



Child Friendly Spaces: Toward a Grounded, Community-Based Approach for Strengthening Child Protection Practice in Humanitarian Crises

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*Natural helpers play a critical role in ensuring
children's safety during and in the aftermath of crises*

Humanitarian crises such as those caused by armed conflict and natural disasters have profound human impact. The weight of this impact often falls on the shoulders of children, who are defined under international law as people under 18 years of age. In most humanitarian crises, children comprise approximately half or more of the affected population and face a welter of interacting protection and psychosocial

risks that threaten their development and well-being. For example, in the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, large numbers of children had their homes destroyed, had family members who were killed, or became separated from their families. The earthquake amplified the abject poverty in which they had lived and forced many children to engage in dangerous labor or sexual exploitation in order to survive.

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In war zones such as those in Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia, children are frequently at risk of attack, displacement, family separation, abduction, recruitment into armed forces or groups, landmines and unexploded remnants of war, trafficking, sexual exploitation, and HIV and AIDS, among others. Large numbers of children live in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs). Many others cross international boundaries and become refugees, although many children and families who have not been granted refugee status but are out of country are stateless. Overcrowded and saturated with unmet needs, IDP and refugee camps or other settlement areas are typically dangerous and not conducive to children's healthy development and well-being. Girls are at particular risk of sexual violence and are frequently attacked at poorly lit sanitation areas or when walking long distances to collect firewood or water.

Both natural disasters and armed conflicts heighten the risks to children at multiple levels of children's social ecologies – especially the family, community, and societal levels. At the family level, children may live outside family care and may live or work on the streets, where they are subjected to a multitude of risks. At the community level, a highly significant loss for children is the disruption of education, which many children view as their pathway toward a hopeful future. In addition, the breakdown of law and order in war and disaster zones enables chaos and violence that may affect children directly. At the societal level, the war or disaster may have weakened the capacity of the government to provide any security or meet basic needs. As evident in conflicts such as that in Darfur, the state may become a perpetrator of direct violence against minority people or of structural violence (e.g., discrimination), both of which damage children's well-being.

These and other needs raise vexing questions for humanitarian agencies that aim to support children's protection and well-being. How can one respond to children's immediate needs for safety and psychosocial well-being on the large scale that is needed? Also, how can children's learning and education continue amid the emergency? How can the programs that are begun as part of the disaster response help to strengthen sustainable child protection supports that have positive, long-term outcomes for children? These questions admit no easy answers, particularly because the field of child protection and psychosocial support is still in its early years. Only in 2012 did the Global Child Protection Working Group launch the first interagency *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action* (CPMS).

At present, however, many humanitarian agencies answer these questions and address children's needs at least in part through vigorous efforts to implement Child Friendly Spaces (CFSs) during and after humanitarian crises. Currently, CFSs are being widely used as part of the humanitarian response for Syrian refugee children who live in countries such as Jordan. Although the agencies that establish CFSs vary in their approach, numerous commonalities are visible, in part as a result of the release of important interagency guidance such as the CPMS; the Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies' *Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, Recovery*; the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's *Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings*; and UNICEF's *Principles for Child Friendly Spaces in Emergencies*.

Typically, a CFS engages approximately 25–35 children in play, supportive social interaction, and informal education in a safe space and under the care and supervision of trained



workers, including volunteers from the affected community. In order to support children of different ages, the CFSs may work in shifts (e.g., provide activities for children aged 7–12 years in the morning and for teenagers in the afternoon). CFSs may also engage young children below 7 years of age, thereby supporting early child development.

CFSs (also called Child Centered Spaces or Safe Spaces) have become one of the most widely used humanitarian interventions for supporting vulnerable children. Agencies favor them because they can provide rapid response on a large scale and can be adapted readily to different contexts. In urban settings such as those in which many refugees from the Syrian war live, CFSs may be set up in apartment buildings. In rural areas such as Southern Sudan, CFSs may be conducted outdoors under a tree. CFSs frequently receive positive reviews from communities and parents, who recognize that CFSs provide immediate support to children and families. What is more, children frequently report that they enjoyed and benefitted from their participation in the CFSs.

The purpose of this article is to outline the functions of CFSs and place the practice surrounding CFSs in critical perspective. The article suggests that CFSs make their greatest contribution when they are implemented in a manner that supports community mobilization and the engagement of informal resources that are contextually appropriate and well-positioned to support children and families over the long term, well beyond the crisis and recovery periods. The article also examines how CFSs are sometimes implemented in an inappropriate manner, which can cause unintended harm. By becoming aware of the challenges involved in implementing CFSs, one moves into a better position to avoid the frequently encountered pitfalls in their use and

to strengthen practice on behalf of affected children.

The Functions of Child Friendly Spaces

Broadly, CFSs aim to enhance the protection, psychosocial support, and education of children through structured activities conducted in a safe, supportive context. A cross cutting aim is to help mobilize communities for protecting children and supporting their resilience. As will be shown in the discussion of each function, CFSs are considered to be a useful starting point and as transitional devices for the construction of a wider, more comprehensive array of supports for children. In most contexts, CFSs are a short-term support and last 6–15 months before being ended or being transitioned for another purpose such as supporting youth groups or literacy programs for children who cannot attend school.

Child Protection

In regard to humanitarian crises, the CPMS have defined child protection as “the prevention of and response to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children,” who are defined under international law as people under 18 years of age. CFSs can strengthen child protection by providing a safe space for children, thereby reducing children’s exposure to significant protection risks. For example, in northern Uganda in 2006, the active fighting between the Ugandan government forces and the so-called Lord’s Resistance Army (which had been one of the worst abusers and recruiters of children) was winding down. However, children who were under 5 years of age and lived in crowded



IDP camps were often left alone in their homes while their parents went to work or to search for food and other necessities. When these young children tried to cook for themselves, they unintentionally caused fires that raced through the camp and killed or injured children and adults. A study by the present authors, however, found that the establishment of CFSs in which food was provided as a means of boosting attendance significantly reduced this protection threat.

The importance of providing safe spaces for children in disaster settings is difficult to overstate. In many contexts, the post-disaster environment is as dangerous as the disaster itself. Following the 2010 Haiti earthquake, CFSs enabled children to play in a safe environment rather than play on or near rubble which was rife with hazards such as broken glass, unstable structures, and exposed power lines. In conflict and post-conflict settings, children's health and well-being requires having access to spaces that are free from attack, violence, crime, and other assaults. Without safe spaces, children are unable to experience the normal flow of development or move beyond the horrors they may have witnessed.

CFSs also support protection by teaching children about local protection threats and developing skills for avoiding them. In Afghanistan, where there were a large number of land mines and unexploded remnants of war, CFSs used child-led drama (vignettes) to teach children how to recognize and avoid unsafe areas, the importance of not picking up or playing with war remnants, and what to do if they found war remnants. CFSs can also help to educate girls about the risks associated with walking long distances alone in order to obtain firewood or water.

CFSs may also support child protection by teaching parents and community members how

to avoid abusive practices such as child beating, which is a norm throughout the developing world. The community members who work in CFSs, frequently on a volunteer basis, model the use of nonviolent methods of discipline (e.g., giving children time-outs for unwanted behavior). Within the CFSs, trainings may be provided for parents that strengthen skills of positive parenting.

Psychosocial Support

CFSs provide much needed psychosocial support that promotes children's well-being and resilience. Being in a safe environment itself provides emotional support by reducing children's fears that they will be harmed, as little healing can occur if children are deeply fearful and worried about the dangers surrounding them. In these respects, child protection and psychosocial support are richly interconnected.

Children's psychosocial well-being and resilience are also promoted through supportive relationships and social integration within the CFSs. Because the workers are natural helpers (i.e., community members to whom children usually go when they need support) and have received training on how to support children in a crisis situation, the CFS workers treat children in a kind, compassionate manner that helps children feel safe. Being treated with kindness and compassion can help reassure children that the world is not a hostile place and that other people can help them cope with challenges such as the death of a parent or loved ones, the destruction of one's home, or the disruption of schooling. Equally important, CFSs enable social integration through children playing and talking with one another in a supportive context. To make the environment highly supportive, children usually participate in CFSs



with members of their own age group, thereby avoiding the issues of power and abuse that might arise, for example, if children 6–9 years of age were mixed together with teenagers. In the CFSs, children learn that they are not alone, and group activities can help to reduce feelings of isolation. **As children interact with caring adults and other children, they regain their sense of social trust and build confidence that the future can include positive relationships.**

Participation in CFSs also helps to re-establish a sense of normalcy. Disasters shatter this sense by turning children's world upside down and disrupting the predictability and usual rhythms they have known. Whether they are rapid onset or chronic, disasters create a chaotic environment that is upsetting and challenging to navigate. To rebuild the sense of normalcy, CFSs provide a structure and a daily rhythm that can be beneficial, particularly if

the CFS includes activities that the children had normally engaged in before the disaster, and the activities are conducted in a supportive manner.

Also, the activities conducted in the CFS can promote healing and recovery. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, CFSs usually engage children in singing and dancing according to the local customs. In many contexts, children may be invited to engage in free drawing in which they draw a picture of whatever they want to draw. These symbolic expressive activities can enable children to express their feelings and come to terms with what they have been through. Such culturally grounded activities are also useful in supporting children's sense of cultural identity and collective esteem for one's identity group, which can be particularly important following genocides and ethnic and religious wars that constitute psychological and physical assaults. CFSs may also support





disaster preparation by facilitating group discussions in which children think through what to do in case of another crisis such as the after-shocks following a large earthquake or more flooding following an initial flood.

Particularly for young children who take emotional cues from their mother and whose well-being is inextricably connected with that of the caregivers, psychosocial support frequently entails support for distressed mothers. Following the 2004 Asian tsunami, for example, some mothers were overwhelmed by their losses and the daily challenges of meeting basic needs for themselves and their children. In the Chennai region of India, the authors observed that some mothers of young children sat listlessly and were relatively inattentive and unresponsive to their children, many of whom had obvious difficulties of health and hygiene. To address this situation, ChildFund India organized regular 2 hour sessions in its CFSs for mothers and their young children. These sessions intentionally brought together mothers who were struggling with mothers who were more resilient, interacted well with their children, and were clearly taking good care of their children. The mothers supported each other through accompaniment and also through group discussions about how to solve their problems. CFS workers asked questions about how to handle particular issues such as a child who had nutritional problems, and mothers made suggestions to each other about what they could do. The mothers who were struggling benefitted from these supportive interactions and also from having observed the well-functioning mothers interact with their young children. Over a period of weeks, the mothers who had struggled not only talked and smiled more, but they also became more attentive to their young children and interacted with them in positive ways.

Although CFS workers are not trained to diagnose or treat mental disorders or children who display very high levels of distress, they may nonetheless be part of a continuum of care and a chain that helps to identify children who need specialized psychological assistance or assistance of other kinds. If CFS workers observe that day after day a particular child is very withdrawn or acting out in an aggressive manner, they can bring the child to the attention of a psychosocial or mental health worker who is trained on when and how to make appropriate referrals for specialized assistance. Similarly, CFS workers who observe that a particular child is badly bruised or has nutritional and health issues can bring this to the attention of appropriate protection or health workers, respectively.

Emergency Education

Education might seem to be a secondary priority in an environment in which meeting basic needs such as those for food and clean water is a challenge. However, children offer a different perspective, as they frequently identify their greatest concern as their lack of access to education, which they regard as a source of hope for the future. Children, particularly teenagers, also recognize that being out of school can put them at risk of diverse issues such as pregnancy, drug abuse, and involvement with gangs or crime. With respect to children's protection and psychosocial well-being, education not only helps to develop children's full potential but also helps to strengthen the cognitive competencies and problem-solving skills that enable children to engage in self-protection and to navigate and cope with a difficult, fluid environment.



For these and other reasons, education in disaster settings has been made a high priority by two of the most important standard setting and coordinating bodies on education – the International Network on Education in Emergencies, which helps to set standards on education in crisis settings, and the global Education Cluster, which coordinates work on education in emergencies. When schools have been destroyed or damaged, or education has been disrupted by an emergency, CFSs provide a useful platform for nonformal education. Typically, CFSs include activities such as teaching basic literacy and numeracy, that strengthens cognitive competencies and helps develop some of the basic skills that formal education aims to develop. In addition, CFSs may help to educate children about the risks of playing on piles of rubble or near electrical wires, being around landmines and unexploded remnants, and other risks in their environment. CFSs may also teach help-seeking skills such as knowing whom to tell if they come upon unexploded remnants. In this manner, CFSs simultaneously support children's education and also develop competencies that enable children's protection and resilience.

Community Mobilization of Informal Resources

In implementing CFSs, the *how* is as important as the *what*. In pre-disaster settings, children typically receive some of the best protection and psychosocial support from informal resources such as families, natural helpers (e.g., religious leaders), and groups in the community. In addition, communities may engage in collective planning and action that complements and supports community efforts. When disasters strike, however, they frequently

strain families' capacities to care for children, disperse the natural helpers, and disrupt collective planning and action on behalf of children. Children are frequently deprioritized in environments in which meeting basic needs is a challenge.

To address this situation, it is essential to take a mobilization approach to forming CFSs that activates and empowers communities and their informal resources around children's protection and well-being. This can be particularly challenging in camp or urban environments in which people have little sense of community. Even in such areas, however, there are informal resources within the setting that are important to engage with and activate on behalf of children. By mobilizing and building on existing resources and supports, it is more likely that communities will take ownership of and be responsible for protecting and supporting their children. Although CFSs are transitional in nature, they can contribute to durable positive outcomes for children by activating and supporting the long-term, informal resources that will be present long after the CFSs have ended.

In developing CFSs, community mobilization for children's protection and well-being occurs through a stepwise progression of relationship building and participatory activities. In the initial visits with affected people, it is important to follow cultural scripts such as having respectful meetings and dialogues with traditional authorities such as chiefs, religious leaders, women elders, teachers, and others who are viewed as legitimate by the affected people. In camp settings, there may be meetings with elected camp officials and members of the management committee. These dialogues serve to build trust, identify the natural helpers and the local power structure, and enable learning about the risks and protective factors for



children. To extend and systematize this learning, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) can conduct a participatory child protection assessment that engages trained adults and youth in the planning, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the findings. This participatory approach brings forward the insights and understandings of local people, enables the assessment to fit the socio-cultural context, and helps to motivate local people to get involved. Subsequent sharing of the assessment findings with communities in group discussions serves to raise awareness of children's issues and helps communities to prioritize children's protection and well-being.

If the assessment had indicated that there are few community supports for children, that girls and boys are exposed to significant child protection risks, and that the context is suitable for CFSs, then discussions with the community – including children – may turn to what can be done to reduce those harms and strengthen children's protection. Ideally, the emphasis is on what the community can do, with the NGO playing a facilitative role. For example, a skilled NGO facilitator can share the idea of a CFS and how it has helped in other contexts, which can invite group discussion of whether it is relevant in the present context. If the leaders, natural helpers, and children themselves resonate to the idea of developing a CFS, they can begin the planning discussions on where and how to implement the CFS. Decisions are typically taken quickly on where to organize the CFS, with the community designating the location and possibly even allocating land or space. Usually, a planning group that includes people from sub-groups (e.g., women, men, girls, boys) works together with national NGO staff to develop an overall plan for the CFS and the kinds of activities it will include. It is valuable in many contexts to include district or

provincial government workers in fields such as education and social welfare in the planning discussions, thereby laying the foundation for a systems approach.

The assessment and planning process can have positive effects beyond the establishment of a CFS. In Afghanistan post-2002, when ChildFund followed the outlined process in provinces in the northeast, after the sharing of assessment data, the *shuura*, or elder men's council, decided to partner with the NGO in developing CFSs. Moreover, the adults became motivated to address urgent risks such as toddlers dying by falling into uncovered wells. That the adults decided on their own to immediately gather wood and cover the wells indicates how community mobilization around child protection can improve children's safety even apart from CFSs. Also, the discussions of the assessment data included natural helpers such as teachers and women whom children liked, as well as youth leaders whom children often sought out for advice. These natural helpers animated discussions of the CFS even outside of the structured discussions, thereby helping to increase the interest of different people in supporting the CFS.

Ongoing community mobilization occurs as part of the process of preparing for and implementing the CFSs. Community dialogues help to identify which people have the appropriate values and skills and are well-positioned to work in the CFSs and to support children on a volunteer basis. The NGO then trains these workers in a participatory workshop lasting approximately one or two weeks. Key topics usually include how children have been affected, the importance of social and emotional support, how to organize supportive and inclusive activities for girls and boys and children of different ages, how to reach



out to families, how to educate children on key protection issues, what to do if a child needs special assistance (referrals are typically made via the NGO), and the necessity to adhere to an appropriate code of conduct to protect children. A key participatory aspect of the workshop is the identification of culturally appropriate activities and play items for children. It is the local people who decide whether to sing and dance, whether to draw, which games to play, and what materials to use. Although these decisions may appear to be minor, they are means of engaging cultural supports, which are among the most valuable informal resources in coping with adversity. Also, this approach is useful in avoiding an excessive emphasis on toys from outside, which tend to be expensive, culturally out of place, and unsustainable.

In the implementation phase, community mobilization continues as the natural helpers work in the CFS and talk with various community members about children's needs and how to support them. The community may use CFSs as public information centers and spaces for community meetings and discussions. Also, CFS workers may reach out to families whose children are not engaged in the CFS in order to learn more about their situation, encourage the children's participation, and identify and help to address potential barriers to their participation. Over time, as youth groups and women's groups become active again, they may take an interest in children's well-being and advocate informally for participation in the CFSs. The net result of this ongoing process can be that local people experience a sense of ownership for the CFS and see it as a means through which the community supports children's well-being.

This mobilization approach may also provide a platform for developing more systemic child protection, psychosocial, and

educational supports for children. As the CFSs run, agencies may conduct ongoing, deeper assessments of the situation of children and families and of ways to support them. Agencies may also identify the at-risk children who do not participate in the CFSs and collaborate with communities in developing supports for them. Further, as the CFSs are phased out or transitioned to serve other functions such as spaces for youth groups, agencies and communities can collaborate with government partners to help restart the formal education system, strengthen referral mechanisms for supporting children who need specialized assistance, and strengthen the overall child protection system. In all these efforts, care should be taken to engage with, support, and strengthen the capacities of the informal resources who are key supports for children.

Challenges in Implementing Effective Practice

One of the greatest challenges to effective practice is the weak evidence base regarding the effectiveness of CFSs. Extant research and evaluations have seldom employed robust designs or measured systematically the actual outcomes for children. More frequently, they have used process indicators and measures such as the numbers of CFSs or the numbers of children who participate. Research that has advanced beyond these process indicators include research by the authors on outcome measures of children's well being in northern Uganda and research led by Alastair Ager and Janna Metzler in a partnership between Columbia University and World Vision that is currently measuring ways in which children's



well-being changes as a result of their participation in CFSs.

A second challenge is that many CFSs are developed without adequate use of a community mobilization approach such as the one outlined in this article. NGOs sometimes implement CFSs as if they were a direct service to the community and follow a process of light consultation with the community. When this happens, community resources such as parents and natural helpers take the back seat, and communities do not invest themselves in making the CFSs work. What is more, CFSs in such situations may be seen by local people as an imposition from outside or even as a colonial enterprise. Agencies should address this challenge by taking a more systematic community mobilization approach in developing and implementing CFSs.

This issue relates, however, to a third challenge: the low capacity of many national NGO workers, including those who staff CFSs. Most NGO workers who help set up CFSs lack the strong listening, facilitation, and dialogues skills that are needed to achieve genuine community mobilization. More typically, they have the skills needed to develop a partnership between the NGO and the community, but they struggle in taking the next step of working in ways that bring forward the voices, leadership, and influence of informal resources. Additional work is needed that focuses not only on strengthening the capacities of national staff but also on the most effective ways to strengthen those capacities and institutionalize deeper mobilization approaches within international child-focused NGOs.

A fourth challenge is that NGOs have sometimes regarded CFSs as a “one-stop shop” for child protection when the situation warrants comprehensive child protection programs. CFSs cannot address some of the most

pressing child protection issues and usually do not reach children engaged in trafficking, dangerous labor, or armed forces and groups. CFSs were intended to be only a small part of a much larger, more comprehensive child protection system. To address this challenge, agencies should regard CFSs as a small part of their overall work to protect children and should use CFSs as a platform for community mobilization that will support those more comprehensive, sustainable efforts.

Complex ethical challenges also arise when establishing CFSs in disaster settings. For example, agencies sometimes set up CFSs without having conducted a proper assessment. This practice can waste precious resources because in some situations, there may be no need for CFSs. Worse yet, in the absence of assessment information, children’s participation in CFSs can actually place them in harm’s way. In zones of armed conflict, the establishment of CFSs in sites near military installations or armed groups may increase risks such as the recruitment or sexual exploitation of children. Fortunately, these harms can be prevented by conducting an initial assessment, developing CFSs only if they are indicated, and using the assessment information to guide the careful placement of the CFSs.

Discrimination is also a significant ethical challenge. Following the 2004 Asian tsunami, the Indian government directed NGOs as to which groups to work with and where to establish CFSs. It turned out, however, that the government suggestions systematically excluded Dalit people who were most vulnerable. Although NGOs might elect in such situations to take steps on their own to support marginalized people, this carries the risk that angry government officials will shut down the NGO operations or even expel the NGO from the country.



Often, however, the problem lies not with the government but from discrimination by the NGO, the community, or both. Amid the chaos of the disaster and the urgent need to support children, CFSs are frequently implemented in a manner that supports boys more than girls. Similarly, CFSs tend to support children who are doing reasonably well, but are not easily accessible for children with disabilities and those children who may be badly stigmatized. Thus, children who are invisible at the community level are often not included, even by the natural helpers. This exclusion serves as a poignant reminder of how communities themselves have power structures that may privilege some people and omit others. To address this challenge, agencies should be systematic in their commitment to codes of non-discrimination and gender equity. They should reach out to include in CFSs more vulnerable children who may be difficult to identify, much less to include directly. Also, in supporting a community-based approach, practitioners should view communities through a critical lens, examine power relations, and work to include marginalized children.

CFSs can also cause unintended harm when they undermine existing supports. Often, NGOs implement CFSs in a manner that makes them parallel systems alongside schools, thereby competing with and undermining the formal education system. For example, NGOs may hire as CFS workers teachers who are temporarily unemployed, and they may pay higher salaries than the government pays. If the CFSs continue to run when the schools reopen, the CFS may draw the best teachers away from the education system and compete with the schools for students. This challenge can be addressed by taking a collaborative approach in which NGOs and district education ministries or related staff coordinate their efforts to avoid

conflict between their activities and the work of formal education. Also, there should be a clear plan for transitioning CFSs and avoiding situations in which they continue *de facto* for many years.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for practitioners, donors, and policy makers is to focus less on what humanitarian agencies do than on what communities do. In urgent crises, it is understandable that agencies would focus mainly on taking immediate action on a wide scale. To be most effective, however, CFSs should be implemented with equal focus on community action to protect children. In turn, this requires a critical, reflective orientation on one's role and a steadfast commitment to building on local resources in ways that will support children's protection and well-being over the longer term.

Although this article focuses on international humanitarian crises, it is noteworthy that the broad principles and approach could be applied outside of emergency contexts. Many children worldwide grow up in impoverished neighborhoods in which gangs, drugs, and other protection risks threaten children's well-being. In such settings, concerned community parents and natural helpers may take the same kind of community-based, self-help approach to protecting and supporting children. For example, they could identify safe places (e.g., places of worship, particular buildings or apartments) that could provide safe spaces where trained adults could organize appropriate play and support activities, provide education on dangers in the neighborhood and on self-protection strategies, and help groups of parents to learn positive parenting skills such as disciplining children without using corporal punishment. The success of such approaches rests in no small part on the ingenuity of the community members in navigating a gang-infested environment while working to



transform it. Indeed, even in very challenging situations, collective action and ingenuity are among the most important assets to be mobilized for the protection and well-being of children.

Keywords: child friendly spaces; children; disaster; armed conflict; community mobilization; informal resources; natural helpers; child protection; psychosocial support; nonformal education

Suggestions for Further Reading

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