SAFE EDUCATION PLAYS A KEY ROLE IN THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

During emergencies, chronic crises, and early national reconstruction efforts, access to education plays a vital role in safeguarding children and in the promotion of their welfare.

Emergencies and crises can extract a severe emotional, physical, and psychological toll on children. By offering structure and stability and by disseminating key messages of assurance and support, schools can offer children a refuge from violence, abuse, and exploitation.

For this reason, strategies focused on building educational infrastructure in regions of crisis must ensure a level of safety and security for all children during their time at school. In this way, a safe and secure learning environment becomes not only a means for personal intellectual development, but, in many cases, a life-sustaining haven from the turmoil that otherwise surrounds children in need.

“WE WANT THE TEACHERS TO LOVE US AND TREAT US WELL. IF THERE IS NO LOVE WE CANNOT LEARN WELL.”

Girl aged 14–17, Zimbabwe: Tongogara Refugee Camp, April 2007

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GUIDING PRINCIPLES RESPONDING TO VIOLENCE IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

• A Rights–Based Approach:
  Action should be guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the best interests of the child, as well as by other legal instruments and international commitments on children’s rights.

• Continuity:
  Safe education should be made available at all stages of a UNHCR operation, starting at the emergency phase and continuing up to and during the implementation of durable solutions. Furthermore, this requirement should apply to both formal and informal educational activities. As children usually face higher protection risks when they reach adolescence, special attention should be given to higher–primary and secondary institutions as well as vocational–training centres.

• Community Participation:
  Actions to prevent and respond to violence in schools should be defined, monitored and evaluated with the cooperation of school administrators, education authorities, parent–teacher associations and students of both sexes. This is essential to devise educational–safety mechanisms that build on existing capacities and resources, and to instil ownership among all participants.

• A Holistic Approach:
  Mechanisms to deal with violence in schools should aim for systemic change, targeting cultural and social attitudes that condone or aggravate violence, rather than focus on individuals. This would also help avoid the targeting or stigmatising of the victims or perpetrators of violence. Interventions should be managed with transparency and accountability to the community, which itself is sometimes responsible for conflict and discrimination.

• Partnerships:
  In addition to partnerships with the community, alliances with ministries of education, UNICEF, UNESCO, and NGOs specialising in education and child protection should be encouraged to coordinate efforts to make learning environments secure. Roles and responsibilities will vary according to the operational context.

• Confidentiality:
  Response mechanisms dealing with abuse and exploitation should guarantee confidentiality and the physical safety of the victim/survivor.

THE UNHCR FRAMEWORK FOR ESTABLISHING SAFE SCHOOLS HAS FOUR ELEMENTS

1. Situational analysis: Understanding violence in educational settings and assessing the quality of support services
2. Preventive measures: Creating safe and supportive learning environments
3. Response mechanisms: Ensuring children have access to support services
4. Monitoring and evaluation: Ensuring safe education

The negative consequences of an unsafe and violent school environment include: low girls enrolment, dropout, perpetuation of the violence cycle and physical and mental trauma.