

# Positive Practices in Disability Inclusion

## “Socialize, not stigmatize”: Including children with disabilities in child-friendly spaces

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its partners in Lebanon are promoting a comprehensive approach to child well-being linking psychosocial support, health and education initiatives through a network of community centers. Child-friendly spaces (CFS) are being established to provide safe and nurturing environments in which children can access structured play, recreation, leisure and learning activities; provide psychosocial support; and restore a sense of normality. While children with disabilities have the same psychosocial needs as other children in any crisis, they may also be more vulnerable to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence, making their inclusion in CFS activities a critical child protection strategy.

International Medical Corps (IMC) is including children with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, in children's activities in the Dari Community Center in Baalbek. Children with a variety of disabilities have an opportunity to interact and play with other children in the CFS under the supervision and facilitation of IMC staff. Staff try to learn as much as they can about the children attending the center, including their skills and capacities, the different ways each child communicates, and preferences that they may have in activities. This helps them to design activities that all children can participate in in different ways.

Parents of children with disabilities have recognized the importance of these activities on the psychosocial well-being of their children: “The most important thing is that the children are happy and not as isolated,” said one parent. “My child didn't interact with others and now she does.” Parents also report that their

children are learning new skills by being included in activities with other children, highlighting that CFS can also foster child development and non-formal learning among children with disabilities: “My child didn't speak, but now he has learned to write and can say his name.”

IMC is also integrating children with disabilities through its Early Child Development program with parents and care-givers. These support groups and training activities run parallel to the children's activities and focus on increasing the knowledge of parents about developmental milestones, the emotional and cognitive needs of children, and in turn strengthen parent-child interactions. Parents can hear their children playing in the room next door, CFS staff can easily seek advice from parents, and the children can also feel free to decide to join their parents.



Fathers and male caregivers of children with disabilities participate in early child development activities.

While many parents initially attended the IMC center seeking medical assistance, they have expressed that it is the attitudes of staff towards their children with disabilities that is a critical factor in their returning and participating in activities. As an IMC staff member explains: “The most important approach for us to have is a personal relationship with the children and compassion. When you are a humanitarian, you work with all people. You accept people the way they [accept] us.”

## Key messages

Child-friendly spaces should be safe and stimulating environments for all children, including those who are often excluded or marginalized. Children with disabilities can play, learn and socialize with other children with very few adaptations or special programs:

- **Interpersonal skills and the attitudes of staff are critical to children with disabilities and their parents feeling welcome and included.**
- **Take time to get to know the interests and abilities of the children with disabilities in your group.** Look at what they can do, instead of what they can't do – this will give you more ideas on how to adapt activities.
- **Run concurrent activities for children with disabilities and their parents or caregivers—**both groups will feel more at ease and secure when they are near to each other.

## Additional Resources

UNHCR (2011) *Need to Know Guidance: Working with Persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement*. <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/4e6072b2.pdf>

Women's Refugee Commission (2013) *Disability Inclusion in the Syrian Refugee Response in Lebanon*. <http://wrc.ms/1qCJypy>



Children's activities at the Dari Community Center, where children with and without disabilities work together with staff in creative activities.

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Women's Refugee Commission (2014) *Disability Inclusion: Translating Policy into Practice in Humanitarian Action*. <http://wrc.ms/DisabilityInclusion>

*The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) has been partnering with UNHCR Lebanon on disability inclusion since 2013, conducting field visits to identify strategies to promote access and inclusion for persons with disabilities in humanitarian assistance. These positive practices were identified in the WRC's third field visit to Lebanon in May/June 2014. More information is available online at: [http://wrc.ms/disab\\_inc\\_Leb](http://wrc.ms/disab_inc_Leb).*

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## Notes

1 *Minimum standards for child protection in humanitarian action* (2012) Child Protection working Group (CPWG).

