

# Feeling safe enough to learn in a conflict zone

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**Building an internal sense of safety, while also teaching coping skills and how to remain alert to the very real risks outside, is essential if psychosocial programming in Afghanistan is to provide a 'safe space' for children to learn in a context of high insecurity.**

Frequently, traditional psychosocial programming focuses on incidents that have taken place in the past and is implemented in spaces that are now physically safe. However, in protracted crises such as in Afghanistan, children are coping not only with past trauma but also with ongoing stress and fear. In these contexts, psychosocial programming must take a different approach. Building a sense of safety must focus on strengthening children's awareness of risk and stress, teaching them individual coping skills and creating a feeling of safety through play, creative expression and trust exercises.

In Afghanistan, there are approximately 767,600 children who have been internally displaced by conflict.<sup>1</sup> Ensuring continuity of education during a crisis is vital to providing routine and structure, enabling children to pursue longer-term goals and reducing lifelong dropouts from education. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) provides education for thousands of displaced children across Afghanistan but has found that, with increased exposure to horrific violence over recent years, it is now even more challenging for children

to integrate into their new environment and stay motivated in their education.<sup>2</sup>

In response, since December 2017, NRC Afghanistan has been implementing a supplementary classroom-based programme within schools across the country in order to address the acute psychosocial needs of children affected by conflict-induced trauma. This programme – the Better Learning Programme (BLP) – was developed by NRC and the University of Tromsø in 2007 and piloted first in Uganda and then in Palestine. The programme helps students to identify their reactions to stress, learn techniques to calm themselves and feel safe, be active in their own recovery, and be able to talk to teachers and family about their problems. It also aims to build resilience in the school community by strengthening collaboration between teachers and parents in supporting students' well-being.

## Identifying stress and feeling safe

Our sense of safety is often distorted following a life-threatening event, and survivors can feel terrified at the slightest noise or sensory reminder. Trauma models



Norwegian Refugee Council, Afghanistan

Children practise tensing and releasing their muscles, for relaxation. Better Learning Programme, Afghanistan.

for recovery focus on the need to re-establish a sense of safety in order to regain control over the body's physiological response to traumatic events. Survivors are frequently encouraged to separate the past from the present, recognising that the life-threatening event is in the past and that now, in the present, they are safe. BLP teaches students to identify the sources of, their reactions to and the physical impact of stress and then to learn practical calming exercises including deep breathing, tensing and releasing muscles, balances and various stretches. Children practise these exercises in each session and are encouraged to practise them at home and with their parents. The exercises help children to take control of their symptoms and to feel able to manage their own stress.

However, in Afghanistan, conflict-related risks continue to affect children even when they have been displaced to safer provinces. It is common for children to continue to hear rocket fire or shooting in their new communities, and encouraging children to believe they are now safe could actually be harmful and leave them vulnerable to further trauma if they experience another incident – or are forced to move once again. One exercise, called 'safe space', helps children to visualise a real or imagined place where they feel safe, thereby experiencing and internalising a sense of safety. Exercises such as this aim to help students not only to cope with nightmares or intrusive memories but also to deal with distressing sounds, rumours or experiences encountered in their daily lives. Children were encouraged to use the

exercises when they were woken in the night by an explosion (provided of course that they were not in immediate danger) and by doing so they felt able to remain calm even when there was fighting in nearby districts.

*"I love the safe space. To just close my eyes and think of somewhere calm and safe, somewhere nice... it's amazing."*

### Keeping physically safe

In the pilot phase of BLP, it was noted that children felt safe during the session but then would encounter frightening situations outside the classroom. On the way to school children face the possibility of being kidnapped or encountering armed clashes or explosions, landmines, harassment from community members and traffic accidents. There are also high instances of domestic abuse and child labour. Telling children that they are safe when they face numerous risks on a regular basis can disempower them and leave them unprepared. In the second phase of developing BLP, therefore, a new session was added to help children to be aware of risks in their communities and to identify measures to keep themselves safe, such as walking in groups to school or identifying alternative routes. Children are encouraged to draw a map of their community and discuss potential risks; with the support of the teacher, they then explore ways to keep themselves safe.

The combination of practical solutions to real problems and coping strategies to deal with the emotional impact has helped to increase students' sense of safety. Meanwhile, teachers also found the session useful to

help them better understand the particular risks individual students face and the different ways that the teachers can support them. Students also had more confidence in seeking support from adults about risks in the community. However, the new session will need further evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the risk mitigation strategies.

### Creating safety through play

For many children in Afghanistan, it is difficult to find a place that is physically completely safe and/or child-friendly. BLP therefore sought to help children to experience a feeling of safety that did not rely on their physical environment. Each BLP session followed the same pattern each week in order to build familiarity and predictability, and creative exercises and games formed an essential part of the weekly routine.

Play is essential for a child's development and it also creates and strengthens a sense of safety. Play helps children to process and express emotions in a measured way and it can help raise self-esteem. Yet for many children in Afghanistan, they have little or no opportunity to play, including at school. Teaching methods tend to be quite traditional, with the teacher relaying knowledge while students take notes. At the start of implementing BLP, teachers tended to talk a lot, explaining the programme concepts, which reduced the time and space available for children to express themselves. As the programme developed, games were therefore introduced into every session. This had two objectives. The first was to help students and teachers to relax, and to increase the feeling of trust and safety within the group. The second objective was to ensure that children left the session feeling good. In light of the lack of support services and networks in the children's communities – including extremely limited access to any form of psychological counselling – it was important to ensure that if difficult emotions or memories emerged during the session, a game could be used to help shake off any uncomfortable feelings.

Since introducing games to each session, there has been a noticeable shift for both students and teachers, in particular in the

level of laughter and ease in the room and the close bond within the group. Teachers said how much they enjoyed seeing their students laugh and how it had increased their confidence as teachers. Observations showed that children's feelings of safety increased and that they could express their feelings and be helped to manage them – children who were observed crying in the middle of the session while sharing a story finished the session laughing and smiling after participating in a group game.

### Impact and implementation

BLP can be implemented almost anywhere and even when classes must be relocated due to security problems, a feeling of safety can be built because it is reliant on the trust of the group, rather than the physical space.<sup>3</sup> To date, evaluation of the programme has indicated a reduction in nightmares, distressing emotions and physical illness, an increase in interest in attending school and completing homework and, perhaps most importantly, an increased sense of safety. Seventy-eight per cent of children who had participated in BLP said that they felt less scared because of the BLP group. Students saw BLP as a space where they felt comfortable, relaxed and safe and said they could access these feelings at home at any time by practising BLP exercises, either alone or with friends and family.

Implementing BLP in Afghanistan has required several rounds of adaptation and we are still in the process of developing the session plans and teacher training and considering how best to involve parents and the wider community. It will continue to require further adaptation and strengthening in the face of Afghanistan's deteriorating security.

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1. As of September 2018.

2. NRC (2018) *Education in Emergencies; Children in Distress. A Child Protection Risk Analysis for NRC Afghanistan's Education Programme* [bit.ly/NRC-eie-afghanistan-2018](https://bit.ly/NRC-eie-afghanistan-2018)

3. For more information on NRC's BLP, please contact [sonia.gomez@nrc.no](mailto:sonia.gomez@nrc.no).