

FOCUS ON MISSION GROUPS

Helping mission guests say goodbye well

by Jenna Schroeder, Staff at Back2Back Ministries

NOTE: One important aspect of growing trauma competent ministry sites is including the training and support of mission team guests. In the article below, we address a crucial need.

When I went on my first mission trip to Mexico with Back2Back Ministries we visited many different children's homes. One day I was paired up with a little boy named Eusebio. At the end of our day at the park, we didn't have sad goodbyes because we had just spent the day getting to know each other and enjoying the park. Later, my husband and I decided to sponsor him and formed a relationship over time. It was a great blessing for all of us!

During my time on staff at Back2Back Ministries, I had the privilege of working alongside many teams, staff, and two orphanages in Haiti. As a new site, the Haiti site had the opportunity to learn from the other Back2Back sites and adopt proven best practices. There is one element to short-term mission trips that is often a unique challenge. That is, *saying goodbye well*.

In Haiti, our teams are limited by the amount of people we can fit in the Back2Back vehicles. This limitation has suited us well because the orphanages we work with are smaller in size, allowing the team to interact on a deeper level. Volunteers spend multiple days serving at the same orphanage which improves the depth and quality of connection with the children. Whether God draws a trip participant to multiple relationships, or one specific child, the relationships are strong.



Examining the Hard Question – How Does One Say Goodbye?

We recognize that emotions are involved when relationships are formed. How wonderful! However, what does one do when it's time to say goodbye? We need to help the children and mission trip guests say goodbye appropriately. This does not mean disregarding feelings of sadness or frustration, but it does mean we must teach the mission team guests to not over-communicate their feelings to a child as this could trigger a child's memories of traumatic loss. When a guest comes for a week at a time, of course there are the beginnings of a relationship, but it is imperative that children view the relationship between themselves and their permanent caregiver as the strongest bond. This connection should always be their primary relationship. We must emphasize this principal with guests to avoid negatively impacting children. Simultaneously, let's not dilute the mission trip participants' exchange with quick, rushed goodbyes, but rather, let's understand parting ways as a part of the process. *We owe it to the children and guests to celebrate the time shared with intentional closure.*

Bridging the Separation

Here are a few ways to help volunteers and children say goodbye well:

- **Celebrate!** Teams get to know the children all week long, so it's important to celebrate who they are! I lead a team who decided to call out a positive word they saw in each child. We found scripture to go with each word and wrote them on a certificate. After a celebratory beach day, we sat beneath a tree and called each child up by name. As they accepted their certificate, they were encouraged and felt celebrated at the end of our time together. When we returned the following year, we presented sashes with the life skills buttons they had been learning. Another informal ceremony was held. As they received their sash and heard the applause, I could see the pride in their faces and confidence growing. Celebrations bring joy to the goodbyes and make memories to last a lifetime!
- **Offer Closure.** Sometimes celebrations aren't enough. During one particular trip, we anticipated that saying goodbye might be hard for the children. All of our hearts were stirring to help them process this new emotion. I wrote a letter to encourage the children and we had everyone on the team sign it. Our staff delivered the letter after we left, which helped to open up the conversation with their caretakers and help them process their feelings.
- **Pictures** are a way to offer more closure. We have used an instant camera with the kids, so they have photos of us and themselves. Team members make photo books, letters, and pictures for our staff to deliver. The reminder of the team's time together keeps the connection line running. The more continuous we can make the line, the more it feels like a relationship.
- **Be mindful of the children's needs and their schedules.** We have hosted a few special beach field trips with our teams in Haiti. It is a fun way to cap off an awesome week of hard work! However, when the children are tired and hungry from playing all day in the sun, saying goodbye then, is not being mindful of the children's needs. Their emotions go from a mountain-top experience at the beach to a valley of sadness. Children need to be well-rested and well-fed before handling any emotional news. The end of a long day is never an ideal time for a transition for a child. Save the farewell for the morning when everyone is well-rested and ready to part.
- **Debriefing with the children.** Back2Back staff debrief nightly with teams to help them process their experience. It is just as important to offer the children a similar opportunity to debrief. Closure can come softly if the children's hearts are being well cared for throughout the week, as well. This can be done on a daily basis with the team by using tools such as asking probing questions like, "What's your picture of the day?" Or it can happen daily with their caretakers. Once we debriefed together on the last day, asking the children and the team members for their "picture of the week". Collectively, we shared and we closed our time with sweet memories, smiles and heartfelt prayers.
- **Prayer is the mightiest goodbye of all!** Do not underestimate the power of prayer as a fantastic way to receive comfort and peace from the Holy Spirit and closure for everyone. Gathering the children, the team, and staff, we can thank God for the time together and ask for His blessing. In doing so, we model turning to the Wonderful Counselor, even when we are sad. I have found praying for others, is the best goodbye that we can offer.

Saying goodbye properly is a gift that doesn't re-open a wound of an abandoned child but allows God's peace and joy to soothe hearts. Through intentional scheduling, meaningful celebrations and prayerful closures, we can help children and volunteer to say goodbye well. As we open the door for cross-cultural connection, let's be people who advocate healthy closure with just as much fervor!