

BACKGROUND GUIDE

Protecting Refugee Children

The Challenge

Nearly half of the world's refugees and internally displaced are children. Many refugee children spend their entire childhoods away from home, sometimes separated from their families. In situations of forced displacement, children are at risk of various forms of abuse, separation from their carers, violence, trafficking and recruitment by armed groups. Being forced to flee war and relocate to a new country can also severely affect their health, education and psychological wellbeing. Additionally, with protracted crises, millions of children are born as refugees, meaning that their parents fled and became refugees before they were born. These children face specific challenges. Their parents might have difficulties registering their births, making it harder to receive assistance or rendering them stateless.

Why It Matters

Refugee children are children first and foremost, and as such, they need special attention. All children are entitled to protection and care under international law. Failing to protect address the challenges faced by refugee children not only impacts them but future generations.

Here are some of the key rights that every child must enjoy:

- The right to a name, legal identity and birth registration;
- The right to physical and legal protection;
- The right not to be separated from their parents;
- The right to provisions for their basic subsistence;
- The right to care and assistance appropriate to their age and developmental needs;
- The right to participate in decisions about their future;
- The right to education;
- The right to health services.

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

“States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures shall, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or by any other person, receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention.”

KEY TERMS:

Separated Children

Children separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other adult family members.

Unaccompanied Children

Children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.

Children Born Refugees

Children who are born into refugee status.

Challenges That Refugee Children Face

UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN

Unaccompanied and separated children are encountered in almost every emergency where people are forced to flee. Separation may occur accidentally when families are fleeing danger, or deliberately when children are abandoned or given over to the care of others (usually an act taken in the desperate hope they will have a better chance of surviving). Separated from their families or other caregivers when they need them most, some unaccompanied children may assume adult responsibilities such as caring for their younger siblings. Children without parental care are at a high risk of violence and exploitation and are in urgent need of care.

“The principle of family unity states that all children have a right to a family, and families have a right to care for their children. Unaccompanied children must be provided with services aimed at reuniting them with their parents or primary legal or customary care-givers as quickly as possible.” — Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children

CHILDREN BORN TO REFUGEE PARENTS

Some children **become** refugees, when they flee war and cross a border. Others might be **born into refugee status**. This would be the case if their parents fled a conflict, and had them later on in the country where they found refuge. Data on births among refugee populations is often unavailable, incomplete or not properly recorded in national administrative systems. Registering children born as refugees can also be complicated for security reasons. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, all children should be registered immediately after birth. The child’s identity, the nationality and identity of his or her family must also be recorded and preserved. A birth certificate is vital to ensure that children receive adequate legal protection, care, assistance and access to services.

EDUCATION

Forced displacement hinders refugees’ access to education. Education is an effective way to ensure the protection of refugee children. It helps them rebuild their life and find stability. It is protective and empowering, giving refugees the knowledge and skills to live productive, fulfilling and independent lives.

However, refugee children in many parts of the world face several barriers when it comes to education. They might face discrimination or limited access to schools when fleeing conflict or persecution. Refugee girls are less likely to be able to go to school than refugee boys due to being forced to do domestic work, a lack of toilet facilities, or sometimes fear that school will not be safe for them.

The 1951 Refugee Convention sets standards which are of special importance to children:

“Refugees must receive the same treatment as nationals in primary education, and treatment at least as favorable as that given to non refugee aliens in secondary education.”

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL BEING

The insecurity and disruption faced by refugee children when fleeing their homes can deeply affect their mental health. Children separated from their families or children who are victims of violence, exploitation and trafficking are particularly vulnerable.

Even once they have found safety, refugee children may still suffer because of what they have experienced - witnessing and surviving conflict or violence, leaving their home and sometimes losing family members. Studies show that the majority of refugee children experience problems that include depression, anxiety/PTSD, and behavioral challenges.

Refugee children must receive psychological support, which includes counseling and access to child friendly spaces to help them overcome trauma, depression or anxiety. Child-development professionals consider that a key element in promoting the child’s recovery is having structured activities to restore a sense of normalcy, along with care and nurturing. For example, practicing a sport or playing are great to help young refugees feel like children again and to make them feel included.

HEALTH CARE & NUTRITION

Refugee children often embark on long and exhausting journeys to find safety, which makes them vulnerable to injuries and diseases. Children in crowded environments such as refugee camps or reception centers are also at a higher risk of catching infectious diseases. Most refugee families and children have limited access to vaccines and health services and do not have the funds to get adequate treatment if needed. Refugee children, especially if unaccompanied, are extremely vulnerable and in need of special food and care, often arriving to safety undernourished after long journeys escaping war and violence.

CHILD LABOR

In situations of displacement and conflict, parents and children often face severe economic constraints. Adults may not be permitted to work in their host country and may engage in low-paying and risky informal employment. To ensure their survival, families may involve their children in helping generate additional income. Children living alone or separated from their parents are also more prone to work, especially if they are not included in any education systems.

Article 32 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation. This includes any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION

Refugee children are at a high risk of trafficking, kidnapping, sexual and gender-based violence, and forced recruitment into armed groups. They may face violence or exploitation at different stages: prior to fleeing their home, when they're fleeing their home or in their country of asylum. Unaccompanied and separated children are particularly vulnerable. Overcrowded conditions in refugees camps also lead to higher risks of sexual and gender based violence, especially for refugee women and children.

Responses and Solutions

UNHCR, THE UN REFUGEE AGENCY

- UNHCR partners with governments and international organizations to **ensure quality education for refugee children** and help provide access to education at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.
- UNHCR **supports the reunification of refugee families**. For example, UNHCR acts as the Secretariat of the Family Reunification Network (FRUN), the first global platform devoted to family reunification for refugees.
- UNHCR helps refugee children **access mental health support**. For example, UNHCR and UNICEF established dozens of Blue Dot Hubs hubs in countries hosting Ukrainian refugees. The “Blue Dot Hubs” are one-stop safe spaces equipped to provide information, counseling, mental health and psychosocial support, legal aid and protection services for refugee children.

GOVERNMENTS

- Governments can protect unaccompanied and separated refugee children by **allowing them to access their territory, register and find adequate care**.
- Host governments can **make it easier for refugee parents to register the birth of their children** which eases access to education, health and other services.
- Host governments can **ease refugees' access to education** both by providing access to national school systems for refugee children, and also supporting resources for education within refugee communities.

HOST COMMUNITY AND NGOS

- Local communities can help **integrate unaccompanied and trafficked children**. For example, the Refugee Council in the UK helps trafficked and unaccompanied children to find shelter, go to school and access health and mental health services.
- Host community members and NGOs can **use sport and play as a method to help refugee children overcome trauma** and to help children develop coping mechanisms and a sense of belonging.
- Host community members and NGOs can help **improve refugee children's access to education** by supporting access to existing schools and providing access to new resources like teacher training, books, and technology that support refugee schools.

Questions to Guide Debates

- How can countries improve refugee children's access to school?
- How can we ensure that children born into refugee status are properly registered?
- How do we make sure that refugee children have access to safe and nutritious food?
- How can we ensure refugee children's access to physical and mental health services?
- What role can local citizens play to help refugee children in countries of asylum and host countries?
- What role can businesses play to support refugee children in countries of asylum and host countries?
- What can be done to prevent children from being separated from their families, and to facilitate the reunification of families?

Useful Resources

- [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)
- [UNHCR: Refugee Children Guidelines on Protection and Care](#)
- [Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children](#)
- [UNHCR's 2025 Education Report](#)
- [UNHCR Children on the Run Report](#)
- [UNHCR Child Protection Framework](#)
- [The Alliance: Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#)
- [UNHCR Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum](#)

Contact Us

If you have any questions about this background guide, please visit our [webpage](#) or contact lindner@unhcr.org.