

Safe Spaces: Protecting Brain Development in Emergencies

The first years of life are the most critical time for the brain: 90% of brain development takes place before age 5. During this period, scientific evidence shows that serious or prolonged exposure to high levels of stress from trauma, violence, neglect, or deprivation — called “toxic stress” — can harm the healthy development of the brain, with potential lifelong repercussions. In emergency contexts, such as conflict or natural disaster, babies and young children are especially vulnerable.

In 2015 alone, an estimated 16 million babies were born into conflict settings¹ and half of the world’s refugees today are children.² After five years of war, 3.7 million Syrian children — one in three — have only ever known life in a violent conflict.³ The significant impact these traumatic experiences can have on a child’s long term health and development means that babies and toddlers absolutely cannot afford to wait for the end of a crisis to learn, play, and receive nurturing care.

On a large scale, early childhood development (ECD) remains seriously under-prioritised in emergency response. While nutrition and health sector interventions almost always include targets for the youngest children, humanitarian response plans neglect to provide for the nurturing care, safe environments to play and learn, and caregiver support that help ensure children living through crisis not only survive, but have the best start in life. It is critical that emergency response plans target the holistic needs of children ages 0 to 5, particularly the most vulnerable, including orphans, those with disabilities, and those from marginalised groups.

Theirworld’s #5for5 campaign is calling on world leaders to commit to a dramatic increase in funding and action to support early childhood programmes to ensure all children are given the best start in life, no matter who they are or where they are born. This means that every humanitarian response must include targets explicitly addressing children ages 0-5 across all relevant sectors, in particular childcare, psychological support, early learning programmes, and support for parents and caregivers.⁴ During an emergency, early childhood programmes — Safe Spaces — give children a safe place to play and learn and offer support to caregivers on how best to combat the effects of stress on their children.

What is Toxic Stress?

The brain undergoes its most rapid period of development in early childhood. Toxic stress — serious or prolonged exposure to high levels of stress from trauma, abuse, or neglect — impedes this development, leading to fewer neural connections in the areas of the brain devoted to learning and reasoning and increasing the risk for developmental delays and learning disabilities.⁵ Without the proper response to counter these effects, children who experience toxic stress are at serious risk for inadequate brain development and difficulties learning, concentrating, and regulating emotions.⁶⁷ Toxic stress also has long term negative impacts, increasing the risk for illness such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, depression, and substance abuse, and affecting social behaviour and interpersonal relationships.

Coupled with toxic stress, the absence of safe places to play and learn can also hamper healthy mental and linguistic development for the youngest children. In the first years, a child develops 700 new neural connections per second.⁸ As the child grows, the neural connections that are repeatedly used become stronger and more efficient, while those left unused are weakened or pruned. As “experiences and environment dictate which circuits and connections get more use,”⁹ missing out on essential communication, early learning, and play due to an emergency can significantly impact children’s brain architecture, impair the acquisition of basic skills, and impede later success in school.

Emergency settings put children at particular risk for the barriers to healthy cognitive development, including a lack of safe places to play, caregivers who are too busy or stressed to provide adequate mental stimulation, the disintegration of traditional care networks, and the absence of quality pre-primary opportunities.

Safe Spaces

Children in emergencies need an environment with a nurturing adult caregiver and a place where they can play and learn safely. During a crisis, early childhood programmes — Safe Spaces — can offer much needed assistance to caregivers on how to best help their children cope with trauma while also providing children with a place to play, learn, and interact with other adults.

Combatting Toxic Stress through High Quality Care

Science shows that the best way to combat or prevent the ill effects of toxic stress on young children is a stable, supportive, and nurturing relationship with a parent or other committed adult such as a teacher. These types of relationships buffer the effects of stress, protect healthy brain development, and foster resilience in young children, helping them thrive in spite of their circumstances.¹⁰ These relationships also help “build key capacities — such as the ability to plan, monitor and regulate behaviour, and adapt to changing circumstances — that enable children to respond to adversity and to thrive” even in the wake of an emergency.¹¹

Early childhood development programmes help combat toxic stress in several ways. First, these initiatives can teach parents and caregivers how best to support their children’s physical, mental, and emotional development in emergency settings and how to help children cope with trauma and stress. This training can take place through classes and support groups, in

combination with other services such as healthcare or food distribution, or through home visiting programmes.

In many cases, however, primary caregivers are unable to provide children with all the support necessary to combat toxic stress during an emergency. In crisis environments, caregivers can be absent or deceased, injured, ill, traumatised, or otherwise unable to provide adequate support, leaving children without their primary buffer against toxic stress. It is therefore essential to also have Safe Spaces – comprehensive early childhood centres – that provide children with access to a stable nurturing relationship with another adult, so that no child (or parent) is left to combat stress alone.

Providing Cognitive Stimulation and Early Learning Support

After a natural disaster, in the midst of conflict, or in a refugee camp, the opportunities for play and learning are seriously lacking and caregivers are often left without the time, energy, or resources to provide mental stimulation. Humanitarian response plans rarely include early learning programmes for young children, particularly those ages 0 to 3, despite the fact that supporting children’s mental development is equally as important as supporting their physical well being. Many child-focused programmes only target ages 3+ or do not focus on learning until a child begins primary school. This can be far too late for many children, especially for those born into emergencies.

Cognitive stimulation, communication, and opportunities to play and learn are critical to a child’s brain development, laying the foundation for future skills, learning, and behaviour. In an emergency, early childhood programmes can provide these essential stimulation and early learning experiences, diminish time spent idle or unsupervised, and offer children a comforting return to routine and normalcy. In addition to pre-primary classes for older children (ages 4 to 6), early learning interventions should include support for caregivers, quality childcare, and a safe place for children to play and learn through games, art, music, and other activities.

As well as supporting healthy development, early learning programmes increase young children’s readiness for primary school, improve learning outcomes, and decrease the likelihood that a child will repeat a grade or drop out. Increasing school readiness is especially important in emergency settings, as children living through conflict are much more likely to be excluded from school or fall behind academically. For example, refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than non-refugee children.¹² Early learning support can be particularly useful for young refugees living in a foreign host country where classes are taught in a different language.¹³ With the average length of displacement now at 17 years,¹⁴ teaching the youngest children the language and skills they will need for success in the host country’s education system allows them to start school ready to learn rather than already behind.

These early learning interventions during an emergency are an important long-term investment in human and social capital, providing children with better chances for future success and prosperity, helping to break the cycle of poverty, and shaping a future generation that will be key to rebuilding post-disaster.¹⁵

Endnotes

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