

For parents

Children, armed conflict and flight



Children's reactions to armed conflict and flight

An increasing number of families and children are affected by armed conflict, and are being forced to flee. Exile is often the final destination on a long journey that may have started many years before they arrive in Norway. Families may have been refugees in their own country, and lived a life marred by repeated moves, unrest and uncertainty. Many children have witnessed or experienced things that are very painful. In addition, flight and separation from family and other adults they trust have a severe impact on children.

Even though the family may have arrived in a peaceful country, their hardships are not over. For asylum seekers, the strain of living in uncertainty can be extreme. Will they be allowed to stay in Norway? Can they dare to hope for a new future, for a new and better life? In this brochure you can read about the natural reactions of children to experiences connected with armed conflict and flight.

Children notice more than we realise

How much do children really realise or understand of what is happening around them? It can be difficult for adults to know how much children actually understand. However, even quite young children register what is said and what is happening around them. Older children may go quiet, so adults are unable to know what they think about what has happened. In some cases they have only heard adults talking about acts of war, police raids or the risk of being expelled from the country. In other cases, children have themselves been exposed to frightening events, or they may have seen or heard their parents or other relatives being treated in ways that make them afraid. Whatever their age, frightening situations and experiences or melancholy atmospheres can become imprinted on their thoughts and feelings, triggering fear and anxiety. Children with a refugee background can be described as being traumatised by three factors:

- They may have had many difficult experiences in their home country, as well as during flight.
- They often live with traumatised and stressed parents.
- Living conditions for children who are asylum seekers may often be an even greater strain than memories of armed conflict.

Children's reactions

Even children who cannot talk, can “tell” you in different ways what is worrying them. They “tell” you about their worries through their behaviour and/or physical reactions. Here are some normal reactions in children who have had frightening and/or traumatic experiences.

- **Problems sleeping:** Some children have nightmares or are unable to sleep. They wake in the middle of the night or start crying when they are put to bed. Many do not want to go to bed.
- **Psychosomatic problems:** Some children do not want to eat, some vomit, some eat too little or far too much and some get stomach ache. They also get aches and pains in various places.
- **Sadness:** Some children can be very upset. They cry a lot. They have no desire to play and become apathetic.
- **Difficulties at school:** Restlessness and difficulties in concentrating. The children are never quiet, they cause problems and break or spoil things around them.
- **Aggression:** Hitting, biting and arguing with other children and with adults. This is often because the children are frightened.
- **Fear and anxiety:** Some children may be afraid of noises, of people in uniform or of objects which/people who remind them of their painful experiences. Other children may be so sad or confused that they have no desire to play.
- **Language problems:** Some children develop language problems and start stammering.

All these are common reactions in children who have experienced difficult situations. Frightening events, repeated moves etc. are factors that trigger insecurity in children, and this insecurity can make them afraid. They become afraid of being separated from their parents and they also fear that their painful experiences will be repeated. Older children may fear that they are “going crazy”, and do not want to talk about their thoughts. It is important for adults to reassure them that these are normal reactions to abnormal events, and that they will usually stop after a while. If they do not stop, it is important to seek assistance from someone who can help both the child and the parents, for example a school nurse, a doctor, a psychologist or teacher.

The whole family is affected

It can be hard for parents to tackle their children’s reactions. It’s easy to get irritated and angry with children who are being demanding, especially for parents who are feeling exhausted and insecure themselves. However, yelling at children makes them even more clingy and insecure. It may be useful to talk to other parents in the same situation.

All children who have had to flee their home country miss the people they love and places they are used to. This can be difficult to talk about. Being reminded of distressing losses is also painful for parents, and it can be difficult to know what to say or to know how to comfort your children. It is also natural for parents to want to shield their children.

Perhaps you try to avoid talking about what is painful because you are afraid that your children will become even more upset. Some parents are afraid that they will start crying themselves, but children are able to cope with this provided they are told that it is not their fault that mummy or daddy is also missing granddad, the family home etc.

As an adult you can feel helpless when you see children suffering. Often they are told: «Don't think about it – go and play! ». «Don't talk about it – do your homework! ». «You shouldn't wet yourself – you're a big boy/girl now!». «Don't hit your brother – you're being naughty! ». However, children feel sad and lonely if they are not able to talk to someone about how they feel. Children need to express what is worrying them.

What do children need?

- Above all, children need to be cared for and to have close physical and psychological contact with parents and other caregivers.
- Children need patience and a lot of attention.
- Children need adults to set limits, not punish them. Stop them if they are being aggressive or breaking/spoiling things, but do not hit or pinch them.
- Children need explanations there and then about what is happening around them.
- Children need routines. Even if the children are not going to school or the parents are not going to work, it is important to get up, eat and go to bed as you did in your home country.
- Children need praise. Even children as young as three can be given small tasks. Being needed makes them feel important.

- Children often need help from adults to play and to find things to do. They will feel more secure if adults also take part. Play is a child's way of processing painful experiences.
- Listen to what your children say about what they have experienced, their feelings, their thoughts and what they are missing. Share your experiences – talking together is important.
- Get the children to draw what they are thinking about. Look at pictures together.
- Get the children to sing and tell stories. Older children can write a diary in which they can express their thoughts, as well as write stories and poems.
- Show the children that what they are doing is good, and that you are interested.
- Allow children to pray and take part in religious ceremonies together with their parents.
- Children need secure adults who have sufficient support for themselves. When parents are unable to care for their children, a child's mental health can rapidly deteriorate. That is why it is important for caregivers to look after themselves, to consider both their physical and mental health, and to seek help where needed.
- Try to convey a sense of hope. Children can manage relatively well as long as parents are able to convey a sense of hope, can console them, give them a sense of security and see their needs. Remember that no parent manages to be there for his/her child in the best possible way at all times, but trying to meet some of his/her needs in the course of the day is a good objective.

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