

A photograph of a woman from behind, carrying a baby on her back. The woman has dark hair in a bun and wears a dark, patterned shawl. The baby is wearing a patterned headscarf and a yellow and orange patterned shirt. They are in a tented area with blue and yellow tarps in the background.

# Early Childhood Development in Conflict and Protracted Crisis

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This past March, the total number of Syrian babies born in Turkey exceeded 150,000.<sup>1</sup> An estimated 3.7 million Syrian children — 1 out of 3 — have been born since the conflict began.<sup>2</sup> These children have grown up knowing nothing but conflict and violence; many have lived their whole lives as refugees. In conflict settings like Syria, the basic essentials for children's healthy physical, mental and emotional growth are often lacking. In addition to physical danger, children living through violent conflict risk psychological trauma, post traumatic stress and inadequate cognitive and socio-emotional development, which can hinder their health, educational attainment and success for years to come.

With the average length of displacement for refugees at 17 years, children cannot wait for an end to violence or displacement for learning and development to begin. Early childhood development (ECD) can be a life-saving intervention for the youngest children living in conflict and protracted crises and helps ensure that these children do not miss out on the opportunity to reach their full developmental potential.





# Impact of Conflict on the Youngest Children

Children living through conflict and protracted crisis have increasingly become the targets of violence, but they also are “disproportionately represented among the victims of its indirect effects.”<sup>3, 4</sup> The youngest children are particularly vulnerable in these contexts and risk not only physical harm, but also psychological trauma and insufficient social, emotional, and cognitive development.

**Physical Harm:** Young children in conflict situations face both direct physical harm — death, mutilation, assault, abuse, trafficking, abduction — as well as indirect physical harm, which can include displacement, malnutrition, disease, lack of access to safe housing and quality health services, and loss of family support systems. In some conflicts, children are actively abducted and indoctrinated by armed groups. In Syria, all sides of the conflict have recruited child soldiers, some as young as 7, and the practice is becoming increasingly prevalent.<sup>5</sup> This lack of physical security and risk of insufficient health care and nutrition can lead to poor development outcomes, such as stunting, which can negatively impact children for their entire lives.

**Psychological Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress:** Children also experience psychological trauma as a result of conflict and crisis situations, from witnessing violence, experiencing the death of family members or family separation, losing home and security, and experiencing displacement and discrimination. The rape endemic in some crisis situations not only traumatises the direct victims, but can also lead to psychological trauma for the children born out of sexual assault.

**Socio-emotional and Cognitive Development:** Living through crisis situations can also harm children’s socio-emotional and cognitive development, with long-term consequences for their learning, physical and mental health and behaviour. Loss of or separation from family members and displacement can lead to issues such as anxiety and stress, lower self esteem, and feelings of insecurity. The absence of safe places to play and learn, together with the effects of toxic stress, can also hamper healthy cognitive development. Missing out on critical early learning and play delays the acquisition of basic skills and can hinder children’s eventual access to and success in school. Finally constant exposure to conflict can normalise violence for children and ingrain in them the prejudices and social divisions driving the conflict.

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**Parental Trauma:** Conflict is stressful and traumatic for adults as well as children, and traumatised caregivers can struggle to provide the psychological support young children need. Due to their own severe stress, parents may unwittingly “exacerbate the problems faced by their children by passing on their own fears and anxieties through, for example, being over-protective or holding anxious discussions with others from which the children are excluded.”<sup>6</sup> Trauma can also lead to increased incidences of parental depression, authoritarian parenting or domestic violence.<sup>7</sup>



# Early Childhood Development Programs Protect Children

The case for universal access to early childhood development (ECD) is clear and convincing; quality ECD services and programmes support healthy physical, mental and emotional development and help to ensure that all children have an equal chance to reach their full potential. Children with access to ECD are more prepared for formal school, have better primary school outcomes and are less likely to repeat a grade or drop out.<sup>8</sup> Critically, ECD programmes are particularly effective for disadvantaged and marginalised children, working to close the achievement gap early and level the playing field.<sup>9</sup> In conflict and crisis situations, the benefits of access to quality ECD services extend even further; ECD can be a life-saving intervention both in the short and the long term for children living through violent conflict and can help foster peace and reconciliation after a conflict ends.

**Physical protection:** ECD centres in conflict-affected areas or refugee camps first and foremost provide safe places where families can leave young children during the day. Here children's physical needs can be met through the provision of routine health care and immunisation, supplementary nutrition, quality nurturing care and a safe environment to play and learn. Though the safety of these centres cannot be completely guaranteed in an active crisis, they do help prevent children from being left unsupervised or in unsafe surroundings during the day and reduce the risk of children being trafficked, recruited into fighting or child labour or otherwise harmed or exploited.

**Psychological and Emotional Support:** In addition to physical security, ECD centres offer psychological and emotional support and provide a safe space for children to examine and come to terms with their experiences and work through their trauma. While children's responses to trauma differ widely between individuals, studies have found that "what seems to be important in many cases in relation to a child's response [to such trauma] is not so much the event itself but their interpretation of it,"<sup>10</sup> meaning that the provision of quality ECD can have a significant effect on how children cope with traumatic experiences. This component of ECD centres becomes particularly important when traumatised parents are unable to provide adequate psychological support for their children or when children are unaccompanied.

**Cognitive Development and Early Learning:** ECD centres provide critical cognitive stimulation, play and early learning experiences for young children, helping them build essential cognitive and social skills and preparing them for primary school. Children living through conflict are much more likely to be excluded from school or fall behind academically; refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than non-refugee children.<sup>11</sup> ECD centres can help keep young children on track to begin school while also diminishing their time spent idle or unsupervised.<sup>12</sup> For refugee children living in host countries, language barriers can also seriously hinder academic progress; Syrian refugees in Lebanon, for example, struggle to succeed in local classes taught in French or English rather than Arabic.<sup>13</sup> ECD centres can therefore prepare refugee children for primary school in a new country by teaching them language and other skills required for success.

**Peace building and Reconciliation:** Beyond safeguarding the wellbeing of children directly, ECD centres can also promote peace building and reconciliation between groups in a conflict or integration between refugees and a host community. An emphasis on acceptance and inclusion amongst the children and throughout the ECD programmes can help diminish prejudice and marginalisation between groups, contributing to a more cohesive and inclusive society over time.<sup>14, 15</sup> ECD centres can also furnish a space for parents and other caregivers from dissonant groups to come together and interact positively; "there is something about early childhood that can transcend existing political divides and encourage those involved in conflict to re-focus their attention and priorities and to think instead of their own children and their future."<sup>16</sup>

Children cannot afford to put their learning and development on hold while conflict rages around them; the earliest years of growth and learning are too important to miss. ECD programmes are a life-saving intervention that help protect young children's opportunity to reach their full developmental potential, even in conflict and protracted crises. More humanitarian aid funding and attention needs to be directed towards early childhood development initiatives that support both young children as well as their caregivers living through violent conflict.

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# References

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