



Children with Disabilities

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (articles 2 and 23) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (article 7) guarantee to children with mental and physical disabilities equal rights to a full and decent life in conditions that ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community. Unfortunately social, cultural, physical, structural and economic barriers often deny children with disabilities equal access to services and opportunities for meaningful participation, while vulnerabilities arising from their situation put them at greater risk of abuse, exploitation, sexual and gender-based violence, neglect and abandonment. A child with disabilities may be seen as a burden on the family and they often remain an invisible group in society. Forced displacement exacerbates their situation and heightens these risk factors. However, displacement situations may also create opportunities for children to access services previously unavailable to them, and work as catalysts for change in attitudes and perceptions towards them.

Key messages

- ➔ The protection, care and development of children with disabilities should **be built on existing national child protection, social welfare and education systems.**
- ➔ **Children with disabilities are not a homogeneous group;** each child has different needs and capacities. Effective response strategies therefore need to **focus on addressing both risks in the wider protection environment** as well as each **child's individual risk factors.**
- ➔ Involve children with disabilities and their caregivers in their own **protection through community-based programmes,** including peer support initiatives and promote their effective participation in community decision-making processes.
- ➔ **Analyse barriers that limit their access to services,** including registration, education, health care, rehabilitation, public spaces, and recreational opportunities, and work to make them inclusive and accessible.
- ➔ Develop and implement activities to **prevent accidents and injuries that result in impairments,** and establish response programmes that address both immediate and long-term psychosocial, physical protection and developmental needs of children.
- ➔ **Awareness raising and sensitization programmes which address discriminatory attitudes** and practices against children with disabilities are important.
- ➔ Contingency plans and **immediate responses for emergencies** should take into account the rights and needs of children with disabilities, (including those who may have become disabled as a result of the emergency).
- ➔ Put in place procedures to **identify and assess the situation of children with disabilities,** and to refer them for **appropriate services.**



This briefing note has been produced by the Child Protection Unit, Division of International Protection, in order to guide field operations on key thematic child protection issues.

Protection Issues for Children with Disabilities

- ➔ Girls and boys with disabilities are more likely to be subjected to verbal, sexual, physical and psychological abuse or violence in their homes and communities, with children with intellectual and mental disabilities most at risk.
- ➔ Bullying, ridicule, stigmatisation and discrimination by peers often result in lack of school enrolment, attendance or completion, which in turn affects future livelihood opportunities and self-reliance.
- ➔ Children with severe disabilities may be seen as a burden or cause of embarrassment to the family, and are more likely to be kept hidden, deprived of adequate nutrition, and experience abuse.
- ➔ Newly displaced children face additional risks due to the change in their environment and the disruption to their family and community protection structures.
- ➔ Persons with disabilities, including children, are often not informed of developments in/changes to services due to lack of information in accessible format.
- ➔ Children with multiple disabilities and their caregivers can lack adequate basic supplies to ensure personal hygiene and care, such as soap, water, cloth or diapers, and mattresses.
- ➔ Children who may have recently sustained a long-term impairment may be at heightened risk if their psychosocial and rehabilitation needs are not addressed.

Language of Disability

The language used to refer to persons with disabilities often contains negative connotations, and play a major role in the persistence of stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, devaluation, and the barriers they face in society. The use of negative terms and labels can have long-term consequences for children as these instill a sense of inability, dependency and low self worth. Child protection programmes should therefore include strategies for identifying and challenging the use of degrading language and promoting respectful terminology focusing on children's capacities.

The Numbers

Statistics and data on childhood disabilities are limited, and vary depending on definition and measure of disability. However, according to WHO, an estimated **15.3% of the world's population** have moderate or severe disabilities. UNESCO estimates that globally **200 million children experience some form of disability**. A joint WHO-World Bank report on disabilities (2011) estimates **5.1% of children aged 0-14 years** to be experiencing "moderate or severe disability" with **0.7% experiencing severe disabilities**.

Key Concepts

DISABILITY: There is no universally agreed-upon definition of disabilities. However, UNHCR understands disabilities as including one or a combination of long-term physical, mental, intellectual and sensory impairments, which in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers hinder the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in society on an equal basis with others. While impairment refers to problems in body function or structure (WHO, 2002), the notion of disability can vary, depending on the environmental context.

PREVENTION & RESPONSE: Prevention and minimization of further disabilities focuses on ensuring that children do not experience risks that result in impairments, and ensuring access to early identification and intervention, as appropriate. Response programmes should aim to address both the immediate and long-term psychosocial, physical protection and developmental needs of children with disabilities.

INCLUSION: Inclusion encompasses the establishment of a series of measures to ensure that all children with disabilities have equal and non-discriminatory access to services, including opportunities to learn and play. Making education, recreation and other facilities inclusive involves: (i) creating appropriate legal and policy frameworks, (ii) making facilities and public spaces accessible and relevant, (iii) training educators and animators on techniques for involving children with disabilities in all activities, (iv) promoting an accepting, welcoming and non-discriminatory environment, and (v) changing attitudes that reinforce and nurture prejudices.

TWIN-TRACK APPROACH: Within the framework of child protection systems, UNHCR adopts a twin-track approach:

- **Mainstreaming:** Design all responses to be inclusive and accessible, including to children with disabilities
- **Targeted Action:** Provide targeted services to address the specific needs of children with disabilities

PEER-TO-PEER PROGRAMMES: Friendship and peer relations are essential components of growing-up: they provide companionship, help develop vital social networks, and enhance children's protection from various forms of violence. Children with disabilities, however, face significant challenges in making and maintaining relationships amongst themselves and with other children in their communities. Programmes and initiatives in schools and communities that promote peer relations between children with and without disabilities including through facilitating acceptance, social interaction, and peer-mediation can help address discrimination and isolation, and support positive learning experiences for all children.

Key Actions: What UNHCR and Partners can do

Legal & Policy Framework

- ➔ Map and analyse national laws, policies and administrative procedures relating to children with disabilities.
- ➔ Support line ministries and departments responsible for social services, education and health, in developing policies and concrete actions to both ensure access for all children and address specific needs of all girls and boys with disabilities.
- ➔ Incorporate protection and care for children with disabilities into Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and Contingency Plans.
- ➔ Advocate for the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Knowledge & Data

- ➔ Conduct assessments on the barriers to participation and service access experienced by children with disabilities, the nature and extent of disabilities, the situation of children with disabilities, as well as risks that could lead to injuries and impairments.
- ➔ Building on the slogan, Nothing About Us, Without Us, engage girls and boys with disabilities in information gathering and analysis, and seek to identify protection risks particular to children with disabilities.
- ➔ Assess and understand community perceptions, attitudes and practices regarding disabilities, services available, as well as how communities traditionally care for persons with disabilities.
- ➔ Establish mechanisms such as a mobile registration and community outreach to proactively identify and register children with disabilities who may not be able to access registration points and thus may remain invisible.
- ➔ Ensure that sex, age, and disability disaggregated data is collected in proGres and other databases.

Coordination

- ➔ Map and engage with national actors (state and civil society) working to protect and care for children with disabilities, including Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs).
- ➔ Ensure children with disabilities are part of the agenda in coordination groups.
- ➔ Increase the participation of children with disabilities in community-based mechanisms and advocate for the election of persons with disabilities to camp management committees.

Human & Financial Capacity

- ➔ Build the capacity of staff and interpreters on child participation and communicating with children with disabilities.
- ➔ Ensure adequate financial resources are allocated to programming for children with disabilities, and establish sufficient capacity to monitor the situation of children and their caregivers.
- ➔ Actively promote the meaningful engagement of persons with disabilities as child protection community volunteers and incentive workers.

Prevention & Response

- ➔ Ensure the environment is safe for children in order to prevent irreparable injuries (E.g. through Mine Risk Education, cover bore-holes/wells, and check the quality of construction in and around places where children learn and play).
- ➔ Ensure that information about protection issues and support services available is communicated in accessible formats and is available through forums accessed by children with disabilities and their caregivers.
- ➔ Ensure Child Friendly Spaces and other psychosocial and recreational programmes are accessible and inclusive with staff skilled in identifying and communicating with children with disabilities.
- ➔ Promote community-based programming approaches such as caregiver support groups and inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education groups.
- ➔ Ensure programmes to prevent and respond to SGBV are accessible to and address the protection needs of children with disabilities who are at heightened risk.
- ➔ Train principals and teachers in inclusive teaching techniques, and work with partners to access catch-up or special education where possible.
- ➔ Building on existing capacity and services, provide appropriate habilitation and rehabilitation services at the earliest possible stage.
- ➔ Ensure distribution is accessible to children with disabilities and their families, and that non-food items and food meet their specific needs.
- ➔ Be aware of the language used to describe persons with disabilities, and together with children and their communities develop programmes to promote change.



Disability resides in the Society **not in the Person.**”

Advocacy & Awareness

- ➔ Advocate with all sectors to ensure that shelters, water and sanitation facilities, schools and other service delivery points are accessible.
- ➔ Working with community groups and organisations, develop strategies to change social norms and practices that discriminate against or are harmful to children with disabilities.
- ➔ Create and disseminate information and messages on access to services, and children's rights that specifically target children with disabilities in multiple and appropriate formats.

UNHCR and Partners in Action:

Examples from the Field

IN YEMEN, UNHCR, together with ADPSN, is supporting Early Intervention Centres (EIC) for children with physical and mental disabilities in the urban area of Basateen, Aden, and the Kharaz camp. The programme promotes interaction between children, helps them learn basic motor and sensory skills, strengthens their self-reliance, and provides psychosocial support in a conducive and encouraging atmosphere. At the centres, children are assessed and prepared for enrolment in the formal education system. The EIC provides recreational activities that build children's self-esteem and help them integrate in the communities. The programme also includes home-based support through community workers, and organises the production of assistive devices locally, strengthening the involvement of the community.

IN TANZANIA UNHCR and IRC are supporting children with disabilities in Nyarugusu Camp through a Community Based Rehabilitation programme that focuses on making education both inclusive and specific. The programme targets children with speech, visual and hearing impairment as well as those with mental and physical disabilities. Children with disabilities are integrated into mainstream classes, and those who need it are enrolled in special education classes within primary schools. Specially constructed/modified classrooms enhance accessibility, while renovation of latrines makes them safe, accessible and hygienic for girls and boys with disabilities. Custom-designed school desks provide children with specific disabilities a comfortable and productive learning environment. Additional teachers and special education instructors are being recruited and trained to address the additional time and support needs of children with disabilities.



Girls and boys are protected against harm, injury and disability caused by physical dangers in their environment, and the physical and psychological needs of injured children are **responded to in a timely and efficient way.** (Standard 7)

All girls and boys in humanitarian settings **have access to basic services and protection**, and the causes and means of exclusion of children are identified and addressed. (Standard 18)

Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action



For More Information:

- ➔ UNHCR 2011. *Need to Know Guide: Working with Persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement*, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/4ec3c81c9.html>
- ➔ UNHCR, *UNHCR and Disabilities Resources*: <http://goo.gl/Q187KH>
- ➔ UN Enable: <http://www.un.org/disabilities>
- ➔ WRC, 2014. *Disability Inclusion – Policy to Practice*: <http://goo.gl/WOM14A>
- ➔ Handicap International Resources: <http://goo.gl/jbkA20>
- ➔ ARC Resource Pack, *Critical Issue – Module 3: Children with Disabilities*: <http://www.unhcr.org/4c98a3af9.html>
- ➔ UNICEF, *Children with Disabilities Resources*: <http://goo.gl/1rCGSq>
- ➔ UNHCR/WRC 2013. *Community Based Protection and Inclusive Education* (video): <http://youtu.be/-jnekaOxz24>