

# *Caring for Children through Conflict and Displacement*



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# *Looking after children who have experienced conflict and displacement*

Parents who have lived through war and conflict and who have been forced to leave their homes have told us how important their children are to them, and how concerned they have been about their children. The information here aims to help you by giving some ideas on how you can help yourself feel better, and how you can help your children.

Caring adults help to protect children in difficult times, especially when they are able to be warm, supportive, comforting and to help children make sense of frightening events. Family harmony helps to reduce children's anxieties while keeping children safe. Encouraging good behaviour in children helps children to cope as well as possible. It also makes it easier for parents to keep them safe.

We hope this information will be helpful for you in caring for yourself and the children in your care. We start by looking at what you might be experiencing, as we know that the ways that adults feel can affect the way that they care for children. Then we talk about ways of helping children.

If you find the ideas helpful and want to try them out, take it gently, step by step, and don't try to do everything at once. It may take a little while to work, but if you keep going then after a little while you should see changes.

# About you

## WHAT MIGHT YOU BE EXPERIENCING YOURSELF?

There are some very common reactions to conflict and having to move home.

- You may find that you become more easily upset or angry than you used to, and your mood may change suddenly. You may be especially anxious or nervous or feel depressed.
- You may have vivid memories of your experiences which come back over and over again. These memories, or flashbacks, can lead to reactions in your body such as rapid heartbeat or sweating.
- You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions, or become more easily confused. You may find that your sleeping and eating change. This can make you very tired.

All of these things are very common reactions in people who have had the experience of living through conflict.



## WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP YOURSELF?

- Remember that this is a challenging time, but one that you can work to manage. You have tackled other hardships at other times in your life.
- Recognise that you have strengths. Think about the skills and resources that you have personally and how you can use these to help yourself and your family.
- Allow yourself and your children to mourn any losses you have experienced. Try to be patient with changes in how you are feeling. These are a natural reaction to what you are going through.

- Try and keep hopeful and to take a positive outlook if you possibly can, even if it is only over small things day to day. This will help the children have hope for the future.
- Support each other and accept help from friends, relatives, community and religious leaders.
- Try to talk about your worries with adults that you trust, rather than talking to children about the things that are upsetting you.
- Look after yourself as much as possible and try to rest when you can.
- As much as you can, try to establish or re-establish routines, such as regular bed times.
- Try to keep yourself occupied with regular chores or with work or activities with others around you.
- Keep on with any religious and social activities you do, as these are likely to make you feel better.

Remember that looking after yourself will help make you stronger and more able to look after the people you need to care for.

## *About your child*

### **WHAT MIGHT YOUR CHILD BE EXPERIENCING?**

We know that there are many ways that children living through conflict and displacement show that they are stressed. How children react to stressful experiences can vary depending on a variety of things, for example their age, but here are some common ways children react:

- Physical complaints such as headache, stomach ache, fever, cough, lack of appetite.
- Being fearful and anxious.

- Difficulty sleeping, nightmares, night terrors, shouting or screaming.
- Children may go back to ways that they use to behave when they were younger, for example bedwetting, frequent crying, thumb-sucking, clinging to their parents or caregivers, being afraid to be left alone.
- Becoming unusually active or aggressive or, on the other hand, shy, quiet, withdrawn and sad.
- Difficulty concentrating.



It is important to remember that more than half of children show these sorts of reactions and behaviour changes after very frightening and distressing experiences. Parents sometimes blame themselves for changes in their children, but these are normal, very common reactions, and this is something that many families will be going through.

Caregivers say they are concerned about:

- Feeling unsure what to do
- Establishing or difficulty in maintaining routines
- Communicating with their children, and worries that their children are not listening to them

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## WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP YOUR CHILD?

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# Safety

- If you are living in a risky place, strive to keep your family together at all times.
  - Try hard not to be separated from your children for long periods of time.
  - Make sure your children know their name, where you are staying and how to get help if they are separated from you.
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- If you are going to collect food or other things for the family either keep your children close by at all times or leave them at home in the care of a responsible and trusted relative or adult.
  - If your child goes out to play make sure that they know that they must let you know where they are going, who they are going with and when they will be back.
  - If your children does go somewhere with you, plan ahead somewhere you can meet if you become separated. Ensure this is somewhere the child will know and feel comfortable.
  - If you are living somewhere that feels very risky, some families say it can be helpful to have a special word or phrase which the child can recognise which means that at that particular moment it is important for them to obey you straight away. For example, it may reduce risk in a dangerous situation, if your child understands that they must be silent when you use that special word. This could be any code word that you agree on. The important thing is that when the child hears the word they will try to do exactly what you want them to do. Practice using the word and praise your child when they do as you ask. You can practice this in a playful way like a game, so that it becomes automatic, but make sure that your child knows that when you use it at any other time it is real.

# *Providing warmth and support*

- Try to tell them often that you care about them. Being caring and telling children that you love them will reassure them and help to make them more confident.

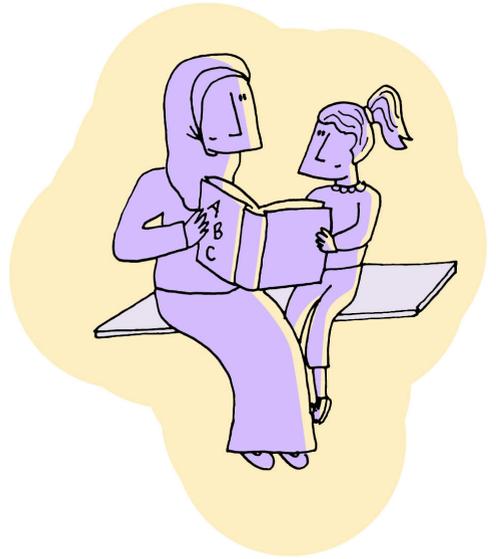
- Promise that you will do everything you can to care for and protect the child.
- Try to be affectionate with the child often by for example, giving them hugs, kisses or holding their hand.



# *Giving praise*

- One of the strongest ways of changing anyone's behaviour is by giving praise, showing that you have noticed what they are doing and that you like it. Noticing, warmth and praise helps to build good relationships with adults and with children. It also helps children to learn the behaviour that you want to see. Children are more likely to do things when they know they will be noticed and praised.
- Children usually love to be praised by people they care about. When you praise a child's behaviour you make them more likely to do the same thing again. If you praise a child for things that you want to encourage, it will increase the chances that they will behave in the way that you want to see them behave.
- If they do something and there is no praise, then they may be less likely to do that particular thing again.
- Look for opportunities to praise your child when they have done something good, however small it may seem. Something as simple as drawing smile helps to show that you are pleased with them.
- Make sure the child knows exactly what they are being praised for so that they learn what you want them to do. For example saying: "Thank you very much for picking those things up for me. You are a helpful boy" means that the child knows exactly what you are pleased with, and that you like his helpful behaviour.
- The child will learn best if the praise tells them exactly what you want them to do more of in the future. For example, "I'm so pleased to see you playing so kindly with your sister".
- Try to give your child very clear instructions. Clear information helps the child to understand exactly what it is that you want them to do. If instructions are given using positive rather than negative words so that the child knows just what they are supposed to do, it is much more likely that they will listen and do as they are asked. "Don't put that there" is negative wording and can sound as if you are annoyed. "Please put the cup on the table" is positive, and you can praise the child straight away by saying "thank you for putting the cup on the table" immediately if they do as they are asked.

- It can take time to get used to praising children often. For children who are not used to it, it can sometimes feel strange too, particularly at first. It's good to practice this on little things in life day-to-day to get used to it. Simply saying "I like it when you ..." or "thank you for..." can make children much more likely to do as you ask.



- There are lots of ways of showing that you are pleased with the child, for example a smile, a pat on the shoulder, a hug or kiss, or a special name "My Superman!" Keeping a chart that you can draw smiley faces on when your child behaves in a way that you want can really encourage them.

It may not work straight away. Give your child time to get used to it, and keep on trying.

Try to be patient with the child and not to criticise them for changes in their behaviour, such as clinging to you or frequently seeking comfort. The child is reacting to the stresses and changes that they have experienced and may still be going through. Being patient and praising them when they are behaving in ways that you want will help them feel more safe.

- Encourage the child to help you and other people, and praise and thank them when they do. Children are likely to cope better and recover sooner when they are able to help others. It makes them feel needed and important.
- Speaking clearly to your child and giving clear instructions without being angry is really important. By practising this calm, clear and positive way of speaking to the child, he or she will pay attention at times when it may be essential they really must follow an instruction.
- There may well be risks and dangers that you will be very worried about where you are living now. There will be times when it is very important that children do exactly as they are told. Making sure that your child is obedient to you and responds quickly to your instructions will help to keep them safe.

# *Spending time together and talking*

- It may be hard to find the time, but spending just a few minutes paying attention to the child whenever you can will help them to feel more confident and less anxious. Perhaps you can spend some time walking together or having a cuddle and a chat. This will make a difference to how you and your child feel. If you possibly can, make a little special time for each child.
- Sometimes, when no one seems to be listening to a child, the child may carry on trying harder and harder to get attention until someone will listen. For example, this may mean that they speak more loudly and perhaps shout for their caregiver's attention. The child learns that by making more and more noise, they eventually get the attention they want. By paying attention to what they want to show or tell you as soon as you can, you will help them to feel confident and to know that you want to listen to them as soon as you can.



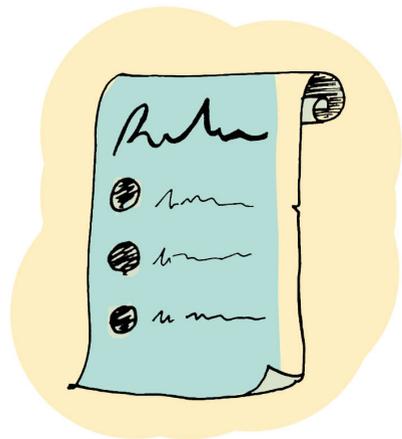
- If they are wanting your attention but you can't give it straight away, make sure that the child knows that you will listen to them as soon as you can. This will also help them to be able to wait a little while for your attention. See if you can explain that you can't listen just now, and tell them when you will be able to give them your attention. This will make it more likely that they will talk to you when they need to.
- Sometimes, when no one seems to listen when the child wants to say something, they may just give up, and not try to communicate so much. It is important that children know that someone will listen to them. Try to make time to listen to them and to understand. Ask how they feel about their experiences and which experiences are most stressful and difficult to adjust to. You know the child best, and can guess at the best way to help them talk to you when they are going through very difficult times. Making sure that your child knows that you want to listen is very important for them.
- Do not promise children things you cannot provide. Children need to know that you are honest and that they can trust what you say.
- Be open and try to give children accurate information about what is happening. Remember though to keep information at a level that the child can understand, and try to explain in a way that will not increase their fears.
- If you need someone to talk to, look for another adult to share your feelings with so that you can stay as strong as possible for your children.
- Remember that they are children and try not to overload them with things you may be worried about, for example a missing family member. This may feel a big challenge but keeping this in mind might help you protect your children.

# Encouraging good behaviour

- We know that in addition to praise, attention and listening, there are a number of things that caregivers can do to help children to behave well.
- First of all it is very important to make sure that children know what the rules are. Sometimes children misbehave because they simply don't understand what it is that caregivers want them to do. There

will be all sorts of very practical things that you will want children to do, like speaking politely, being gentle with other children or keeping things tidy. You can help your child to learn by being really consistent in what you ask them to do and praise them for. Demonstrating the behaviours that you want to see through your own actions is extremely important. Children learn by watching the adults around them. Showing them the right way to behave will have a strong influence on them.

- Some caregivers who have lived through war and conflict and who have had to leave their homes to seek safety have told us that they are really concerned about children swearing and using bad words. So, a very straightforward rule for the child can be about how you expect them to speak to you and other people. It is important that you demonstrate this yourself so that they see the behaviour that is expected.
- Rules help to keep children safe and to behave well. Drawing a simple list of rules for the household can help the child to remember them. Positive wording is very important in making sure that the child knows what you want to see, for example, "speak politely", "be gentle" or "keep our home tidy". Image 10 Rules
- When you need to tell the child to stop doing something that you do not want them to do, make sure that you have the child's attention



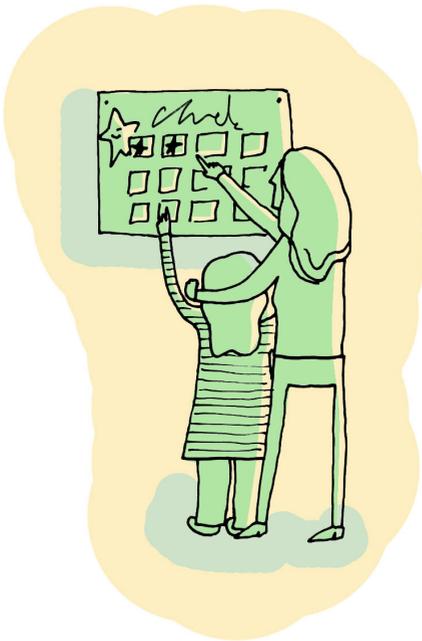
and then tell them very simply what it is about their behaviour that you want them to stop, and what you want them to do instead. For example, you might say, "Stop shouting and speak in a quiet voice"

- If the child stops what they are doing, thank them using a clear and straightforward comment such as "thank you for speaking quietly when I asked you to."



# *Fears, anxieties and night disturbances*

These are very common reactions for children who have experienced conflict. Many children who have lived through conflict will be experiencing fears and anxieties. Using the positive approaches that we have described can help to make children feel more confident and reduce their fears. Warmth and praise, and providing as much safety and predictability as possible is very helpful for them.

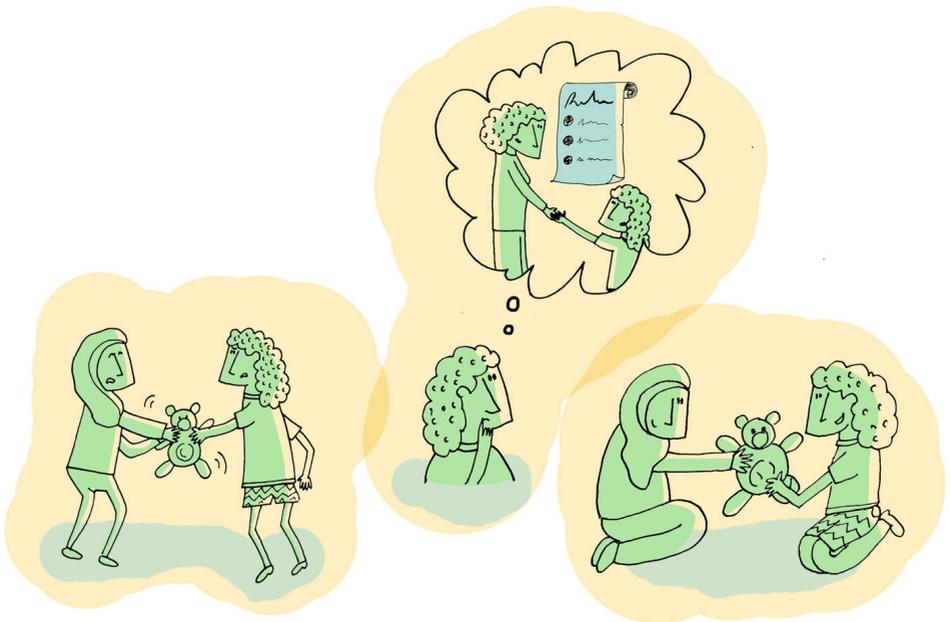


- Fears and anxieties may lead to sleep difficulties such as nightmares and wetting their beds. Remember that it is difficult to control these and so it is important to take a gentle approach and not to make the child more anxious by showing that you find these night disturbances troublesome.
- If they are wetting their bed, check for any obvious changes that you can make. For example, are they afraid to get up in the night if they need to urinate? Think through the evening and night time routines for changes which might help. Make sure that they have enough to drink during the day, as this can affect the bladder. Restricting drinks during the day may actually make them more likely to wet the bed.
- Keeping a chart of dry nights and praising the child for these may help.
- Because of the situation, you may not be able to make promises for the future, but you can assure them that you will take the best possible care of them that you can and that you will do everything you can to keep them safe.
- If you have serious concerns, do try to see if you can find a doctor or specialist worker who can help.

# *Fighting and aggression*

One of the common changes that parents notice in times of conflict and change can be an increase in fighting and aggressive play and behaviour. This is a reaction to the changes that the child has been through, and what they may have seen, but is upsetting and worrying for parents. The place that you are living, and experiences that the child has had, can affect the way that they behave. Experiencing

or seeing violence may make children more likely to show these sorts of behaviours themselves. Sometimes something may remind them of something that has upset them, and this may cause them to show aggressive behaviour. They may re-play aggression that they have seen.



- A good way of preventing fighting and aggression in the household is to have clear rules about what is and is not allowed. Writing these rules down, and discussing them with children is a good way of showing what the rules are. Saying what you want your child to do is very important. For example, rather

than saying “no fighting” you could say something like “keep your hands and feet to yourself” or, instead of saying “no shouting” this can be positively worded as “speak in a quiet voice”. Keeping to these positive rules very carefully, and praising children for doing as they are told to do, helps children to learn how you expect them to behave.

- When children are fighting, the first priority is to ensure the safety of the children. If children in your care are fighting, tell them firmly to stop immediately, and then tell them clearly what they should be doing instead.
- If there is a fight between a child in your care and someone else’s child, you will need to step in and protect your child. Then, you will need to consider speaking to the other parent about how to manage the children. Your child needs your protection, but you should not allow them to harm other children and they need to have clear limits for their behaviour.
- It is very important for caregivers to be fair in the way that they use these approaches to address aggression between children. With older children, finding a time later on when you are both calm to discuss the fighting can be helpful. Understanding the reasons that they got into the fight should help to enable the caregiver to give appropriate advice.
- Explaining your beliefs and what you value as important while your child is calm will help to build their understanding of appropriate ways to behave and react. Identifying risks in the broader environment and supervising play as closely as possible, perhaps by agreeing to share this with other families, can also help to reduce the risk of harmful activity.

# *Maintaining routines*

When you have had to move, it can be difficult to keep routines going. When you have a large family this may be even more true. However difficult life is at the moment, routines can be helpful. They can help to give you all structure in life. This sense of knowing what is going to happen can help children to feel more safe.

- Try to keep to some everyday routine as much as you can.
- For example if you are able to keep to a plan when it is time to go to bed, this can help children sleep better. Plan the time each evening when you would like your child to go to bed. Think about what you can do, as far as is possible, to make the same things happen each evening in a particular order so that your child has settled down and is ready to sleep. For example taking time to sit together, telling stories or singing songs can be a good way to do this.
- Encourage children to do school work (reading, maths, writing), even if there are no regular schools at the moment. This will help them to learn, and give hope for the future. Perhaps you could look at families around you to see if they could help with this.



# Encouraging play

Play is important in helping children relax. It is also an opportunity for them to work through past and current stress and experiences and to prepare for the future. Encourage the child to play with you, their siblings or other children. It helps maintain some normality in their lives.

- You can help your child's development by finding moments to play with them. Just finding a few minutes to play, or for older children, to talk with them, also helps to build your relationship. When you play with the child, try to watch what they are doing and show an interest, rather than trying to tell them what to do. The child will appreciate it if they can tell you what to do for a change! Let them guide you on how you can help them in their play. Tell them what you like about the way they are playing. For example, you could say "I like the picture you're drawing. Tell me about it".
- Parents have told us about their concerns about changes in their children's play. This may be through acting out violence or scenes that they have seen or heard about. If you are concerned about this, try to find alternative activities that you can suggest and attract them to take part in. Teaming up with other parents can be helpful in this.
- It is normal for teenagers to want some time away from you. Knowing who they are with, what they are doing and when they will be back is an important part of keeping them safe. Talk to your children about this and try to reach an agreement.



# *Relaxation techniques*

It is important that you spend time doing things that help you feel relaxed. To be able to care for your children appropriately, you must also spend time caring for yourself. For some people this could be by maintaining religious and social activities, for others it may be spending time alone reading or walking.

The way you breathe affects your whole body, yet when you are worried and anxious your body may become tense and your breathing may speed up. You can use breathing techniques to help you to calm down when you are feeling stressed or worried. Full, deep breathing is a good way to reduce tension, feel relaxed, and reduce stress.

To practice deep breathing you could try the following:

- Start by dropping your hands below your waist, and keeping your palms facing up. Slowly raise your hands as you breathe in through your nose. Stop when your hands are about shoulder level. Slowly lower your hands as you breathe out through your mouth.
- The key thing you should aim for is to breathe deeply from your abdomen.
- Try practicing this for two to three minutes. The slower you do this and the more attention you pay to taking deep breathes, the more relaxed you should feel.

Your children can also greatly benefit from learning these breathing techniques and using them when they too feel stressed or anxious. You may like to try teaching them and practicing deep breathing together.

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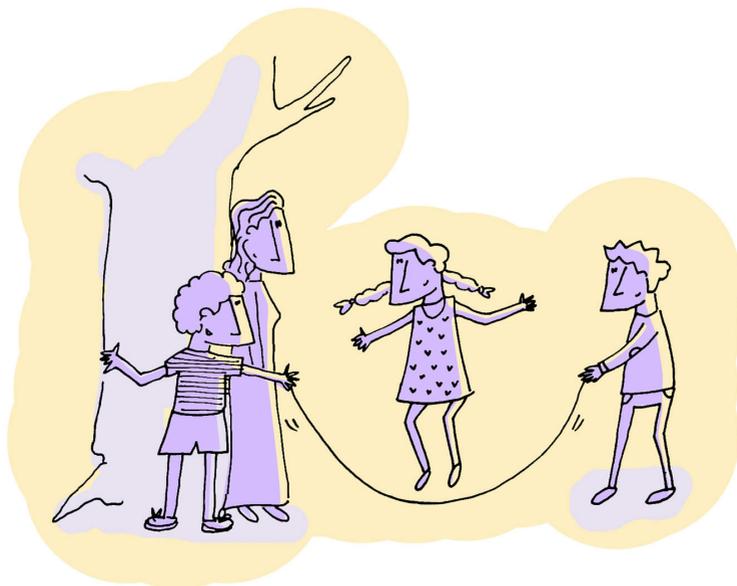
# WE HOPE YOU FIND THESE IDEAS HELPFUL

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Parents have told us that conflict, displacement and living in areas of low resources makes everything harder. Acknowledging to yourself that you are in difficult times can perhaps help you to find the moments when you are able to act on these tips.

Remember that fears, anxieties and sadness are a completely natural reaction to the experiences that you and the children have been through, and may still be going through. These reflect stress as a result of the conflict, and the losses that have been experienced. So far as is possible, trying to reduce stress by helping children feel loved and cared for, listening to their concerns, keeping up routines and trying to build in enjoyable activities are very important things that you can do.

Many families are living through these hard times and working together can make you stronger. Trying to stay positive can help, and give hope for the future.







*This booklet has been developed by Professor Rachel Calam, Dr Aala El-Khani and Dr Kim Cartwright.*

*An accompanying Conversation Group two hour PowerPoint presentation, encompassing the information in this booklet in a step by step manner, is available for facilitators to run with groups of caregivers. Notes for those facilitating the Conversation Groups are also available. These can be downloaded, along with other open access Family Skills resources, at:  
<http://research.bmh.manchester.ac.uk/pfrg>*