



# Protecting Children Post-Disasters

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## What children face:

### Survival:

In the aftermath of a natural disaster, children continue to face dangers to their survival. Because of unsanitary conditions and lack of clean water or disinfectant, even minor injuries sustained in a disaster can become life-threatening without medical attention. As well, fallen buildings, destroyed homes, flooded paths or waterholes continue to pose safety hazards to children who are left unsupervised.

Children need appropriate food, adequate water and sanitation, and shelter as soon as possible. Without these basics, children's immunity against disease will be vastly reduced.

### Separation from parents:

When children are separated from their parents by a natural disaster, it may take days or even weeks to reunite them. In the meantime there is no way of knowing whether parents have survived. As people move away from affected areas, there is also further risk to the breakup of families. The distress caused by this is considerable for children, made even worse if they cannot find extended family to care for them in the meantime.

A priority for agencies should be to identify separated children in disaster-affected communities, ensure they are being cared for, and let them know, as well as family members, friends and neighbours, what is being done to help.

### Distress and grief:

Children have lost friends, siblings, parents and relatives. At a minimum, they need psychosocial support (see overleaf), with routine and a sense of safety and normalcy restored as soon as possible, and an understanding that their basic needs of food, shelter, water and care can still be met.

### Health and hygiene:

Children are especially vulnerable to deteriorating health, not least because they often do not understand the hygiene risks. Pregnant or nursing mothers particularly need rapid care and safe places to take care of their babies. Education on avoiding infections and water-borne diseases should be delivered to children as well as adults in terms that they understand. Appropriate hygiene supplies need to be delivered rapidly to prevent further death and illness. There are particular risks at this time due to the coming monsoon rains and the lack of basic shelter and protection against mosquitoes and other animals/insects.

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## child protection in myanmar after cyclone nargis



**Countless children were left orphaned, injured, and vulnerable to disease after the devastation caused by Cyclone Nargis. World Vision's priority is to ensure all children are safe and to support their recovery.**

### Instability:

After a disaster, affected communities do not know what will happen next. This instability affects both adults and children and can result in depression, panic or despair.

Agencies working in disaster zones need to give parents and children as much information as they can about their entitlement to support, what they will get and when they will get it - for example food, water, and shelter. This will help support their psychosocial well being.

Spaces where children can feel safe are a priority for World Vision post-disaster. These spaces enable children to establish a routine, while their parents get on with the practical realities of dealing with displacement. They allow key hygiene and safety messages to be given out. Child-friendly spaces are also important in keeping children away from dangerous places and protecting them from exploitation or abuse. Trained staff can identify and respond to children in need of counseling or medical care.

## What is psychosocial support?

Exposure to natural disasters has a devastating impact on the psychological and social well-being of children, adolescents and adults. Early psychosocial interventions help to recognise and reduce the effects of trauma, alleviate psychological distress, and strengthen resiliency to face the future.

“Psychosocial” refers to the mind’s balance of psychological reaction (an individual’s internal cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses) and social reaction (a response to altered relationships, family and community networks).

Nearly all children and adolescents who have experienced catastrophic situations will initially display symptoms of psychological distress, including intrusive flashbacks of the stress event, nightmares, withdrawal, inability to concentrate, and others.

Most children and adolescents will regain normal functioning once basic survival needs are met, safety and security have returned and a way forward is identified within the social, family and community context.

Children’s – and adults’ – participation in decisions which affect their lives has a positive effect on their mental health, empowers them and helps them to regain control over their own lives. Structured, normalizing, empowering activities within a safe environment will help the majority of children recover over time.

The psychosocial well-being of adults, particularly parents and caregivers has a direct impact on that of children, and concurrent parent-focused psychosocial interventions should also be a priority.

### Psychosocial interventions aim to:

- Reconnect children with family members, friends and neighbours
- Foster social connections and interactions
- Normalize daily life
- Promote a sense of competence and restore a person’s control over one’s life
- Allow for expressions of grief within a trusted environment, when the child is ready and follow-up is guaranteed

Some, but certainly not all, children will require more specialized counseling to address psychological issues post-disaster. This is most effective if facilitated by people the children know and trust, with the ability to offer ongoing contact and support.

Staff in World Vision’s child friendly spaces or other child-focused activities receive training to ensure they understand and are comfortable in dealing with children’s natural distress, as well as recognising and referring children who may need more specialised support to professional counselors.

*Children participating together in counseling sessions, funs, games and taking some refreshments after Cyclone Sidr devastated Bangladesh in 2007.*



## What is a child-friendly space?

The term “Child Friendly Space” (or CFS) refers to a space set up specifically for children in crisis, usually after a disaster, emergency or conflict. Its purpose is to address both physical and psychosocial needs of children in a stable environment that invites trust.

A CFS is a structured and safe place where children and youth meet other children to play, learn competencies to deal with the risks they face, be involved in some educational activities and relax in a safe place. It gives the children the sense of safety, structure and continuity that provides support amidst overwhelming experiences.

It can be a school, a community center, a tent(s) or an open space in a camp or in a community. It **MUST** be a place where the children feel safe; often the children are asked to map where this might be before the space is set up.

A CFS must be accessible and culturally sensitive to all children: for example girls, street children, school dropouts, children with disabilities, infants and pre-schoolers, and so on. In some cultures, boys and girls may need separate space. Different age groups require different activities.

Staff for CFS are recruited where possible from the local community with an emphasis on child protection practices: for example, teachers or community workers, adults who work well with children or with some basic psychosocial or childcare development training. These staff work with the community to design culturally appropriate activities. They receive training from World Vision on psychosocial support so that they can identify and refer children who are at risk of long-term trauma.

### A Child Friendly Space provides:

- **Play** – A fun place with sports, team and cultural activities to allow the children to switch off from their worries and concerns.
- **Transitional Formal and Informal Education** - literacy and numeracy, but also life skills, health education in new environments, psycho-education to reassure each child they are having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.
- **A place to express and voice their feelings** to help them realize that they are not alone through role-plays, dances, talking and traditional coping activities, connected with local cultural identity.
- **Important information** on what is happening around them to help them regain a sense of control in their lives.
- **Safety for children** while their parents/caregivers attend to daily activities. It also becomes a place for parents to meet and support each other
- **Security and hope** for separated children by registering them, and a place for parents/children to enquire about missing children/siblings.

*Child Friendly Spaces gave boys and girls a safe place to learn and play after the 2004 Asia Tsunami in Banda Aceh, Indonesia.*



## Child-friendly spaces in previous disaster zones



**Cyclone Sidr, Bangladesh—December 2007** » A massive storm leaves two million in need of assistance. World Vision opened this Child-Friendly Space for children devastated by Cyclone Sidr. Badsha, 10, was outside in the storm when the iron roof of a nearby home fell in front of him. “I thought it fell on me,” he exclaimed. Since enrolling in this Child-Friendly Space, Badsha has been able to participate in sports and games, counseling, cultural events, education and health care.



**Indonesia Quake—May 2006** » A 6.3 magnitude quake in central Java renders 650,000 homeless. Children in Kebom village dance and sing to celebrate the opening of the first World Vision Child-Friendly Space opened in response to the disaster. “I like the singing best,” said Pungki Retno, 8, shouting above the joyful cacaphony.



**Philippines Mudslides—February 2006** » A landslide buries hundreds alive in St. Bernard municipality. Children temporarily forget their troubles at a Child-Friendly Space established at an evacuation center for survivors. Vice Mayor Felix Lim told children to remain hopeful despite their experiences. “This place can help us forget—not our loved ones who died—but the pain and the sufferings the experience has caused us,” he said.



**Asian Tsunami—December 2004** » One of the deadliest natural disasters of modern history kills more than 200,000, chiefly in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand. Idawati, 5, is comforted at the World Vision Child-Friendly Space in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. When she first arrived at the Child-Friendly Space, Idawati, who was orphaned by the tsunami, was withdrawn, confused, and aggressive. But over time, she began to participate. “We almost cannot see the tragedy they’ve lived through,” facilitator Safriati said of the children.

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