

March 2019

www.fmreview.org/education-displacement

Child-friendly spaces: enhancing their role in improving learning outcomes

Gurvinder Singh and Charlotte Tocchio

Providing psychosocial support to children through the medium of child-friendly spaces can improve learning outcomes for children but requires more localised, partnership-driven and gender-responsive approaches and strengthened monitoring and evaluation.

Children's psychosocial well-being is directly correlated with their ability to learn. In contexts of conflict and humanitarian crises, child-friendly spaces (CFS) can promote psychosocial well-being and provide a safe space for learning but research has shown that their quality, relevance, effectiveness and sustainability vary widely.¹ They are too often implemented for long periods without being phased out or converted into sustainable and relevant formats. In addition, they can too easily become places where kicking a ball and drawing pictures are the goal rather than thought-through, research-based and focused psychosocial support. Important stakeholders such as local teachers, school administrators, parents and community leaders can be left out of the planning, thereby weakening the relationship between CFS and the improvement of learning outcomes.

However, while CFS are not a comprehensive answer, they can be important tools to enhance learning outcomes. Experience gained by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in country-specific contexts highlights a number of lessons learned which underscore the need for localised, partnership-driven approaches that build on existing capacities and provide children with safe spaces. This allows children to meaningfully build resilience and provides enough stability for them to be able to focus on education during humanitarian crises.

Yemen

Since 2015, insecurity and instability in Yemen have forced approximately 2.8 million civilians to flee their homes. The consequences of the conflict have been particularly difficult for children. Local volunteers report that pupils in Yemen have been feeling disconnected

from school and are not motivated to continue their education. Children are overwhelmed by the conflict and do not feel safe hearing the sounds of bombs and warplanes. They risk being killed on their way to school and many parents choose to keep their children at home.

At least half a million children have dropped out of school since the conflict escalated in 2015. In addition, there is a severe shortage of teachers, and 2,500 schools are out of use because they have been damaged or destroyed, used for military purposes or used as shelters for displaced people. The lack of access to education has also pushed children and families into dangerous alternatives, including child marriage, child labour and recruitment as fighters.

To try to address this lack of access, the Red Crescent first assessed the needs, in consultation with the Ministry of Education. Then 118 Red Crescent volunteers and 133 school teachers from 40 schools were trained in providing psychosocial support, and CFS were developed in each of these schools to provide a place where girls and boys can access psychosocial support, play games, learn protection skills (such as accessing help and getting to safety) and be taught about topics such as child rights and preventing child marriage. In the CFS, emphasis is put on peer education because the schools and Red Crescent believe that youth-led activities are the best way to maximise impact. For example, children from the CFS lead school assemblies and put on plays to highlight protection and psychosocial issues. Moreover, volunteers have held psychosocial support sessions for children of different ages. Nearly 5,000 girls and boys (and 350 adults) have been reached each month through the project that began in 2016 and continues today.

Kenya

Life is hard for the migrants and refugees living in informal settlements in Kenya's urban centres – and perhaps particularly so for children, living in poor and cramped conditions, struggling to access school, some having to work, and facing the ever-present risk of gender-based violence. In response, the Kenya Red Cross has partnered with 30 schools to organise CFS within schools where girls and boys aged 11–14 years learn new skills, plan social activities and access psychosocial support provided by approximately 40 Red Cross volunteers. The volunteers are professional counsellors who run activities designed to boost self-esteem, self-awareness and trust. They also provide the children with someone to talk to, offer advice and help them to access protection, health and social services through local non-governmental organisations. Over 3,000 children are reached annually through these partnerships with schools.

Youth volunteers complement the work of the counsellors by sharing knowledge and skills – through workshops and school events such as after-school mentorship – that help the children to be safer and more resilient. They also act as a link between the Red Cross, schools and parents, including by organising school meetings with parents and other caregivers in order to help engage them in finding ways to improve children's learning and psychosocial well-being.

Questions around CFS

The measurable impact and sustainability of projects such as these remain open to question. Barriers to measuring interventions include a lack of planning at the start to build evaluation into the projects, limited financial resources within the projects, a lack of local professionals who are experienced in conducting evaluation, the time required to do so, the constant movement of participants in and out of projects, and the unpredictable security situation of many hard-to-access locations. Furthermore, the relationship between psychosocial well-being and learning outcomes among children in humanitarian settings is itself still based on general observation, and requires more scrutiny.

A problem across many CFS that aim to improve psychosocial outcomes is a lack of gender-responsive programming. Too often, in our experience, children are seen and treated through an approach that does not take adequate account of gender. This results in projects that miss important psychosocial elements, do not recognise the full needs of children, and can perpetuate gender-based power inequalities and discrimination. Gender analysis of psychosocial and educational projects – at both the planning and evaluation stages of such projects – is needed if this issue is to be tackled.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in partnership with World Vision International has developed a new CFS toolkit; this draws on a series of evaluations conducted by World Vision and a review by IFRC of lessons learned in implementing CFS in emergencies programming.² IFRC has also published a new study that examines the need to improve the protection of unaccompanied and separated children from sexual and gender-based violence in hard-to-access locations.³ These findings further reinforce the need to ensure children's psychosocial well-being in order for them to access basic services including protection and education. Promoting the psychosocial well-being of children through the use of CFS allows children to spend time learning and gaining the skills necessary for managing the challenges that they face and for achieving better learning outcomes in humanitarian settings, including situations of displacement.

Gurvinder Singh gurvinder.singh@ifrc.org
Global Child Protection Senior Adviser

Charlotte Tocchio charlotte.tocchio@ifrc.org
Global Coordinator for Humanitarian Education

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies www.ifrc.org

1. World Vision (2015) *Evaluation of Child Friendly Spaces* bit.ly/WVI-CFS-2015

2. Toolkit at [http://pscentre.org/archives/publication/child-friendly-spaces; Lessons learned report at bit.ly/IFRC-CFS-Lessons-2017](http://pscentre.org/archives/publication/child-friendly-spaces; Lessons%20learned%20report%20at%20bit.ly/IFRC-CFS-Lessons-2017)

3. IFRC (2018) *Alone and Unsafe: Children, migration and sexual and gender-based violence* <http://bit.ly/IFRC-Alone-unsafe-2018>