



Positive Effects of Innovative Early Childhood Development Programs on Refugee Youth Resilience

There are approximately 60 million refugees in the world, half of them women and children. Forced migration is driving refugees out of their homes every single day; the number of young refugee children is growing, and their needs must be addressed. Right now.

A robust and growing body of literature from many fields provides convincing and compelling evidence of the positive effects of parental support and early childhood education and care upon developmental trajectories across differing contexts.

Unless governments provide adequate programs for refugee women and young children, they will have no chance of achieving the targets of SDGs 3 (Health), 4 (Education), 4.2 (Early Childhood Education), 5 (Gender Equality), and 16 (Peaceful and Inclusive Societies).

Children have been severely neglected in the response to the massive, ongoing refugee crisis. Significant numbers of children between birth and five years old spend these most critical developmental years – and often their entire childhood - facing severe restrictions of the most basic rights guaranteed to them by international human rights and humanitarian law, in particular by the Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹

Psychological well-being and education are rights, which need to be ensured and protected by the States of origin, transit, refuge, and resettlement.²

For the youngest refugee children the developmental and psychological consequences of forced displacement can be devastating because the first five years of life play a vital role in the formation of intelligence, personality and social behavior as well as in the capacity for later participation and productivity in their communities, workplaces and societies.³ The youngest refugee children require special attention, but they are commonly forgotten.⁴ They are invisible to those responsible for protecting them.

¹ Jacqueline Bhabha, *Child Migration & Human Rights in a Global Age*, (Princeton University Press), 2014.

² According to the CRC and international humanitarian law.

³ Angela Nickerson, Idan M. Aderka, Richard A. Bryant, and Stefan G. Hofmann, “The

Some older refugee children and youth manage to thrive in spite of having faced life-threatening risks. They may be particularly resilient because of their positive and supportive early childhood environments, which included family, friends, and school.⁵ Yet, most very young refugee and internally displaced children today do not have such beneficial early childhood environments. Their families are separated, their mothers are traumatized, and they have no access to early childhood education and care.

Failure to intervene on their behalf will undoubtedly create negative consequences for the global community. Refugee youth, including unaccompanied minors who are the most vulnerable, are facing psychological distress, low performance in school, and issues in cultural and social integration.⁶ These long-lasting consequences⁷ could have been attenuated and even prevented by early intervention with Early Childhood Development (ECD) and education.⁸

ECD alleviates childhood trauma, toxic stress and deprivation, creating the human and social capital needed for development⁹ and contributes to peace-building.¹⁰ It helps break the cycles of intergenerational transmission of economic and education poverty.

ECD has an especially significant benefit in the developing world, where most of refugees are located. The benefits to society are also substantial: increased parenting assistance and ECD lead to better outcomes in education and to lower spending on social assistance, and welfare as well as reduced criminality, thereby increasing social and cultural cohesion.¹¹

ECD protects children from exploitation and helps them become productive youth with increased access to livelihoods.

Relationship Between Childhood Exposure to Trauma and Intermittent Explosive Disorder”, *Psychiatry Research*, 197, no. 1–2 (May 2012): 128-134.

⁴ Jack P. Shonkoff et al., “From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts”, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2016.

⁵ Jack P. Shonkoff et al., “Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience”, Working Paper 13, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2015.

⁶ Selcuk Sirin, S., and L. Rogers-Sirin, “The Educational and Mental Health Needs of Syrian Refugee Children”, Migration Policy Institute, 2015.

⁷ Laura Pacione, Toby Measham, and Cecile Rousseau, “Refugee Children: Mental Health and Effective Interventions”, *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 15 (2013): 341-344.

⁸ ECD incorporates all aspects of human development, including the physical, language, cognitive, intellectual, social, emotional, moral and ethic domains, as well as preschool education. High quality ECD is culturally sensitive and includes parents, families as significant players in children’s overall wellbeing.

⁹ Jack P. Shonkoff, Linda Richter, and Jacques van der Gaag, “An Integrated Scientific Framework for Child Survival and Early Childhood Development”, *Pediatrics*, 129 no.2, 1-13.

¹⁰ Yale University and Mother Child Education Foundation, “The Ecology of Peace: Formative Childhoods and Peace Building,” Yale Child Study Center, August 2012.

¹¹ World Bank, “World Bank Support to Early Childhood Development: An Independent Evaluation”, 2015.

Social and cultural identity forms in childhood through relationships between caring adults and children, creating a sense of belonging, and promoting resilience.

If this need for belonging is not met, children do not form positive social and cultural identities, which can lead to alienation and conflict with the host culture in youth and adulthood. Mental health problems generated from difficulties that refugee children experience often persist across generations.

Large numbers of war-affected children who ultimately do well have had at least one stable and committed relationship with supportive parents, extended family members, neighbors, teachers, religious leaders, among others.¹²

To achieve improved developmental outcomes for refugee children, refugee women's rights must be protected and community-based action must be supported.¹³

The provision of intercultural spaces in camps and in host communities, staffed by culturally sensitive mental health professionals and early childhood educators, can give mothers and other caregivers the opportunity to negotiate developmental and cultural pathways to resilience with their children. These spaces bridge the culture of origin with the host country through language learning, competency building, socializing, and other activities helpful for integration within the host community and development of a sense of cultural identity, connection, and support.

Women will be helped to overcome cumulative trauma and engage positively with their children and other women and men in these safe, intercultural spaces. Children will be better prepared for school.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides an opportunity to promote new investments and new engagements and to consider refugee children as protagonists and not as victims of their future. The SDGs provide a rationale and a framework for investing in early childhood programs and services. Robust research especially in economics, illustrates clearly that such investments are wise, both economically and socially.¹⁴

¹² Michael Wessells, "Strengths-Based Community Action as a Source of Resilience for Children Affected by Armed Conflict," Columbia University, January 2016.

¹³ Shonkoff et al., "Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience", Working Paper 13, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2015.

¹⁴ World Bank, "World Bank Support to Early Childhood Development. An Independent Evaluation", 2015.

It is the responsibility of States, with the support of the international community as a whole, to:

1. Implement the rights guaranteed to all children, irrespective of their migration status, according to international human rights and humanitarian law, in particular by the Convention on the Rights of the Child
2. Promote a child-centered approach in migration policy, and ensure that the best interest of the child is a primary consideration
3. Recognize the particular vulnerabilities of refugee children
4. Collect and share disaggregated data, facilitate refugee children's birth registration and move towards greater portability of documents, so that they may be accounted for and be able to access services including education and health care
5. Acknowledge the critical importance of the earliest years of life (birth through five), and prioritize Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs and services
6. Recognize that progress towards implementation of the 2030 Agenda SDGs 3 (Health), 4 (Education), 4.2 (Early Childhood Education), 5 (Gender Equality), 16 (Peaceful and Inclusive Societies) is favored by ECD programs
7. Recognize the high payoffs and low costs of implementing ECD and the sustainable outcomes for refugee children and youth
8. Utilize community-based approaches, employing both refugee mothers/caregivers and members of the local communities in ECD interventions in order to promote community building and facilitate intercultural dialogue and cultural integration
9. Listen to the voices of refugee women and children in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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