

Study highlights need to rethink emergency responses for children in humanitarian settings

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From risks of violence and abuse to disrupting their development, humanitarian crises present major threats to the wellbeing of children, and for more than two decades Child Friendly Spaces have been considered one of the best ways to respond.

A recent study by World Vision and Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health looked at the impact of Child Friendly Spaces in five countries affected by humanitarian emergencies and found major differences across settings. This is the first study to evaluate whether existing interventions successfully provide a safe environment and opportunities for children to engage in activities. The findings are published in the journal *BioMed Central Public Health*.

"Now more than ever children living in dangerous places, and those affected by disasters, are extremely vulnerable to violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. We know Child Friendly Spaces have been seen as a key intervention to protect them and promote their well-being, but there has previously been little robust evidence related to their impact," says Kevin Savage, World Vision's Humanitarian Research Director.

World Vision and Columbia Mailman School worked with partners from the Global Alliance for Child Protection to carry out a multi-country evaluation of CFS in humanitarian emergencies over four years. The study, which covered 23 Child Friendly Spaces and included Somali

refugees in Ethiopia, South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, Syrian refugees in Iraq and Jordan, and children affected by an earthquake in Nepal, found both encouraging and challenging results. The researchers compared children who attended for several months with children who had not attended at all. They also considered parents' views of the experience of younger children and interviewed [older children](#) themselves.

Perceptions of risk, well-being and knowledge of resources were measured before children began attending the Child Friendly Spaces, and measured again once they had been operating for several months.

The findings showed [younger children](#) who attended consistently showed greater improvements in psychosocial well-being than those who did not attend. When activities were implemented with quality, and well suited to the local context, Child Friendly Spaces were effective in reducing protection concerns and promoting development.

Professor Alastair Ager at Columbia Mailman School's Heilbrunn Department of Population and Family Health, the study's lead researcher, noted: "Younger children who attended Child Friendly Spaces consistently showed major improvements in well-being compared to those not attending." However, there was little evidence that the spaces had a positive impact on older children. "Engaging youth is recognised as challenging in humanitarian contexts given pressures on livelihoods, so future interventions need to be more explicitly shaped to their interests and circumstances," noted Ager.

The research is a timely reminder for all those involved, from aid agencies to government donors, to ensure consistent quality regardless of where the spaces are set up, said World Vision.

"It is clear children benefit from Child Friendly Spaces, but this research

reminds us how important it is to ensure this intervention always meet quality standards, and that we must continually strive to better meet the needs of vulnerable children and young people," said Savage.

Organizations are already implementing some of the lessons the research highlighted, with a recent rewrite of guidelines. "But more needs to be done to ensure a sector-wide rethink to ensure [children](#) of all ages get the support they need," said Ager.

More information: Sabrina Hermosilla et al, Child friendly spaces impact across five humanitarian settings: a meta-analysis, *BMC Public Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-019-6939-2](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-6939-2)

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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