

## WHO WE ARE

Smile Train is the world's largest cleft-focused charity, empowering local medical professionals with training, funding, and resources to provide 100% free cleft surgery and other comprehensive cleft care to children globally.

A cleft occurs when certain body parts and structures do not fuse together during foetal development: a cleft lip is an opening in the upper lip, while a cleft palate is a gap in the roof of the mouth. Around 1 in 700 babies are born with one or both each year worldwide. Without timely surgery, these children are at higher risk of malnutrition, speech difficulties, ear infections, and social stigma – issues Smile Train works to prevent through free treatment and comprehensive support.

Reconstructive cleft surgery has advanced over more than half a century, and today is safe, effective, and transformative. The comprehensive cleft treatment we support often also includes nutritional programmes, speech therapy, dental care, and psychosocial support. Most experts agree that cleft lips should be treated within the first three to six months after birth, while cleft palates can be operated on between eight and 12 months. In the UK, clefts are usually treated within the first year of life by specialist NHS cleft teams. In many countries, however, families may wait years for care or never receive it at all due to a lack of trained professionals and resources – which is why Smile Train's local training model is so critical.



Smile Train UK is the registered UK charity (no. 1114748) that raises awareness and funds to support Smile Train's global programmes, which span more than 75 countries worldwide. Since its founding in 1999, Smile Train globally has supported safe and quality cleft care for children from 95 countries, from Chile to the Philippines, and will continue until every child in need with a cleft has access to the quality, safe care they deserve.

## OUR MODEL

Smile Train's "teach a person to fish" model was inspired by an ancient proverb: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." Through this approach, we empower local healthcare professionals to treat children in their communities — not just for a few weeks at a time, but 365 days a year. It works by:

- Locating children in need
- Local staff and volunteers build awareness through media, outreach, and community activities, connecting families to free cleft care at partner hospitals.
- Empowering local professionals
- Smile Train funds training and supports local medical staff in delivering life-changing cleft surgery and care.
- Providing comprehensive support
- From surgery to speech therapy, emotional help, nutrition, and orthodontics, every aspect of a child's recovery is considered.
- Built for sustainability
- Our model empowers 365-day access to care, avoiding the limitations of short-term mission trips and helping build resilient local health systems.



## KEY FACTS & FIGURES:

- Founded: **1999**
- Founder: **Chinese-American businessman and philanthropist Charles B. Wang**
- UK office opened: **2006**
- Global: **2 million+ surgeries sponsored to date in 95+ countries**
- Economic impact of surgical program: **\$69+ billion USD**
- Countries where we support non-surgical comprehensive cleft care: **48**
- No. of training opportunities provided to medical professionals: **100,000+**
- President & CEO: **Susannah Schaefer also a trustee for Smile Train UK**
- Celebrity ambassadors (UK): **Heather Small OBE and James D'Arcy**
- UK: **Nearly 1,000 (est.) babies with a cleft born each year**
- Registered UK charity number: **1114748**
- UK address: **Smile Train UK, York House, Wetherby Road, York, YO26 7NH**
- Average cost per surgery: **£300**

## HOW TO HELP A CHILD WITH A CLEFT

Learn more about how you can help a child with a cleft by visiting the [Get Involved](#) section of our website.

## IMPACT SNAPSHOT:

**Broader impact:** improved nutrition, speech, self-esteem, education, and social inclusion.

**Every 5 minutes**, a child receives life-changing cleft surgery from a Smile Train partner.



## KEY SPOKESPEOPLE



**Susannah Schaefer**, President & Chief Executive Officer  
Susannah “Susie” Schaefer serves as President and Chief Executive Officer of Smile Train, leading the organisation’s vision to expand access to healthcare and build local cleft care capacity worldwide. She has spearheaded Smile Train’s rebrand, expanded global surgical training and education initiatives, and grown non-surgical comprehensive services such as nutritional support, speech therapy, and psychosocial counselling around the world. Susie joined Smile Train in 2013, having spent almost 20 years in the private sector.



**Dr Felicity Mehendale**, Medical Advisory Board Member  
Dr Felicity Mehendale is a member of Smile Train’s Medical Advisory Board and Chair of the charity’s Research and Innovation Advisory Council, which provides clinical and research expertise to ensure high standards across their cleft surgery and comprehensive care programmes globally. An award-winning plastic, reconstructive, and cleft surgeon, Felicity trained in India before moving to the UK to train in plastic surgery and subsequently taking up cleft surgery clinical and research fellowships at Great Ormond Street Hospital, North Thames Cleft Centre, and the Institute of Child Health. She leads the Global Cleft Lip and Palate Research Programme at the University of Edinburgh’s Usher Institute.



*Interviews can be arranged by contacting:*  
[pressofficeuk@smiletrain.org](mailto:pressofficeuk@smiletrain.org)

# CASE STUDIES

## EDEN, MADAGASCAR

Eden was born with a cleft during the pandemic. His parents, Tafitasoa and Heriniaina, were initially told they would have to wait indefinitely for visiting foreign doctors to return. But thanks to Smile Train's locally trained partners at Santé Plus Hospital, Eden received the nutrition support and free surgery he needed close to home when he was a year old.

"As soon as I saw him, I told myself that he is my child, and I will do my best to take care of him and his condition," said Eden's father, Heriniaina. Now four, Eden is a thriving little boy — eating well, growing strong, and bringing joy to his family.



## TOM WHITELEY, UK

When Tom's son Louie was born with a cleft in 2022, he was treated on the NHS and has since had both his lip and palate healed. Grateful for the care his family received, Tom decided to support Smile Train so that children in countries without access to cleft treatment could get the same chance.

In summer 2025, Tom set himself the challenge of walking 1,000 miles — including Peru's Inca Trail and Colca Canyon — to raise funds and awareness for Smile Train. His "Miles for Smiles" campaign aimed to raise £1,000, enough to fund three cleft surgeries.

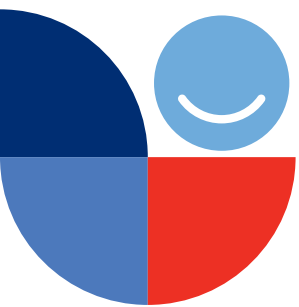
"I couldn't imagine being in that position and Louie not having the support and care he needed," said Tom. "Hopefully, I'm in a position to help make a difference through this campaign, and so it's something I'm determined to make the most of."

## STACEY HUSSELL, UK

Stacey Hussell was born with a cleft and underwent 13 surgeries growing up. For years, she rarely spoke about her experiences, but the birth of her son Dylan — who was also cleft-affected — inspired her to start sharing her story and to support other families.

Now a photographer and member of Smile Train UK's Cleft Community Advisory Council, Stacey runs Changing Smiles, a project celebrating cleft-affected babies, individuals, and families. She also offers Smile Journey portraits in hospitals, giving parents treasured images of their children.

"Don't be afraid to talk about it. Share your story and connect with others it makes all the difference," said Stacey.



More stories available at [smiletrain.org.uk/stories](https://smiletrain.org.uk/stories)





## Q&A / MYTHBUSTERS

### Is cleft surgery cosmetic?

No. Untreated clefts can lead to serious health issues, including malnutrition, speech difficulties, hearing problems, and social exclusion.

### Are clefts rare in the UK?

About 1 in 700 babies are born with a cleft worldwide. In the UK, we estimate that almost 1,000 babies are born with a cleft each year.

### How are clefts treated in the UK?

Clefts are almost always treated soon after birth in the UK, as the NHS provides surgery and aftercare, but globally, access varies. Smile Train works to ensure every child in need can receive safe, timely, and free cleft care.

### How much does surgery cost?

On average, £300 globally.

### Are clefts caused by something parents do wrong when they have a child?

This myth suggests that parents somehow are guilty for their children's cleft. For example, some people think that clefts result from the mother being promiscuous during her pregnancy or using a knife during a full lunar eclipse – both of which are completely false. Believing that parents cause clefts is not only hurtful and wrong, but can be dangerous, too, because it potentially discourages mothers from seeking much-needed help for their children for fear of being judged by their community.

While no one really knows exactly why clefts occur, most experts agree that they could be a result of many things. There could be a genetic component as well as environmental factors, infections, lack of Vitamin B, and more.

A cleft can happen to anyone. Nobody is to blame.

### Aren't clefts unfixable?

We don't "fix" clefts because people with clefts aren't broken. What we do is support real care, such as nutrition, surgery, speech therapy, and psychological support, so children with clefts can live healthy, confident lives. It's not about fixing – it's about treating and empowering.

### Won't children with clefts always have a speech impediment?

With the right speech therapy, which Smile Train helps make possible, children with clefts can develop strong, clear voices – and this is just one reason why our work goes way beyond just surgery.

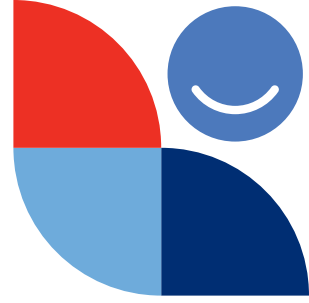
### Are clefts contagious?

Clefts are not contagious. Children with clefts shouldn't be isolated from others or deprived of playing with other kids because of this false belief.

### Are clefts only found in humans?

Some animals, like dogs and cats, can also be born with a cleft lip and/or palate. But just like with humans, most clefts in animals can be treated.





## KEY DATES & AWARENESS HOOKS

These annual awareness days provide natural opportunities to highlight Smile Train's work and wider issues around health, nutrition, and equality.

- 8 March **International Women's Day**
- 20 March **World Oral Health Day**
- March **Mother's Day (UK) (last Sunday of Lent)**
- 7 April **World Health Day**
- 3-11 May **Cleft Lip and Palate Awareness Week**
- 12 May **International Nurses Day**
- 12-19 May **Face Equality Week**
- 28 May **World Nutrition Day**
- July **National Cleft and Craniofacial Awareness and Prevention Month**
- 20 July **World Cleft Awareness Day**
- 17 September **World Patient Safety Day**
- October **World Smile Day (first Friday in October)**
- 16 October **World Anaesthesia Day**

## PRESS RELEASES

Smile Train UK's latest news and announcements are available here:  
[smiletrain.org.uk/news](https://smiletrain.org.uk/news)

### RECENT HIGHLIGHTS:

[Smile Train Launches World Cleft Awareness Day to Unite Global Cleft Community](#) Smile Train announces the first officially recognised global day on the calendar dedicated to raising awareness about cleft lips and palates

For earlier press releases, visit the [News archive](#).

