

Diana is an 8 year old refugee from Afrin in Syria now living in Iraq. Despite huge needs, mental health services for children affected by conflict are very limited, with just one psychologist per one million people in Iraq.  
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# HEALING AND RECOVERY THROUGH EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

## SUMMARY

- Children are especially vulnerable in conflict situations to “toxic stress”, with potential lifelong impacts to their ability to learn, grow and develop.
- Greater expertise, research and learning are needed to scale up and provide better quality mental health and psychosocial support through education that reaches the most vulnerable children.
- Education Cannot Wait investments have the potential to address the significant gap in MHPSS for the millions of children affected by conflict in these countries.
- The emerging partnership between Education Cannot Wait and the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Collaborative (MHPSS Collaborative) for Children and Families aims to ensure children affected by conflict can access opportunities for healing, recovery and learning in safe and nurturing educational environments.

## CRITICAL IMPACTS OF CONFLICT ON CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING

Humanitarian emergencies and protracted crises currently affect millions of children around the world with serious consequences for their ability to learn, grow and develop. 420 million children – nearly one-fifth of children worldwide – are living in a conflict zone.<sup>1</sup>

Children are especially vulnerable in conflict situations, including because a child's experiences during the earliest years of life have a lasting impact on their physical and mental development. For children in conflict, the combination of exposure to traumatic events, grave violations of their human rights and chronic adversity, insecurity and deprivation can lead to "toxic stress"<sup>2</sup> – a type of stress that is particularly damaging to a developing child's brain architecture.

Children under extreme stress may show a range of mental health and psychosocial problems, such as regression to earlier behaviours, self-harm and suicide, depression, anxiety, aggression and withdrawal. Many children impacted by conflict do not have access to the protective environment of schools and to quality education.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHO-SOCIAL SUPPORT IN AND THROUGH EDUCATION

Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for children in conflict is essential to overcome the impacts of toxic stress and give children the chance to develop to their full potential. Integrating MHPSS programming into the existing structures that support and protect children, such as educational systems, is essential to ensure children can access opportunities for healing, recovery and learning at scale. Education, delivered in safe, nurturing environments, is critically protective for children in conflict, and has the potential to support their mental health and psychosocial development.

Education Cannot Wait believes in a world where all children affected by crises can learn free of cost, in safety and without fear. Effective learning requires nurturing school environments to help children recover psychological wellbeing and a sense of safety, and teachers who understand children's experiences and can effectively support them. MHPSS approaches, including social emotional learning (SEL) play an important role in mitigating these adversities, increasing school attendance and completion and improving academic outcomes for children who have been exposed to humanitarian emergencies.<sup>3</sup>

For example, an IRC after-school programme incorporating teacher training in SEL (Learning in Healing Classrooms) was found to significantly improve school retention and learning outcomes for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. In terms of cost-benefit analysis, investments in SEL interventions also demonstrate strong returns: on average, every dollar invested results in a return of eleven dollars.<sup>4</sup> MHPSS through education also helps to ensure inclusion of the most vulnerable children – including those with disabilities – in educational opportunities.<sup>5</sup>

Integrating MHPSS into education provides teachers with critical skills to support children more effectively, as well as vital support to recover from their own experiences of conflict. With training and support, teachers can create safe and healing learning environments and can identify and refer children with higher level MHPSS needs to appropriate services.

## A CRITICAL NEED FOR INTEGRATING MHPSS AND BUILDING BACK BETTER SERVICE SYSTEMS FOR CHILDREN

Now, more than ever, the importance of mainstreaming MHPSS interventions into humanitarian responses is widely recognized.

However, the huge needs borne of protracted crises and mass displacement are not being matched with funding and support to ensure inclusion of MHPSS services in emergency responses. Mental health care treatment gaps are greater than 90% overall, and for child and family MHPSS, there is a lack of targeted, evidence-based programmes, workforce capacity and sustained funding.<sup>6</sup>

According to the World Health Organization's Mental Health Atlas, in most conflict areas, there are no reported available outpatient facilities specifically for children and adolescents, or child psychiatrists, and in the rare instances that these services are available, they are not enough to address the scale of the problem.<sup>7</sup>

## THE OPPORTUNITY TO SCALE UP MHPSS FOR CHILDREN IN CRISIS: ECW AND THE MHPSS COLLABORATIVE

The MHPSS Collaborative for Children and Families, hosted by Save the Children, serves as a global platform for research, practice, learning and advocacy, that aims to build meaningful partnerships to address the critical MHPSS needs of children and families in fragile contexts. Education Cannot Wait has partnered with the Collaborative in order to support implementing partners to mainstream evidence-based, contextualized MHPSS into education in emergency programmes – addressing urgent care needs and providing safe and healing learning environments for the millions of children affected by conflict.

Education Cannot Wait's funding supports speedy emergency responses when a crisis erupts or escalates, while also linking humanitarian and development aid efforts to ensure quality learning outcomes for children in protracted crisis contexts. Multi-Year Resilience Programmes ensure access, continuity, protection, equity and gender equality in education for children – especially for the most vulnerable groups with special attention to girls, children with disabilities and minorities.

By 2021, Education Cannot Wait will support Multi-Year Resilience Programmes in at least 25 countries affected by protracted crises where vulnerabilities and education needs are significantly high and underfunded. As we ramp up these programmes in the coming months and years, we are calling on strategic donor partners, the private sector, foundations and international leaders to help us to scale up our funding and assistance to these countries, with additional dedicated resources for life-saving and sustaining MHPSS.

## MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF WAR AND DISPLACEMENT ON CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH IN IRAQ



Children at one of Save the Children's temporary learning spaces in Qayyara Airstrip IDP Camp, Iraq  
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As a result of the conflict in Iraq millions of children are trying to cope with the loss of their caregivers and homes, ongoing threats of unexploded ordinance and terror attacks. Research conducted by Save the Children in 2016 found high levels of psychosocial distress among girls and boys, with 41% reporting trouble sleeping, 45% experiencing nightmares, and 31% reporting feelings of fear or anxiety on a weekly basis.

MHPSS services are very limited, with just one psychologist per one million people.<sup>8</sup> Teachers who are working to bring these children back to school are not sufficiently trained to provide the emotional support that children need to feel safe and protected, and to learn.

Save the Children's Child-Friendly Space in Garmawa camp for displaced persons in Iraq is a safe place in which children are supported to express how they feel and act in support of their interests and concerns. The programme has been designed to help children adapt to their new environment in the camp, cope with change, and make friends.

Abdul Azim, whose grandchildren attend the child-friendly space said, "We obtained electricity, water, toilets, and most importantly a school and a child-friendly space, which was the only safe place for the children to play and be children again. It had a huge influence on them. [...] They would go every day and come back different kids. You could see the joy on their faces. It closed on the weekends and so they hated the weekends and just wanted the time to pass so they could go again. It was their only escape from the ugly reality. I can say that after attending the school and the child-friendly space, their condition was restored to as much as 70 percent of what it was before [the crisis]."

## DEVELOPING AND DELIVERING A MINIMUM PACKAGE OF MHPSS SERVICES FOR EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Education Cannot Wait, together with the MHPSS Collaborative and its partners, are calling on governments, donors, private sector companies, philanthropic foundations and global leaders to support our efforts to increase the provision and quality of MHPSS via education in emergencies with \$50 million in dedicated financing to be channeled through Education Cannot Wait. €5.0 million has been committed by the government of the Netherlands to the development and demonstration of the WHO-UNICEF Minimum Service Packages (MSP) on MHPSS within Health and Protection sectors. Immediate additional funding <sup>9</sup> will ensure the development and demonstration of the MSP on MHPSS within Education, together with UNICEF, and support implementation of the package in five Education Cannot Wait Multi-Year Resilience Programme countries between now and 2021.

The MSP on MHPSS within Education will build capacity across the education sector to deliver lifesaving MHPSS and effectively link educational systems with health, protection and social services, ensuring a critical safety net for children and their caregivers. Delivered through the new partnership with the MHPSS Collaborative, and in coordination with the Global Education Cluster and other coordination mechanisms, this investment will help to provide lifesaving MHPSS for an estimated 9 million children by 2021.

## IMPROVING CHILDREN'S WELLBEING AND LEARNING

All children have the right to learn in safety, and without fear in order to grow and reach their full potential, and the education system has a critical role to play in providing nurturing and healing learning environments for children in crisis.

Education Cannot Wait investments have the potential to provide quality MHPSS to promote the learning and wellbeing of an estimated 9 million children in some of the world's worst humanitarian crises. This is why we are calling for \$50 million in dedicated financing for MHPSS to be channeled through Education Cannot Wait. For the millions of children around the world exposed to conflict, violence, insecurity and toxic stress, this support is needed now to support their learning, and secure better futures for themselves, their caregivers and communities.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Stop the War on Children, Save the Children, 2019 <<https://www.stopwaronchildren.org/report.pdf>>
- <sup>2</sup> Invisible wounds: The Impact of Six Years of War on the Mental Health of Syria's Children, Save the Children, 2017 <<https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/emergency-humanitarian-response/invisible-wounds.pdf>>
- <sup>3</sup> The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Guidance Note on Psychosocial Support.
- <sup>4</sup> The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning, Columbia University, 2015 <<http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/SEL-Revised.pdf>>
- <sup>5</sup> IRC Healing Classrooms Retention Support Programming Improved Syrian Refugee Children's Learning in Lebanon, NYU Global Ties For Children, 2017 <[https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/smsAdmin/media/users/mhm327/3ea\\_docs/3EA\\_-\\_Impact\\_report.pdf](https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/smsAdmin/media/users/mhm327/3ea_docs/3EA_-_Impact_report.pdf)>
- <sup>6</sup> Reducing the Treatment Gap for Mental Disorders: A WPA Survey, Vikram Patel, Mario Maj, Alan J. Flisher, Mary J. De Silva, Mirja Koschorke, Martin Prince, and WPA Zonal and Member Society Representatives
- <sup>7</sup> WHO, Mental Health Atlas Country Profiles, 2017
- <sup>8</sup> WHO, Mental Health Atlas Country Profile, 2014
- <sup>9</sup> Supplementary to funding provided by DFID

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