Protecting children from violations and abuse in Gaza



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Children participate in group counselling activities at one of the family centres in Beit Lahia, in the Gaza Strip. Ninety-five per cent of children in Gaza aged 1–14 experience psychosocial aggression or physical punishment.

By UNICEF State of Palestine

After being forced to work at a young age and living through years of conflict in Gaza, Ahmad suffers from emotional and psychological distress. With the assistance of UNICEF-supported family centres, he's finally getting the help he needs to begin recovering.

GAZA, State of Palestine, 21 October 2016 – Seventeen-year-old Ahmad* has spent much of his childhood living in fear. Growing up in the Gaza Strip, he has witnessed three major rounds of armed conflict since 2009, and nearly ten years of blockade.

At home, his relationship with both of his parents is strained. Ahmad's father forced him to start working when he was just a boy, prompting him to move in with his mother at the age of 10. He still lives with his mother and stepfather, but often feels unsafe at home. He is unable to sleep unless he keeps a sharp object and a stick near him for self-defence.

Ahmad is not alone in this experience – the situation in the State of Palestine has taken a heavy toll on many of the children living in Gaza. With an unemployment rate of 43 per cent – one of the highest in the world – nearly 40 per cent of Gazans fall below the poverty line, and some 80 per cent of Gaza's 1.9 million people depend on humanitarian assistance.

Families often cope by sending their children into the labour market, or into child marriage. Ninety-five per cent of children aged 1–14 experience psychosocial aggression or physical punishment, and 29 per cent of girls are married before age 18.

To be a vulnerable child facing sexual abuse or violence in this context, where even the most basic needs of food or shelter are not ensured, is frightening.

>> *Learn more about the humanitarian needs of children in the State of Palestine*



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Children meet with a UNICEF staffer at a family centre in the Gaza Strip. UNICEF is working in partnership with Al Fakhoora on this project, which is funded by the Qatar Development Fund.

Recovering from mental scars

UNICEF is working to better identify and reach these most vulnerable children by providing psychosocial support and child protection services through a network of 28 community-level family centres in Gaza. The project is supported by Al Fakhoora, a programme of the 'Education Above All' Foundation funded by the Qatar Development Fund.

Child protection counsellors are stationed at the centres, all using a case management approach to child protection. The centres also offer psychosocial support services, life skills education, awareness-raising on positive parental care and coping strategies to help children handle the issues they face.

"Counselling is available, and if a child shows signs of acting out, anxiety or isolation – which may indicate that they are suffering from abuse, violence, exploitation or neglect – he or she will be referred to a case manager who will open a file and do a comprehensive assessment in order to learn more about the child and

the family, and try to understand why the child is exhibiting these signs of distress," says Safa Nasr, UNICEF Child Protection officer in Gaza. "This helps them to prepare a case plan for the child, with the assistance needed from relevant stakeholders to address the child's protection needs."

The project also gets families and educators involved by establishing child protection community committees in each family centre. These committees are comprised of individuals who have an interest in child protection and a local understanding of the issues involved.

Changing practices

Another important part of the UNICEF project is changing practices that perpetuate ad hoc handling of abuse. Traditionally, some people in the Gaza Strip tried to solve problems of sexual abuse by using informal justice mechanisms instead of bringing cases to court, or would try to justify domestic violence, for example, by using religion.

UNICEF is working with support from Al Fakhoora to advance a more formalized process of handling these cases.



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Children participate in group counselling activities at one of the family centres in Beit Lahia, in the Gaza Strip. In addition to case management, the centres offer psychosocial support services, life skills education, awareness-raising on positive parental care and coping strategies to help children handle the issues they face.

Five different ministries and international and national organizations have drafted and agreed upon an action plan to protect children. The case management operating procedures for child protection and gender-based violence outline the processes and referral pathways to follow, so that no child is left alone to face abuse. A

directory of service providers has also been developed to facilitate the referrals of children who are identified as needing protection.

More than 80 child protection counsellors have been trained in case management, including ten from the Ministry of Social Development, which speeds up and eases the process addressing violations against children.

A new database will help to track cases and to draw statistics on child protection trends in the Gaza Strip. It will also ensure that the authorities are handling serious child protection cases, while local organizations address the needs of the most vulnerable children.

People who care

To help better understand her son's needs, Ahmad's mother began attending awareness-raising sessions on child protection at one of the family centres in her area. Realizing that support was also available for her son, she approached a case manager who visited them at their home.

The case manager found that Ahmad suffered from emotional and psychosocial distress, and he began attending individual counselling sessions at the centre. He was soon referred to specialized institutions to help answer his legal, health and psychological needs. Through all the services provided, he started to gradually build a better, more trusting relationship with his family, especially his mother.

"When I first came to the family centre I felt shy, but now I feel more comfortable and I like to come to the sessions," Ahmad says. "In the family centre I find someone who listens to me, gives me attention, and advises me on how to deal with my problems. I feel that there are people who care about me."

His mother says she has seen an improvement.

"Ahmad is now communicating with us, and this is something really good," she says. "He is treating his siblings in a friendly manner, and is building a positive relationship with his stepfather."

Ahmad says he sleeps better now – finally without a stick or sharp object near him. "I don't have nightmares anymore and for the first time in my life, I have a friend."