



© UNICEF/UNI156073/Noorani

# No Time to Wait

## A Call to Increase Investments for Young Children and Families Facing COVID-19 and Displacement

When conflict made life unbearable for 5-year-old Safa in her hometown of Aleppo, Syria, she and her family fled to Ghouta in southwest Syria, seeking safety. Little did her family know that the conflict would follow them, and they would become trapped in an area that came under regular bombardment.

One day as Safa was playing outside, a shell landed nearby injuring one of her legs. Despite best efforts to save Safa's leg, it had to be amputated, leaving her disabled. Months later, Safa's family was able to escape the fighting in Syria and crossed the border into Jordan where they ended up in Azraq camp. Upon arrival, an NGO provided Safa with a wheelchair. While Safa and her family were physically safe in Azraq camp, she missed playing freely with her friends, her

school in Syria, her home and her room. In the camp, Safa's family of 8 all lived in a small caravan. Other families lived in close proximity, giving little privacy and space. With COVID-19, these types of tight living conditions, seen in many refugee camps around the world, are making it even more difficult to practice social distancing.

Safa is one of millions of young children (aged 0-8) worldwide whose lives have been uprooted and turned upside down by war and conflict. Many children around the world need to escape war, often multiple times, and need to leave behind everything that is familiar, stable and comforting. Many live in constant limbo, uncertainty and fear. These displaced children and families now have to face a double burden of displacement *and* COVID-19.

The impacts of both displacement and COVID-19 are threatening the positive development of many young children around the world. The key impacts on refugee children's ability to survive and thrive include, among others:

**1 Insufficient access to basic services:** Lack of documentation (e.g. birth registration), exclusion from public systems, discrimination, and restrictions on movement for displaced young children makes it even more difficult for them and their families to access basic services such as nutritious food, clean water, and health care. This is because regular planting seasons and product supply chains have been disrupted, hospitals and frontline health workers are overwhelmed with COVID-19 cases and adults are losing opportunities to make a living, placing families in a more precarious economic situation than before the pandemic.

**2 Lack of early learning opportunities:** As pre-schools, education and child care centers around the world have closed, displaced children have reduced access to early learning during a critical window of brain development. A pre-COVID-19 analysis of 26 humanitarian response plans showed only 9% of them included early learning interventions.<sup>1</sup>

**3 High levels of stress, anxiety and mental health challenges:** Children and families face even higher levels of stress, anxiety and family violence due to greater uncertainty and fear. The mental health burden in conflict-affected contexts is twice the global average.<sup>2</sup> During the current situation, numerous and compounding stressors and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 can exacerbate stress and further impede caregivers' ability to provide responsive care to their children.<sup>3</sup> Science shows that the accumulating effects of stress over a prolonged period in children can become toxic and impair their development.

**4 Increase in violence, abuse and exploitation:** Humanitarian situations increase the likelihood of (sexual) abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect, especially for girls. This abuse affects young children's overall development. Humanitarian agencies are reporting a rise in violence in the home, particularly against women and girls. It is estimated that up to 85 million more girls and boys worldwide may be exposed to physical, sexual and/or emotional violence as a result of COVID-19 lockdown measures.<sup>4</sup>

**5 Limited dedicated resources:** At the exact time that we should be investing more in young children and families in crises, resources are stretched. Even before the pandemic, young children and families in humanitarian situations were only receiving a fraction of what was needed to assure support for nurturing care. Services like pre-school, parenting support and nutrition assistance were already beyond the reach of too many children facing displacement, war and natural disasters.

<sup>1</sup> Bouchane, Kolleen. (2018). Paper commissioned for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report, *Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls*.

<sup>2</sup> Charlson, Fiona et al. (2019). The Lancet vol. 394, *New WHO prevalence estimates of mental disorders in conflict settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis*.

<sup>3</sup> Brooks, Samantha et al. (2020). The Lancet vol. 395, *The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence*.

<sup>4</sup> World Vision. (2020). Report, *COVID-19 Aftershocks: A Perfect Storm*.

Given the urgency of the crises facing young children and their families, **we recommend that governments and donors honor existing commitments, ensure inclusion of young children and families in public systems and take FIVE immediate actions to increase investments in:**

## Food supplements, health care access, cash assistance & other social protection measures



as part of the COVID-19 response so that families can meet basic needs – particularly for pregnant women, children under age three and young children with disabilities and developmental delays

## Emergency early learning programs



and outreach to families with messages to support nurturing care, play and learning at home, with special attention to young children with disabilities and developmental delays

## Remote and ongoing mental health and child protection support to families



to help alleviate family conflict, to support caregivers/parents and to reduce stress

## Rapid vulnerability assessments



of the conditions facing young children and families during the pandemic, and the implementation of cross-sector plans to address emerging issues

## Training, adequate personal protective equipment & WASH facilities



to assure hygiene and health for all those working directly with young children and families

World Refugee Day shines a spotlight on those that flee their homes in search of safety and hope for the future. Millions of refugees like Safa and her family are now facing a double burden with the COVID-19 pandemic. But negative development outcomes are not inevitable. There is a wealth of knowledge and experience to show that investing in early learning and caregiver support in humanitarian contexts can help to rebuild children and families' resilience, resulting in both short and long-term gains. As the world responds to this new pandemic, we must not forget young refugees and their families.

Written by: Dr. Joan Lombardi, Early Opportunities; Nada Elattar, UNICEF; Dr. Sweta Shah, Aga Khan Foundation

## For More Information about ECD in Emergencies:



**Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies**

[ECDAN COVID-19 Resources](#)

[MMA COVID-19 Brief](#)

[INEE ECD Task Team](#)