



INTRODUCTION: DALE EDMONDS

When we started, we didn't have a plan. We just had a scared skinny girl trying to decide if she should take a leap of faith and join our family.

She'd been sold and re-sold by people she loved and trusted, and now strangers who could barely speak her language turned up with her little sister and brother whom she thought she'd lost forever.

We wanted her to know she could trust us, so we promised we would take care of the two small children she'd been bought to look after. They clung to her, chattering away and then crying when she left with us because for a year, she had fed and dressed and loved them.

The family that bought her were traffickers. The family that sold her were traffickers. She loved them both.

Over the next five years, I learnt through painful experience and long thoughtful conversations with Cambodians and others working there what worked and what didn't.

We learned to be practical and thrifty. We learned that what counted most was discovering the truth and being trusted by families in trouble.

That love and abuse can co-exist in the same family, and children want their family's love and care more than anything — more than a full belly, more than new clothes or shiny toys.

I saw my adopted children recover from their painful pasts and begin to thrive.

In 2007, when my father offered to help fund the start of a tiny NGO from the informal classroom we ran, I thought of the other children we'd seen in the hidden slums of Phnom Penh and said yes.

When you read these stories, you'll come closer to the families we work with and the complicated truths of child trafficking in Cambodia. There are no quick fixes, but there are ways to change lives with patience and compassion.

I hope you'll be inspired to join us. Together we can help even more children in Cambodia.

Dale Edmonds
Director, Riverkids



*(Left) Children from the Kilomet-Six community crowd around the camera moments before an ice-cream treat.
(Right) Dale Edmonds and three Riverkids children halfway through a game of Zombie Chase at the Alexandra site.*

RIVERKIDS: THE START

Riverkids started in 2001 when a family from Singapore discovered their newly adopted daughter and son had been trafficked. The little girl had been threatened and abused by the orphanage into silence, but she took a leap of faith and told her new parents, the Edmonds-Yaps, the truth.

The adoptive family went back to Cambodia and managed to find her family in slums by the river. They adopted her older sister and brother who had also been trafficked. The sister had been bought by a woman in the riverside slum who made her living by buying and

selling teenagers into the sex trade. The sister was put to work as a child nanny, looking after the trafficker's two young children.

Those two little ones became the first Riverkids children.

As much as the sister wanted to reunite with her lost siblings in Singapore, she was desperately worried about the two children she'd taken care of in the last year.

The Edmonds-Yaps arranged food and school for them, promising that they would keep them safe.

Two children became a classroom, and in 2005 the Edmonds-Yaps realised that more help was needed. Friends and families joined in and Riverkids had a name, a house and full-time staff. In 2007, we registered as a local NGO in Cambodia, Riverkids Foundation, that was governed by a charitable trust, Riverkids Project, in Singapore.

Those two children are now teenagers. Their mother is now in jail for human trafficking, but the older brother is apprenticed at a motorbike repair shop in the countryside and his little sister is still at school, living with their family in Vietnam.

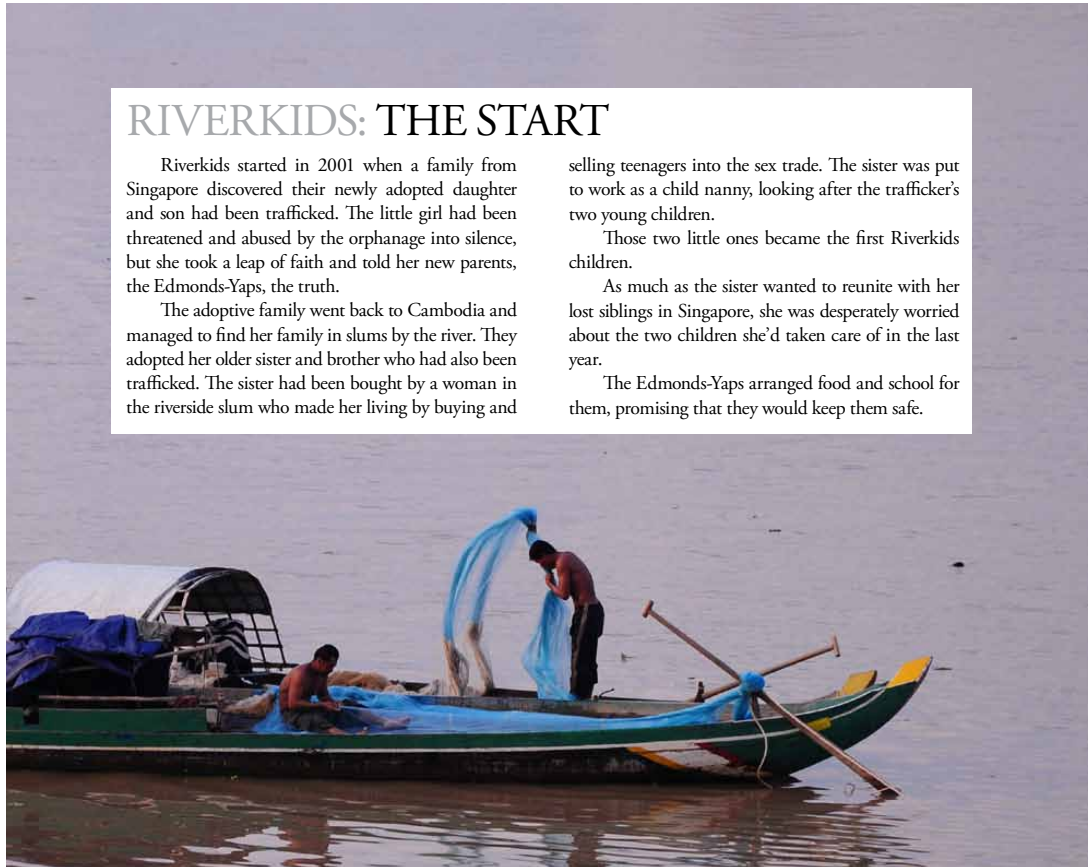
In 2011, we're now an NGO in Cambodia with a strong local team, supported by a non-profit company and an international board of directors from Singapore. We reach more than 600 children in our direct programs alone.

We've seen babies born, teenagers graduate and go on to safe jobs, and families transformed from abuse and despair to safe homes for children.

And we kept our promise for those two children.

(Left) Fishing families on the Phnom Penh river.

(Right) Baby Kalliyen laughs as her foster brother tosses her in the air.



CAMBODIA: LIFE IN THE SLUMS

You won't find them in the guidebooks, or even see them from the street but over a third of Phnom Penh's 1.5 million people live in slums.

Some are recent migrants from the countryside, searching for work, others were born and raised in the slums and have never left the city.

All of them are crowded into tiny shacks with bad drainage, illegal electricity and water, and exorbitant rents.

Life in the slums has its own peculiar economy. Many families go without legal paperwork because they can't afford the "fees" to get them, and without savings or stable jobs, they end up paying \$15 to \$40 a month for a 100 square feet shack. Across the road, in a safe middle class neighbourhood, a decent house can be legally rented for a fraction of the cost per square foot.

Transport to work can cost half a day's wage, so the slums squeeze into any spare land in the city that's walking distance to the construction sites, nightclubs and bars, markets and factories.

With nowhere to safely store food, families have to walk to the markets every day and end up paying

more for lower quality food. Meals are stretched with a plastic bag of three cracked eggs, somehow managing to feed a family of five.

Brightly coloured foil packets of shampoo flutter from the stalls inside the slums because it's much safer to pay a premium for one day's worth of shampoo than to risk paying more for a cheap bottle of shampoo that could be stolen from your shack.

Bags of rice, shoes, even school uniforms are stolen, and there's nowhere safe to keep your savings because the banks won't accept an account without paperwork. So families buy gold jewellery when they can, something they can quickly pawn in an emergency and guard on their own bodies.

Every day could be the end. A traffic accident, a lost job, a sick child or a fire can destroy everything they have, with no social safety net to catch them.

Many give up and retreat to the haze of alcohol and drugs, or chase an escape in gambling.

When most of your neighbours are in crime or sex work, there's little judgement for families that sell their children.

Eight months pregnant, in a flooded one-room, she had to quit her job at a shoe factory when the chemical fumes made her faint.

And the slums are full of children, barefoot and dressed in rags.

They race through the tiny alleyways, jumping over the mounds of plastic bags, broken syringes and faeces, climbing the poles that hold up shacks and diving into the river to swim past where the drains let out.

If they're very lucky, their parents scrimp and save to send them for a few hours of school each day, but when they come home there are no books or colouring pencils.

The slum children learn early to help out minding their younger siblings, cooking and washing, picking up trash to sell or begging from tourists.

For the children in the slums, this is their world and their future.





(Clockwise from Left Top) Khmer tuition at Riverkids. A well-equipped state school classroom. A relatively well-off fishing family in their houseboat. Two teenage girls set off early to collect trash before school. Playing "Spin your brother around as fast as you can" in their sleeping hammock. A stray puppy becomes a beloved pet. Searching for a bargain at the markets. Crossing the monkey-bridge to get from one side of a flooded slum to another. Kilometer-Six row houses are built on a marshy field that floods the houses most of the year.



RIVERKIDS: OUR FAMILIES

Why would a parent sell their own child?

One father asked for help, desperate because his son was dying. Desperately poor, he had nothing to sell except his teenage daughter. We helped him get a loan and job from his former boss. His son died soon after, but the father had not lost both his children.

In another, the grandmother had been sold as a young girl, and she in turn had sold her daughter to a brothel when she reached puberty.

Her daughter sold her first child to a childless neighbour, then her second child to a trafficker. The baby was rescued just before she was taken by motorcycle across the border to Malaysia and is now growing up in a small family-style orphanage. For this family, selling their child was just a way of life.

Selling your own child has happened throughout history and across the world.

Even in developed rich countries like the US and Australia, abusive parents still sell their children and underage runaways are prey for pimps.

In Cambodia where most of the population is very poor and laws are weakly enforced, child trafficking flourishes.

For families in the countryside with a network of relatives to help during a crisis, child trafficking is often by deceit with promises of lucrative work or free education to trick families to entrust a trafficker with their child.

In the cities, child trafficking is a darker tragedy. Slum families are more isolated, far away from networks of relatives and with a stark social divide around them. Everyone knows a family that has sold their child for a windfall.

"Why not sell her virginity and make money?" we hear when we talk to parents about the forced rape of their virgin daughters. "It happened to me," their mothers say, "and I survived."

Again and again, we hear from the young women who are sex workers that this is the only way they can support their parents.

In families twisted by abuse and despair, there is no balance with parents sacrificing themselves to protect their children.

Instead, their children are possessions to be raised and sold to market, just as they once were.

Gambling is an escape for many parents. The wagers can be as little as 100 riel or less than three cents, but debt rapidly builds up thanks to credit extended by the game runners.



RIVERKIDS: OUR MODEL

With more than 400 slums in Phnom Penh, Riverkids has a waiting list of slums notorious for child trafficking. We work in communities that don't already have a strong NGO presence.

Riverkids works on a site basis, with programs carried out within walking distance of the families we need to help.

First, we meet and talk to as many families as possible to learn what's really happening in the community, what families want and what children need most.

We start a small classroom for up to 25 children in our Afterschool Tuition program with a housemother recruited from the community, and a teacher and social worker. As the children gain confidence and skills, we enroll them in a nearby state school.

Through this we know who the troubled families are and they've learned that Riverkids can be depended on for compassionate help.

More programs like our Kindergarten and Get Ready programs are added to meet the needs of the community.

With the growing trust of the community, Riverkids is informed of planned child trafficking and exploitation, and can intervene before a child is harmed.

With more families involved in our programs, we can encourage them to turn to each other for help and think of community driven solutions.

Positive examples of changed families with thriving children help start to change the community standards so that trafficking is seen as a tragedy and not as an easy choice.

As our families recover, we slowly graduate them out of our programs. For some deeply troubled families, their children will need our help until they reach adulthood.

Our goal: To transform child-trafficking slums into communities that care for and protect their children.

*Illustrated and donated
by Angie Wang*



RIVERKIDS: OUR SITES

ALEXANDRA

The first of our community model sites, Alexandra started in 2007 with a single classroom of 25 children. Now more than 200 children and teenagers come for classes, training and shelter every day. Over the years, we've become a safe harbour for families in the Psar Touch community. People will come by to ask for help for their families and neighbours, knowing we'll answer.



BLUM

Blum started in 2008 in a house nearby the Phnom Penh railway where shacks are crammed alongside the tracks. We reach more than 100 children for Afterschool Tuition classes, family programs and our Get Ready program for teenage boys. Blum is supported by the Ingram family and friends, and named in honour of their late grandmother, Blum.



COMPASSION

Down the winding railway tracks, we opened classes in a small house to reach a community of street sex workers and single mothers. Close to 100 children now crowd into the brightly painted house for Afterschool Tuition, Kindergarten classes and meals. Many of their mothers have started vocational training with us.

KILOMET-SIX

Built over a swamp near the road marker "Kilomet Six", the slums here are almost hidden. Made up mostly of ethnic Vietnamese families, over 80 percent of the children don't attend school and almost all the teenage girls are "missing". We just started two classes there in a tiny one-room house. As community trust builds, we'll add more programs.



RIVERKIDS: EIGHT STORIES

Older children are expected to take care of younger siblings. The string bracelet and necklace are charms for protection.



STORY: CHAU AND KIM

Once, there was a young woman — barely out of her teens — who lived in Vietnam. She wanted to help her family so she went looking for work in Cambodia, but like so many young migrants, she ended up betrayed and sold to a brothel.

Chau was trapped in the brothel because of a fake debt. Until quite recently, brothels in Cambodia kept trafficked women captive with fake debt.

The brothel owners would charge outrageously high interest on the money paid to the trafficker or the family that the sex worker had to pay off.

Then the brothel owner would charge rent, meals or any cost they could dream up, until the sex worker was trapped in spiralling debt, most of it fictitious but terrifying. The brothel owners used violence and threats to force the sex workers into paying far more.

One day, a young man came to the brothel and started talking to her. Kim was a blacksmith, and like her had come to Cambodia from Vietnam, searching for work. She confided her story in him and over time, they fell in love.

Kim worked and saved until he could pay off her debt to the brothel and free her.

Chau and Kim married and moved into a tiny rented room in a slum.

Both of them worked hard and they were able to send their children to school, making plans that their children would have a better future than they had had.

Then Kim lost his job at the blacksmith, and had to search for another job. His new job paid less and they had to take their children out of school. Soon, it was a struggle just to feed their children — and Chau was pregnant with their fifth child.



(Left) Nyla gets her little sister ready for kindergarten.

(Above) A social worker from Riverkids brings food to their house and comforts Chau who was then too weak to stand up.



With a heavy heart, she decided to secretly return to her old job as a sex worker. She lied to her husband that she was working at a restaurant to protect him and hide her own despair.

The money she brought in for a while helped, and when Kim's work improved she was able to quit. Their life seemed back on track and they welcomed a tiny baby boy into their family.

But Chau began to feel weak. She got sicker and sicker. They went to the local clinics and learnt that she was HIV positive, and devastatingly so was her little baby boy.

Chau began to fade. When the Riverkids social worker met Chau, she couldn't get up from where she lay, emaciated and close to death.

Their savings were gone on medical care. The older children and Kim were devastated, watching Kim suffer. Their little boy seemed healthy, but they knew that his future was bleak.

We got them to a good local hospital and connected them to an NGO that helps HIV positive people, Medecins Du Monde. Chau and her son were put on antiretroviral medication for free.

Riverkids helped them navigate the medical system and supported the family with food.

(Left) Nyla finds a quiet place to study at the Riverkids centre.

(Right) Nyla plays with the little children in the Riverkids Baby Room.

Within three weeks, Chau began to take her first shaky steps again.

Riverkids enrolled the three oldest children in our school programs. For Kim and Chau, their children's future began to show hope again.

Their oldest daughter Nyla excelled at school and Riverkids chose her as one of our Smartypants Scholarship students.

Nyla was chosen not just for her academic smarts,

but for the quiet and steady hard work she put into school. In class, she's quick to answer questions, but patient and gentle with other students who ask her for help.

Her parents made sure she had time to study and encouraged her to dream of a future where she could become a teacher, a doctor or more.

Nyla's four little siblings aren't quite as well behaved, especially her baby brother who much prefers





to race around and play, but they are just as bright and loved as Nyla.

At the end of 2010, Chau was healthy enough to start planning to open a secondhand clothes shop at the local market. Kim had a steady job driving a tuktuk.

He was driving home two days after Christmas when a car slammed into his tuktuk. The driver raced off, leaving Kim bleeding on the road with severe head injuries.

At the hospital, surgery was delayed until family paid the \$800 demanded by the medical staff. Thanks to volunteers and Riverkids staff, we were able to pay the money within a day. Without our assistance, the family would likely have wound up in massive debt, forcing Chau back to sex work, or worse, to sell Nyla.

But the late surgery failed. Kim died.

Grieving, Chau decided to return to Vietnam to her mother's house. She decided to leave Nyla in Weekly Boarding at Riverkids so she could stay in school.

In Vietnam, Chau got a job at a bakery shop earning \$80 a month. Her mother looked after the four smaller children.

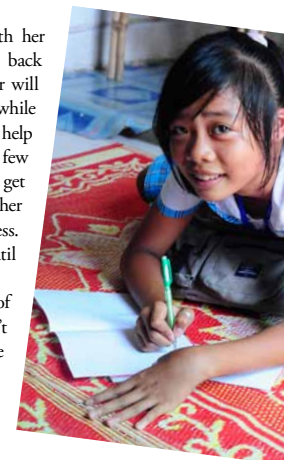
But being apart from her eldest daughter is incredibly hard for both Chau and Nyla, so after much discussion with Riverkids, Chau is coming back.

She's now preparing with her mother to move the family back to Phnom Penh. Her mother will help look after the children while Chau works. Riverkids will help her with rent for the first few months, and a small loan will get her started at the market with her secondhand clothes business. Nyla is counting the days until they are all reunited again.

Kim wasn't a man of means or education. He wasn't known outside of the slum he lived in with his family. But to his wife and his children, he meant the world.

Losing Kim has changed their family. He left them nothing but memories. Memories that have shaped a widow who kept her family together, who sacrificed for her daughter's future and who is raising five bright healthy and loved children.

That's an inheritance.



(Left) Kim, a tuktuk driver, was killed in a hit-and-run accident driving home last December.

(Right) Nyla won an academic scholarship, much to her parents' delight.



RIVERKIDS: PROGRAMS



PROGRAMS: EDUCATION

Most schools in Cambodia demand daily “fees” from students to attend class, even though state schools are meant to be free. Underpaid teachers struggle with few resources. Little is learnt in these crowded classrooms. For children from slums, many have to work after school, with no time for studying.

But a good education opens up a child’s future. It’s more than just better job opportunities. An education means children can make smarter choices. They’re less likely to get tricked into trafficking, and they’ll be better parents, breaking the cycle of poverty in Cambodia.

Our Education Programs have been extremely successful and at the end of 2010 we had more than 500 children enrolled in our educational programs. We work closely with the dozen schools our children

attend across Phnom Penh to help them integrate socially and keep up academically.

We find vocational training and other non-traditional education for the children who are too old or struggle academically at school.

Under our Education programs, we have the Get Ready programs for teenage girls and boys, School Support, Afterschool Tuition, Kindergarten, Smartypants Scholarships and Turtle Track classes, as well as English classes, Football, Gymnastics, Traditional Dance, Breakdancing and Choir.

(Left to right) Football training with Happy Football Cambodia Australia. Traditional Khmer dance. Yoga class with girls from Get Ready. Gymnasts in their donated uniforms. Choir practice at Alexandra.



SCHOOL SUPPORT

Getting children into school is surprisingly easy. It’s keeping them there that takes work! We help get children registered, then negotiate school “fees” to be paid directly each month to the school so the children aren’t frightened or ashamed to go to class.

Every September, there’s a flurry of activity as we organise over a thousand school uniforms plus books, bags, stationery and everything else needed to pack hundreds of children off to school.

Each month, we co-ordinate with the schools to record attendance and grades so we can keep an eye on struggling students and provide counselling and meet with families.

We run afterschool classes for Grades One, Two and Three so the children have a solid academic grounding.

Older children can opt for a fun class like Breakdancing or English class to keep them coming back to Riverkids and close to their friends.



KINDERGARTEN

Kindergartens are rare in Cambodia, and unheard of in the slums of Phnom Penh. The kindergartens at Alexandra, Compassion and Kilomet-Six offer a well-rounded Cambodian language curriculum that builds creativity, co-operation and confidence in the children aged five to eight years old who come for class and snacks each day.

The children learn the basics of reading and writing in Khmer, as well as playing games, drawing and colouring, making puppets, fingerpainting and all the little joys of kindergarten under the careful eyes of our trained Kindergarten teachers and assistants.

For families, Kindergarten means a safe place to take care of their children instead of forcing an older sibling to skip school to look after them.

Riverkids has seen more than 60 of our little guys and girls go on to state school, and they are doing much better than their peers thanks to their early preparation!



GET READY FOR GIRLS

Our Get Ready program prepares teenage girls between 11 and 21 years old who are highly at risk for trafficking and exploitation through intensive training to return to school, start vocational training or apprentice at safe jobs.

The program runs for three to 12 months, and covers Khmer language and basic math lessons, social and work skills, as well as breakfast and lunch.

Each program is small, with just 12 to 15 girls so they can support each other. Their families receive aid to replace the teenagers' lost income from working on the streets at night so the teens can concentrate on class instead of being pressured to drop out.

For some girls, it's only a few months and they're full of confidence and ready to return to school. Other girls need intensive counselling and training before they dare to imagine a different future to being sold.

We've seen more than 60 girls graduate from Get Ready with an 85 percent success rate.



GET READY FOR BOYS

Teenage boys are tough to reach. People see them as problems, not children in crisis and there are far fewer programs than for teenage girls.

The Get Ready program was adapted for teenage boys when we realised that the older brothers of our students were working in gangs, on drugs or selling sex on the streets because they had no hope after dropping out of school.

Like the Get Ready for Girls, our Boys program bridges the gap between at-risk teenage boys who are not ready for formal work training or employment. It gives them a chance to go back to school or to find safe employment.

We've placed our Get Ready for Boys graduates in apprenticeships and training at motorbike, air-conditioning, phone repair and tailoring shops.

With patience and support, our angry gangster teens have become good brothers and sons. They've given up drugs for school, left gangs for football teams, and found their own better futures.



SMARTYPANTS

The Smartypants Scholarships are awarded to the top three percent of students at Riverkids. Our first batch of scholars consisting of 12 boys and girls benefitted in the 2010/2011 academic year.

They are both academically gifted and hardworking students. The scholarship funds a year's school fees at a private school with high academic standards in Phnom Penh, schoolbooks, bags, stationery and uniforms.

Because the scholarship costs are relatively high compared to state school, we decided to limit them so we could send more children to state schools.

With stronger academic tuition, including English language, these 12 children have the opportunity to achieve higher grades and a path out of the slums into university.



TURTLE TRACK

We offer free Afterschool Tuition for all our children in grades one to three, to give them help with homework that they can't get at home. When our children reach grade four, we welcome them into English, Computer, Arts and Sports classes to widen their horizons and encourage them to excel.

But for some of our children, school just isn't easy. Learning disabilities and years of missed school can leave them far behind their peers. Turtle Track is a small friendly classroom with a patient teacher who will work with the lowest 20 percent of our students. Regular tuition in small groups will help them catch up and stay in school.

Just like Aesop's turtle, these children can reach the end of the race — they just need extra encouragement along the way.

PROGRAMS: HEALTH

A health crisis like a road accident or chronic health problems like HIV and tuberculosis can spiral a family into debt and trafficking. Malnourishment and ill health means children fall behind at school, crippling their futures.

Riverkids works on basic healthcare, especially cost-effective preventive care like immunisations and testing, and better nutrition through multi-vitamins, extra meals and training.

Thanks to a wide network of health partners, we've been able to find free or subsidized healthcare for families with HIV, tuberculosis, physical disabilities, mental illness and other severe health issues.

Riverkids provides free medical care to all children in our programs, and assistance to adults in their families according to a sliding scale.

Part of our work is accompanying children and families to help them get medical care. For poor Cambodians, a visit to the doctor might mean a "fee" just to get seen. Hospitals rarely provide basics like towels and water, so Riverkids makes sure that a family member can accompany the child by paying for meals, transport, medicine and missed work.

Under our Health programs, we have Baby Bellies, Preventive Care, Community Nursing, Foodboxes, Pregnancy Care, and Health Workshops.

(Left to right) The nurse provides vitamin drops to toddlers in the Baby Room. Checking on a child with a fever. Dishing out rice for a healthy lunch for hungry children.



BABY BELLIES

Babies and children undergo amazing physical growth before the age of six. That's when nutrition is vital for their brains and bodies to develop normally.

We screen our children under six for underweight and malnourished children. Some are hungry because dire poverty forces their mothers to stretch a can of milk powder for a month by watering it down. Others are neglected because of abuse or struggle to gain weight due to illnesses like cerebral palsy or diarrhoea.

Our nurse evaluates each child and works with the baby's family to improve the baby's care with extra nutrition and training on health and parenting.

For less than \$1 a day, we've seen tiny tired babies turn into chubby cheerful children in a few months. For little ones, that can mean more food for a breastfeeding mother or extra cans of milk powder, while toddlers thrive on extra eggs and fresh fruit.



COMMUNITY NURSING

Being a nurse at Riverkids means a lot of walking. Hard lives mean our families rarely think to ask for help, so when children miss school, we need to go to their homes and find out why.

Our senior nurse takes special care to ask around for pregnant and new mothers, knowing what a huge difference prenatal care can make for a healthy delivery.

Preventive care for children means regular dental check-ups, extra vitamins for malnourished children, and organising immunisations. Working closely with our teachers, we've been able to improve the health of hundreds of children.

We can provide basic first aid and care such as wound dressing and medical supplies both on-site in our nurse's room, and when we visit families.

Visiting a family at home is an opportunity to share better health practices and identify hidden health problems. It builds trust and helps us keep children healthy and safe.

PROGRAMS: SOCIAL SERVICES

Social Work is the thread that binds all our other programs together. Our social workers find children and families at risk, and match them to the programs that will help them the most.

The social workers are out and about most days, walking through the slums to visit families and chat with neighbours. They slip off their shoes and crawl inside a shack to listen quietly as a battered woman pours out her heart and asks for help.

Our social workers have to be detectives. Child trafficking is illegal and abuse is hidden in shame. With patience and care, our social workers need to piece together what's really happening in a family. Otherwise, well-intentioned help can make things worse.

With more than 600 children and families enrolled in our program in 2011, there's a lot of paperwork to keep organised and our social workers rely on detailed casefiles and care plans to make sure that none of our children slip through the cracks.

Under our Social Work programs, we have Social Work, Casefiles, Weekly Boarding, Foster Care and the Baby Room.

(Left to right) Distributing school supplies to a family under the Little Birds program. Our social workers on one of their daily walks around the communities. Talking with a family about the damage to their shack and how Riverkids can help.



BABY ROOM

A bright airy room at Alexandra is full of toddlers and babies being watched over by housemothers who have been trained in childcare and first aid.

They hand out fruit slices and milk bottles in the morning, bathe and change the children and put them down for naps when they're worn out from playing with each other and all the bigger children who come pouring in to the room during recess to play with and read to the babies.

The Baby Room means our parents can go to work and training without having to pull an older child out of school to watch the baby. Overnight care continues under our Foster Care program at home.

Sometimes, the Baby Room is a short-term help such as when two little ones who spent their days safe with us while their mother worked up the courage to leave her violent husband.



WEEKLY BOARDING

Our weekly shelter is a vital refuge for children experiencing severe abuse at home or a family crisis such as a seriously ill parent.

The children stay Mondays to Saturdays under the care of our housemothers, with weekends at home with their families or foster families. They're able to stay at school and see family and friends with minimum disruption during a difficult time. Most of our weekly boarders stay for less than a month, reuniting with their families after the crisis has passed.

Teenage girls share a room, while younger children are divided by gender in other rooms. Weekly Boarding for teenage boys will open soon at Blum.

For abused children, legal removal is difficult in Cambodia without documented severe injuries or the family's agreement. Temporary weekly care offers some protection and gives us time to counsel the family without risking the child's safety.



A social worker discusses violence and child discipline at a parents meeting.



SOCIAL WORK

Our social workers are our eyes and ears. Playing a critical frontline role, they work directly with children and families. We have two teams: Crisis and Support.

Our Crisis team focuses on high-risk families who are deeply troubled and need urgent help now. From frequent home visits, to organising counselling and care, the social workers aim to stop the crisis before a child is trafficked or abused.

In cases such as child rape, our job is to help the family find aftercare and restoration, helping them navigate the police and hospitals and looking to heal their damaged families.

Our Support team monitors all our families, tracking potential problems and referring them to the Crisis team before they escalate. The Support team has to work closely with every other department at Riverkids to make sure programs work smoothly together.

The work is intense and difficult, requiring compassion and calm against horrifying acts of abuse.



LITTLE BIRDS

We make a promise to every child that enters our programs: we won't give up on you. That means when a family moves away from the slums or a child gets in trouble with the police, we don't stop helping.

It can mean travelling to the new area where they live, finding a partner NGO to help them, and sometimes simply keeping their place in the program open until they can come back from the provinces. For our older students, it means organising transport to the high school or training program they're enrolled in so they don't give up and drop out.

We have around 40 to 50 children currently in our Little Birds program. Most of them are living too far from our sites to attend programs there, so instead we enroll them in their nearby school and our social workers go to visit them regularly. When there's a crisis, we're only a phone call away to help.

PROGRAMS: WORK & INCOME

A group of mothers from the community and some of the teenage girls in Bright Girls, a small co-op, chatted cheerfully as they fulfilled another order for a fair trade shop in Australia. Nearby, another group of women crowd around sewing machines, listening intently to their trainer.

Most of our families are very poor. Without a stable income or savings, every crisis becomes desperate. School and healthcare for children are luxuries.

Finding safe jobs and vocational training for troubled adults with no skills is challenging, especially in Phnom Penh where job competition is fierce.

Many of them struggle with a regular schedule and strict workplace rules. The lure of “easy money” from dangerous jobs like sex work and drug dealing is hard to fight.

Our Work & Income team works holistically on social skills and family care as well as financial training. Preparation is critical for microloans and training. A woman about to start a six-month hairdressing course needs to know she can feed her children and that she has support from friends and family — or she is much more likely to give up.

Under our Work & Income programs, we now have Business and Finance Training, Community Loans, Helping Hands Clubs, Direct Credit Aid and the Bootstraps Program.

(Left to right) A small business funded by a community loan. Visiting a family to collect handmade jewellery for a fair trade order. A teenager in our sewing class.



COMMUNITY LOANS

Many of our families can't get credit because they don't have ID papers, any assets or regular income. That drives them to neighbourhood moneylenders who charge up to 1,200 percent interest. A \$50 debt in an emergency can balloon to more than \$500 in a year, driving a family to sell their children.

We have developed three types of community loans to meet the needs of our families: business, training and emergency loans.

Our emergency loans are for crises like urgent surgery or to buy out debts at exorbitant rates. Buying out bad debts before they turn into enormous sums stops them from selling a child.

Our business and training loans have helped some families lift their families out of desperate poverty.

These loans, with a simple 10 percent annual rate and frequent small repayments, come with close supervision and screening. Support and encouragement from our staff to a struggling family is as critical as the loan.



BOOTSTRAPS

Our Bootstraps scholarships help women commit to vocational training by sponsoring training fees and income replacement so they can concentrate on their training and new jobs.

We've seen more than 60 women already graduated into safe jobs in hairdressing, housekeeping, cooking and sewing. We have a waiting list of women eager for a second chance.

It's always easier to face the future with friends. The women from Bootstraps are drawn from our Helping Hands clubs. We now have two clubs for young women aged 16 and up who are involved in the sex trade, one club for those with children and one for single sex workers.

Gently supported by volunteers and social workers, the Helping Hands Clubs bring them together to talk and bond. Outings to fun places like the waterpark or behind-the-scenes at a restaurant give them a chance to be ordinary young women and see new opportunities.

Thanks to the friendships they've formed, they have the support they need to succeed in Bootstraps.



RIVERKIDS: HOW YOU CAN HELP



HOW TO HELP: DONATE

By donating to Riverkids, you're funding programs that directly work with children in danger. Our programs are low cost and practical, and all our finances are tracked and published online at our website.

Our donors come from all over the world, from Singapore and Cambodia to Finland to Australia to the US and more. We've had children donate their lunch money to foundations making grants for entire programs. All those donations make a huge difference.

We try to thank each and every donation, but if we haven't, then please know that your support makes everything possible, and we're very grateful.

We love donations of classroom toys and manipulatives, board books, craft or art books for children and adults, wooden puzzles, Lego, baby clothes and school backpacks.

Toys will either be shared by dozens of children or need to be small enough that we can give them out as little rewards. Sturdy or small please!

Please note that we do not take soft toys because they're difficult to keep clean and share. No toys that need batteries or have multiple parts, thanks!

It's much cheaper and more practical to buy secondhand shoes and clothes in Cambodia than to pack and bring up donations.

Please do not donate candy, biscuits or diapers or infant formula. We try to encourage healthy eating habits, and we use only one kind of baby formula. Diapers are not used in Cambodia typically.

Very few of our children read English fluently. We are able to get secondhand books and dictionaries for older children quite easily. Please think of books children can enjoy with only a little English, such as sturdy board books.

If you're visiting Cambodia, and you'd like to purchase items from the local market to donate, we suggest: school bags, towels, crayons, poster paints and art and craft supplies, toothpaste, shampoo and other basic toiletries.

A toddler in the Baby Room shows off her new stickers.



THE BEST WAY TO HELP

Donating every month makes the impact of your donation more than twice as effective. Recurring donations mean we can open our doors to more families in trouble.

They're easy to set up and a great way to keep in touch with Riverkids' work as you see each month what an impact you make.

Our regular donors are the heart of our work.

Fair trade handwoven silk scarves sold by Riverkids for Christmas and Mother's Day.



HOW TO GIVE

Online: You can donate by credit card at our website, www.riverkidsproject.org. You can also sign up easily for a recurring donation online.

By cheque in Singapore. SGD cheques to 'Riverkids Project Limited' can be sent to our mailing address: Riverkids, Blk 125 Bukit Merah Lane 1, #04-166, Singapore 150125.

To donate by bank transfer or GIRO, please email us at info@riverkidsproject.org for our bank details.



HOW YOU CAN FUNDRAISE

Love to throw a party? We've had boxing matches, movie nights, birthday parties, car washes and more to bring friends together and raise funds for Riverkids so celebrations mean so much more.

Sometimes it's as simple as writing an email to friends for a program you've taken to heart.

In 2010, more than \$100,000 was raised for Riverkids through donor-organised events.

Many of our supporters first heard about Riverkids from a friend, making advocacy one of the most powerful ways you can help our children.

For fundraising events in Singapore, please contact us at info@riverkidsproject.org for guidelines on fundraising as for some fundraising activities, you may need to follow some regulations and fill out fundraising forms.

We're thrilled whenever someone fundraises for us because it helps so much. Thank you!

(Left) A little girl pauses in her race through the narrow wooden paths of the slum when a friend calls her name.

(Right) Children greet their teacher with the traditional "sampeah" of hands held together.



*After English class at Riverkids,
a teenage girl writes to her mentor.*



HOW TO HELP: MENTORING

We had to explain what a letter was. We handed out paper and colouring pencils and stickers and guided the children through writing their first letters.

“Write about yourself, what you like and your family. Write about the kind of person you’d like to write back to you.” The children were puzzled but settled down to fill their pages with neat Khmer script and drawings around the margins. Some spent as much time decorating the envelopes as their letters.

Our mentoring program is different. We know how much child sponsorship means to donors, an individual connection to a child in need far away.

But we’d also learnt through discussions and research all the drawbacks on the children the program is meant to help — disappointment when the sponsor drops out, jealousy when some children get special treatment, humiliation when their faces and life stories are used as heartbreaking marketing.

We wanted a program that would protect our children’s privacy and foster a relationship with someone who truly cared about them.

We realised that this could be a way for our children to safely share their feelings, fears and hopes.

Cambodian children are strictly taught not to say anything about problems at home with neighbours and friends: “Don’t take inside fire outside, nor bring outside fire in” as a popular Cambodian proverb teaches.

Yet even in their first letters, children wrote about losing a parent or being afraid at home.

Becoming a Riverkids mentor is much more than writing a cheque.

You’ll need to complete an application form, and then be interviewed by email and phone. Children can also apply. They will be matched to younger children and their parents need to agree to help.

We’ll match you to the child who needs you most and send you a welcome package with guidelines and forms. Mentoring is \$45 a month, which goes to support all our programs. You must commit to a letter every month for a year.

The first time they received letters, each with a photograph of the mentor far away, the children pored over them, fascinated that someone had taken the time to write to them, that someone out there knew about them and cared.

Then, they wrote back.

**To become a Riverkids Mentor,
visit www.mentors.riverkidsproject.org**

HOW TO HELP: VOLUNTEER

Riverkids has benefited from amazing volunteers who've taught, researched, fundraised and brought new ideas and so much more to the children in Cambodia.

Volunteering at Riverkids can be as simple as a trip to the park with a group of children for an afternoon to weeks of in-depth research alongside staff in a Phnom Penh slum.



Volunteering brings you right into the heart of the Riverkids community, interacting with children and families.

When you contact us about volunteering in Cambodia, we'll talk to you about what would be the best match for your skills and time.

Our Advocacy Walk and Mural Painting activities are easy to schedule for short trips. Other volunteer opportunities for under a week are training workshops, research interviews and field trips.

Please note that if you would like to volunteer in Cambodia for more than a few days, our child protection policy requires that you have police clearance from your own country or an employer referral letter if you live in Cambodia.

Short-term volunteers are supervised by our staff, and don't need a background check.

Volunteers are asked to cover their own expenses and costs. We will provide a budget and schedule in advance of your trip.

To get started, email us at info@riverkidsproject.org.

Photographs taken by Riverkids children on Lomo cameras in a workshop to encourage storytelling by university students from Singapore.



ADVOCACY WALKS

Want to learn more about Cambodia? Riverkids will take you to the places and people surviving in Phnom Penh's slums. You'll learn firsthand from families and sex workers who've agreed to be interviewed about the challenges of daily life for the very poor, the thriving sex industry and the terrible cost for children in Cambodia.

The 12-hour Challenge (\$80) starts at 6.30am when you meet child garbage collectors for breakfast and an interview and follow them on their daily walk. You then visit Riverkids' projects and learn more about the slums before joining our staff as they meet families in the slums.

After a long break for lunch, you head to a local market notorious for trafficking and talk in-depth with street sex workers at their homes and at roadside brothels. You will visit White Building, a lively but infamous vertical slum, and then over dinner talk with other sex workers at a local beer garden and a tourist sex bar in the late evening.

A child-safe shorter tour is also available for volunteers under 17.



MURAL PAINTING

Inspired by gorgeous murals in Brazil's favelas, we worked with several artists in Singapore and Cambodia to design easy-to-paint murals in bright colours to inspire families in our communities with positive messages.

Volunteers in groups of up to five people are paired with a bigger group of our children who are working on the streets or skipping school.

On the painting day, volunteers play games with the children to get them warmed up before the massive painting job starts. Volunteers work with the children to mix the paints and fill in the giant outline drafted on the wall. There's a break for lunch and then it's a race to finish the mural before dusk.

For our children, it's three days of fairly paid work, as the children prepare and varnish the wall before and after the painting day. For volunteers it's one to three days of fun, mess and children's laughter.

And every day our children walk past a mural that they helped create, making the slums a place that says children are treasured.



LONG-TERM VOLUNTEERING

Interested in volunteering for longer?

Our English Classes are designed for volunteers with a minimum of three weeks. Teaching experience is a great asset, but the beginners' English classes focus more on fun activities and conversational practice, with local teachers working with our advanced students.

Other long-term volunteers have worked on developing kindergarten curriculum, strengthening our medical support for malnourished children, training our staff in better accounting processes and much more.

For long-term volunteers, we work closely with you before you go up to Cambodia to design a placement

that matches your skills and strengths. We can also advise you on places to stay and help organise your trip.

We don't charge for long-term volunteer placements, although volunteers are expected to cover their own costs and any additional services needed such as translators for field research.

Because our families don't speak English and are often reluctant to trust outsiders, volunteers work with our staff, and children primarily.

To learn more about long-term volunteering, please email us at info@riverkidsproject.org with your interests and your CV.



CHECK-IN FOR RIVERKIDS

Riverkids often has donations and equipment heading up to Phnom Penh. We would very much appreciate any excess luggage you can spare! We have prepacked bags of donations (usually schoolbags,

children's books and classroom equipment) that can be picked up at our Singapore office. In Cambodia, Riverkids staff can either pick the bags up at your hotel or you can visit the site to drop them off.

*A visitor plays itsy-bitsy spider
with one of our weekly boarders.*



CONTACT US

Email: info@riverkidsproject.org
Telephone: +65 6270 2180

Please send mail and post to:
Riverkids
Blk 125 Bukit Merah Lane 1
#04-166
Singapore 150125

We welcome visitors to our Cambodia offices in Phnom Penh. Please email or call us to schedule a visit. Because our programs are for high-risk children and families, all visitors and short-term volunteers must be accompanied by staff.

Weekly boarders mug for the camera under the shade nets that are set up for a meeting later that day in the only playground space in the community.