Early Childhood Development in Emergencies

Early Childhood Development (ECD) services in humanitarian and fragile settings are increasingly recognized as essential to end preventable deaths of newborns and children under five, support healthy brain development in young children, and drive economic recovery and peacebuilding in children’s and parents’ communities and countries. However, ECD is not well represented in humanitarian response plans, and where it is, implementation of each component is inconsistent and lacks coordination.

Tools:
UNICEF has developed tools and interventions to address the critical need for ECD services in humanitarian and fragile settings. These tools are being refined and adapted through tests and evaluations, both in their content and utilization.

FACTS

An estimated 29 million babies globally were born in areas affected by conflict in 2018.

Approximately 5 million pregnant women and 34 million women of reproductive age live in humanitarian and fragile settings.

An estimated 60 per cent of preventable maternal deaths and 53 per cent of under-five deaths take place in settings of conflict, displacement and natural disasters.

ECD in 2018 Humanitarian Response Plans

The percentage of ECD interventions recommended by the United Nations Nurturing Care Framework and incorporated into 26 active humanitarian response plans include only:

- 58 per cent for nutrition
- 24 per cent for safety and security
- 22 per cent for health
- 10 per cent for responsive care
- 9 per cent for early learning


Care for Child Development

The Care for Child Development (CCD) training package was developed to support caregiver practices that improve child development. Particularly in emergencies, it is important for families to buffer young children from risks like toxic stress by providing a safe, stable and nurturing environment. The CCD training aims to increase caregiver capacity to raise happy, healthy children, and builds frontline worker skills to activate family and community supports for caregivers and children. The package groups guidance into developmental age groups within the 0-3 age range and uses 2 central practices with caregivers: communicate and play. It has been widely adapted and implemented in low resource settings.

Caring for the Caregiver

The Caring for the Caregiver (CFC) training module aims to build front-line workers’ skills to support caregivers. The module recognizes that helping young children thrive in areas where risks are high and resources limited depends upon the quality of care and support provided to their caregivers. The training module uses a strengths-based counselling approach that increases caregivers’ confidence and helps them to develop stress management, self-care and conflict-resolution skills. It has been tested in two countries and will continue to be adapted according to country and regional contexts, and further tested. UNICEF will also extend the training to additional entry points, such as community leaders and mother support groups, and develop approaches to support the sustainability of the CFC package.

ECD Kits for Emergencies

The ECD Kit for Emergencies was created in 2009 to strengthen the response for young children caught in conflict or emergencies. The kit complements basic services related to young children’s hygiene and sanitation, health and nutrition, protection and education. It contains materials to help caregivers create a safe learning environment for young children, aged 0–8, and offers children access to play, stimulation and early learning opportunities. Each kit is designed to reach up to 50 children. Between 2009 and 2018, UNICEF distributed 142,235 ECD Kits for Emergencies across 104 countries, reaching more than 7 million children.

A recent evaluation found the ECD Kit for Emergencies to be well designed, providing a variety of toys for children of different ages and good logistical assets for caregivers. The evaluation also identified opportunities to strengthen the kit’s efficient and effective use in practice. It recommended a greater focus on resources for parents, and sourcing toys through local toy-making with parents and caregivers to reflect traditional forms of play.

Contents include: puzzles, games, counting circle, boxes to stack and sort, board books, puppets for storytelling, art supplies, soaps, and water containers.

For more information please contact Nada Elattar, MPH Early Childhood Development Specialist for Emergencies at UNICEF (nelattar@unicef.org) or visit www.unicef.org