

## How to help children and adolescents in the first days and weeks after conflict:

### **Psychological ‘first aid’ starts with helping to ensure that people’s basic needs are met.**

This means practical help or ‘signposting’ to where they can be safe, find water, food, shelter, get medical treatment etc.

Use smiles, mime and gesture, pictures, play, music...to communicate if there are language difficulties.

**Children need to be with someone who can care for and support them-** if they are alone, help **link** them with someone appropriate.

It is **normal** after conflict or forced displacement for children to experience distress including feeling frightened, anxious and sad, difficulty sleeping and bad dreams, strong and difficult memories and thoughts about the conflict and their experiences, difficulty concentrating on other things, not wanting to be separated from a parent/carer, crying easily, irritable or angry outbursts, rapid mood swings, behaviour difficulties, being unusually quiet and withdrawn. Some children will also be grieving the loss of a family member.

### **Children need:**

To know that they are **safe** now,

**Reassurance** that the conflict will end, that life will not always be like this, that they will have a home again, go back to school again ...even if this happens in a new place.

**Social support** – from family, other children, teachers, religious leaders, NGO staff...

So far as possible, **familiar routines** – eg school, or a regular time for some school work, regular bed-times and a bed-time story etc

Opportunities to **‘let off steam’** and release some of the tension, to run around together, play football, tag, keep-up-the-balloon, dance to favourite music, sing, clapping games..

Opportunities for **play**. Do not be too concerned if children play out difficult events – this can be a way of working through what has happened.

Opportunities to **talk, led by the child** about what has and is happening with parents, carers, **if** they want to, and **when** they are ready. Try to answer questions as appropriate for the child’s age and development.

Opportunities and materials for **art**-to express fears, bad memories, dreams and hopes for the future- or just to enjoy themselves. Let children draw/ paint what they want, and talk about their pictures **if they want**. For some children the memories of what they have experienced are too painful and intense to express, for these children – and at the end of any art session - suggest children think about somewhere they would love to be, or live, in the future – this may be serious wishes for a new house, or fantasies – eg living on the moon...Plasticine and play-dough are valuable to help children express and regulate their emotions.

Opportunities for **fun**, and to **escape** from the difficulties in play, games, stories, art, video games, films and videos etc

Help to **relax**: Show children how to take a few deep breathes, scrunch all their muscles up tightly..then give themselves a gentle shake to release tension and relax- especially before going to sleep. **Butterfly hug** is helpful for calming before sleep: cross your hands over and place them, palms down, on your chest, linking your thumbs to make a butterfly shape. Slowly tap one hand then the other, near your shoulders, while you breathe slowly in ...and out..and think of something nice...

**IT /Social media**: helps children stay in touch with friends and family, and provides entertainment and education. But a never-ending stream of news and posts, photos, etc related to the conflict may also fuel children's fears and anxiety. It is important when possible for adults/ parents to try to have conversations that may be distressing, or watch distressing news, away from small children. Older children and teens – and parents too- will benefit from trying to limit their viewing of news related to the conflict.

**As time passes**, children need:

Support to feel **hope** for the future.

**Opportunities to make sense of what has happened**: by talking with an adult who listens and answers questions in a truthful but age-appropriate way, or through art, drama, or play, or making their own stories.

- Parents are also coping with loss and displacement, and may need support to meet the emotional needs of their children at this time.

Many of the emotional and behaviour difficulties which are normal reactions to conflict and displacement should gradually settle when life becomes more stable. But many children will continue to feel very anxious, and some will experience traumatic grief. For a number of children, the symptoms of psychological trauma will continue and they will require specialist treatment for PTSD. Children and teens with latent vulnerabilities (eg children with problems and difficulties in their life before the conflict) are at particular risk of developing longer-term mental health difficulties.

**ACT International** provides training for childcare professionals to run groups for children who are anxious or grieving and coping with difficult memories after conflict and forced displacement: **Teaching Recovery Techniques** (from Children and War Foundation), and **Anxiety and Resilience Programme**.

Training courses in '**Children's Accelerated Trauma Treatment**' (**CATT**) for mental health professionals working with children and adolescents with PTSD is provided by TraumaPsychology Global.

See also:

Children and War Foundation, UNHCR, UK Refugee Council, UK Trauma Council.