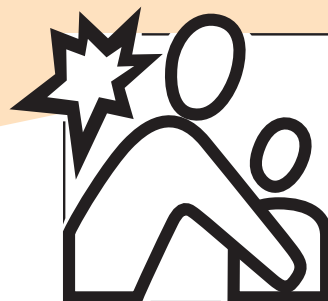




UNICEF/00-0884/Lemoine

Why it is important to share  
and act on information  
about



# Disasters and Emergencies

In disaster or emergency situations, children are very vulnerable to illness and trauma and require special care and attention.

Of the world's estimated 27 million refugees and 30 million displaced people, 80 per cent are women and children. Almost 2 billion people were affected by disasters from 1990 to 1999. Disasters disproportionately affect the poor. More than 90 per cent of disaster-related deaths occur in developing countries.

Some 9 million children worldwide have been killed, injured, orphaned or separated from their parents by conflicts in the past decade.



# Key Messages:

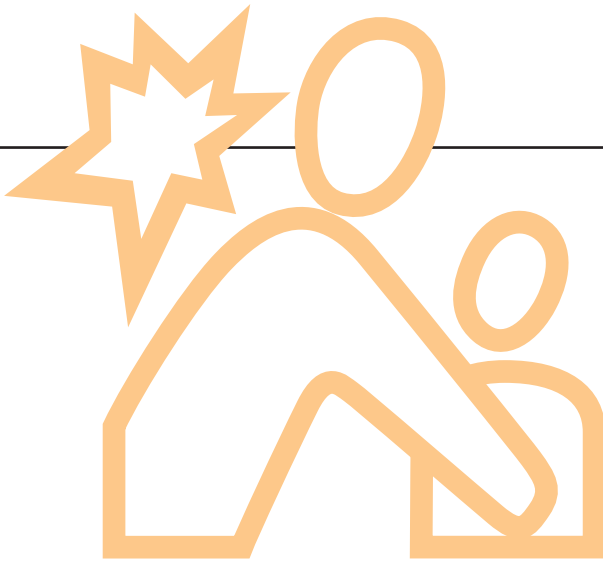
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What every family and community has a right to know about

## Disasters and Emergencies

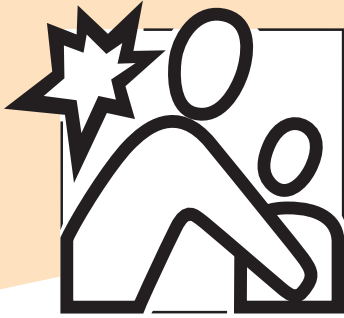
1. In disaster or emergency situations, children should receive essential health care, including measles vaccination, adequate food and micronutrient supplements.
2. Breastfeeding is particularly important in emergency situations.
3. It is always preferable for children to be cared for by their parents or other familiar adults, especially during conflict situations, because it makes children feel more secure.





4. Violence in the home, war and other disasters can frighten and anger children. When such events occur, children need special attention, extra affection and the opportunity to express their feelings and to describe their experiences in ways that are appropriate for their age.
  
5. Landmines and unexploded ammunition are extremely dangerous. They should never be touched or stepped over. Establish safe play areas for children and warn them not to play with unknown objects.





## Supporting Information

# Disasters and Emergencies

**1. In disaster or emergency situations, children should receive essential health care, including measles vaccination, adequate food and micronutrient supplements.**

Disease can spread quickly when people are crowded together. All children living in congested conditions, particularly in refugee or disaster situations, should be immunized immediately, especially against measles, at the first point of contact or settlement. Vitamin A supplements should also be provided.

All immunizations in emergency settings should be given with auto-disable syringes – syringes that can be used only once.

Measles is even more serious when children are malnourished or living in conditions of poor sanitation.

- As measles spreads very quickly, a child with measles needs to be isolated from other children, examined by a trained health worker and given vitamin A supplements.
- Measles frequently causes severe diarrhoea. Immunizing children against measles prevents diarrhoea and protects against pneumonia.

If, for any reason, a child has not had the full series of immunizations in the first year of life, it is extremely important to have the child fully immunized as soon as possible.

## **2. Breastfeeding is particularly important in emergency situations.**

Family members, other mothers and skilled health workers are important sources of knowledge and practical support for breastfeeding mothers, to encourage six months of exclusive breastfeeding and continued breastfeeding for two years or beyond. In addition to breastmilk, adequate complementary foods should be provided to children older than six months.

Special attention and support are needed for mothers with stress reactions to overcome the unfounded belief that stress permanently affects breastfeeding.

Special attention to exclusive breastfeeding of babies under six months should be a priority to avoid illness and deaths.

If infant formula is judged to be necessary, the mothers or caregivers involved should have practical counselling on hygienic preparation of feeds. Artificially fed babies need a lot of cuddling and holding. They should never be left alone while self-feeding from a bottle. Cup feeding is recommended.

## **3. It is always preferable for children to be cared for by their parents or other familiar adults, especially during conflict situations, because it makes children feel more secure.**

In crisis or emergency situations, it is the duty of the government, the authorities in charge or the United Nations (in the absence of a government) to ensure that children are not separated from their parents or caregivers.

If separation occurs, it is the responsibility of the government and the authorities in charge to provide special protection and care for the child. The government and the authorities are also responsible for attempting to trace the child's family and for reuniting the child with his or her family.

In emergency situations, interim care must be provided for children who have become separated from their families. Where possible this interim care should be provided by families from the child's community until the child is reunited with relatives or placed with a foster family.



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Children who have become separated from their parents in an emergency situation cannot be assumed to be orphans and are not available for adoption. As long as the fate of a child's parents and/or other close relatives cannot be determined, each separated child must be considered as still potentially having close relatives who are alive. If the parents or relatives cannot be traced, it is best for the child to be adopted by a family of the same origin. Only if that is not possible should adoption by a family from another culture or country be considered.

A move to a new home or country is stressful, especially if the family has fled violence. Refugee children sometimes face the additional burden of having to learn a new language and culture.

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**4. Violence in the home, war and other disasters can frighten and anger children. When such events occur, children need special attention, extra affection and the opportunity to express their feelings and to describe their experiences in ways that are appropriate for their age.**

When familiar people, places or things are lost or threatened, and when adults are too upset or distracted to notice, children may feel afraid and forgotten.

In crisis and emergency situations, parents may find it difficult to give their children affection and security.

It is normal for children to show stress reactions or problem behaviour after frightening, painful or violent experiences. Some children withdraw; others become more aggressive. Some children appear to be coping well, even though they have not worked through their fears. Children may become 'accustomed' to long-standing violence, but it still hurts them.

If children do not receive help to understand their feelings, they may become more upset.

- Regular routines – going to school and maintaining regular eating and sleeping schedules – give children a sense of security and continuity.



- Enjoyable activities help children deal with stress. Opportunities should be created for organized non-violent play, sports and other forms of recreation, such as safe play areas in refugee camps or settlements, to encourage communication and interaction among peers. Drawing or playing with toys or puppets can help children express their feelings and adjust to stressful experiences. Re-enacting stressful situations through play is extremely common and helpful for very young children. This is the child's way of trying to master the impact of what happened.
- Children should be encouraged to talk about what is troubling them. They should be encouraged to express themselves but they must not be forced. They need to be listened to and to express what they have seen or experienced.
- Children between the ages of three and six years may feel responsible for the problem. These feelings may create a strong sense of guilt. These children need support and attention from a caring adult.
- Children need constant reassurance; they should not be scolded or punished. If a close family member has to be away, the child should be told beforehand. The child should be told where the person is going, when he or she will return and who will be caring for the child during the absence.
- Because adolescents have a clearer understanding of war and other traumatic situations, they are in some ways more vulnerable to stressful experiences than younger children and may feel guilt for not being able to prevent the event. They may appear to be coping, but they lack the emotional maturity to deal with traumatic experiences. Adolescents some-



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times become aggressive to cope with feelings of anger and depression. They may rebel against authority, use drugs or steal. Or they may withdraw, become fearful or anticipate bad experiences. Adolescents need the help of adults to work through their experiences. Involving adolescents in the life of the community and giving them a role to play is very beneficial.

- Peers, teachers and community members are an important source of support and security for adolescents, who tend to rely less on their immediate families. Adolescents should be encouraged to talk about their experiences with peers and trusted adults and to participate in healing community activities.
- When children's stress reactions are severe and last for a long time, they need special help from a counsellor.

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**5. Landmines and unexploded ammunition are extremely dangerous. They should never be touched or stepped over. Establish safe play areas for children and warn them not to play with unknown objects.**

Landmines come in many different shapes, sizes and colours. Mines can be buried underground or hidden in grass, trees or water. Rusty mines that have been exposed to the weather may be difficult to recognize but they are still dangerous.

Landmines are usually not visible. Special caution is needed near areas of military action or abandoned or overgrown areas. Mined areas may be marked with a picture of a skull and crossbones, crossed sticks or knotted grass. No one should go into these marked areas.

Mines and unexploded ammunition should never be touched. Many of these items are intended to explode when they hit the ground, but sometimes they do not detonate. They are still extremely dangerous. Burning



of fields will neither detonate all landmines nor render the area safe.

Some mines are set off by weight, others by tripping or pulling a wire, others just by touching or tilting them. No one should ever step over a trip wire – underground mines may be nearby. Where there is one mine, often there are others. Anyone who sees a mine should stop walking and retrace her or his steps, or stay very still and call for help.

### **If a landmine injury occurs:**

- Apply firm pressure to the bleeding area until the bleeding stops.
- If the bleeding does not seem to be lessening, tie a cloth or piece of clothing (a tourniquet) just above or as close to the wound as possible and send for medical assistance. If help is delayed more than one hour, loosen the tourniquet each hour to check the bleeding. Remove the tourniquet if the bleeding has stopped.
- If the child is breathing but unconscious, roll the child onto her or his side so that the tongue does not block breathing.

Professional demining is the best solution to ensure that the area is safe.

