Psychosocial support refers to programmes that assist children, families and communities to cope with crises and to reinforce or regain healthy psychosocial behaviours and resilience in the face of challenging circumstances. Along with safety and security, material and social needs are key factors in ensuring psychosocial well-being, and they should be recognized as part of effective psychosocial support.

Psychosocial Support in Emergencies

The Situation
Experiencing an emergency can significantly affect a child’s psychological and social well-being and development. Exposure to violence or disaster, loss of or separation from family members and friends, militarization and community conflict, deteriorating living conditions, loss of livelihoods and lack of access to services all can have both immediate and long-term consequences for the functioning of children, families and communities and their ability to live in dignity. Yet despite extreme adversity, most children show considerable resilience and ability to cope if their basic survival needs are met and they have sufficient security and emotional and social support.

UNICEF Strategy
UNICEF recognizes that psychosocial distress experienced in an emergency or in the context of abuse or violence is a real issue requiring professional care and support. For that reason, mental health and psychosocial support is a core area of UNICEF’s response in emergencies, because the positive effects of UNICEF programmes will be lost if children and their families are not equipped to cope emotionally in the midst of a crisis. In working with other UN and international organizations, UNICEF often provides leadership and coordination on this issue.

The delivery of psychosocial support has been misunderstood in some emergency contexts because it has been associated with excessive reliance on a western clinical approach or because the term has been applied inappropriately to ad hoc interventions. To address these challenges, UNICEF participated in the development of the Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and participates in the MHPSS Reference Group, which consists of 100 individuals from 30 agencies. Since the launch of the Guidelines in 2007, the Reference Group has implemented numerous initiatives in countries throughout the world, including Iran, Jordan, Kenya, Nepal, the Palestinian State and Peru. UNICEF also played a lead role in development of the Inter-Agency Guide to the Evaluation of Psychosocial Programmes in Humanitarian Crises. It aims to ensure that psychosocial programming meets international standards in monitoring and evaluation. Recently, UNICEF on behalf of the Inter-agency Standing Committee Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), facilitated a review of the
implementation of the IASC Guidelines on MHPSS. UNICEF in partnership with the Government of the Netherlands also convened a symposium: Growing up in conflict: The impact on children’s mental health and well-being, on 26-28 May in The Hague.

UNICEF’s approach to mental health and psychosocial support is family and community based. It promotes strengthening of a protective environment for children, not just during emergencies but also in the context of long-term development.

Globally, UNICEF promotes a package focused on children, families and communities as below:

1. Child focused package comprising:
   (1) Psychological First Aid (PFA) for Children
   (2) Structured activities for children
   (3) Identification and referral for more specialized mental health, child protection and other services, including community-based and school based interventions.
   (4) peer-to-peer support focused on adolescents and youth

2. Parent/caregiver package:
   (1) Psychological first aid for parents/caregivers and parent support groups
   (2) Programmes on positive parenting

3. Community-based package:
   (1) Community messaging on psychosocial support. It could include where and when relevant other prevailing child protection issues e.g. ERW risk education, child marriage, recruitment...
   (2) Mobilize, strengthen and/or reactivate pre-existing community based structures for children and their families, or likely to provide support to children and their families
   (3) Psychosocial support through schools in collaboration with Education sector

Progress and Results
UNICEF has stepped up its efforts in response to the recent transformation in the Middle East and other disaster affected countries. As of end 2014, all the countries in the region have scaled up their psychosocial programmes to reach more children and families. In Jordan, a total of 210,000 girls and boys benefited from psychosocial support. More than 23,000 of these children, including 2,500 unaccompanied and separated children, also received multi-sectoral child protection and GBV-related case management services, and access to 180 child and adolescent-friendly spaces nationwide. In Lebanon, 346,810 children and 131,986 caregivers accessed psychosocial support services thanks to UNICEF’s programmes. UNICEF Lebanon reached refugees and vulnerable children through a number of gateways, including public schools, informal settlements, Primary Healthcare Centres, Social Development Centres, community centres, Palestinian refugee camps and UNHCR registration points. UNICEF worked closely with the Ministry of Social Affairs to enhance and extend services through 26 Social Development Centres. Moreover, Child Protection Committees, composed of both host communities and refugees, also play a central role in the outreach activities and in child rights monitoring.

Aided by UNICEF’s leadership support, the MHPSS Reference Group has played a key role in facilitating field coordination during recent crises, such as in CAR, the Middle East and the Ebola...
The Reference Group also has a technical working group on monitoring and evaluation, which is leading some work on developing and M&E framework for MHPSS.

UNICEF, in partnership with the Government of the Netherlands and other 17 organizations, convened a Symposium, growing up in Conflict: The impact on children’s mental health and well-being, on 26-28 May in The Hague. The Symposium assembled experts on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS); practitioners, especially field colleagues from key agencies working in conflict-affected countries; academics; and representatives from United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations to determine what is known, examine what is happening in the field in terms of programming and make recommendations for advancing knowledge and practice. It was the first event of this kind over the last one decade and is perceived to be a milestone. The panel presentations of the session is available on

Recent Resources

Some of the recent resources on the issue include:

1. UNICEF provisional draft on : Community based Psychosocial Support (attached )
3. Inter-agency training and resource package on Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) https://www.dropbox.com/sh/kuo7pp0ppwx9twv/OD-GrcuDgl
4. The Crossroads of Child Protection and Education in peacebuilding (attached)

Useful Websites

- UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee: www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc
- https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-emergency-settings
- MHPSS Net - http://mhpss.net/
- The symposium related content: http://mhpss.net/growing-up-in-conflict/

Other Resources

Find the following and additional resources at: www.unicefinemergencies.com/downloads/eresource/mhpss.html

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