

Families and Children in Crisis

In today's interconnected world, crises affecting families and children have become increasingly complex and widespread. Disasters are typically classified into several categories, including natural disasters and major disease outbreaks, mass violence and human-made disasters, and technological disasters. Regardless of the category, millions of families find themselves in crises that demand urgent attention and support. Addressing the needs of families and children in crisis requires coordinated efforts, empathy, and a commitment to comprehensive, integrated, long-term solutions. Nations, organizations, businesses, and faith groups that invest in humanitarian aid, education, healthcare, and psychosocial support contribute to building a more resilient and compassionate world where families and children are better equipped to overcome the challenges of crisis situations. National governments have the sovereign responsibility to identify potential threats, prevent and prepare for possible crises, and then protect and support their citizens when problems occur. This involves implementing effective policies that facilitate aid, protect rights, and support recovery. The good news is that most individuals, families, and communities are generally resilient following disasters and manifest few or no long-term adverse health outcomes, a finding consistently documented in numerous studies.

Families in Crisis:

The impact of war, armed conflict, or natural disaster extends beyond casualties and destruction, affecting the very fabric of families. Separation, loss of homes, economic upheaval, disrupted schooling, and the uncertainty of the future are challenges families face in crisis. Separation from loved ones by death, war, or migration, and the breakdown of support networks can lead to feelings of isolation and abandonment. Immediate relief to families and children in crisis is critical, including food, shelter, and clean water. Medical assistance is also essential to treat physical injuries and respond to ongoing health conditions. Tailored programs addressing parenting skills during a crisis and supporting caregivers of children are essential for long-term recovery and resilience. Restoring a sense of normalcy and community is crucial. Initiatives promoting social integration – such as community centers, regular school classes, and support groups – help families rebuild their lives by providing children with stable environments.

Children in Crisis:

Children are among the most vulnerable victims of crisis situations, and their mental health and well-being may experience lasting effects as a result. Children may exhibit behavioral issues such as aggression, withdrawal, or regressive behaviors as coping mechanisms and signs of emotional distress. Avoid forcing children to talk about their experiences if they are not ready. Instead, provide supportive environments, with supportive family if possible, in order to allow children to express themselves when they feel comfortable to facilitate healing.

Crisis situations increase the risk of child protection issues, including abduction, recruitment into the armed forces, child labor, and exploitation. The International Labor Organization (ILO) notes that crises risk forcing children into hazardous and exploitative work conditions, compromising their health and safety. Families, already struggling to meet basic needs, sometimes find it challenging to protect their children from various forms of harm, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability. Disruptions in their education exacerbate long-term challenges, hindering social adjustment, skill-building, and opportunities for their futures.

Efforts to mitigate adverse childhood experiences can include safe and child-friendly spaces for education, psychosocial and spiritual support, and recreational activities to build resilience and healing from trauma. Educational Initiatives should focus on providing emergency support for learning in conflict and disaster-affected regions. Additionally, policies prioritizing children's well-being should be implemented during and after crises. These policies address their unique needs and vulnerabilities. Empowering children to help others and create improvements in their communities through education and skill-building programs builds resilience and a sense of self-sufficiency.



Abuse, Violence, and Intervention:

Conflict zones often see an increase in abuse and violence, particularly affecting women and children. The IWH condemns all forms of abuse, violence, and rape as despicable acts of war. These are heinous and destructive crimes against humanity. The use of physical, emotional, or psychological abuse and violence is morally reprehensible and a grave violation of international humanitarian law. Abuse and violence targeting vulnerable citizens exacerbate the cycle of fear and destruction disrupting communities. Rape as a tactic of war represents one of the most abhorrent aspects of armed conflicts. It is a deliberate strategy employed to instill fear, exert control, and degrade the dignity of individuals and communities. Rape not only causes immediate and long-term physical harm but also leaves survivors with deep emotional scars, perpetuating trauma lasting a lifetime. Rape is an affront to human rights, gender equality, and the principles of humanity itself.

Preventive measures such as awareness campaigns and legal protection help to ensure safer environments for women, children, and families. Government leaders, civil society members, faith leaders, and individuals must condemn abuse, violence, and all violations of protection and safety. Every individual should live free from the fear of violence and abuse, even during conflict.

Psychosocial and Mental Health:

The psychological toll of crisis situations is profound. It often exposes children and families to traumatic events, including natural disasters, violence, injury, displacement, terminal diagnosis, divorce, unemployment, and loss of loved ones. Experiences like these can lead to acute stress reactions and may develop into more severe mental health conditions. Families and children may experience anxiety related to safety, survival, and the future, which increases the likelihood of depression in both children and adults. Grief and loss manifest in complicated ways, impacting psychological well-being. Some refugee and crisis programs have developed emergency mental health initiatives that can be implemented to support victims in distress. Both parents and children may experience mental health issues, requiring targeted psychosocial support. Early, brief psychosocial interventions are one of the most important predictors for resilient parents and children. The availability of individual, family, and community psychosocial resources appears to be effective in reducing and mitigating adverse health consequences.

How to Help Families and Children in Crisis:

Immediate Relief Priorities:

- Ensure access to safe shelter, food, and medical care.
- Psychological First Aid: assessment, crisis intervention, and trauma treatment

Education and Skill-building:

- Empower families and children with education and skills for self-sustainability
- Healing After Trauma Skills (HATS): facilitated by teachers, psychologists, social workers, community health workers, and other counselors working with children from kindergarten to early middle school
- Disaster Preparedness Nutrition Education Program (DPNEP).

Psychosocial Support:

- Implement programs assessing and treating the psychological impact of crises:
 - Assessment, Crisis Intervention, and Trauma Treatment Model (ACT).
 - Johns Hopkins RAPID Model of Psychological First Aid
 - Listen, Protect, Connect Model of Psychological First Aid
 - Faith Communities & Disaster Mental Health

Protection Measures:

- Establish and enforce measures protecting children and families from abuse and violence

Community Integration:

- Facilitating the integration of displaced populations into host communities for social cohesion
- Prayer/Worship Services/Events: Religious leaders help communities find meaning in crisis by providing opportunities for prayer/worship services, an essential foundation for community recovery

The Importance of Faith-Based Organizations in Crisis Response

In an era marked by both local and global crises, faith-based organizations have emerged as crucial pillars of support for vulnerable children and families. Driven by spiritual convictions and humanitarian principles, these organizations actively bridge gaps left by governmental and secular agencies.

Faith-based groups are often the first line of defense for families in crisis. They provide essential services such as food, clothing, and shelter, particularly in areas where governmental support is limited or slow to respond. In the event of natural disasters, faith-based organizations are frequently among the first responders, providing aid, rebuilding homes, and offering trauma counseling. These groups often provide emotional and spiritual assistance through counseling services to individuals and families coping with trauma, stress, or loss. The community-centric approach of many faith-based organizations promotes a feeling of belonging and supports resilience.

On the global stage, the impact of faith-based organizations is profound and far-reaching. In response to international disasters, groups representing a variety of religions are often among the first to provide emergency aid and medical care in affected areas. Many faith-based groups set up clinics, conduct vaccination drives, and provide surgeries in underserved areas, combatting diseases and improving overall community health.

In areas ravaged by conflict or natural disasters, faith-based organizations engage in rebuilding efforts, going beyond immediate relief to ensure sustainable recovery. One way this is done is through educational approaches, such as providing schools and vocational training, aiming to break the cycle of poverty and empower future generations. Peacebuilding and reconciliation programs in conflict zones not only address immediate needs but also foster long-term commitment to fostering harmony and stability.

Faith-based organizations play an indispensable role in aiding children and families in crisis, both at local and international levels. Their unique blend of practical help, emotional guidance, and spiritual support make them invaluable in the global effort to alleviate suffering and promote human dignity. As the world continues to face complex challenges, the compassionate and coordinated efforts of these organizations remain a beacon of hope for the most vulnerable.

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