

# Strengthen Standards to Improve Early Childhood Development in Humanitarian Crises

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## Abstract

Substantial evidence across disciplines indicates that children's early years are critical for building the foundation for optimal development. In contexts of crisis, conflict, disaster and displacement, children are at particular risk. Primary caregivers often have fewer resources and less time to provide children with attention and necessary socio-emotional and cognitive stimulation. Risk factors for children are often multiplied in crises and conflict settings, and access to services becomes more challenging where family and social networks have been weakened and social service delivery interrupted.

To address the needs of young children, we must strengthen humanitarian response. Practitioners often use humanitarian standards and guidance to systematise planning, implementation and evaluation of programming. These documents describe the broad principles and essential elements (i.e. specific benchmarks and actions) for high-quality response, reflecting best practices at a global level.

We analysed the degree to which existing humanitarian standards and guidance documents explicitly recognise young children and their caregivers in humanitarian response and looked at gaps in the five areas that experts agree are essential for children's holistic development: good health, adequate nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning. We then made recommendations for achieving more comprehensive and consolidated guidance to address early childhood development in emergencies.

**Keywords:** humanitarian standards; early childhood; guidance

## Introduction

Substantial evidence across disciplines – from neuroscience to economics – indicates that the early years of a child's life are critical for building the foundation for optimal development. In settings affected by crisis, conflict, disaster and displacement, children are at particular risk. Primary caregivers often have fewer resources and less time to provide children with attention and necessary socio-emotional and cognitive stimulation (Masten and Narayan, 2012). Risk factors for children are often multiplied in crises and conflict settings, and access to early childhood development (ECD) services becomes more challenging where family

and social networks have been weakened and social service delivery interrupted.

Despite being vulnerable, young children are also tremendously adaptable and resilient. Appropriate support for children's physical, mental and socio-emotional needs can mitigate the destabilising effects of trauma and allow them not only to survive but also thrive, even in the most hostile circumstances.

However, to address the needs of young children, we must strengthen humanitarian response. Practitioners often use humanitarian standards to systematise the planning, implementation and evaluation of programming. These standards describe the broad principles and essential elements (i.e. specific benchmarks and actions)

for high-quality response, reflecting best practices at a global level. Guidance documents – whether associated with specific standards or stand-alone – provide additional information and recommendations on priority issues. These resources are critical in ensuring high-quality implementation of activities.

While there has been some analysis of humanitarian standards and guidance,<sup>1</sup> there is no comprehensive review of these documents with respect to ECD. To fill this gap, we reviewed fifteen existing humanitarian standards and guidance documents and assessed the extent to which early childhood interventions and the needs of infants, young children and caregivers are included (Bassett and Bradley, 2021).

We sought to determine to what degree existing humanitarian standards and guidance documents explicitly recognise young children and their caregivers as important groups to target in humanitarian response. We also looked at the main gaps in the five areas that experts agree are essential for children’s holistic development: good health, adequate nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning.<sup>2</sup>

## Main Findings

1. *Half the world’s refugees are children; more detailed guidance on supporting them is needed.* Attention to young children and their caregivers is present but should be more detailed. While all fifteen humanitarian standards and guidance documents reviewed address children, less than half specifically define young children. Two-thirds of the documents mention ‘caregiver’, but only one explicitly defines the term.
2. *Children need nurturing care, which includes good health, adequate nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning. These topics are not fully covered in any one standard or guidance document.* Taken all together, existing humanitarian standards and guidance do an adequate job of addressing these five domains, but no single set of standards or guidance documents has high alignment with all five.
3. *Details matter – within each of the five ECD domains, most elements are covered by at least one standard or guidance document, but gaps remain.* Specifically, more is needed to support responsive caregiving and address critical populations, including care for children with developmental difficulties, nutrition for ill children, local language use and involving fathers and extended family in nurturing care.
4. *We don’t need to start from scratch – we can bolster existing standards and guidance documents.* In fact, standards holders suggested strengthening existing

standards and developing new guidance documents rather than developing an entirely new set. Experts noted several opportunities to create new guidance documents and improve training. Some of these opportunities are time sensitive.

## Recommendations

There are four critical steps to achieve comprehensive and consolidated guidance for addressing ECD in emergencies.

First, strengthen attention to young children and caregivers and add missing nurturing care elements in existing humanitarian standards and guidance. Specifically, add definitions of young children and caregivers to ensure these groups receive the attention needed. The upcoming revisions to the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards provide a first opportunity to do this.

Second, add material on ECD to existing or planned training on humanitarian standards and guidance and develop complementary products to accompany these documents, such as case studies, video series, webinars, podcasts and illustrations or other visuals. Training is an effective way to reach practitioners with essential information.

Third, develop practical guidance on holistic ECD that covers the five domains. Guidance should include clear definitions for young children and caregivers, describe key actions for implementation for each of the five domains, include indicators for monitoring and evaluation and use accessible language for non-experts. This could be a catalogue outlining where to find each of these elements in existing materials or a repackaging of the information in one place.

Finally, additional consultations and research on national and organisation-specific guidance, community engagement in standards and guidance, and ECD throughout the INEE Humanitarian Program Cycle could be useful to further inform and institutionalise this effort.

## Acknowledgement

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## Notes

- 1 For example, Theirworld’s discussion of INEE Minimum Standards in their 2016 *Safe Spaces* report (Theirworld, 2016) and UNESCO’s commentary on principles and

standards governing humanitarian, crisis and refugee response (UNESCO, 2018: 10–11).

- 2 The concept of ‘nurturing care’ emerged in the 2016 *Lancet* series, *Advancing Early Childhood Development: From Science to Scale*, and has become a widely accepted norm guiding ECD policy and programming (WHO, UNICEF, World Bank Group, 2018).

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