PSYCHOSOCIAL SAFETY

Save the Children

Pathways to psychosocial safety for Syria's displaced children and adolescents: policy brief

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'Nobody loves anyone anymore. People have become harder, they have transformed. It is not safe. You can't trust anyone anymore. Where I come from nobody has anything. All is destroyed.'

Saleem, 16, a Syrian refugee girl in Jordan, talking during a Save the Children focus-group discussion

Every child has the right to a future. Save the Children works around the world to give children a healthy start in life, and the chance to learn and to be safe. We do whatever it takes to get children the things they need – every day and in times of crisis.

In order to protect children and the families who agreed to be interviewed by Save the Children, names in this report have been changed and exact locations omitted. All testimonies are based on children's experiences while living in Syria.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The conflict that began in Syria in March 2011 has resulted in the largest displacement crisis in the world: over six million Syrians are currently living as internally displaced people (IDPs)[1] and, in 2019, people inside of Syria continue to be displaced on average in the thousands-per-day. While the conflict and displacement have psychosocial consequences for Syria's displaced people of all ages, the consequences for children— who represent around half of the IDP and refugee populations[2] — are particularly pronounced. This executive summary highlights key components of the full policy brief, which brings to light some of the psychosocial-related priorities highlighted by displaced Syrian children and their caregivers. By introducing the concept of 'psychosocial safety', the brief offers an overview of the impacts of displacement on psychological and social processes that are crucial to a child's healthy development and provides recommendations on how targeted interventions can support protective factors in order to contribute to progress towards durable solutions.

Understanding psychosocial safety

When assessing progress towards durable solutions , Save the Children emphasises the importance of a child's ability to obtain physical, material, legal and psychosocial safety, all of which are crucial for a child's survival and development. However, Save the Children's emphasis on psychosocial safety in particular aims to draw attention to aspects of durable solutions that are inherently present in established policy frameworks , but which have received less dedicated attention in durable solutions discussions to date.

Psychosocial is a term used to describe the intertwined relationship between psychological and social processes, which continuously interact with and influence one another.[3] What a sense of "safety" means to each individual can vary greatly. Rather than aiming to objectively measure this experience, which is impacted by multiple protective factors as well as environmental and individual risks, this brief focuses on recommending ways in which actors can contribute to settings that promote psychosocial safety.

The impact of displacement on psychosocial safety

Given the innumerable stressors that displaced Syrian children have experienced, it is unquestionable that many have had to endure considerable threats to their well-being and development. Displacement can impact Syrian children's psychosocial safety in many ways, including:

Lack of opportunities: In Syria, displaced children often cannot meet their essential needs such as healthcare, adequate housing, a legal identity, and education. The dire economic conditions mean that most families cannot provide their children with quality food or nutrients to achieve or maintain normal child growth and development. After nine years of conflict, this has led to a generation of children who have lost access to education, have often been exposed to harmful work and are chronically malnourished, impairing their physical and cognitive development, interfering with their ability to learn, and ultimately having long-lasting negative impacts on physical and mental health, self-esteem, and productive opportunities in the future.[4]

Exposure to traumatic events: Most Syrian children today have witnessed, heard about or experienced at least one potentially traumatic event[5] since the beginning of the conflict. Many Syrian children report the ongoing bombings and shelling to be the number one cause of psychological stress that they endure in their daily lives[6] and two-thirds of Syrian children living in Syria and surveyed by Save the Children in 2017 reported that they had lost a loved one, had their house bombed or shelled, or had suffered injuries as a result of the conflict.

Grief and loss: The death of a loved one or a separation from friends and family can have profound, life-long impacts on a child's development, influencing relationships with other people and functioning across the lifespan. This is especially true if the child's support system is already hampered by other stressors.

Diminished community and peer support: Most displaced Syrian children are now growing up in communities ill-equipped to provide the infrastructure and support needed for healthy growth and development. The loss of education has clear implications for a child's learning and cognitive development, as well as their social development and ability to interact with others. Given the mobility limitations, Syrian children are often unable to engage with and connect to others, weakening or limiting their social networks and supports.

Displacement-related discrimination: The experience of discrimination can be thought of as any personally felt stigma, ostracism, or harassment that occurs on the basis of one's status. In the context of displacement, discrimination is a day-to-day reality for many children. In 2019 interviews, refugee Syrian children reported discrimination pervading all parts of their life, making it difficult for them to feel safe anywhere outside of their home.[7] Research shows that some children in similar contexts end up enduring a dual-coping burden, where they are forced to grapple with both their minority status and the stress that comes with ongoing political conflict and related uncertainty about their futures.[8]

Identity development: Identity development is a key task of childhood and, particularly, of adolescence. It is during adolescence that children start to identify with their group identities including their cultural, ethnic or national affiliations.[9] When discrimination is experienced at a time in a child's life when their brain is still developing and working to make sense of who they are, it may not only act as a stressor, but also shape how adolescents accept and interpret the negative views society has towards them. This negativity can lead to 'internalised oppression'[10] as well as to an inability for a child to concretely understand who they are and to whom they most belong. Perceived discrimination among minority adolescents in the Middle East has been found to be associated with increased depression symptoms, greater psychological distress, more reports of behavioural problems and risk-behaviours (including engaging in cigarette smoking or violence), and decreased self-esteem.[11]

Diminished agency: The lack of predictability arising from displacement can place notable stress on a child's sense of psychosocial safety. Many of Syria's displaced children have now grown up in displacement, never having had the guarantees that they could build their futures in the context in which they live. Adolescents especially need to take part in decision-making and have a voice when it comes to issues that impact their broader environment, including through political participation and voicing their priorities around the future of their country. In the context of Syria, opportunities to speak out in a protected environment are scarce and little evidence exists to confirm that young people are given opportunities to contribute to community or other decision-making mechanisms.

Building psychosocial safety

Making sure that children can be safe and secure enough to pursue their right to development, learning, and other opportunities regardless of their displacement histories, is fundamental for the attainment of durable solutions. The policy brief identifies eight ways of strengthening protective factors to support psychosocial safety for Syria's displaced children:

1. Fulfilling physical, material and legal safety needs: Fulfilling needs related to love, self-esteem, or self-actualisation interacts closely with physical, material and legal safety. Given the poverty and insecurity that a large majority of Syrian children are living in, major threats are posed daily to their ability to meet their basic needs, such as access to healthcare, education, sustainable household income, personal documentation and freedom from threats of violence and criminality.

2. Supporting positive identity development in changing contexts: Understanding how a child's identity is formed and the potential conflicts with the surrounding community that for example return to Syria may provoke, is crucial for ensuring support to positive parenting in this context.

3. Strengthening family units and supports: Across cultures, increased family connectedness matters greatly for a child's psychosocial safety. This is particularly true during displacement, when children's experiences of migration and attempts to integrate in new environments are known to be impacted by their parents' ability to adapt.[12] It is clear that supporting children also means support for positive, sensitive, and nurturing parenting, as well as parental self-care, psychoeducation, and person-focused psychosocial support through evidence-based intervention packages and referrals to clinical services for those parents whose mental health needs exceed the capacity of non-specialised providers.

4. Ensuring participation and voice for children: The right of children to express their views and to be heard[13] also applies to decision making around children's futures, including in relation to durable solutions. Access to information on issues that are relevant to children themselves based on their age, gender, and other characteristics, can help them cope with some of the stressors related to uncertainty and significant future changes, such as potential return or settlement in a new location.

5. Ensuring access to safe spaces: Children should have access to spaces that enable interaction, play, and safe learning and that are appropriately tailored to different ages and genders. Safe and inclusive schools are a primary example of such a space, and a key contributor to psychosocial safety. Safe, accessible, age- and gender-sensitive safe spaces provide opportunity for adolescents and youth to gather, connect and exchange with their peers.

6. Combatting discrimination and strengthening child-focused social cohesion: Cultivating psychosocially safe environments means cultivating environments that combat the stigma and discrimination risks that displaced Syrian children experience. All responses to discrimination should serve to support communities as a whole and refrain from highlighting or enforcing perceived differences between different communities and individual children.

7. Steps towards peacebuilding and rebuilding a sense of justice: The level of psychosocial safety children feel is also intrinsically linked to the reasons they had to flee their country in the first place, including violence, conflict and injustice. Without cultivating paths towards meaningful reconciliation and sustainable peace, achieving psychosocial safety will remain elusive.

8. Ensuring access to specialised mental health care: Additional mental health support may be needed for some children, which may be provided by non-specialised staff who can be trained and supervised to deliver evidence-informed interventions. For more severe mental health conditions, support can also be provided by specialised mental health professionals in clinical or community settings. On top of being specialised, displacement-, and ideally trauma-informed, mental health and psychosocial support services must also be accessible. Even prior to the outbreak of the conflict, availability of specialised mental health services in Syria was extremely limited and it remains so in the current situation.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Authorities in Syria, donors, and practitioners must provide practical support to protect children in conflict and enable their recovery, including actions directly fostering children's psychosocial wellbeing, such as:

- Integrating psychosocial safety as an important element in all durable solutions frameworks. Authorities as well as humanitarian and development actors must recognise the psychosocial safety needs of displaced populations, including Syrian children and adolescents, as an important element in all durable solutions frameworks and ensure psychosocial safety is included and funded in related programmatic and advocacy initiatives

- Involving children in durable solutions planning. Authorities, humanitarian community (including donors) as well as civil society actors should ensure that displaced Syrian children have agency when planning for durable solutions

- Investing in community-based support systems. Humanitarian actors must support and expand existing family- and community-based networks and mechanisms that bolster psychosocial safety for children

- Mainstreaming mental health and psychosocial support considerations into the provision of education, healthcare and social services. Stakeholders must increase access to specialised mental health care and other targeted support for children and adults who need them.

- Committing to peacebuilding as a necessary prerequisite to achieve psychosocial safety.

2. INTRODUCTION

'I think about the army. Could I go and fight in a battle? Do I know what I am doing? You're going to kill your cousin, a human. Why do I have to do that?'

Eyad, Syrian refugee boy in Jordan, talking during a Save the Children focus-group discussion

Psychosocial safety refers to a sense of safety in relation to the psychological and social processes that can be negatively impacted by displacement. Psychosocial safety is achieved when conditions are conducive to support a child's healthy development and wellbeing, In addition to psychosocial safety, for a durable solution to be achieved, a displaced child should also be able to feel physically, materially and legally safe.

The conflict that began in Syria in March 2011 has resulted in the largest displacement crisis in the world: over six million Syrians are currently living as internally displaced people (IDPs) inside the country[14] and, in 2019 alone, people inside of Syria continued to be displaced at an average of the thousands-per-day. An additional 5.6 million other Syrians are registered as refugees in neighbouring countries.[15] Millions of displaced children and their families have had to endure distress related to their ongoing exposure to violence, stress and uncertainty.

While the psychosocial consequences impact Syria's displaced people of all ages, the consequences for children—who represent around half of the IDP and refugee populations[16] — are particularly pronounced. The uncertainty around a child's social environment can have a deep impact on their physical, emotional, cognitive and social development.[17] Some of the events triggering displacement can be traumatic or can result in a long-term sense of injustice.[18] Displaced children are also at higher risks of discrimination than children in host communities.[19] Refugee returnee children in particular can also endure high levels of anxiety or stress specific to their experience of return.[20] All of these experiences can further compound the psychosocial distress that Syrian children already grapple with.

This policy brief brings to light some of the psychosocial-related priorities highlighted by displaced Syrian children and their caregivers when discussing durable solutions, which typically receive less attention in durable solutions frameworks than the physical, material and legal aspects of durable solutions do. By introducing the concept of 'psychosocial safety', this brief offers an overview of the impacts of displacement on psychological and social processes that are crucial to a child's healthy development and provides recommendations on how targeted interventions can support protective factors in order to contribute to progress towards durable solutions.

To note, this brief refers to children when talking about those under the age of 18. However, the age, gender and developmental stage of a child matter greatly for how displacement and consequently psychosocial safety is experienced. Though this policy brief focuses on the impacts of displacement on psychosocial safety, it is also important to also acknowledge the challenges that resident communities in Syria are also bound to be experiencing due to the conflict. Responses in Syria need to address the needs of all vulnerable children regardless of their displacement history or other characteristics. Many of the recommendations for supporting psychosocial safety outlined in this brief are equally applicable to non-displaced populations and should be delivered through a whole-of-community or society approach.

A drawing by a 13 year old boy from Dara, currently in Jordan, during a Save the Children run focus group discussion, illustrating what going back to Syria mean to them.

3. UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOSOCIAL SAFETY

'I feel safe. I have never been attacked since I came here. Nobody attacked me in the streets or even at school. I have plenty of Turkish friends whom I love. They never hurt me during my stay here.'

Khalil, a Syrian refugee boy in Turkey talking during a Save the Children focus-group discussion

Save the Children considers a durable solution to displacement achieved when a displaced child's rights are fully reinstated during and/or after displacement and when the specific vulnerabilities and risks for the child arising from displacement — including discrimination — are meaningfully minimised. Additionally, for a durable solution to be realised, a state has to permanently recognise or reinstate an individual's legal protection or status.

When assessing progress towards durable solutions, Save the Children emphasises the importance of a child's ability to obtain physical, material, legal and psychosocial safety, all of which are crucial for a child's survival and development. However, Save the Children's emphasis on psychosocial safety in particular aims to draw attention to aspects of durable solutions that are inherently present in established policy frameworks such as the 2010 Interagency Standing Committee Framework on Durable Solutions for IDPs[21], but which have received less dedicated attention in durable solutions discussions to date.

Psychosocial is a term used to describe the intertwined relationship between psychological and social processes, which continuously interact with and influence one another.[22] What a sense of "safety" means to each individual can vary greatly. Rather than aiming to objectively measure this experience, which is impacted by multiple protective factors as well as environmental and individual risks, this brief focuses on recommending ways in which actors can contribute to settings that promote psychosocial safety.

Regardless of which pathway to a durable solution a child is pursuing, an environment that supports psychosocial safety is one in which a displaced child:

- Feels that their identity and belief systems are valued

- Experiences supportive relationships and connection to their family, friends and community

- Can access age-friendly spaces to socialise, play and learn

- Is socially included and is free from discrimination

- Is empowered to contribute to decision-making on matters that concern them

- Has access to meaningful opportunities and feels hopeful about the future

- Has access to appropriate reconciliation and peacebuilding measures if they so wish to use them

- Can access specialised mental health support services when needed

Because a child cannot meaningfully enjoy the elements above without having security in all realms of the durable solutions framework, a psychosocially safe environment is also one that is free from immediate threats to a child's physical, material or legal safety as well.

Material safety · Psychosocial safety · Physical safety · Legal safety · **Child-sensitive durable solutions**
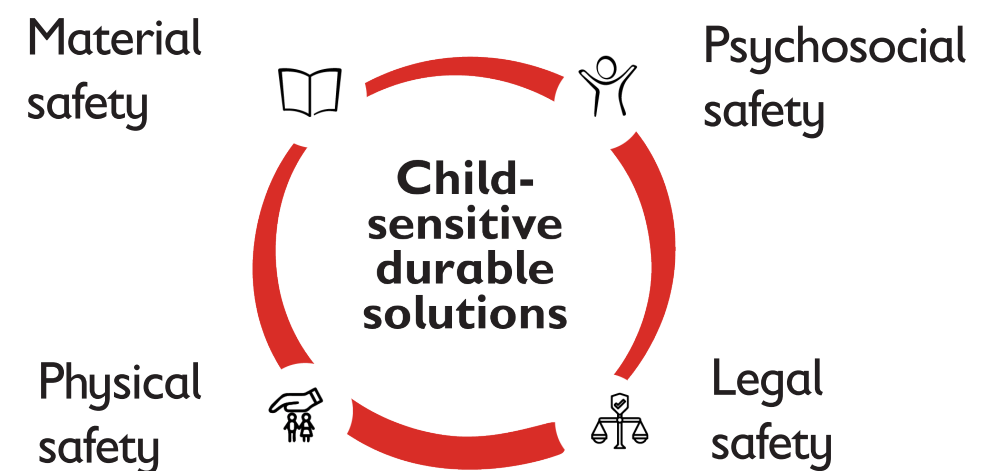
■ Save the Children's child-sensitive durable solutions framework

4. IMPACT OF DISPLACEMENT ON PSYCHOSOCIAL SAFETY

'I feel excited to return and see my family and friends. [here], I feel terrible [starts crying], I feel so much pain inside, we're poor in a foreign country, and I miss my country.'

Lama, a Syrian refugee girl talking during a Save the Children focus-group discussion

It is impossible to predict how any single Syrian child may experience psychosocial safety as it is a complex concept impacted by their experience, interpretation of the experience, and the context in which they live.[23] But given the innumerable stressors that displaced Syrian children have experienced, it is unquestionable that many (if not all) have had to endure considerable threats to their wellbeing and development.

First and foremost, displacement in and of itself is an experience of upheaval and insecurity and a subsequent strain on psychosocial safety. When displaced, children experience a range of losses including loss of a home, a familiar environment, the routine of an educational setting, social networks and often the usual patterns of family life. Depending on their age, displaced Syrian children may have been born into displacement, never having known the place their

parents and communities call home. They may also have varying memories of their environment before displacement or complicated relationships with their environment 'in displacement', which can weaken their sense of belonging. Outcomes for individuals depend largely on a combination of exposures, risks and protective factors. That said, displacement can impact Syrian children's psychosocial safety in many ways, including:

3.1.   Lack of opportunities

In Syria, displaced children are largely materially, physically and legally unsafe and are often restricted in their ability to enjoy their rights. This includes limited access to essential needs such as healthcare, adequate housing, a legal identity, and education. Approximately two-thirds of children in the country live in extreme poverty,[24] and

those returning from countries of asylum in the region have also suffered from pervasive poverty.[25]

The dire economic conditions mean that most families cannot provide their children with quality food or nutrients to achieve or maintain normal child growth and development. After nine years of conflict, this has led to a generation of children who are chronically malnourished, impairing their physical and cognitive development, interfering with their ability to learn, and ultimately having long-lasting negative impacts on physical and mental health, self-esteem, and productive opportunities in the future.[26]

Refugee returnee parents in Syria have expressed concern around access to safe play areas and materials and many caregivers are afraid of hazards such as explosive remnants and devastated buildings and restrict their children's outdoor play as a result. Caregivers also lament the lack of access to toys and games that could keep their children meaningfully occupied during free time.[27]

Perhaps even more disrupting to displaced Syrian children, though, is the diminished access to education. School enrolment in Syria is among the lowest in the world now, with one-third of school-aged children no longer attending school and an estimated 1.35 million are at risk for dropping out.[28] It is a risk that increases as children get older, given the pressures many of them face to supplement the family income or prematurely take on adult caregiving roles. Additionally, the emergent changes to the context, such as the COVID-19 outbreak and its control measures have driven the numbers of out-of-school children even higher, further increasing the severity, depth and long-term impacts of the education emergency in Syria. This not only has an impact on educational outcomes, but also exposes children to other protection risks.[29]

The loss of school brings loss of stability, routine, skill development (including problem solving, coping skills, self-worth and resiliency), and the opportunity for regular and meaningful socialisation with peers. Peer-to-peer interaction is undeniably important as it facilitates children learning patience, cooperation, trial and error, and group solidarity—vital building blocks for healthy social relations in later life.[30] Overall, by providing a safe, peer-to-peer environment, school is often irreplaceable and uniquely situated to foster a multitude of critical social and emotional developmental processes. Sixty percent of adults surveyed by Save the Children in 2017 cited 'not receiving an education' as one the factors that they felt would have the biggest impact on their child's life and Syrian children, as well, report feeling unable to imagine a happy future for themselves without an education.[31]

Lack of opportunities and economic hardship also expose children and young people to multiple protection risks. Girls in particular are at risk of forced and early marriage, which in turn exposes them to potential loss of self-esteem, risk of violence and personal protection risks, and long-term health issues. Boys, on the other hand, are at a relatively higher risk of recruitment into armed forces and groups[32], as well as harmful forms of child labour outside the home. In general, the movement patterns of Syrian men and boys in particular have been impacted by the need to protect property and assets and fear of conscription, which may impact mobility inside Syria,[33] as well as significantly contributes to decision making around refugee returns[34], including for boys soon to be of military age, who frequently mention conscription as a key reason for them not to return to Syria, even if they otherwise feel that return would give them better access to higher education or livelihood opportunities.[35]

Drawing by a 13-year-old refugee boy in Ramtha, Jordan, about how life in Syria looks like. He arrived in Jordan at the age of six from Dar'a. He and his friends are concerned about bombs and shooting when returning back to Syria.

3.2.   Exposure to traumatic events

A large proportion of Syrian children are currently living in a state of prolonged distress,[36] which can have serious impacts on their development. Most Syrian children today have witnessed, heard about or experienced at least one potentially traumatic event[37] since the beginning of the conflict. In the first six years of the conflict alone, there were more than 4,000 violent attacks on Syrian schools[38] and in 2016, children accounted for nearly 1-in-4 of all combat-related civilian deaths.[39] Many Syrian children report the ongoing bombings and shelling to be the number one cause of psychological stress that they endure in their daily lives[40] and two-thirds of Syrian children living in Syria and surveyed by Save the Children in 2017 reported to have lost a loved one, to have had their house bombed or shelled, or to have suffered injuries as a result of the conflict. Syrian children who are recruited into armed groups are even more vulnerable.[41] In 2018, for instance, 94 percent of the 806 children (670 boys and 136 girls) known to be recruited into armed forces or armed groups were used in combat roles,[42] increasing their likelihood of exposure to combat-related trauma.

An estimated 15 percent of children between 12-19 years of age in Syria live with a disability.[43] While numbers for younger children with disabilities from inside Syria are not available, it is estimated that over 3 million Syrian children are exposed to explosive hazards.[44] Lack of access to adequate care, including mental health and psychosocial support, further prolongs and worsens disabling conditions and their impacts on children's lives. [45]As an example, a 2016 study conducted by HI among Syrians in Jordan found that 80 percent of people injured by explosive weapons expressed signs of high psychological distress, while around two-thirds were unable to carry out essential daily activities because of their feelings of fear, anger, fatigue, disinterest and hopelessness, and were so upset that they tried to avoid places, people and situations that reminded them of the event. A devastating 75 percent of children under the age of five assessed in the study felt so afraid that nothing could calm them down.[46]

The serious psychological adversity that children are likely to have experienced includes not only severe incidents such as bombings, but also exposure to pervasive and insidious harmful experiences including deprivation and violence in the home (including physical, verbal and emotional abuse or neglect). In one survey of Syrian adults in 2017, 50 percent reported that they believed that instances of domestic violence had grown in their communities since 2011.[47] Another found that about 17 percent of Syrian communities report that violence against children in the home is a common or very common occurrence in their neighbourhoods.[48]

Children with disabilities often face an additional, particularly high risk of violence, abuse and neglect at home,[49] as well as discrimination and exclusion in their communities.

Overall and due to the ongoing conflict, many Syrian children are living in fear of terrifying things happening to them or their families and in general, of dying[50]—fears that can linger long after direct exposure to the violence has ceased. Indeed, focus group discussions with adolescent Syrian refugees have highlighted the extent to which distressing and traumatic memories of their earlier lives in Syria remain, resulting in a complicated relationship to the notion of return. Even for those who express a desire to reunite with their families and to 'go home', thoughts of returning are often accompanied by deep levels of anxiety and fear,[51] as well

as expressed increased pressure among adolescent refugee boys to personally find ways to guarantee the safety of their sisters and other girls in their families upon return to Syria.[52] According to caregivers, Syrian children can exhibit extreme stress-responses triggered by the experience of return, including aggressiveness, panic attacks, relentless feelings of fear, self-isolation, and/or bedwetting.[53]

3.3. Grief and loss

The death of a loved one or a separation from friends and family can have profound, life-long impacts on a child's development, influencing relationships with other people and functioning across the lifespan. This is especially true if the child's support system is already hampered by other stressors.

Over the past nine years, multitudes of Syria's children have had to grapple with the grief associated with losing family and friends to death or to separation. Adolescents voice great distress around feeling that their loved ones have been taken away from them because of the conflict. According to OCHA, in 2018, 31-40 percent of the surveyed Syrian community members reported that family separation (due to factors like death, disappearance, displacement, or economic drivers) was common or very common in their area.[54] Additionally, in interviews, many adolescents acknowledge that they have lost parents, close family members, spouses and even children to the conflict and those who have yet to experience such a loss, name it as a daily and persistent fear.[55]

It is as such understandable that nearly 60 percent of 13 to 17 year-olds polled in 2017 reported that they did not feel safe when away from their parents. Evidence suggests that parents become similarly very 'stressed' when their children are away from the

home.[56] The impact of loss and separation is remarkable on all children, it is particularly profound for very young children, who rely on a secure attachment to their primary caregiver(s) to develop their sense of self and place in the world and to develop their emotional and social wellbeing.[57]

3.4. Diminished community and peer support

Most displaced Syrian children are now growing up in communities that are ill-equipped to provide the infrastructure and support needed for healthy growth and development. The loss of school has objective implications for a child's learning and cognitive development, as well as their social development and ability to interact with others. It also takes away a critical chance for a child to be part of something meaningful.

Based on sentiments they receive from their family members still inside of Syria, Syrian refugee adolescents report that their peers in-country are not able to safely travel outside of their homes. Adolescent refugees highlight as well that in Syria, girls in particular tend to face more restricted mobility due to greater concerns (either their own or their caregivers') about safety.[58] This inability to move around freely can be particularly challenging for returnee children, who often had experienced greater freedoms when living in a neighbouring country.[59]

Given the mobility limitations, Syrian children are often unable to engage with and connect to others, weakening or limiting their social networks and supports. These limitations are likely greater for IDP versus host-community children. Even in areas that are now less impacted by direct conflict (e.g. Al Hasakeh in the North East), host community adolescents still move around more and have greater access to services

and supports compared to their IDP counterparts.[60] This is partly because displaced families can have less knowledge about what services exist in host communities—a knowledge gap that is exacerbated by the sometimes strained relations or fragile trust between displaced and non-displaced communities.

Anecdotal information suggests that refugee returnees in particular prefer to hide their displacement history for fear of exposure to discrimination, crime or even retaliation by the broader community.[61] For adolescents especially, this means that they are being tasked with hiding significant and formative life events which can impact their sense of identity and strain their peer relations.

3.5. Displacement-related discrimination

The experience of discrimination can be thought of as any personally felt stigma, ostracism, or harassment that occurs on the basis of one's status. Non-discrimination is a basic principle of international child rights, with Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child stating that no child must be discriminated against, 'irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status'.[62] However, in the context of displacement, discrimination is a day-to-day reality for many children.

Syrian child pokes out of their tent in Idlib, Syria. Photo taken on 15 May 2019 by Khalil Ashawe / Save the Children.

A 2018 qualitative study, for instance, found that IDP students were the most commonly marginalised and discriminated against in Syrian schools and that they faced many challenges to community integration. Almost half of the children participating in that study also reported that they had witnessed or experienced teacher-driven discrimination in their classrooms whereby displaced children, as well as children with physical or psychological disabilities,[63] were targeted.[64]

Because approximately one-third of the population inside of Syria is currently living as IDPs, the levels of cohabitation between host and displaced communities in Syria is high.[65] In different parts of Syria, IDPs are living among host communities potentially different from them in ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation. Individuals with displacement histories may therefore be at particular risk for 'othering' and related hostility, leading to heightened social and communal tensions.[66] The 'othering' experience may also be particularly pronounced for returnees given that many of them were already confronted with high levels of discrimination when living outside of Syria. In 2019 interviews, for instance, refugee Syrian children reported discrimination pervading all parts of their life, making it difficult for them to feel safe anywhere outside of their home.[67] Though those children expressed feelings of gratitude towards their host communities, they also detailed experiences of verbal abuse and taunting and of subsequent isolation or ostracism. Research shows that some children in similar contexts end up enduring a dual-coping burden, where they are forced to grapple with both their minority status and the stress that comes with ongoing political conflict.[68]Elsewhere, this has been observed among Palestinian children, explaining how living as a member of a minority group in a discriminating community can be doubly burdensome and

can contribute to an accumulation of stress and eventually also have serious impacts on a person's physical health.[69]

3.6.   Identity development

Identity development is a key task of childhood and, particularly, of adolescence. It is during adolescence that children start to identify with their group identities including their cultural, ethnic or national affiliations.[70] When discrimination is experienced at a time in a child's life when their brain is still developing and working to make sense of who they are, it may not only act as a stressor, but also shape how adolescents accept and interpret the negative views society has towards them. This negativity can lead to 'internalised oppression'[71] as well as to an inability for a child to concretely understand who they are and to whom they most belong.

Ideally, during adolescence children have opportunity to build positive affiliations with the groups they are part of and have opportunity to establish a sense of security, so that they are equipped to buffer against the negative effects of discrimination if and when it occurs.[72] Indeed, children who are given opportunity to develop their group identities fully are believed to have stronger egos, better capacities to self-evaluate, higher senses or agency and autonomy, stronger family relations, and more social and peer interactions.[73] Having more pride in and identification with a group identity is associated with improved adjustment and development for children.[74]

Yet because identity development is not complete before mid-to-late adolescence (if then),[75] discrimination during childhood is especially harmful. Children have had less time to build up strong senses of self and strong affiliations with their identities. As such, perceived discrimination among

'I will be unhappy. I have so many concerns about the war. I am afraid that some day a missile will hit the ceiling of my house and fall on my head while sleeping'

Ibrahim, a Syrian refugee boyin ,Jordan, talking during a Save the Children focus-group discussion when asked about returning to Syria

minority adolescents in the Middle East has been found to be associated with increased depression symptoms, greater psychological distress, more reports of behavioural problems, more risk-behaviours (including engaging in cigarette smoking or violence), and decreased self-esteem.[76] Among Arab minority youth in particular, more perceived discrimination has been found to be associated with more post-traumatic stress symptoms, psychosocial distress, and emotional behaviour problems.[77] In interviews with returnees inside Syria, some caregivers of adolescent boys in particular highlighted worries about aggressive behaviour and suspected drug abuse.[78]

Furthermore, without having sufficient time to build up strong sense of identity and origin, children exposed to discrimination are more likely to internalise the negative messages they receive about themselves and their group affiliations. This is particularly true for children with marginalised identities (which displaced children often are) and can result in long-lasting negative perceptions of self.[79]

In particular, returnee children must cope with navigating the cultural gains and losses they get from living in a country that was not their own and then returning to Syria. Many may deal with "nostalgic disorientation,"[80] or the discomfort and agony that comes from longing for the familiar and settled after experiencing upheaval, destruction, or dislocation (essentially, a longing to belong).

Interestingly, while adolescent Syrian refugees who had spent most of their adolescence in countries of asylum brought up multiple experiences of discrimination and ostracism in focus group discussions, many also referred to 'brotherhood' or 'sisterhood' between Syrian refugees and their host communities,[81] and a strong sense of belonging in countries of asylum.[82] By contrast (and even though many highlighted strong Syrian identities and significant ties to their country of origin), discussants expressed significant feelings of 'otherness' in relation to their families and communities inside of Syria. This was related to adolescents perceiving the communities inside of Syria to be more

conservative. Adolescent girls especially expressed worry that they may have less freedom upon return than in their countries of asylum, where they perceived women to have stronger rights, to marry later, and to have greater ability to independently socialise outside of the home.[83]

In addition to differences between cultures that displaced children are balancing, displacement can lead to change in gender and other roles and norms inside the family, impacting children's idealised identities. A recent study on changes in the role of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, for example, highlighted multiple ways in which the conflict had shifted their roles towards more decision-making power and agency – a change which vast majority of the respondents experienced as a positive one.[84] Changes in expected roles of adolescent boys and girls as a result of the conflict and displacement are also documented inside Syria: based on a recent study, both girls and boys being expected to take on adult roles and fulfil caretaking and provider responsibilities at an early age. For both girls and boys, this shift was often seen as a positive one, both in terms of a sense of pride related to being able to contribute to their households, but also contributing to feelings of stronger sense of masculinity for the boys, and a stronger sense of equality for the girls.[85]

3.7. Diminished agency

Displacement limits ability to take part in and access opportunities in multiple ways. In particular, the lack of predictability arising from displacement can place notable stress on a child's sense of psychosocial safety. Many of Syria's displaced children have now grown up in displacement, never having had the guarantees that they could permanently stay or build their futures in the context in which they live in. The result of not having

clarity around the stability of their home, community, or society is that the notion of the 'future', in and of itself, is a source of stress for Syrian refugees.[86]

While young people have their own preferences and hopes for the future, decisions on significant topics such as place of settlement and potential for return are primarily seen through the lens of the adult(s) in the home. In interviews, adolescent boys report to often having had conversations about the future at home, but decision making about the future seems indeed to largely rely on the judgement of the head of the household, who is most often a male. The vast majority of the interviewed girls felt like they do not have a role in family decision-making or even discussions about topics such as return, which were seen as highly political and far-removed from them. [87] This is concerning given that when asked, children voice clear opinions, fears, and priorities of their own around potential and future returns to Syria. When these opinions, fears, and priorities are not accounted for or addressed, children are at risk for increased stress, impairments to mental health, a loss of dreams, and a loss of perceived opportunities.[88]

Adolescents especially have a need to take part in decision-making and have a voice when it comes to issues that impact their broader environment, including through political participation and voicing their priorities around the future of their country. In discussions, adolescent boys in particular readily express their concerns around the situation inside of Syria, regional politics, and the history of the conflict. In the context of Syria, opportunities to speak out in a protected environment are scarce and little evidence exists to confirm that young people are given opportunities to contribute to community or other decision making mechanisms.

A drawing by a 12-year-old refugee boy's of his perception of life in Syria. He is originally from Aleppo, but currently lives in Baalbek, Lebanon. His family is planning to return to back to Syria.

A group of children playing 'army' inside a damaged school in Deir Ezzour, Syria. Photo taken in 21 March 2014 by Khalil Ashawe / Save the Children

4. BUILDING PSYCHOSOCIAL SAFETY

'Here you have something nice: girls get married at the age of 30 or so. In Syria it is so early. We have a female teacher who is 27. We asked if she is married and she said "no I am still young!" [laughter in the group]'

Hana, 17, a Syrian refugee girl in Mafraq city, Jordan, talking during a Save the Children focus-group discussion

Any effort to support durable solutions for Syria will need to take account of the impacts of displacement on the psychosocial safety of Syria's children if it is to be meaningful. As everyone's wellbeing is inextricably linked to the environments in which they live,[89] the promotion of psychosocial safety must extend beyond focusing on the child alone to additionally target the family, community and wider Syrian society. Making sure that children can be safe and secure enough to pursue their right to development, learning, and other opportunities regardless of their displacement histories, is fundamental for the attainment of durable solutions.

Efforts to do this should be guided by an analysis of the ways in which children are affected by the adverse impacts of displacement, depending on the combi-nation of risk and protective factors they are exposed to. According to the IASC intervention pyramid for mental health and psychosocial support in emergencies,[90] all conflict-affected people, including the displaced, will need their basic needs for physical safety, security, food and liveli-hoods, shelter, and access to basic services to be met. MHPSS considerations should also be integrated throughout provision of those services, including through ensuring that staff are adequately trained on topics such as psychological first aid and appro-priate communication with populations exposed to emergencies and conflict. A large proportion of conflict-affected peo-ple will also need assistance in restoring and re-engaging family and community supports including community spaces, net-works and activities that may have been disrupted by conflict and displacement.

How to build psychosocial safety

1. Fulfil physical, material and legal safety needs
2. Support positive identity development in changing contexts
3. Strengthen family units and communit supports
4. Ensure participation and voice for children
5. Ensure access to safe spaces
6. Combat discrimination and strengthen child-focused social cohesion
7. Take steps towards peacebuilding and rebuilding a sense of justice
8. Ensure access to specialised mental health care when needed

For most people, these interventions will be sufficient to restore normal functioning when they are adequately tailored to reflect displacement-specific challenges and vulnerabilities. For some, however, additional focused mental health and psychosocial support may be required. These additional supports may include task-shifting approaches that train non-specialists to provide emotionally supportive care to persons experiencing distress or common mental health conditions. Further, some persons might require specialised interventions to address severe mental health conditions The below sections suggest six ways of strengthening protective factors to support psychosocial safety for Syria's displaced children.

4.1. Fulfilling physical, material and legal safety needs

Fulfilling needs related to love, self-esteem, or self-actualisation interacts closely with physical, material and legal safety. Given the poverty and insecurity that a large majority of Syrian children are living in, major threats are posed daily to their ability to meet their basic needs, such as access to healthcare, education, sustainable household income, personal documentation and freedom from threats of violence and criminality.

As such, they are severely restricted in their ability to pursue or secure their own psychosocial safety. This extends to caregivers as well. Without addressing the basic safety needs of Syria's displaced children and their families in a sustainable manner, the pursuit of psychosocial safety will not be attainable. This will require a specific emphasis on ensuring meaningful access to services for children of all ages, genders and abilities, without discrimination based on their displacement history.

4.2 Supporting positive identity development in changing contexts

While displacement can significantly impact on a child's identity development and sense of self, these impacts are hardly uniform. Many young people may not even identify themselves as displaced or different, as displacement is the state of 'normal' they have ever known.[91] Instead, beyond displacement, it is crucial to understand the multiple other factors that contribute to identity formation, including a child's gender, ability and other characteristics, as well as the surrounding community's attitudes and expectations in relation to these, wherever displaced children end up settling in the long term.

As an example, despite some of the reported changes in gender roles and in particular the expanded role of women during displacement, some of the aspirations for more freedoms that refugee girls report to have acquired in countries of asylum[92] may not translate into increased opportunities for them on the long term – either due to resistance from families and communities once returning to Syria or, as warned by a recent report, because of the displacement-related pressures that have forced girls to drop out of school and marry at a young age.[93] This can result in frustration and a sense of loss perceived opportunities and dreams, which can have long-term impacts on psychosocial wellbeing. Understanding how a child's identity is formed and the potential conflicts with the surrounding community that for example return to Syria may provoke, is crucial for ensuring support to positive parenting in this context.

4.3. Strengthening family units and supports

Across cultures, increased family connectedness matters greatly for a child's psycho-

A generic photo of a 'street' that goes across Al Hol camp in North East Syria. Photo taken in September 2019 by Idris Hussein / Save the Children.

social safety. This is particularly true during displacement, when children's experiences of migration and attempts to integrate in new environments are known to be impacted by their parents' abilities to adapt.[94] Yet in a recent study, Save the Children identified that only 40 percent of surveyed children feel that they can turn to their family when feeling scared.[95] Other research by Save the Children among Syrian refugee populations highlighted similar findings, whereby adolescents mentioned they did not want to rely on their caregivers for support because they felt misunderstood by their parents, they did not want to overburden them, or they simply felt 'lonely' overall.[96]

Strong social support and social networks matter greatly. Yet in the same Save the Children study, only two percent of surveyed children said that they had people in their community like counsellors, teachers, or psychosocial professionals that they could turn to when they were feeling afraid, sad, or upset. Recent research among Syrian refugees from families planning for return to Syria also showed a worrying lack of positive coping mechanisms in general, including

supportive family and community relations, among older adolescents.[97]

Despite the fact that caregivers in Syria are multi-stressed and under-supported themselves, many are aware of the displacement-related psychosocial support needs of their children and report wanting to know how they can better make their children feel safe, feel reassured when concerned, and how they can create a sense of normality within the context of highly non-normal circumstances.[98] On the other hand, some refugee parents also report feeling exhausted and not knowing how to relate to their "stubborn" adolescent children.[99] It is clear that supporting children also means support for positive, sensitive, and nurturing parenting, as well as parental self-care, psychoeducation, and person-focused psychosocial support through evidence-based intervention packages and referrals to clinical services for those parents whose mental health needs exceed the capacity of non-specialised providers.

While it is clear that Syrian children need more in the way of positive relationships

with trusted adults and mentors they can rely on, as well as safe spaces in the community in which they can be children, play, learn, and develop their social skills, it is also vital to create opportunities for their participation and engagement in the community.

4.4. Ensuring participation and voice for children

The Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for children to be recognised and respected as rights holders rather than as passive objects of protection and care, including the right of children to express their views and to be heard in decision-making processes that affect their lives.[100] This also applies to decision making around their futures, including in relation to the durable solutions options available to them. While meaningful choices for Syria's displaced are often limited, access to information on issues that are relevant to children themselves based on their age, gender, and other characteristics, can help them cope with some of the stressors related to uncertainty and significant future changes, such as potential return or settlement in a new location. Based on findings from research among refugee caregivers and children from

families planning for return to Syria, there is a general lack of reliable information about the situation inside of Syria, resulting in various concerns among the populations planning for return. Information relevant to children of different ages and their caregivers was a particular gap, leading to significant concerns pre-return and various regrets after in regard to parents not having considered the priorities of their children in return planning.[101]

4.5. Ensuring access to safe spaces

One way to contribute to a psychosocially safe environment is through ensuring that children, in all their diversity, have access to spaces that enable interaction, play, and safe learning and that are appropriately tailored to different ages and genders. Safe and inclusive schools are a primary example of such a space, and a key contributor to psychosocial safety—not to mention the essential role that schools play in supporting the development of various academic competencies. Furthermore, spaces for play and socialising serve multiple goals for identity formation, social connectedness, and community cohesion.

A drawing by a 15-year-old girl from Dara, currently living in Lebanon, who feels that safety for children in Syria means being together with their parents. Arabic word in the painting reads 'safety'.

In volatile contexts where these kinds of spaces do not readily exist, humanitarian actors can help establish them to fill the gap. When linked to existing community structures and resourced with staff and volunteers trained in psychosocial principles, such spaces can offer opportunities for both unstructured creative play alongside age-appropriate structured activities that facilitate expression, socialisation, and calming techniques.[102] These settings are paramount for building healthy coping skills and social activities fundamental for generating a sense of belonging.[103] These types of safe spaces can also offer access to additional services and referrals for more vulnerable children and families by ensuring that staff and volunteers are trained in safe identification and referrals, as well as information dissemination.

As such, safe spaces are not only important as play areas for younger children. Safe, accessible, age- and gender-sensitive safe spaces provide opportunity for adolescents and youth to gather, connect and exchange with their peers. They are equally important for realising some of the crucial developmental outcomes of late childhood (e.g. identity formation, peer support, and social networks) as they are for early. Save the Children is in the process of finalising guidelines for establishing "adolescent-friendly spaces" in Syria and the region more broadly to ensure access to these opportunities for all children.

Similarly, safe spaces are crucial for adolescents who may no longer be able to live their childhood roles. In Syria, Save the Children and partners are providing safe spaces for adolescent mothers and their babies to receive nutrition and health advice as well as psychosocial counselling. Beyond individual psychosocial support, these spaces are often opportunities for young mothers (and in some instances fathers) to meet in a pro-

tective environment, to share their stories, to laugh and cry, and become empowered to find solutions to early childhood challenges together.

4.6. Combating discrimination and strengthening child-focused social cohesion

Cultivating psychosocially safe environments means cultivating environments that combat the stigma and discrimination risks that displaced Syrian children experience. The foundation for this is ensuring that all responses to discrimination support communities as a whole and refrain from highlighting or enforcing perceived differences between different communities and individual children.

Research shows that a higher positive regard for one's own identity and stronger family connections[104] can all protect against the detrimental impacts of the discrimination children can experience. Preparing adolescents for discrimination they may be exposed to—for example, through having open and honest conversations with children about what discrimination is and how to respond to it—also seems to serve as a buffer against negative psychological effects.[105] Therefore, environments that work to increase positive messaging about displaced identities, that work to support strong familial or kinship connections, and that help children understand how to recognise and rehearse responses to the discrimination they may experience can all serve to promote a more psychosocially safe environment.

At the community level, advocating for and implementing explicit policies that discourage discrimination across all levels is essential.[106] In the context of Syria, this needs to be done with a strong focus on conflict sensitivity and do-no-harm, as inter-commu-

nity relations are often strained and people may not wish for their displacement histories to be highlighted. Establishing neutral meeting places for persons from different backgrounds over a non-sensitive topic (e.g., parental exchange of used children's items) or adaptations of methods such as community-wide storytelling events,[107] can have an impact on improving community relations

4.7. Steps towards peacebuilding and rebuilding a sense of justice

The level of psychosocial safety children will feel is also intrinsically linked to the reasons they had to flee in the first place. These reasons may have involved violence, conflict and injustice. As highlighted by a recent review on peacebuilding and mental health and psychosocial support practices, simultaneous incorporation of psychosocial support and societal reconstruction is required to meaningfully address social suffering and to enable both individual and interpersonal healing.[108] Without cultivating paths towards meaningful reconciliation and sustainable peace, achieving psychosocial safety will remain elusive. Children and youth should also have an opportunity to safely and meaningfully participate in these processes.

The formal process towards lasting peace in Syria is currently uncertain. As devastatingly described by a Syrian adolescent in a recent group discussion: 'People loved each other [in Syria in the past]. Now everyone is killing each other.' Many young people also expressed feelings of frustration and hopelessness over wrongs experienced by their families, communities or Syrian children in general.[109] Meaningful progress towards restoring a sense of justice will require, as a first step, a complete cessation of hostilities.

Re-establishing trust and reconciling narratives around the conflict will require a long

process and will be an immense task for the Syrian population. At the community level, exploring ways for initiating these processes to support local peace with participation and leadership from children could provide a sense of meaning and agency. However, the potential risks for those engaging in these activities mainly prevent them from taking place in the current context. It is important to note also that, in and of themselves, some peacebuilding processes such as truth-telling can contribute to increased psychosocial distress by reopening psychological wounds, so care must be taken when engaging children in these processes.[110]

Small steps are possible, however. At the community level, young people can be supported to safely take action in trust- and confidence-building through activities such as volunteering to help those in vulnerable situations, supporting younger peers, or contributing to projects that benefit the greater community. In addition to their immediate benefits, these altruistic and prosocial behaviours can have positive, longer term effects such as establishing dialogue and creating a sense of belonging across population groups. In addition, they create opportunities for children to "give back" and help others in the community, reinforcing resilience in individual children — a symbiotic experience that has been found to have positive impacts in other displaced communities.[111]

An interesting example of work towards young people's participation and contribution towards lasting peace and restoring justice in Syria is also the guide developed by Dawlaty and the International Centre for Transitional Justice.[112] The guide was developed for young people who are interested in or are working on transitional justice issues in their communities. It focuses on what transitional justice means for young people in the Syrian context and

what strategies can be used to pursue the objectives and priorities identified by young people, for young people.

Engaging children and young people in formal and informal peace and reconciliation processes is challenging, but vital if peace is to be meaningful and trust is to be built. These entry points illustrate the potential, and further discussion is needed to more concretely articulate how the voices of children of different ages can be safely included.

4.8. Ensuring access to specialised mental health care

Whilst community-level processes and mechanisms — such as the ones described above — are critical to fostering the psychosocial safety and wellbeing of children, adolescents, and their families, for a proportion of these populations additional mental health supports may be needed. These additional supports can be provided by non-specialised staff (for the management of psychological distress and common mental health conditions) who can be trained and supervised to deliver evidence-informed interventions. They can also be provided by specialised mental health professionals (for more severe mental health conditions) in clinical or community settings.

Mental health and psychosocial support interventions for Syria's displaced children may benefit from approaches that are trauma-informed. Trauma-informed approaches are those that recognise the impact that traumatic events can have on someone's life and acknowledge that the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours displayed by children exposed to acute and/or prolonged distress may be the consequence of or adaptive response to the adversity these children have had to face. Trauma-informed approaches strive to develop and

reinforce empathy, normalise how people respond to events that are not normal, and stress the importance of placing people in the context of their own lived experiences. They also include approaches that strengthen an individual's senses of safety, control, and autonomy. In addition to developing a good understanding of what trauma is and how it can impact a person, being trauma-informed means understanding that there is no one way that an individual reacts to traumatic events and that a child's relationship to these events can be heavily influenced by their gender, age, family and support systems, personal history and genetics.

On top of being specialised, displacement-, and ideally trauma-informed, mental health and psychosocial support services must also be accessible. Even before the conflict, availability of specialised mental health services in Syria was extremely limited and remains so in the current situation. Therefore, it is requisite to undertake adequate analysis of the needs for specialised services among the population, invest in task-shifting approaches, and build capacity among non-specialists to offer relevant evidence-based interventions. Increasing the specialised workforce and reinforcing their ability to manage severe mental health conditions is also of critical importance. Facilitating the availability of information on these services inside Syria is another essential piece.

Given the limitation of service provision inside Syria, reaching refugees planning to return while still in countries of asylum will also be key in addressing any pre-existing mental health and psychosocial support needs they may have, addressing specific needs related to the return process itself,[113] and supporting returnee children and their caregivers in attaining self-help and community-based psychosocial support skills.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

'Children and adolescents worry about their unknown future and they've grown unfamiliar to stability'

It is critical and urgent that stakeholders invest in supporting Syria's children and adolescents to overcome their displacement-related vulnerabilities in order to help them progress towards durable solutions—something that cannot be achieved without psychosocial, material, physical and legal safety. Based on the factors identified in this policy brief that both threaten and support psychosocial safety, the following actions are required:

1. **Authorities in Syria, donors, and practitioners must provide practical support to protect children in conflict and enable their recovery, including actions directly fostering children's psychosocial wellbeing, such as:**

   - **Integrating psychosocial safety as an important element in all durable solutions frameworks.** Authorities as well as humanitarian and development actors must recognise psychosocial safety needs of displaced populations, including Syrian children and adolescents as an important element in all durable solutions frameworks and ensure psychosocial safety is included and funded in related programmatic and advocacy initiatives. This requires the following actions:

     » Produce and better-utilise related research (and specifically research that incorporates the perspectives of Syria's children of different ages, genders and abilities), so it is clear what psychosocial safety means to the population these efforts intend to support.

     » Develop a participatory and meaningful methodology to measure progress towards psychosocial safety, taking into account how psychosocial safety is linked to material, physical and legal safety, based on consultative, child-led research.

     » Improve communication and collaboration among stakeholders to ensure all actors are appropriately accounting for psychosocial safety in their approach to durable solutions.

   - **Involving children in durable solutions planning.** Authorities and humanitarian actors (including donors) should ensure that displaced Syrian children have agency when planning for durable solutions by:

     » Providing Syrian children of different ages, genders, and abilities with access to relevant, timely, and child-friendly information, including information on the situation inside Syria.

     » Establishing platforms that enable displaced children of all ages and genders to safely voice their needs and priorities for their futures and for that of Syria and to participate in finding solutions.

     » Engaging with caregivers to encourage greater communication around durable solutions in the home.

   - **Investing in community-based support systems.** Humanitarian actors must support and expanding existing community-based networks and mechanisms that bolster psychosocial safety for children by:

     » Strengthening families in all phases of displacement, which includes offering parenting support to caregivers and addressing risks for violence in the home.

     » Ensuring that effective mechanisms for family tracing and reunification are in place and that unaccompanied and separated children are provided with adequate support, including investment in alternative care.

     » Equipping schools to become safe environments for all children by removing barriers to access, especially on account of displacement, gender or ability.

     » Adequately supporting teachers to ensure quality of education and inclusion of social and emotional learning, and working to combat bullying or discrimination of any kind.

     » Ensuring the existence of safe, gender-sensitive, age-appropriate and accessible meeting places for children and adolescents.

   - **Mainstreaming mental health and psychosocial support considerations into the provision of education, healthcare, and social services.** Stakeholders must increase access to specialised mental health care and other targeted supports for children and adults who need them including through:

     » Integrating trauma-informed approaches to education, physical health, mental health, and social services.

     » Supporting existing and/or establishing sustainable systems for quality assurance, supervision, and referrals.

- » Using data-driven methods to monitor the implementation of these approaches and ensuring that lessons learnt are systematically recorded and disseminated to the broader community.

- **Committing to peacebuilding as a necessary prerequisite to achieve psychosocial safety.** This means investing in trust- and peace-building efforts at the community level by:

  - » Systematically using conflict-sensitivity analyses in all humanitarian and resilience building interventions, including understanding conflicting narratives between different communities.

  - » Supporting trust- and peace-building efforts through initiatives designed and implemented in a participatory manner with children of different ages and genders, while ensuring thorough analysis of risks and application of 'do-no-harm' principles.

  - » Establishing safe and neutral meeting spaces for persons, including children, from different backgrounds to exchange based on topics that do not highlight the divides within communities, while respecting people's choices of whether or not they wish to disclose their displacement history.

  - » Protecting and supporting civil society organisations led by young people and, in particular, girls who may face higher barriers to engagement.

2. **Authorities in Syria and host governments must uphold international norms and standards to protect children in conflict and respect their rights, including by:**

- **Respecting the right of displaced persons to seek protection.** In line with international humanitarian, human rights, and humanitarian law, it is paramount that:

  - » Authorities in Syria and armed actors enable unhindered access to humanitarian actors for affected populations.

  - » Freedom of movement and choice of place of residence inside Syria is respected, including enabling voluntary return to places of origin and protection from forced return.

  - » Countries hosting Syrian refugees and asylum seekers must respect the principle of non-refoulement and give due consideration to the Best Interest of Child in asylum decisions for children, including in the regard to their psychosocial safety.

- **Prioritising the re-establishment of physical, material and legal safety.** In addition to restoration of psychosocial safety, authorities in Syria and the humanitarian community must support the re-establishment of physical safety and security, food security and sustainable livelihoods, access to documentation, as well as reliable and non-discriminatory access to quality basic services to all populations. In particular this means:

- » Immediate and lasting cessation of hostilities and commitment to upholding humanitarian standards.

- » Accounting for the expressed and evidence-based needs of displaced persons and other affected communities and investing in area-based interventions to respond to these needs.

- » Ensuring that accountability mechanisms for affected populations are in place and functional, such as participatory needs-assessments, project design and effective two-way communication with communities.

- **Facilitating and co-leading of efforts by humanitarian actors, development actors and authorities to destigmatise mental health care and grow a robust mental health workforce.** Authorities in Syria must support the establishment and professionalisation of a robust mental health workforce and promote mental health care as an essential component of healthcare overall. This means that:

  - » Tertiary education and supervised clinical practice, as well as professional accreditation processes, need to be strengthened in order to ensure availability of qualified psychiatrists and clinical psychologists.

  - » Mental health support should be integrated into the provision of primary health care, including through the implementation of task-shifting approaches and by building capacity among non-specialised actors to deliver evidence-based psychological/psychosocial interventions.

  - » Safe, effective and sustainable mental health and psychosocial support referral pathways and mechanisms must be put in place.

  - » Information campaigns need to be carried out, communicating the role of mental health as an integral part of health.

3. **The international community and authorities on the ground must hold perpetrators of violations against children to account, including by:**

- **Ensuring systematic tracking, monitoring and reporting of attacks on civilians and violations of children's rights.** In particular, this requires that:

  - » Authorities in Syria and armed actors commit to systematically tracking and reporting attacks on civilian infrastructure, harm to civilians and civilian casualties, including disaggregating this data by age and sex.

  - » The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism for Syria is supported to continue its systematic monitoring and reporting of violations of children's rights, including the tracking of age- and sex-disaggregated data on casualties and other violations.

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PSYCHOSOCIAL SAFETY

Save the Children

Pathways to psychosocial safety for Syria's displaced children and adolescents: policy brief