

# Schooling protects fleeing children from disease

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Refugee children have scant access to medical care and are particularly vulnerable to disease. Fresh research results from the University of Copenhagen show that just a few hours of schooling a week may have a pronounced positive impact on their health not only in childhood but later in life when they achieve adulthood.

"There is an unambiguous link between health and schooling among refugee groups as they flee," says external Associate Professor Tania Dræbel, PhD from the Department of Public Health, University of Copenhagen, where she works as an expert in health among refugees and groups in internal exile.

"The women, who as children were refugees but also had access to school, markedly improve their chances of survival for themselves and their own children. In our study we concentrated on the risk of malaria, one of the major health burdens in war-torn Sudan: there were big differences in the attitudes to malaria in women with or without schooling. Compared to women who have never attended school, among women with schooling five times as many use mosquito nets, 2.5 times as many take anti-malaria drugs, and three times as many women who seek treatment if they suspect the disease", she continues.

The research group followed the incidence of malaria among refugees and internal exiles in Sudan from 2008. In particular they monitored pregnant women as they are especially vulnerable to a certain type of malaria which is very dangerous for mothers-to-be and their unborn

babies, in order to identify the best way of offering protection to this exposed population.

"The answer turned out to be completely different to any we had expected", Tania Dræbel says. "If the [women](#) had been to school as children it made them seek out knowledge of preventive [health](#) care and disease treatment, and apply it in their everyday lives. Our results thus demonstrate that targeted efforts using very few resources can make a huge difference."

She points out that refugee children who undergo schooling are given structure and hope in lives otherwise full of chaos and fear. Schooling may enable them to see the world as a place where they can make a difference. They reflect the positive attention they receive from a teacher and discover their own resources and their part in ensuring better lives for themselves.

This moves them into an active role. It makes each of them less of a victim to the terrible experiences to which they are subjected and makes them mentally stronger later in life. So Associate Professor Dræbel emphasises the importance of schooling for children who are otherwise in the midst of a crisis as refugees.

"It is extremely important to make sure that these children receive some kind of formal schooling. Even a limited number of years, say three, four or five years over a period of ten years, has a vital impact. The [children](#) learn to take care of themselves, and they carry this into [adulthood](#) for themselves and their families. It is an upward spiral that ought to be incorporated into efforts to help refugees and internal exiles", Tania Dræbel concludes.

Provided by University of Copenhagen

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