

Growing Amidst War: Children & Youth Mental Health in Armed Conflicts

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Educational Objectives

1. Examine the unique dimensions of children's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing in conflict settings through a holistic, socio-ecological perspective.
2. Highlight the role of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in humanitarian emergencies and emphasize the need for comprehensive, multi-level, and multisectoral approaches when addressing the needs of children exposed to protracted violence and crisis.
3. Stress the importance of contextualization and cultural adaptation, drawing on insights from liberation psychology, ethics, advocacy, and international humanitarian law.



Children & Armed Conflicts

- Disproportionate impact of war on children.
- Often the primary victims of armed conflict.



“Every war is a war
against children.”

- Eglantyne Jebb



Children & Armed Conflicts

- **UNICEF: 2024 'is one of the worst years in UNICEF's history' for children in conflict**
 - Over **473 million children**—more than **1 in 6** globally—now live in areas affected by conflict - highest number of conflicts since World War II
- **Children:**
 - **30% of global population**
 - **40% of refugee population**
 - **49% of IDP (internally displaced people)**
- More than **52 million children** in countries affected by conflict are **estimated to be out of school.**





The effects of war on children

- Children in armed conflicts are frequently deprived of:
 - Most basic needs
 - Psychologically supportive environments
 - Opportunity for schooling: educational & vocational opportunities
 - Resources that promote positive psychosocial development and mental health
 - Physical health (trauma, war injury...)
- Infliction of war and military aggression upon children :
 - Violation of their basic human rights: right to life, health, non-discrimination and equity...
 - With long-term consequences for their developmental potential

**Marked
contrast with
need & right
to develop in
safe, secure &
predictable
environments**

The effects of war on children

- Broad range of stress reactions and symptoms:
 - Specific fears
 - Dependent behaviors and regression
 - Prolonged crying
 - Lack of interest in the environment
 - Psychosomatic symptoms
 - Aggressive behaviors
 - Play affected: emergence of morbid themes, restriction in symbolic play, social withdrawal
 - Sleep, eating and toilet training problems
 - Concentration problem, forgetfulness





The effects of war on children

- **Most common disorders:**
 - **NORMAL REACTIONS**

- Others:
 - Acute stress reactions
 - Panic disorders
 - Anxiety disorders specific to childhood
 - Sleep disorders
 - PTSD & depression
 - Externalizing symptoms, including behavioral problems, conduct and oppositional disorders.

- Prevalence Surveys in Humanitarian Settings *
 - Unable to **distinguish between normal stress reactions and persistent clinical mental disorders**



Stories From Gaza

- War Child published a devastating account following a need assessment survey conducted with children in June 2024
 - 96% of children feel death is imminent,
 - 92% of children are not accepting of reality,
 - 87% display severe fear,
 - 79% suffer from nightmares,
 - 77% of children avoid talking about traumatic events,
 - 73% of children exhibit symptoms of aggression,
 - 49% of children wish to die because of the war,
 - and many more show signs of withdrawal and severe anxiety, alongside a pervasive sense of hopelessness.



War Child. *War Child Shares First Study of Psychological Impact of War on Vulnerable Children of Gaza*, [War Child shares first study of psychological impact of war on vulnerable children in Gaza - News - War Child](#), published June 2024, consulted May 9th 2025.

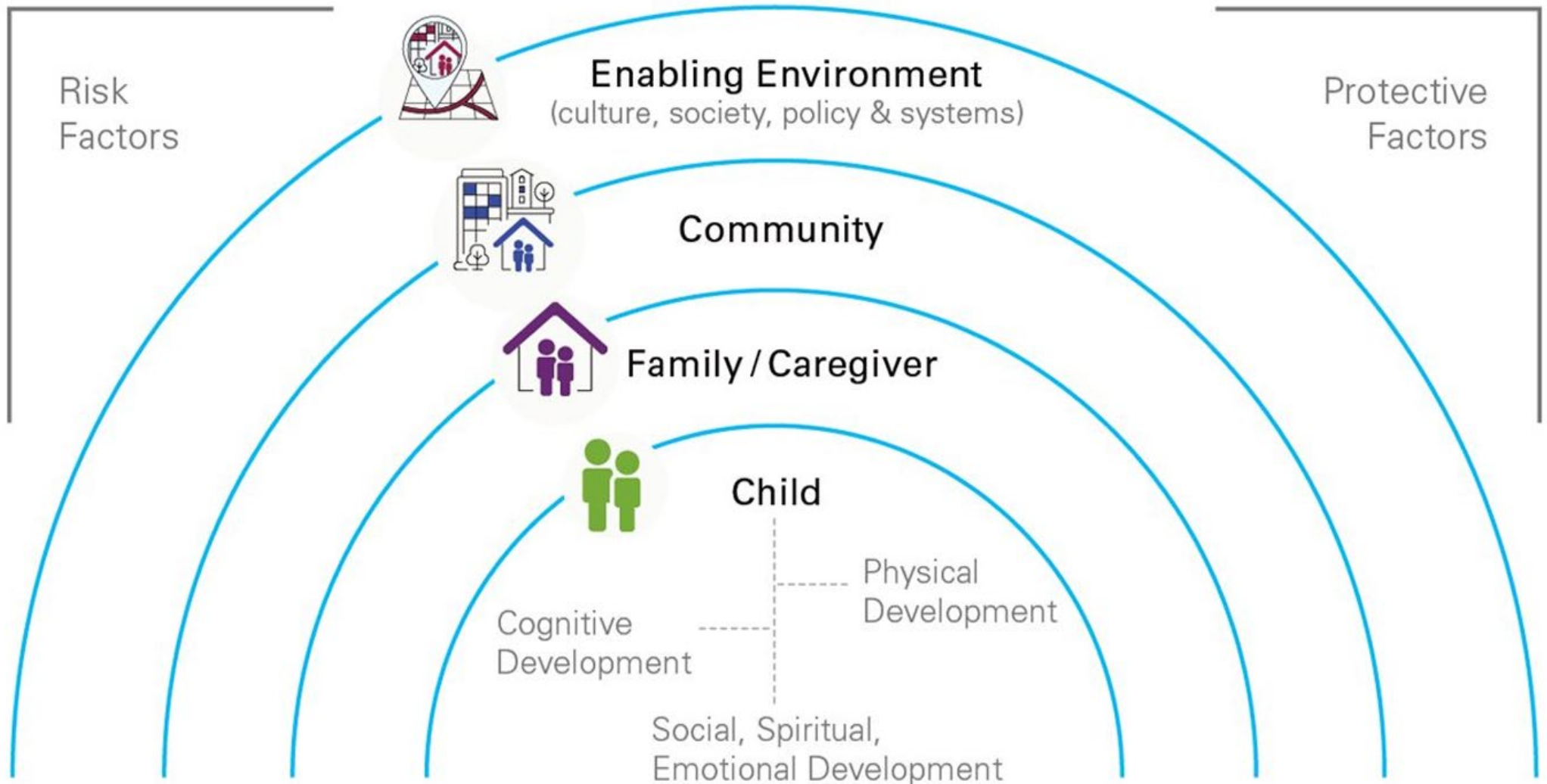


Most protective factor

- **RESILIENCE REQUIRES RELATIONSHIPS**
- The capacity to adapt and thrive despite adversity develops through the interaction of supportive relationships.
- **The reliable presence of at least one supportive relationship and multiple opportunities for developing effective coping skills** that are the essential building blocks for **strengthening the capacity to do well in the face of significant adversity.**
- **Family and community acceptance:** buffer the negative effects of war, reduce mental disorders and promote psychosocial functioning.
- * **Mother and 2-year-old baby in South Sudan.**



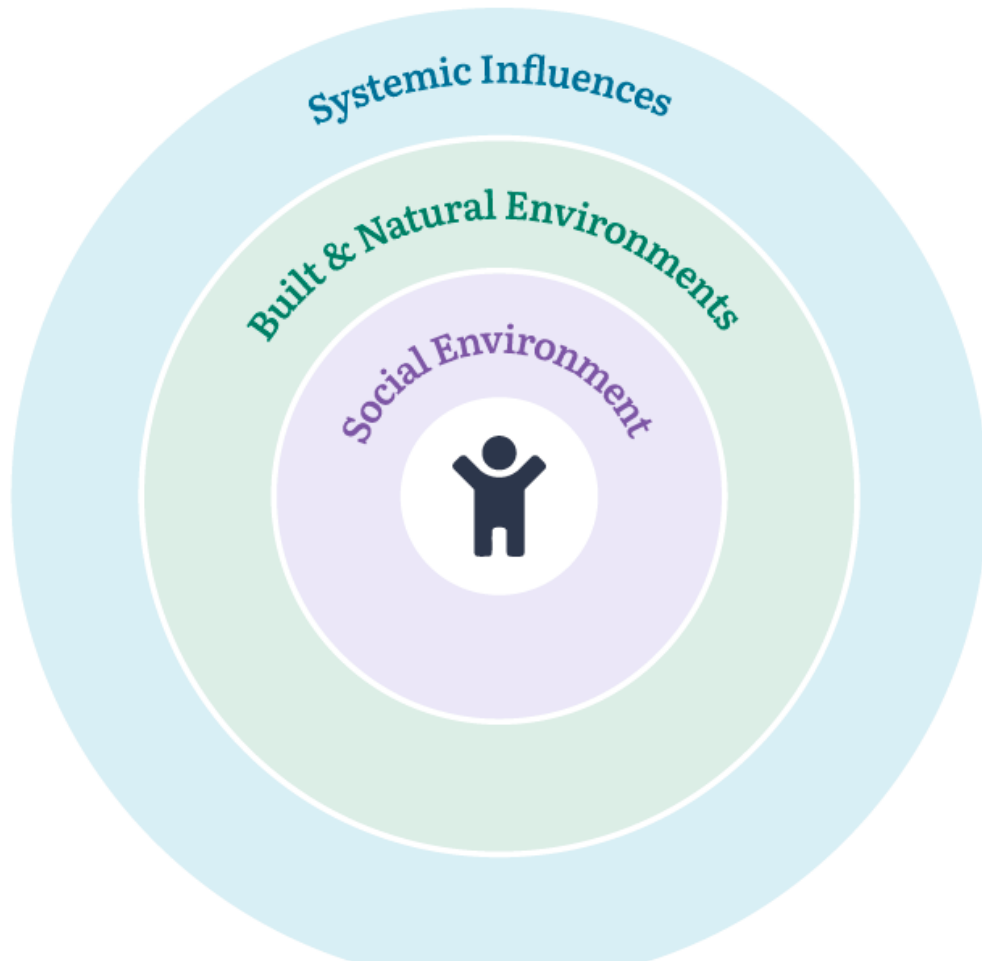
Socio-ecological framework





Place Matters: What Surrounds Us Shapes Us

Center on the Developing Child from Harvard University





Place Matters: What Surrounds Us Shapes Us

Center on the Developing Child from Harvard University



Social Environment

The presence or absence of key influences in a child's social environment plays an important role in their development.



Responsive relationships



Significant stress and adversity



Caregiver well-being



Social connectedness



Community supports



Faith and cultural traditions





Place Matters: What Surrounds Us Shapes Us

Center on the Developing Child from Harvard University



Built & Natural Environments

The accessibility and exposure to various influences in a child's built and natural environments shape their development directly, by influencing their developing biological systems, and indirectly, by interacting with their environment of relationships.



Air quality and temperature



Clean water supply



Safe green space



Safe, healthy housing



Exposure to toxins and hazards



Economic opportunities

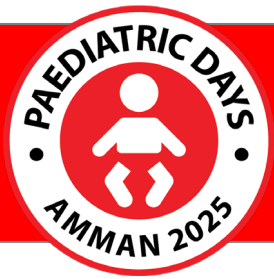


Nutritious food



Neighborhood infrastructure





Place Matters: What Surrounds Us Shapes Us

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Systemic Influences

Broader systemic influences such as the ones listed here shape children's development directly, while also shaping their environment of relationships and their built and natural environments.



Current and historic public policies



Systemic racism



Structural inequities



Intergenerational poverty



Healthcare system disparities



Access to quality childcare and education





MHPSS in Humanitarian Emergencies

- **Key mental health guidelines & interventions for children and youth:**
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee. IASC Guidelines on MHPSS in Emergency Settings. [IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings, 2007 | IASC](#)
- UNICEF. Core Commitments for Children. [Core Commitments for Children | UNICEF](#)
- MHPSS MSP. Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Minimum Service Package. [Home - MHPSS MSP](#)





Multi-Level Approach

Mental health and psychosocial support services

Responses suggested

Impacts on population due to crises

Mental health care by mental health specialists (psychiatrists, psychologists, etc)

Professional treatment for individuals or families

Specialised services

Severe psychological disorders

Basic psychological care by PHC doctors
Basic emotional support and social support (community workers)

Individual, family or group interventions

Focused, non specialised support

Mild to moderate mental health disorders

Social & Community Network
Traditional Community Supports
Child-friendly spaces

Psychosocial support activities

Community and family supports

Mild psychological distress (natural reactions to crisis event)

Advocacy for safe basic services, socio-culturally appropriate, and that protects dignity

Fulfilling basic needs, providing security

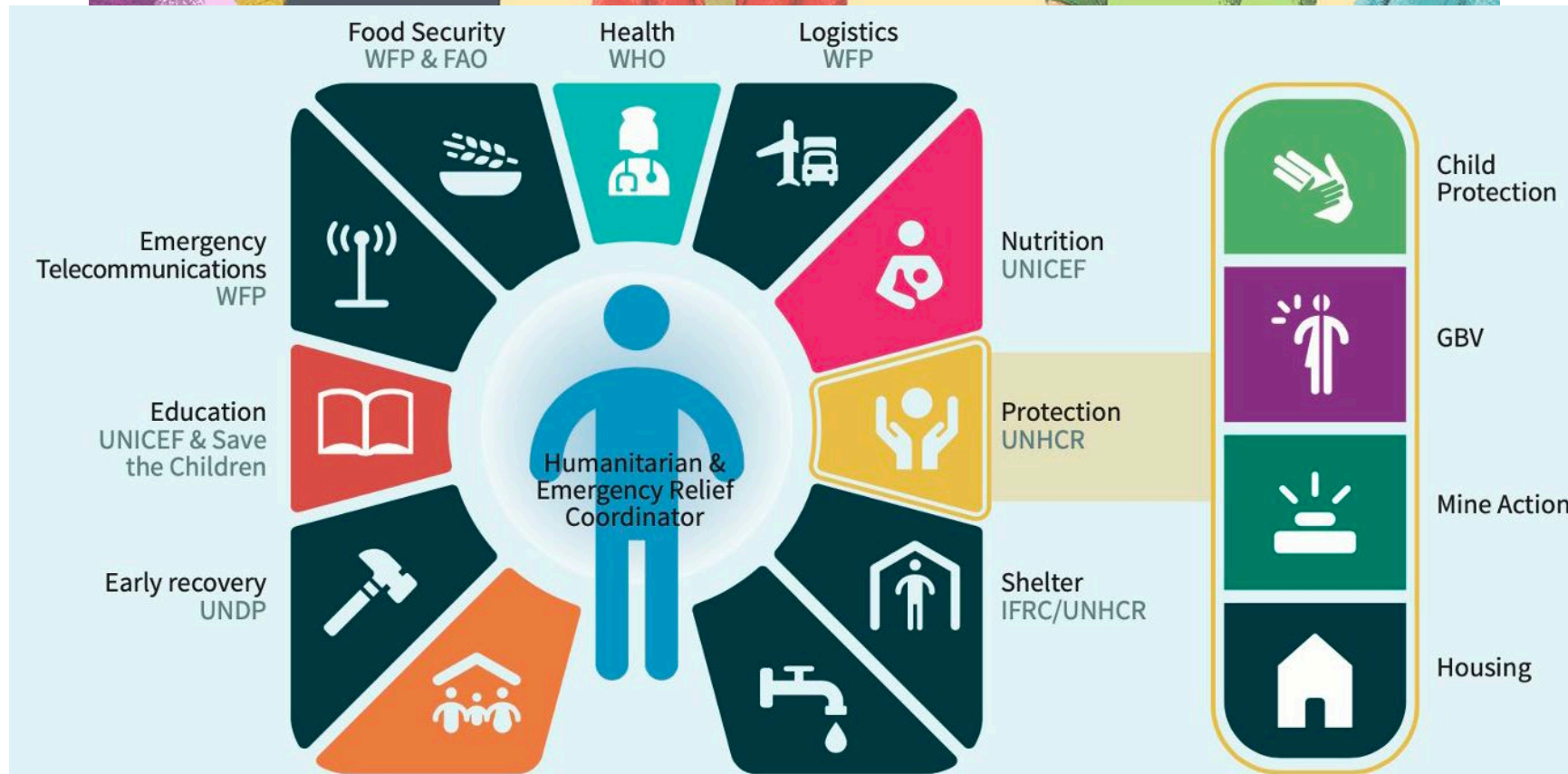
Basic services and security

General population affected by crisis

Source: This illustration is based on the intervention pyramid for mental health and psychosocial support in emergencies in the IASC Guidelines (2007).



Multi-Sectoral Approach





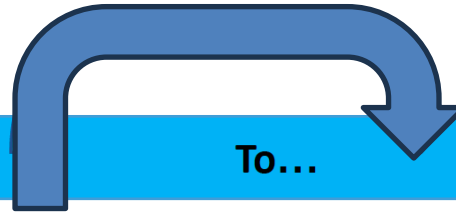
MHPSS in Humanitarian Emergencies

- **MHPSS & Protection**
 - Child Friendly Spaces
 - Child Protection Networks
- **Educational support**
 - Emergency Education Programs
 - Psychosocial Support in Schools
 - Non-formal education
- **Strengthening Family Support**
 - Parental Support and Parenting Programs
 - Family Tracing and Reunification
- **Addressing specific vulnerabilities**
 - Gender-sensitive Approaches
 - Children with disabilities
- **Community-Based Interventions**
 - Community Engagement
 - Peer Support Programs
- **Specialized Psychological and Psychiatric Services**
 - Integration into Health Systems (primary health care, community mental health center)
 - Scalable psychological interventions
 - Task-shifting : mhGAP program





Needed positive shift



From...

Emphasis on “traumatization”, pathology, and treatment

Children and adolescents as passive & helpless

Over-dependence on referral to mental health experts/external specialists

Lack of specialised services for children

One-size-fits-all approach

Fragmented services & focus on individuals in isolation

To...

Normalization of stress responses & emphasis on children’s **resilience and capabilities**

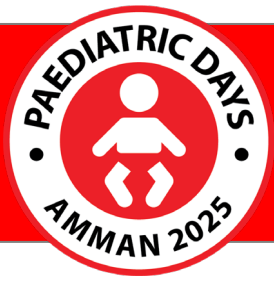
Children & adolescents as **active agents** in response & recovery

Empowering caregivers, teachers, community members and trained humanitarian workers to respond to children’s distress

Investment in **scalable psychological interventions** for children & adolescents

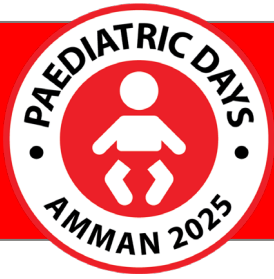
Improved attention to **diversity** (e.g. gender, disability, life-course approach, chronological age vs developmental stage)

Improved communication between Child Protection, Education, Health and others – Layered, interconnected systems



Contextualization & Cultural adaptations





Reflection on liberation psychology & professional ethics

Liberation psychology, developed by Ignacio Martín-Baró, emerged in Latin America during times of political repression. It's a framework that challenges traditional Western psychology's individualistic focus and instead centers collective experience, historical context, and social justice. It contextualizes trauma and situates it within systems of oppression and recognizes that psychological suffering is a response to a real, ongoing threat. It focuses on collective healing and empowerment; it links the personal and the political and encourages critical reflexivity for the therapist about his/her own positionality in the system of oppression.



Reflection on IHL

- A question that keeps coming back is how does non-compliance with international humanitarian law worsen the mental health consequences for the children in armed conflicts?
- On a clinical level, this particularly involves creating spaces where children can tell their stories through narrative exercises, storytelling, drawing, theater, or any other tools available to the child.
- Concretely, the maintenance of international humanitarian law should be defended at all costs, as it is one of the guarantors of mental health, an essential pillar of individual and collective reconstruction.



Considerations for training

PLOS MENTAL HEALTH

OPINION

Equipping the next generation of clinicians for addressing conflict mental health: A role for Geopsychiatry

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OPEN ACCESS

Citation: El-Khoury J, McMahon A, Kazem F, Atoui M, Castaldelli-Maia JM, Corrêa de Magalhães Narvaez J, et al. (2024) Equipping the next generation of clinicians for addressing conflict mental health: A role for Geopsychiatry. *PLOS Ment Health* 1(3): e0000094. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmen.0000094>

The past two decades have seen a surge in violent conflicts worldwide, leading to 238,000 conflict-related fatalities in 2022 alone [1]. This challenges the perception that conflict is limited to 'unstable' regions, highlighting its global reach. Active wars in Ukraine, Sudan and Palestine have drawn attention onto conflicts even further. Beyond immediate death tolls, the enduring psychosocial impacts are profound, with conditions like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) affecting millions [2, 3]. During its last World Health Assembly, the World Health Organization approved a crucial resolution to integrate mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) across all stages of emergencies, including conflicts, disasters, and humanitarian crises. The distant and recent experience from conflict zones raises doubt on whether local healthcare systems and external interventions have the needed skills and experience to deliver in times of crisis [4].





Conclusion

“I never have been in despair about the world. I’ve been enraged by it. I don’t think I’m in despair. I can’t afford despair. I can’t tell my nephew, my niece. You can’t tell the children there’s no hope.”

- James Balwin -





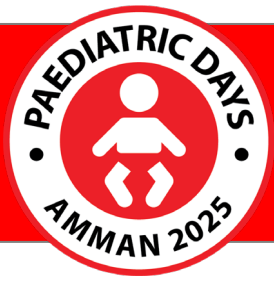
Resources on MHPSS for children & families

The screenshot shows the homepage of MHPSS.net. The header includes the MHPSS.net logo, navigation links for "Home" and "Toolkits", and a "Login" button. The main heading is "The Children and Families Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Resource Collection". Below this, there is a paragraph of text: "The Children and Families MHPSS Resource Collection offers access to a wide range of key materials that are relevant to mental health and psychosocial support work with children and families across humanitarian and development settings." A quote follows: "The aim of this collection of resources is to provide practitioners, policy-makers and others who work to support children and families with a easy-to-access, first-stop repository when they need to find materials to support their efforts across the programme cycle and beyond." Below the quote is the name "Ananda Galappatti, Co-Director (Strategy)". At the bottom, there are buttons for "About the toolkit", a "Select Language" dropdown, and a "Search resources" button.

The screenshot shows the "Browse Toolkit" page. It features a grid of colorful buttons for browsing the repository by sectors. The sectors listed are: GENERAL MHPSS, CHILD PROTECTION, EDUCATION, FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT/SOCIAL PROTECTION, HEALTH, PEACEBUILDING AND HUMAN RIGHTS, GENDER EQUITY AND INCLUSION, CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION/DISASTER REDUCTION, MIGRATION, DISPLACEMENT AND PEOPLE ON THE MOVE, CAMP/SHELTER MANAGEMENT AND WASH, and SPORTS, RECREATION, ART CULTURE. Below the grid, there is a section for "Browse the repository by programming areas / phases".

The screenshot shows the "Browse the repository by programming areas / phases" page. It features a grid of colorful buttons for browsing the repository by programming areas / phases. The areas listed are: ASSESSMENT, ADVOCACY AND POLICY, CAPACITY-STRENGTHENING, IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION, PROGRAMME DESIGN, RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE, CARE FOR STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS, and COORDINATION, MAPPING AND REFERRAL.





Key Resources: PFA & Storybooks

Save the Children
Psychological First Aid Training
Manual for Child Practitioners

Psychological First Aid for Children: 2 Days
Stress Management for Staff: 1 Day

 Save the Children **Training**
manual for child practitioners

ONE-DAY PROGRAMME

My Hero is You
Supporting each other
when wars come

FIELD TEST VERSION

My Hero is You
how kids can
fight COVID-19!

IASC
Inter-Agency Standing Committee



Key resources : The Message Bank

- What might you [caregivers] be experiencing?
- What can you do to help yourself?
- What might children in your care be experiencing?
- How can you support children & teenagers?
 - *Safety*
 - *Care, praise, appreciation*
 - *Talking & spending time together*
 - *Play & exercise*
 - *Maintaining routine*
 - *Helping teenagers cope*

- **Specific issues (grief, panic, aggression etc.)**
- **Specific circumstances (evacuation, on the road)**
- **Messages for teenagers**
- **Relaxation exercises**
- **When to look for extra help**

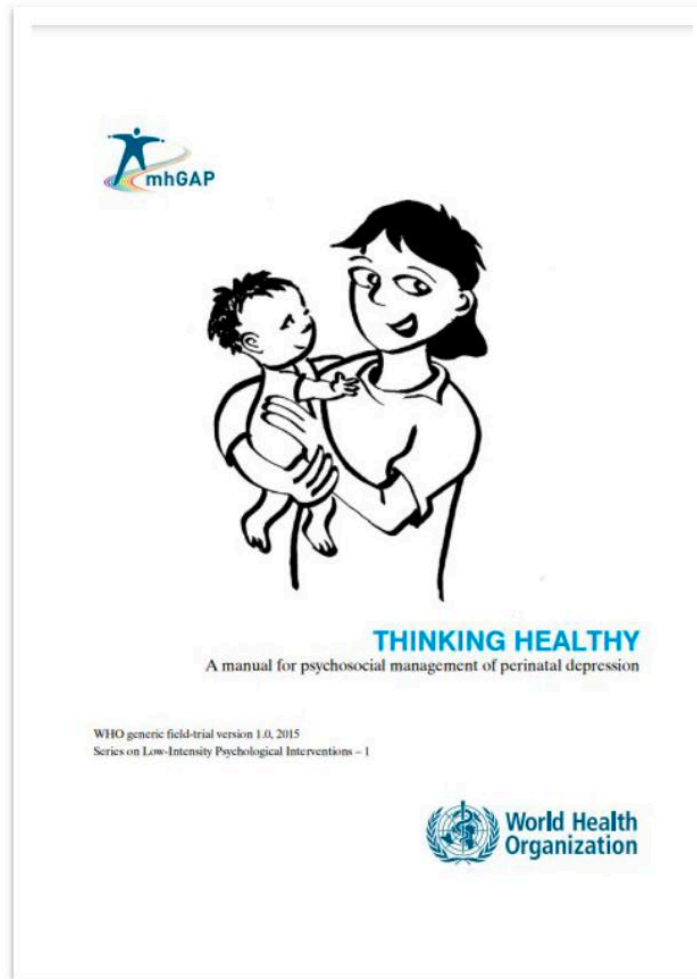
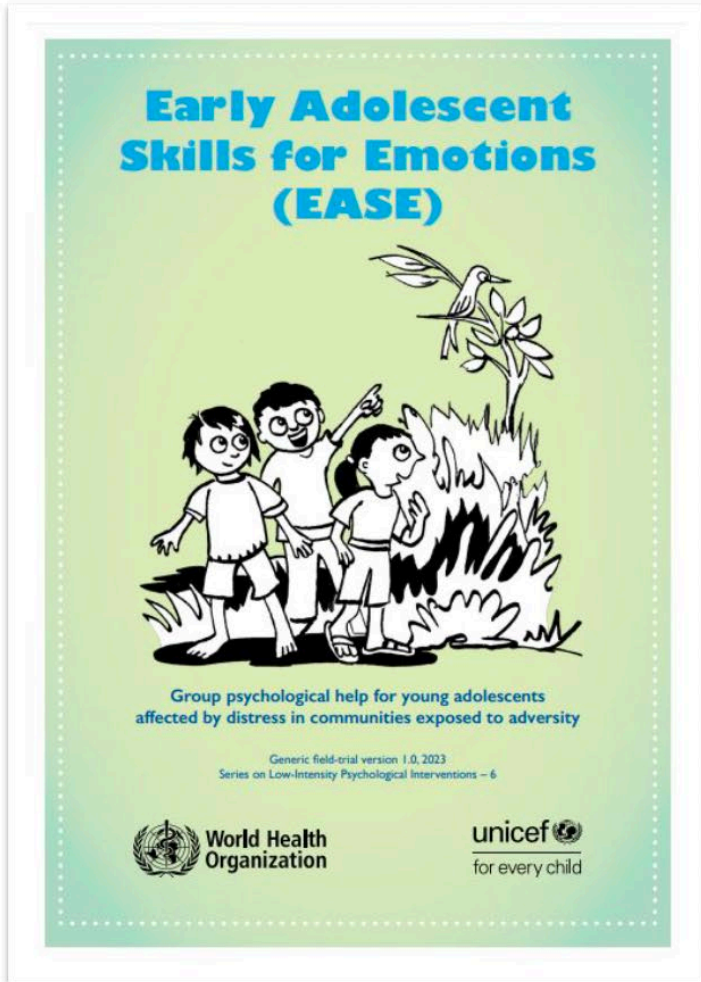
	English	Ukrainian	Polish	Español
1				
2				
3	1. Caring for yourself and for children during an emergency	1. Подбай про себе і дітей під час надзвичайної ситуації	1. Zadbaj o siebie i dzieci w sytuacji zagrożenia	1. Cuidar de sí mismo una emergencia
4				
5	1.1 What might you be experiencing?	1.1 Що ви можете відчувати?	1.1 Czego możesz doświadczać?	1.1 ¿Qué puede estar exper
6	You may find that you become upset or angry more than you used to, and your mood may change suddenly. You may feel nervous, worried, or overwhelmed.	Ви можете помітити, що засмучуєтеся або злитесь частіше, ніж зазвичай, а ваш настрій може раптово змінитися. Ви можете почуватися знервованим, стурбованим або прибитим.	Możesz częściej niż zazwyczaj odczuwać smutek lub złość, możesz też doświadczać nagłych wahań nastroju. Możesz odczuwać zdezorientowanie, niepokój lub mieć wrażenie przytłoczenia.	Es posible que se altere o se que su estado de ánimo cam que se sienta nervioso, preo
7	You may feel depressed and lose interest in every day activities.	Ви можете відчувати симптоми депресії і втрачати інтерес до щоденної діяльності.	Możesz odczuwać przygnębienie i tracić zainteresowanie codziennymi czynnościami.	Puede sentirse deprimido y actividades cotidianas.
8	You may have repeated vivid memories of your experiences. These memories can cause reactions in your body such as a rapid heartbeat or sweating.	У вас можуть виникати повторні сильні переживання того, що вам довелося пережити. Такі спогади супроводжуються реакціями тіла, зокрема	Wspomnienia przeżyć mogą powracać w pamięci wielokrotnie, a obrazy mogą być bardzo żywe i intensywne. Mogą też wywoływać reakcje w Twoim ciele, takie jak	Es posible que tenga recuer experiencias. Estos recuerd en el cuerpo, como acelerac
9	You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions, or become more easily confused, your sleep and eating patterns may also be disrupted.	Вам може бути складно сконцентруватися та приймати рішення. Ви можете бути розблуданим. Можуть відбуватися порушення сну та харчування.	Możesz mieć trudności z koncentracją, podejmowaniem decyzji lub częściej tracić poczucie pewności. Zaburzeniu mogą ulec także rytm snu i odżywiania.	Puede que le resulte difícil c decisiones, o que se confun de sueño y alimentación tan
10	All of these things may affect how you care for children you are looking after.	Все це може впливати на дітей, за якими ви наглядаєте.	Wszystkie te czynniki mogą wpływać na to jak zajmujesz się dziećmi będącymi pod Twoją opieką.	Todo esto puede afectar la fi que tiene a su cargo.
11	1.2 What can you do to help yourself?	1.2 Що ви можете зробити, аби допомогти собі?	1.2 Jak możesz sobie pomóc?	1.2 ¿Qué puede hacer para
12	Remember, you do not have to be a perfect caregiver every day. During emergencies, even supporting your child's basic needs can be a challenge.	Запам'ятайте, що ви не повинні бути ідеальним опікунком щодня. Під час надзвичайної ситуації,	Pamiętaj, że nie musisz być zawsze idealnym opiekunem. W sytuacjach zagrożenia nawet zaspokojenie podstawowych	Recuerde que no tiene que t los días. Durante las emerge



Available via mhpss.net and the MHPSS MSP platform
Languages: En, Fr, Ar, Sp, Uk, Po, Sl, Ru, Cz, Arm



Key resources : Scalable Psychological Interventions for Children & Youth



(Forthcoming)