



Psychosocial Trauma

Children Speak of Violence and Lack of Protection in Save the Children Assessment

Extensive research conducted in conflict situations shows that children who are exposed to traumatic experiences of war and conflict usually end up having special needs for understanding, emotional resolution, security, sense of belonging, and self worth. Trauma can affect a child's cognitive and affective processes, leaving emotional, psychological and physiological scars. This in turn may lead to distrust and hostility, preventing the child from developing into a productive and social adult and citizen. Research into risk and resiliency has shown that most children can cope fairly well with low levels of risk, but that an accumulation of risk will place children in jeopardy of reaching their full potential. The West Bank and Gaza represent such an environment where risk factors accumulate for young people.

Child's Perspective

In this study's focus groups, children talked about the following:

Risk Factors

Economic deterioration

- 32% of their fathers were unemployed, and 11% of their fathers had only part-time work

Lack of permanency

- 21% reported moving temporarily or permanently because of the threat of attack

Overcrowding

- 67% lived in a household of over 7 members
- 53% lived in a home of 1-3 rooms

Danger and violence

- 18% were physically injured in the past two years
- 9% had a family member (immediate or extended) killed
- 19% had a family member injured or disabled

- 20% had a family member arrested
- 5% had been arrested and reported psychological and physical pressure

Lack of protection

- 59% of children aged 13-17 felt their parents could not protect them from danger

Protective or Resiliency Factors

Pessimistic world view and optimistic personal view

- 85% felt that the current situation would remain as is or worsen
- 70% felt that they could improve their own personal situation through self-improvement activities, taking an active role to improve the political situation, and/or participating in social and other activities such as sports and arts

School as pivotal academic and social arena

- 96% reported that schooling was an essential aspect of their lives and they would continue their education
- 48% said they no longer can be involved in extra-curricular activities

Role models

- Children ranked their parents and "educated and cultured persons" as their top role models



Methodology of Assessment

Save the Children US and Sweden and the Secretariat for the National Plan of Action for Palestinian Children (NPA) undertook this USAID-funded study* in 2002 to assess the psychosocial and protection needs of children in the West Bank and Gaza. The team determined that qualitative research would be carried out through focus groups to encourage open discussion.

A stratified, random sample of children aged 5-17 years was selected to participate in the study. The sample distribution took into account age, gender, districts, and place of residence (village, city or refugee camp).

Selected sites included both areas that had suffered high levels of conflict and areas that had not: Ramallah, Jerusalem, Hebron, Gaza City and Khan Younis. In total, 95 children's focus groups were held with an average of 10-15 children per group. In addition, 35 focus groups for parents and five groups for teachers were held.

*A Psychosocial Assessment of Palestinian Children, by Dr. Cairo Arafat, Director of The Secretariat for the National Plan of Action for Palestinian Children in consultation with Dr. Neil Boothby, Professor of Public Health, Columbia University, and Senior Advisor, Save the Children-US

Previous Updates

Update #1: Malnutrition - April 2003

all updates available on the web at www.caresaveupdate.org

Adults' Perspective

In focus group discussions, parents and teachers reported five types of behavior changes they had observed in children during the past two years:

Symptoms of Trauma

- identified behaviors included repeated nightmares, lack of concentration and attention skills, sleep disorders, bed-wetting, lack of initiative, fears, anxiety, obsessions, hyperactivity, thoughts of revenge, uncontrolled anger/aggression, and loss of confidence and trust in adults

Change in Play

- half of the parents reported a change in their child's play behavior, playing more violent games and those emulating war and conflict

Negative Social Behaviors

- parents and teachers reported behavior such as rebelliousness, increased disobedience, and aggression
- over half of the teachers reported higher levels of irritation and stress in students

"Our children are fine while at home, but at any point in time our house could be bombed or invaded and then we will not be able to protect our children or ourselves."

parent

School Involvement and Participation

- over one third of the parents reported that their children were afraid to go to school at times, and both parents and teachers reported that children had difficulty with concentration and were experiencing decreased school achievement
- one quarter of teachers noted increasing absenteeism and a growing number of dropouts
- over 90% of teachers had dedicated more time in class to allow children to speak out about their feelings

Thoughts of Death and Revenge

- from 5-8% reported that their children had recurrent thoughts of dying in the struggle.

Marianne Leach

CARE Director, Office of Public Policy and Government Relations - Phone: 202-595-2811
email: leach@dc.care.org

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this assessment it is suggested that a three prong, interactive intervention strategy be adopted to assist children and families in coping with the current conflict situation and developing effective resiliency in the face of negative life events.

"I feel sad because I am getting older and older but I do not see the situation here changing."

11 year old boy

Empower children

- Provide opportunities to participate in sports, recreational and cultural activities
- Construct or renovate safe play areas and support non-formal educational programs
- Support empowering activities such as youth-to-youth activities

Support families

- Ensure that basic needs of health, nutrition, shelter and education are met through increased economic opportunities and sustained access to public services
- Offer guidance and counselling to help deal with children experiencing trauma

Safeguard schools

- Make schools safeguarded zones
- Provide counselors and teachers with training on proven trauma relief methodologies
- Encourage increased use of schools as multi-functional centers for instruction, play and socialization

The kind of interventions suggested can serve as safeguards to ensuring children's overall well-being, including those of the children that are most affected. If Palestinian children are to be afforded their right to develop to their full potential, they must be able to enjoy safety in their homes, schools and communities, and be able to continue aspiring to a future very different from their present.

Carol Miller

Save the Children Associate Vice President for Public Policy and Advocacy - Phone: 202-467-1438
email: cmiller@dc.savechildren.org

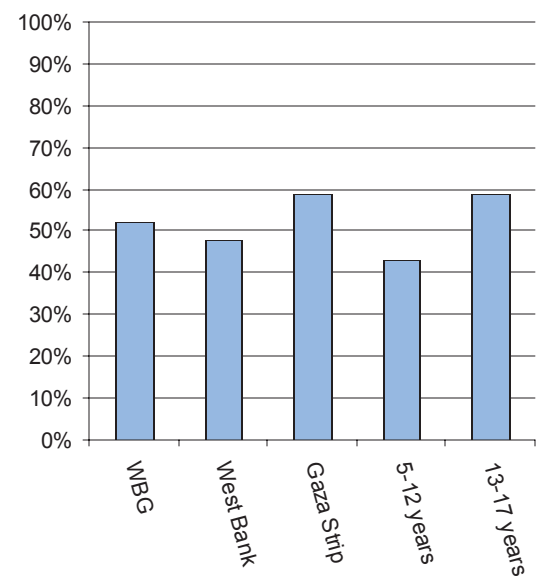
CARE and Save the Children

Founded in 1945, CARE has programs in 69 countries around the world supporting the efforts of families in poor communities to improve their lives. CARE works in the West Bank and Gaza to eliminate poverty, strengthen civil society and public institutions, and promote dignity, social justice and democracy. Visit CARE online at www.care.org.

Save the Children began assisting poor children in 1932 during the depression in the United States and now works in more than 40 countries, including the United States. Programs in the West Bank and Gaza invest in education, improved health and economic opportunities, and address the physical and emotional well-being of some of the poorest children and mothers. Visit Save the Children online at www.savethechildren.org.

CARE and Save the Children developed a privately-funded initiative in 2002 to inform policy makers about the humanitarian situation in the West Bank and Gaza through research findings and staff experience. Download this update and link to other program information at www.caresaveupdate.org.

Percentage of children who feel that their parents cannot protect them



The National Plan of Action for Palestinian Children is a nongovernmental organization (NGO) working with the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. They coordinate activities among international organizations, local NGOs and government agencies to improve the well being of children in the West Bank and Gaza.

Nancy Nye

Advisor and Consultant to CARE and Save the Children - Phone: 240-876-2771
email: nyecaresave@aol.com