and benefits of child participation across MEAL activities.

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“CRS staff, together with partners, utilize an approach to accountability that emphasizes the importance of listening to and understanding the needs of the boys, men, girls, and women we serve, and reflecting those needs in the project’s decision-making processes and activities.”¹

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How to use this guidance²

This guidance can help CRS and partner staff better understand what child-centred accountability looks like in practice. It can be used as a:

- **Guidance tool** when designing a new accountability system for projects involving children.
- **Self-assessment tool** to assess the quality of existing accountability systems for child-focused programs.

Accountability is everyone’s responsibility

This checklist should be used jointly by both MEAL and program staff. As structures in each country program are different, it is recommended that an action plan be developed that assigns clear responsibilities to each MEAL and program staff member involved in the project.

Working with partners

This guidance document can also be used as a basis for discussions with partners who are implementing child-focused programs. It can help to identify gaps and capacity-building needs. CRS and its partners could then jointly agree on priorities and a way forward.

The guidance is broken down into three sections:

- Information sharing
- Handling feedback
- Roles, responsibilities, competencies and attitudes of staff and volunteers.

1. CRS MEAL Policies and Procedures: [Beneficiary Accountability](#)

2. Adapted from the Programme Accountability Guidance Pack, Save the Children (2013)

A. Information Sharing ³

Information sharing means CRS ensures that children and parents have access to clear, timely, relevant, age-appropriate information about the organization and the program activities. All information needs to be shared in a child-friendly manner. Child-friendly communication means communicating in ways that are appropriate and accessible to children, such as providing information in simple language or with locally appropriate illustrations that can be understood by children of different ages and literacy levels. The best way to achieve this is to involve the children in the design process of the communication material.

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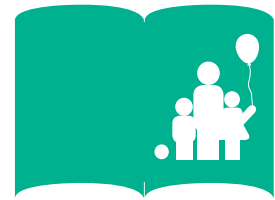
CRS ensures that children and parents have access to clear, timely, relevant, age-appropriate information about the organization and the program activities.

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Checklist to ensure quality information sharing

- CRS and partners consult children and their parents on the preferred ways of sharing information that are appropriate to the context, culture, situation, age and education level of children and parents (e.g. literacy level).
- Before the start of the project, CRS and its partners ensure that children and parents are informed about:
 - ✓ The organization's background (e.g. what it does, where it works, what it wants to achieve)
 - ✓ The objectives, activities, target groups and duration of the project
 - ✓ The duration of each cycle for a specific cohort of children
 - ✓ The [Code of Conduct](#) and Protection Policy, as well as the conduct the children can expect from staff and volunteers (please refer to the *CRS Standards of behavior toward children* in Annex 1.)
 - ✓ The process for giving feedback (about the project and/or staff behavior) and how response to feedback will be provided by CRS or its partner
- CRS and its partners regularly inform children and parents about:
 - ✓ Any updates and changes affecting the project that the children are participating in (e.g., in staffing, schedule, content or location, etc.)
 - ✓ The feedback received by the project team and the responses to this feedback (see more details in the following section)
 - ✓ The progress and results of the project (only to parents)
 - ✓ The exit strategy of the project (depending on the context, this might be communicated at the beginning of the project. It should, however, always be communicated at least 1 month before the close of the project).
- CRS and partners share relevant program learning and plans for improvement with children and parents in an accessible and child-friendly manner.

3. This document focuses exclusively on information-sharing with children and parents. For a general guidance on information-sharing guidelines with other stakeholders, please consult: CRS MEAL Policies and Procedures: [Beneficiary Accountability](#)



Practical tips and considerations

- If the implementation area includes both a host and an internally displaced or refugee population, CRS or partners staff should also share information with the host community—including children—in order to build trust and relationships with the host community, and to prevent rumors and increased tension.
- A promising practice is to create a child-friendly (pictorial) version of important information (e.g. the Protection Policy) so children are taught in a child-friendly way that no one is allowed to harm them, and who they can turn to if they feel unsafe.

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A promising practice is to create a child-friendly (pictorial) version of important information.

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Examples of pages from the child-friendly version of Plan International's Child Protection Policy, *Say yes! to keeping children safe*.

- When working with children, it is equally important that parents be told in simple and straightforward language about the expected behavior of CRS and partner staff toward their children and how they can report any protection concerns. Even if parents encourage teachers and animators to use corporal punishment against children in a particular context, it is CRS' obligation to clearly explain the agency commitment to protecting children from harm, as defined in the Protection Policy, while they are under CRS care.
- When designing a communication strategy for children, it is critical that staff choose their words carefully. For example, if there is a program for children that are in emotional distress, do not tell children that it is *'a program for distressed or traumatized children,'* but rather phrase it in a positive way: *'This is a program where children can play, relax and learn new skills, etc.'*

- Several types of communication may be needed to reach different sub-groups of children (e.g. different age groups, literacy levels, children with visual or hearing impairments, etc.). When designing communication materials, aim to be as participatory and inclusive as possible. For example, children's own drawings can be included in the design of posters and leaflets. Diverse means of communication can include but are not limited to:
 - ✓ **Speaking directly** to children and parents
 - ✓ **Community meetings with children and parents**
 - ✓ **Songs, theater, puppet shows** and other creative expression
 - ✓ **Posters, banners, leaflets** (Illustrated versions for younger and non-reading children)
 - ✓ **Social media posts, radio announcements** (could be done by children for children)
- When communicating with children, it is especially important not to make any promises that the organization cannot deliver. Doing so could jeopardize children's overall trust in adults, and may keep children from reporting safeguarding concerns. As with adult beneficiaries, ensure that children have *realistic expectations* when involving them in data collection efforts. This is particularly important during assessments when the organization might not know where a project will be sited or who will be included (e.g. what age group.)

B. Handling Feedback*

Children that participate in our programs and their parents should have safe and accessible ways to make suggestions or raise concerns about the decisions or behavior of CRS or partner staff. CRS and partners should ensure that feedback and complaints by children and their parents are received, heard, reviewed and acted upon in a timely manner, including referring to other stakeholders any feedback about issues beyond CRS' scope.

**Please note that parents will use the feedback mechanisms established for adult beneficiaries and therefore this section refers only to child beneficiaries.*

Checklist for handling feedback

- CRS and its partners have established feedback mechanisms specifically for children based on consultations with children.
 - ✓ The feedback mechanisms are safe and accessible for various groups of children, including adolescent girls, and children with disabilities.
 - ✓ At least one feedback mechanism allows for provision of confidential feedback.
 - ✓ Children and parents understand that their feedback and reports, regardless of if it is positive or negative, will not have an impact on their access to services or how they will be treated by program staff.
- CRS and its partners have established response mechanisms specifically to respond to feedback received by children.
 - ✓ Children were consulted on the response mechanism design and are aware what complaints, suggestions and requests can and cannot be handled by the system.
 - ✓ Children are informed about the steps and timeline for CRS to acknowledge and respond to feedback.
 - ✓ Children receive appropriate explanations and responses to their suggestions and complaints.
 - ✓ CRS and partners keep a record of all feedback received by children, the responses given and subsequent project decisions made or actions taken.
 - ✓ Out-of-scope feedback—issues that fall outside of CRS' mandate and project activities/services—from children and their parents is referred to the appropriate stakeholders and service providers, and the beneficiaries are told why the organization cannot respond to these complaints or suggestions.
 - ✓ Provisions have been put in place so that when anonymous feedback is received from children, confidentiality is ensured and the anonymity of the children is protected.
 - ✓ *Serious complaints/allegations related to neglect, exploitation, violence or abuse in the homes of the children who participate, or allegations against CRS or partner staff or volunteers regarding inappropriate behavior toward children, or other forms of misconduct, are **immediately** reported to senior management in line with the CRS Protection Policy. See Annex 2 for more detail.*
- CRS and partners adapt and modify the way the feedback-and-response mechanism works according to the findings of regular program reviews of feedback/complaints by children and their parents. CRS and partners actively use feedback received by children to improve ongoing programming as appropriate.

Types of child-friendly feedback mechanisms

Feedback mechanisms should be appropriate to the children's ages, capacity and environment.

Feedback mechanism	Age	Further considerations
Suggestion boxes	When the majority of children can read and write.	Consult children about the ideal location, including the height of where the boxes are placed. This method is anonymous, and it would therefore be difficult to identify a child who had reported sensitive information that might require follow-up.
Telephone hotlines or SMS line	When the majority of children in the age group have access to and use phones (this may vary significantly across contexts). Usually 9+ years	Consider a separate phone number for children's feedback and/or specifically trained staff who respond to children's feedback on the hotline. Hotlines can be used by children who cannot read or write. This method can be anonymous; in this case, it would be difficult to identify a child who reported sensitive information. Consultation with parents is recommended before selecting this method, to ensure parents are supportive of children using phones and that there is no cost concern.
Dedicated email account or internet application (e.g. Whatsapp, Viber, Facebook Messenger)	When the majority of children in the age group have access to and use the internet (this may vary significantly across contexts). Usually 9+ years	Consultation with parents is recommended before selecting this method, to ensure parents are supportive of children using email or internet applications and that there is no cost concern.
Dedicated help desk (e.g. next to the Child Friendly Space)	All age groups	This can be used to promote transparent information sharing and logistical problem-solving, especially at the start of a program or for a new cohort of children.
Community engagement committees made up of respected and trained community members or trusted adults who receive feedback from children on behalf of CRS	All age groups; particularly suitable for younger children	Depending on the context, the children could be involved in selecting adults they feel most comfortable with. This method facilitates the engagement of the community and has the potential to increase ownership of the program and awareness of and response to child protection issues. It is appropriate for children who do not read or write.
Daily or weekly feedback sessions with children that participate in the program	All age groups	Feedback sessions should focus on specific activities that took place in the previous day or week. Children may prefer providing active feedback. Consider including artwork, videos or drama/role-plays, etc. to obtain this type of feedback.
Self-administered survey (can be pictorial) with children and parents	10+ years	Surveys can capture the overall level of satisfaction with the program.
Individual interviews and questionnaires with children	7+ years	Interviews can capture the overall level of satisfaction with the program.
Focus group discussions with children and parents	Children 10+ years	See Practical guide: Focus group discussions for more details on child-specific considerations and tips.
Establishment of and regular meetings with children's committees/child advisory groups	10+ years Age depends on the overall objectives of the committee/group	Potentially empowering for children and using child-led method. More time commitment required from participants. Higher likelihood of biased feedback and potential to under-represent the population.
Establishment of and regular meetings with caregiver committees	All age groups	Potentially empowering for caregivers and using caregiver-led method. More time commitment required from participants. Higher likelihood of biased feedback and potential to under-represent population. Also excludes children's voices.

* The educational capacity (e.g. writing and literacy levels), access to and comfort level with different communication mediums among children of different age groups are important to consider across contexts.

** All children should be encouraged to tell their parents any sensitive information about CRS or partner staff conduct for reporting to CRS.

Practical tips and considerations

- **Engage children in the design** and establishment of feedback channels. This helps to increase their confidence in using the channels and their understanding of the feedback process.
- **Research any existing mechanisms in the community** for handling feedback from children and explore the feasibility of using these in the project (e.g. UNICEF Child-friendly and Safe Schools typically have child feedback systems).
- **If appropriate, explore the use of technology** options to communicate with children. Children (especially adolescents) may be more digitally literate and have more regular access to mobile phones and/or the internet than is assumed.
- **Giving feedback on behalf of someone else** should be possible using the mechanisms (as the person wanting to give feedback might be unable to read or write, afraid for their security or unable to access certain mechanisms).
- **Explain clearly what types of feedback can and cannot be processed**, when setting up the feedback-and-response mechanisms for children. For example, if a program is in a school and there is no budget to spend on infrastructure, children should be made aware of this and that we do not have any influence (e.g. we cannot install a basketball goal). However, children should let us know if they have any safety concerns even if these relate to the infrastructure.
- **Children can easily be discouraged** if they do not see immediate action. The more often they are given responses to and explanations about their feedback, the more they will use the system and the better it will work.
- **Engage children in addressing the feedback**, when appropriate, especially if it entails programmatic suggestions. This gives them opportunity to engage in discussions and decision-making around possible responses to their suggestions (e.g. starting a football club) and to learn essential skills, such as negotiation, giving constructive feedback and advocating for their ideas. They can also learn about budgets and prioritization, for example, that all projects have a limited budget and if some changes are made, such as including a new activity, the trade-off might be to cut another activity.

Engaging children in the design and establishment of feedback channels helps to increase their confidence.



Feedback boxes created by refugee children in CRS Child Friendly Spaces

6. [Interagency study on child-friendly feedback and complaint mechanisms within NGO programmes.](#) Educo, Plan International, Save the Children UK, War Child UK and World Vision (2015)

- **Collect disaggregated data** on the use of the feedback channels. This will allow us to analyze it and identify or confirm children's preferences, and determine which groups of children are using the channels and which are not. This information can be used to design feedback-and-response mechanisms that are better targeted to the needs of specific groups of children by age, gender, ability and vulnerability.⁶
- **Create a frequently asked questions (FAQ) document** for staff of hotlines and information desks, so they know how to appropriately answer children's questions about the organization or project.

Please also consult the following CRS MEAL guidance documents:

1. [Effective Feedback Handling Mechanism Checklist](#)
2. [Feedback and Response Mechanism Flowchart](#)

For more information on how to consult with children on a child-friendly feedback mechanism, please visit Page 32 of Save the Children's [Programme Accountability Guidance Pack](#) (2013)

REMEMBER: Each feedback item, complaint, response to a survey or interview with a child represents a child trying to tell **you** something that is important to him/her. This is never just feedback or just data. We need to always keep this in mind, and have trained staff and systems in place that can respond appropriately if we receive any sensitive information or feedback. **Take any feedback or input from a child seriously** and ensure you have an appropriate reporting and referral system.

⁶ [Interagency study on child-friendly feedback and complaint mechanisms within NGO programmes.](#)
Educo, Plan International, Save the Children UK, War Child UK and World Vision (2015)

C. Roles, Responsibilities, Competencies and Attitudes of Staff and Volunteers

Accountability and human resources

CRS provides appropriate orientation and training to ensure staff and volunteers' skills, attitudes and conduct are in accordance with the organization's (child) Protection Policy and other relevant policies and procedures that guide our interaction with child beneficiaries.

Checklist for accountability and human resources

- All CRS and partner staff/volunteers **understand** the [Code of Conduct](#), Protection Policy and the *CRS Standards of behavior toward children*.^{*}
 - ✓ All CRS and partner staff/volunteers have signed the **Code of Conduct** and **Protection Policy**.
 - ✓ All CRS and partner staff/volunteers have been trained on the Code of Conduct and Protection Policy.
- All staff and volunteers know how the feedback mechanism works, and understand their roles and responsibilities in the process, especially around **procedures for handling sensitive complaints by children** (e.g. allegations of abuse are immediately referred through the county program internal procedures for dealing with breaches of the Protection Policy and Code of Conduct).^{*}
- Relevant job descriptions specify tasks and responsibilities regarding accountability toward children and communities, and their participation in the program cycle.
- Capacity building support and training are provided to staff and volunteers on accountability standards for child-centered programs.
- CRS and its partners have a performance management process that ensures, through regular performance appraisals, that staff working directly with children are performing well technically and behaviorally, including delivering on accountability to children and in child participation.

^{*} Requires on-the-job monitoring

Practical tips and considerations

- **Ensure understanding of, and adherence to, the Code of Conduct and Protection Policy** During emergency responses, when time is limited, there can be a tendency to reduce the orientation and training of new staff and volunteers (particularly volunteers). However, it is the responsibility of CRS and its partners to ensure that every staff member and volunteer—particularly those interacting directly with children—has a very good understanding of, and is able to adhere to, the Code of Conduct and Protection Policy. This includes knowledge of how to behave toward children and what to do when there is a report of a protection concern. A promising practice is to conduct role-plays with staff during training, using case studies and scenarios that highlight realistic protection and conduct issues relevant to your context.
- **Create a feedback-and-response flow chart** with processes and specific roles for MEAL and program staff. Both staff and partners should be oriented to this. The flow chart should be posted prominently in CRS and partner offices.

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Conduct role-plays with staff during training, using case studies and scenarios that highlight protection and conduct.
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Annex 1:

Policy on Protection From Abuse and Exploitation

STANDARDS OF BEHAVIOR TOWARD CHILDREN

Staff¹ and affiliates² must remain aware of perceptions and appearances in their language, actions, and relationships to children, and safeguard them from harm. Staff and affiliates should be aware at all times to uphold the dignity of each child and treat all children with respect.

The following outline provides behavioral expectations of all staff and affiliates when interacting with children (any person under 18 years of age).³

Dos

- Do** listen to children.
- Do** treat all children and their families with respect.
- Do** be sensitive when you are around children, i.e. your language, conversations, touch, gestures.
- Do** have at least one other adult present when you are with a child. Care and discretion must be used in all one-on-one situations.
- Do** ensure that an adult caretaker is present when transporting a child; and if not possible, obtain appropriate permission.
- Do** report any concerns of child abuse or exploitation.
- Do** remember that if staff breach the (child) Protection Policy they may be subject to disciplinary action up to and including termination.

Don'ts

- Don't** be alone with a child (there may be exceptions).
- Don't** take a child to your home.
- Don't** hire a child.
- Don't** encourage a child to meet with you outside of programs or work-related activities.
- Don't** emotionally or verbally abuse a child.
- Don't** hit a child.
- Don't** have sex or engage in any sexual activity with a child, including inappropriate touch.
- Don't** send degrading or harmful written or verbal messages to a child, such as sex-texting or pornography.
- Don't** be harsh toward a child. If a child expresses discomfort, stop the behavior.
- Don't** forget that adults are always accountable for their actions with children.

1. *Staff* refers to all CRS staff: Domestic (US-based), international and national.

2. *Affiliates* refers to consultants, volunteers, interns and project partners in service to CRS.

3. See policy for specific exceptions due to local law.

Annex 2:

Receiving and responding to sensitive and serious complaints and allegations

1. What are serious complaints, reports and allegations?

- Reports or allegations that CRS, partner staff or volunteers have violated the Protection Policy and/or the Code of Conduct.
- Reports or allegations that children are facing abuse, exploitation or neglect in their homes, in their community or by humanitarian workers of other organizations.
- Reports or allegations of CRS, partner staff or volunteers breaching any of the CRS ethics policies such as fraud, theft and corruption.
- Any other issues that may be very sensitive in the context in which you are working (this could be issues of safety and security or that put staff in a difficult position).

2. How to manage serious complaints, reports and allegations involving children

- If a child makes a serious allegation verbally or in written format, ***always take it seriously.***
- If a child reports such an allegation directly to you (or another staff member):
 - ✓ Listen to the child
 - ✓ Take all precautionary measures to ensure the protection and safety of the child
 - ✓ ***Immediately*** report it to senior management in-country as described in the Protection Policy and await further guidance
- Please remember that ***failure to report it may put the victim and the organization at risk and is a breach of the Protection Policy and Code of Conduct.***
- ***Do NOT start investigating the allegation;*** that is not your responsibility. Only report. Any investigating, if necessary, will be done by senior management staff trained to investigate such allegations.
- Always ***ensure the confidentiality of the child:*** Do not discuss this case/allegation with anyone besides the person you have reported it to. Senior management will ensure follow-up, contact appropriate authorities or services if required, and help you to access specialized counselling should you wish to do so.

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