

What is Child Protection in Emergencies?

Child protection in emergencies is about preventing and responding to violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect of children during times of emergency caused by natural and man-made disasters, conflict or other crises. Emergency situations can carry on long after the initial crisis has passed. They require effective and sustainable solutions to provide both short and long-term protection to children living in the wake of disaster and conflict. The delivery of child protection in emergencies occurs in a wide variety of locations from the immediate locality of the crisis to internally displaced people and refugee facilities.

The most common risks

Dangers and injuries

Unintentional injuries account for over 30% of deaths among 10- to 14 year-olds and almost 50% among 15-19 year-olds. In emergency and conflict settings children are at greater risk of injury and disability caused by natural disasters or by explosive remnants of war. If injuries to children are not treated quickly and appropriately for their age, there is a greater chance of long-term or permanent injury.

Physical violence and other harmful practices

During conflicts, children may suffer extreme violence, such as killing, maiming, torture, and abduction. Patterns of violence are heightened in humanitarian settings. Families and other sources of protection are often put under immense strain and the weakened protective social structures around the child may result in family or community members abusing children, putting those children more at risk of domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, and corporal punishment.

Sexual violence

In the chaos that can follow an emergency, children are especially at risk of sexual violence and exploitation. The consequences of sexual violence on girls and boys are social, physical, emotional, spiritual and psychosocial, and require a multi-sectoral response. Sexual violence is present in all emergencies, but it is often hidden. Harmful practices such as early marriage or female genital mutilation can become more prevalent in the aftermath of a crisis.



Unaccompanied and separated children

In a conflict or a natural disaster situation, children can accidentally become separated, abandoned, abducted, or orphaned during flight to safety or through the death of parents or guardians. Unaccompanied and separated children can be extremely vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking.

Psychosocial distress and mental disorders

The stressful situations experienced in times of emergency can lead to short and long-term psychosocial distress and mental disorders such as sleeping problems, nightmares, withdrawal, problems concentrating, guilt, confusion, insecurity, and post traumatic stress hindering the successful future development of the child.

Children associated with armed forces or armed groups

Despite growing international attention to the recruitment and use of children in conflict and wide condemnation of this practice, children continue to be forced in to service with armed forces or armed groups across the world. Boys and girls are used as combatants as well as in active support roles such as spies, porters or informants, or for sexual purposes. Children associated

with armed forces or armed groups are exposed to tremendous violence – often forced both to witness and commit violence, while being abused, forced to use drugs, exploited, injured or even killed as a result.

Child labour

Many child labourers are victims of the worst forms of child labour, such as forced or bonded labour, using children in armed conflict, trafficking for exploitation, sexual exploitation, illicit work or other work which is likely to harm their health, safety or morals. In emergency contexts children become particularly vulnerable to child labour. An emergency may increase the overall incidence of the worst forms of child labour, trigger new types of hazardous work, result in working children taking on more dangerous work or result in unsafe movement of children to search for work, putting them at greater risk of exploitative work situations.

Children and the Justice System

Emergency situations often increase the possibility of children coming into contact with the justice system as alleged offenders, victims or witnesses, or in a combination of these roles. Risks and needs arising from emergencies through which children may come into contact with the justice system include: arbitrary arrest and deprivation of liberty, torture and other forms of ill-treatment, trafficking or recruitment by armed forces, including criminal groups. When law and order breaks down in emergency situations, cases of arbitrary arrest and detention of children suspected of involvement in crime or of having committed administrative offences often increase. In all situations, the principle is to resort to detention and formal trial only as a last resort and, where possible, to use diversion and alternative measures.