Emergencies and the psychosocial care and protection of affected children
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Emergencies and psychosocial care
and protection of affected children

Emergency is defined as an acute, difficult and often life-threatening situation involving a large number of people, such as armed conflicts, displacement, natural disasters, epidemics, droughts and famines, a crisis situation that overwhelms the capacity of a society to cope using only its own resources.

Psychosocial refers to the dynamic relationship that exists between psychological and social effects.

Psychological effects are defined as the effects affecting the individual on different levels, including cognitive (perception and memory as a basis for thoughts and learning), affective (emotions) and behavioural effects.

Social effects are defined as the effects related to altered relationships, family and community networks and economic status.

Exposure to acute emergency situations, for instance in connection with natural disasters, can have a devastating impact on the psychological and social well-being of children, adolescents and adults. It is becoming widely accepted fact that early psychosocial interventions as an integral part of humanitarian assistance in emergencies help to alleviate psychological distress and strengthen resiliency.


The UN CRC is the most effective international instrument for safeguarding the rights of children and young people in emergencies. The four main principles of the Convention – the right to life and development, the right to non-discrimination, the best interest of the child and the right to participation – are all relevant to the issue of the psychosocial well-being of children. Article 39 in the CRC refers to the aspect of rehabilitation care and appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim. The article does not specifically mention child victims of natural disasters but must still be seen as applicable and relevant in this context. The article stresses, for instance, that “… recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child”.

Other articles are also relevant to the well-being of children in emergency situations. Nutritious food (Article 6), good health (Article 24), a secure, stable and safe environment (Article 27 and 32), caring parents and adults (Article 18), access to play (Article 31), education (Article 28-29), all of them fundamental to a child’s well-being, are rights that cannot be guaranteed in an emergency situation. In their absence, children face the risk of slowed down or disturbed development.
**Some important considerations in responding to children in emergencies**

Children who have experienced natural disasters or conflicts are bound to be psychologically affected in some way, although their reactions to these situations and their ways of coping will differ. Psychological distress might manifest itself in flashbacks of stress events, nightmares, headaches, withdrawal, aggression, an inability to concentrate. It is important that these manifestations be understood by those around them, and not dismissed as “naughtiness” or a lack of cooperation – or simply overlooked if they do not cause practical problems.

Most children and adolescents will regain well-being once basic survival needs are met, safety and security have returned and developmental opportunities are restored within the social, family and community context. But it is extremely important to achieve this normalisation of daily life as soon as possible in order to avoid prolonging psychological distress unnecessarily. Some children, in addition to normalization, will need special attention from adults in order to regain their well-being.

Aminah, 15 years old, from Banda Aceh, Indonesia was affected by the tsunami in December 2004. Three weeks on she is hoping hers school will open soon again. ‘My school is badly damaged. I now spend my days washing the clothes that my parents have salvaged from our home. I worry that my knowledge is decreasing.’

Children need a stable emotional relationship with a parent or other caregiver, and are likely to be especially dependent on adults to fulfil their right to psychosocial well-being in emergencies. Research tells us that young children can cope relatively well with the stress of a disaster or emergency and the subsequent social changes if their parents (or other close adults) can sustain a strong attachment to their children and project stability, permanence and competence. There may be a need for extra supports for adults to play this role adequately, when they themselves are under stress.

In a refugee camp in Mocambique, groups for women and their children were set up and the children were given opportunities to play in order to support healing after trauma. The mothers were encouraged to see how this would support the children to step back from the immediate sorrow for a while and regain strength. One woman said after this had been explained to her: ‘If we had known this was important, we would have done it before.’

Profound social changes resulting from the emergency situation can lead to more damaging consequences for the child’s well-being and long-term life path than the traumatic event itself. The loss of a parent, for instance or the destruction of social networks can leave children unsupported at a critical time.
Special consideration must be given to children without their parents or close family members since they are the most vulnerable in situations of emergency. They must be protected from further harm, including abuse and various forms of exploitation. Children who have lost their family must be identified as quickly as possible and their details recorded for tracing family members and relatives so that a stable emotional relationship can be maintained.

Access to schooling can play a protective role in an emergency, as well as helping to restore a sense of normalcy. Education plays a fundamental role in providing structure, contributes to stability, and is essential for children’s optimal development. It is critical that schools be re-established as soon as possible. Teachers can play an important role in supporting children to discuss their situation.

A stable, secure physical environment is strongly related to the psychological well-being of children, and deserves attention. The most pervasive violation of children’s rights is related to their living conditions. Creating supportive, healthy, safe areas for living, recreation and play is important a part of the humanitarian response if psychosocial well-being is to be restored.

Children and young people must not be seen as passive recipients of assistance. Children have the right to participate in everything that concerns them, including in the process of restoration and rehabilitation after an emergency situation. Even young children are active and helpful and very early want to be part of the activities to restore the daily life and help others. This has a positive effect on their psychological well-being and strengthens their coping mechanisms as well as it helps them to regain control over their lives, develop organisational skills and strengthen the identity. Recreational activities, especially, can be planned effectively with the active participation of children and young people.

All ethnic groups and cultures have own ways of coping in difficult situations. International organizations must be sensitive to other cultures ceremonies and rites around growing up and becoming adult, about death, burial, mourning as well as ceremonies to give spiritual and psychological cleansing. Trauma counselling, commonly used in western countries, should never be the point of departure for psychosocial programming. Structured, normalization, empowering activities within a safe environment will help the majority of the children recover over time.

What is most important for children?

• To be reconnected with family members, friends and neighbours, people well known to the child.
• To have the routines and structures of daily life restored as soon as possible, with adequate attention to local culture and traditions.
• To have access to education, creative and recreational activities, and supportive adults ready to listen and discuss.
• To be involved as active participants in the process of restoration and rehabilitation after an emergency situation.
In order to safeguard children’s rights to psychosocial well-being in emergencies, action on various levels is needed

- A community-based approach that encourages self-help and builds on local culture, realities and perceptions of child development;
- The promotion of normal family structures and everyday life to reinforce children’s natural resilience;
- A focus on immediate care and the prevention of further harm when working with recovery of children’s psychological wounds;
- The provision of support as well as training for staff that directly care for children.
- Raising awareness of the value of children’s participation and non-discrimination in designing appropriate responses.
- Developing an understanding that children have a right to be protected from intrusion into their private lives. This must be protected in emergency situations where there is often a tension between the needs for interviews of children by field staff and journalists/photographers and the child’s right to privacy.
- Advocating for children’s rights though awareness training, in particular with staff from governmental organisations. In addition, CRC training can include children and young people, local staff, teachers, parents, and partner organisations. It is also important to create networks among child right’s organisations.

References

