



Child protection in emergencies

Researching the impact of Child Friendly Spaces



PROJECT: Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) research



TIMEFRAME: 2012 – 2021



LOCATION: Uganda, Jordan, Nepal, Iraq, DRC and Ethiopia



DONOR: ELHRA – Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC), funded from 2014-16 and 2019-22



GOAL: Evidence-based research on the effectiveness of Child Friendly Spaces in humanitarian settings

Introduction

Disaster, war, famine – whatever the crisis, it is always the children who are most vulnerable and in need of protection. Leading humanitarian agencies, including World Vision, run Child Friendly Spaces (CFS), where children are offered activities to keep them safe, to learn and to recover from traumatic experiences.

For over 30 years, World Vision has been running CFS programmes in countries throughout the world where emergencies cause displacement and suffering. Places like Syria and Lebanon, Mozambique and Bangladesh.

As short term responses to crises, CFS offer a range of support to help children to overcome adversity, through activities like drawing and games, education, and raising awareness of their rights. More recently, CFS have become integrated with other services like health, family care and community-based child protection.



Leading the way with evidence-based research



ABOVE: Drawings of children seen at a World Vision Child Friendly Space in Uganda. While there are many drawings of houses, trees and animals, some drawings depict the violence that South Sudanese children have witnessed. ©2021 World Vision **TOP:** Children playing under the rising sun at a Child Friendly Space in Uganda. World Vision with support from UNHCR and UNICEF ran 46 CFSs in the West Nile refugee response attended by 33,000 children of different ages. ©2019 World Vision

Despite their widespread use, no in-depth research was being done to assess their effectiveness, causing leading humanitarian child protection practitioners to call for research.¹ In 2012 World Vision International responded and, financed by World Vision UK and World Vision Australia, launched a three-year collaborative research project with researchers from Colombia University (New York), Queen Margaret University, and several agencies, including UNICEF and Save the Children.

The project evaluated six CFS programmes in five different emergency settings across Africa and the Middle East. It found their impact was modest, with much variation and inconsistent standards. The team realised that further research was needed and over a longer time period.

In 2014, UK charity Elrha awarded World Vision a grant from their Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) programme to do this research. With three more humanitarian agencies joining the project, the team examined 23 Child Friendly Spaces in Uganda, Jordan and Nepal over three years, involving over 1,000 children and 1,200 caregivers.²

What were the findings?

The research found that Child Friendly Spaces had a modest positive impact on younger children’s wellbeing and mental health in the short term, but this varied greatly depending on context, age, gender, and how well the programmes were run. It found that CFS programming needed to improve in a number of ways if they were to effectively support older children and younger boys, and to have a longer-term impact on children’s psycho-social wellbeing.³

As a result of this research, World Vision, together with the International Federation of the Red Cross, produced the CFS Toolkit for managers and staff. Including an ‘enhanced’ curriculum of activities, training and evaluation materials, this toolkit soon became recognised as a key resource for agencies running CFS.⁴

Keen to test this new curriculum of activities, World Vision and Columbia University won funding from R2HC for another three years of research to compare the enhanced curriculum with the standard guidelines, to find out exactly the difference it makes. The research was conducted in collaboration with World Vision Uganda and AfriChild (Centre for the Study of the African Child) in the West Nile

region of Uganda, where World Vision runs several CFS for refugee children alongside other services.

Encouragingly, the research found evidence that the new enhanced curriculum of activities is more effective for certain groups of children and, importantly, that it can have an impact for longer when other complementary services are provided after CFS sessions.⁵ Specifically, they found evidence of strengthened resilience amongst children – both young and adolescents – reduced PTSD symptoms, fewer protection concerns and daily stresses for caregivers, as well as better literacy. The academics were even able to identify “increased hopefulness.”

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Ultimately, this research gathered evidence that both the standard guidelines and the enhanced curriculum are effective in improving children’s mental health and wellbeing.

Key to successful impact are two important factors: activities need to be tailored to fit the local context and, for longer term impact, CFS services must be linked to existing family and community support systems.

¹The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (alliancecpha.org)
²Evaluating the longer-term mental health, developmental and systems impact of Child Friendly Spaces in humanitarian emergencies – Elrha (elrha.org/project/wvi-mental-health-call1). AVSI, Mercy Corps, Plan International, AfriChild.

³See ‘Do we need to rethink CFS?’ [Elrha-R2HC-Research-Snapshot-9895-Child-Friendly-Spaces.pdf](#)
⁴[The Toolkit for Child Friendly Spaces in Humanitarian Settings](#) | [The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#) (alliancecpha.org)
⁵Longer-term means 12 months after attending CFS.



📍 2014 – Refugee response
📍 Jordan



📍 2015 – Earthquake response
📍 Nepal



📍 2019 – Refugee response
📍 Uganda



📍 2021 – Beirut explosion response
📍 Lebanon



Grace's story

"Watching my brothers killed was the most devastating experience that happened to me. Anytime I was alone, the memories came alive. All I wanted was revenge," said 13-year-old Grace.*

Grace's family had to flee for their lives when her brothers were killed by cattle raiders and their home burnt to the ground in South Sudan. They settled in a neighbouring district where World Vision has set up six Child Friendly Spaces to support children like Grace affected by displacement, conflict, flooding and other crises.

Through a mixture of community-based psycho-social support, games, and lessons about their rights as a child, the CFS is enabling children suffering from distress to process this and to build resilience.

"Through the psychosocial support (PSS) I was able to let go of the negative thoughts of revenge. Slowly I became positive, I came to terms with it and accepted the fact that death is a part of life."

In total 2,330 boys and 1,904 girls have attended the six CFS's in the project.

But it's not just the children that benefit: their families receive visits from trained counsellors to give them psychosocial support. This, in turn, enables the parents to support their own children going forward.

Grace adds, "My whole family was living in stress, no one comforted the other, but through me, my whole family got World Vision's services and we are grateful."

The project has so far reached 10,104 people with psychological support and counselling on distress.

Broadening psycho-social support to the wider community like this is an example of how CFS practice has changed as a result of the research, which had identified the lack of integration with the community as a barrier to longer-term impact.

Similarly, counsellors at Grace's CFS also take time to raise awareness amongst the parents, not just the children, about the dangers of child marriage.

"Now more than ever, I am fully aware of my rights as a girl. I also take time to educate my parents because keeping them aware will help stop them from marrying me off early," Grace says with hope.

World Vision's Protection Officer Patricia Ajok says, "It is fulfilling to see girls freely open up on issues affecting them in the community. Before, a girl would go through pain alone and keep silent for fear of being disowned by their families."

Ajok adds, "When I visit this community, I can see the encouraging changes the CFS, as well as the house-to-house counselling visits by the protection teams, have made."

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Grace smiles, "The CFS is like a new home and the psycho-social support so helpful – I find true comfort in talking with the social workers. I got my life back and I can proudly say that it's because of the psychosocial-support and the CFS. We are excited to have this centre. It is indeed a safe space for us!"

LEFT: Apart from having left behind their friends, family members and their homes, the Syrian refugees, especially adolescents, are struggling to adapt to the changes that the war has forced on them, "First they didn't make friends for a long time and would always want to be alone. But now, they have started mingling and want to be together all the time", says Zuhoor one of the facilitators at a Child Friendly Space in Jordan; Nepal earthquake. Children at a Child Friendly Space in Nepal to help children recover from their distress experience from the earthquake. All of the houses collapsed so families have been living in tents; Uganda. Children reading under a tree at a Child Friendly Space (CFS) in Uganda. Books are laid out for children of all ages to come and read at leisure. These include story books, pictures books, riddles among others. "Children enjoy reading at free will with limited supervision and they like having the power to select whatever book they want." Said John Moru- the assistant head caregiver, Lebanon. Rawan, ten, wants to be a hairdresser like her mother when she grows up. At the time of the explosion, Rawan was home. To this day, she can still remember vividly that moment, "our door flew from one room to the other", she describes. ©2021 World Vision **ABOVE:** Grace, 13, (purple dress) enjoys playing with her friends at World Vision's Child Friendly Space after school. ©2021 World Vision *Name changed to protect her identity.

Impact of the research for the future

As well as successfully measuring the quality and effect of Child Friendly Spaces, the research has had a number of other significant impacts:

Changing global standards

The findings of this collaborative research have directly influenced the drawing up of industry-wide agreed standards for implementing psycho-social support activities for children and families, standards that all agencies working with children in humanitarian settings are obliged to follow.⁶

Improving knowledge and capacity

One of the key outcomes of this was the development of a Toolkit for Child Friendly Spaces,⁷ a set of training resources and practical guidelines for practitioners in how best to run and evaluate CFS programmes.

Informing debate

As part of their efforts to measure the impact of the research, the donor (Elrha) found that humanitarian agencies followed the study very closely. One described the research as “very influential,” and another described the initial findings as “a challenge to the status quo” and “changing the debate.”⁸ It also furthered collaboration and understanding between leading agencies.

Shaping programming

World Vision’s own understanding of how best to protect and support children in humanitarian settings has been refined and adapted over the course of the research. It has directly influenced our guidelines on best practice, with an increasing focus on a more coordinated and holistic response.⁹ For example, we now help establish locally-run child protection committees, and offer counselling services to caregivers (see Grace’s story). Findings of the latest research will be used to advise practitioners in how best to use the ‘enhanced’ curriculum.

Conclusion

After almost 10 years of pioneering research, World Vision and the humanitarian community now have an informed, evidence-based understanding of the effectiveness of Child Friendly Spaces and, most importantly, the knowledge and tools for how to improve their impact. **The results of this research have so far helped humanitarian agencies to radically reframe their programmes, to provide holistic psycho-social support and child protection in emergency settings, a process of learning that is still ongoing.** Mental health academics also have a better understanding of how to measure psycho-social change and wellbeing in children in these contexts.

As a result, thousands of vulnerable, hurting children like Grace and their families are now receiving improved, more effective CFS services as well as other complementary services to help their whole community overcome adversity.

Agencies we partnered with for this research



⁶See the Alliance’s [Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action \(CPMS 2019\)](#) and Unicef’s [Operational Guidelines for Community-Based Psychosocial Support in Humanitarian Settings](#)

⁷[The Toolkit for Child Friendly Spaces in Humanitarian Settings | The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#) ([alliancecpa.org](#))

⁸Research Impact Case Study: Rethinking CFS’ by R2HC, Elrha (2021)

⁹Reframing Child Friendly Spaces within a broader approach to Child Protection in Humanitarian Action. A WV Disaster Management Position Paper July 2021.

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At World Vision, our focus is on helping the most vulnerable children, in the most dangerous places, overcome poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian faith, we’ve worked together with communities, partners, local leaders and governments, for over 70 years, so that children – of all faiths and none – are empowered to experience fullness of life.

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COVER: Child refugees from Southern Sudan at a Child Friendly Space in Uganda. ©2015 World Vision

