

## The Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC)

# GLOBAL CALL TO ACTION IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 FOR CHILDREN IN FRAGILE AND CONFLICT AFFECTED SETTINGS: THE PROMISE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

June 2020

**THE ECPC STRONGLY SUPPORTS THE UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL ANTONIO GUTERRES' APPEAL TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN AND SAFEGUARD THEIR WELL-BEING DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

### WHO WE ARE

The [Early Childhood Peace Consortium \(ECPC\)](#) is a global movement of United Nations agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations, academia, practitioners and the private sector focused on sharing scientific and practice-based evidence on how investment in early childhood development (ECD) can contribute to sustainable peace, social cohesion and social justice. We recognise that investing in ECD is a powerful and cost-effective strategy for reducing violence, poverty and exclusion and for building peaceful societies.

The Consortium upholds the urgent calls from world leaders to prioritise peace as humanity grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic. We join the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in his COVID-19 call for an immediate Global Ceasefire in all corners of the world ([United Nations](#)), a message echoed by world leaders, and most

We stand in solidarity and collaborate with the UN Secretary-General, UNICEF, WHO and all other United Nations Agencies, as well as with Governments, Religious Leaders, Non-Governmental Organizations, academia, Early Childhood Networks and civil society as a whole in the response to the global pandemic humanitarian crisis, to mitigate its impact on families and young children living in situations of conflict, military occupation, and displacement.



**250 million children** live in areas affected by conflict ([UNICEF](#))



**29 million babies** globally were born in areas affected by conflict in 2018 ([UNICEF](#))



An estimated **3.7 million children** live in refugee camps or collective centres. ([IOM](#))



**60% of all children** (1.4 billion) live in countries with a full or partial lockdown due to COVID-19. ([UNICEF](#))

An additional **6,000 children** under 5 could die *every day* over the next 6 months if coverage reductions are severe. ([The Lancet](#))

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importantly, by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore, who urged warring parties to stop fighting to safeguard the lives of children living in conflict-affected areas ([UNICEF](#)).

### IMPACT ON THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN

The COVID-19 outbreak and containment measures exacerbate existing crises and further violate vulnerable children's rights. The pandemic severely affects young children's physical and mental

health, their social and emotional development, safety, economic security, access to education, play, recreational activities and more ([United Nations](#)).

### CHILDREN LIVING IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED AND FRAGILE SETTINGS

Children and their parents/caregivers living in conflict-affected and fragile settings already struggle with limited access to health services, including vaccinations. Virus-related containment measures negatively impact their already volatile safety and access to education ([United Nations](#); [UNHCR](#)). With school and childcare centre closures, young children's learning, nutrition and hygiene suffer. For hundreds of millions of children, these closures can mean going without daily school meals, clean water and sanitation facilities ([United Nations](#)).

Measures to contain the pandemic, including movement restrictions lead to economic insecurity which is likely to result in increased child labour, sexual exploitation and trafficking, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence. Lockdown measures also increase the risk that children will suffer or witness violence and abuse ([United Nations](#); [UNHCR](#); [UN News](#)). Furthermore, more children *and* abusers than ever before are online, heightening the risk of exposure to cyberbullying, hate speech, sexual exploitation and abuse ([EVAC](#); [UN News](#)). Childcare and school closures weaken or eliminate important early warning mechanisms for child abuse and neglect detection and reporting. Hence, there is an urgent need to protect children from violence amidst the pandemic. In a statement, 22 leaders of UN agencies and international organizations called on governments to provide child protection case management and emergency alternative care arrangements, and to ensure that all virus containment measures include social protection systems that support children's rights ([EVAC](#)).

### CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

Even in the absence of a pandemic, uprooted children, mothers, mothers-to-be and families—those living as refugees, migrants or internally displaced persons (IDPs)—face immense barriers to accessing health services and sanitation ([UNICEF](#)). The rapid spread of COVID-19 and the containment measures are worsening this already precarious situation, making migrants, refugees and their children, disproportionately vulnerable to exclusion, xenophobia, stigmatization and discrimination.

In camps or in overcrowded detention centres, the uprooted often live in deeply unsafe and highly stressful environments with no possibility of social distancing ([CRC COVID-19 Statement](#)). This pandemic also poses greater challenges for migrant and displaced families and children as they are faced with higher rates of deportation and mass expulsions; these practices threaten children's rights and are a risk to public health.

### WHAT DOES SCIENCE TEACH US ON THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19?

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it has produced huge societal public health and economic challenges across the globe. Although there is still a great deal we do not know, infectious disease experts have clearly outlined the steps we all need to take to limit the spread of the coronavirus ([WHO Advice for Public](#)).

Although most children are less likely to be symptomatic with COVID-19 compared to adults ([Ludvigsson](#)), data is now emerging that a small percentage of children can develop a novel pediatric multisystem inflammatory syndrome (PMI) that can be deadly ([Verdoni](#)). In addition, there is no question that there are

and will be many other life-threatening adverse consequences of the pandemic for millions of children across the globe. Children are, in many ways, the hidden victims of the pandemic.

Parents/caregivers are the first line of response to protect and support their young children's health, learning and socio-emotional development, particularly in a crisis such as a pandemic ([UNICEF COVID Guide for Parents](#)). Consequently, separations from primary attachment figures (parents/caregivers) due to illness, quarantine, hospitalization or death will have immediate, harmful, and long-term effects on a child. Adverse effects also result from economic losses from lost wages and jobs of parents/caregivers, associated food insecurity, and the potential loss of housing. These factors are compounded by the psychosocial stress experienced by parents/caregivers – especially mothers – which seriously undermines their mental health and ability to provide nurturing care ([Lundberg; Barrero-Castillero](#)). The unique challenges of uprooted families or those living in conflict-affected settings greatly exacerbate these adverse effects. As a result, hundreds of millions of children are now growing up in environments conducive to “toxic stress,” which can impair their neurological development and will likely prevent them from reaching their full developmental potential ([Shonkoff](#)). Sadly, this can cause lifelong challenges and become a self-perpetuating and intergenerational cycle ([Shonkoff](#)).



**43% of all children** under 5 years of age in the world are at risk of not achieving their developmental potential ([Black](#))



Because of the pandemic, a much **higher percentage of children are at risk** for having devastating physical, socioemotional, and cognitive consequences over the course of their entire lives. ([Lundberg](#))



How a child is **parented** provides a legacy that transcends their genes (epigenetics) and **can directly affect the development of the child's brain**, their cognitive and socioemotional skills, as well as their mental and physical health. ([Black](#))



Confinement and/or crowded conditions can also **increase child abuse and exploitation** as well as **domestic and gender-based violence**.



The costs of inaction in early childhood, which can lead to poor health, nutrition, and inadequate learning, are estimated to be as great as **26% of the annual adult income**, trapping families into transgenerational poverty. As a result, **countries may forfeit up to twice their current GDP expenditures** on health and education. (The [Lancet](#))

Investing in ECD can have a rate of return of **13.7%**. ECD programmes have been shown to markedly **reduce government expenditures** in health care, public aid, child protective services, and the criminal justice system. ([UNICEF; US Gov.](#))

*Icons from icons8.com*

The good news is that developmental neuroscience has led to a revolutionary shift in assessing the interplay between genetic alterations in the developing brain and early life experiences, both positive and negative. The neuroscience and other multiple disciplines, such as epigenetics, psychology, and economics, indicate how ECD services can prompt members of high-risk groups to rebuild trust, re-connect, and develop long-lasting resilience ([Donaldson](#)). The science heralds a new era, asserting that ECD is a vital opportunity for building a sustainable future fit for the world's children and empowering them through promoting The Culture of Peace, as called for by the United Nations ([UN Resolution A/RES/74/21](#)).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### IMMEDIATE

- **Maintain and further invest in quality programmes and services** for families and their young children that live in situations of conflict, military occupation ([Watchlist](#)) and displacement during the COVID-19 response efforts ([JPEDS](#)).
- Ensure that **essential child protection services** are recognised as **lifesaving** and continue to be provided and made accessible to all children even during lockdowns, quarantines and other types of restrictions.
- **Prioritise protection of young children**, who in this time of crisis are highly susceptible to neglect, abuse, violence, exploitation, and stigma as their parents/caregivers experience increased instability and stress, which may result in long term irreversible negative consequences.
- Use **mass media – radio, television and social media** – to promote **psychosocial support, cognitive development, nutrition and physical activity**. Ensure existing online resources are accessible and address pre-existing inequalities in fragile and conflict affected settings. Ensure children’s experiences are safe and positive during the COVID-19 pandemic ([UNICEF](#)).
- **Invest in new research** to understand the impact of COVID-19 on children and their families: (i) the adverse impact of the pandemic on parents/caregivers and their ability to provide nurturing care for their children; (ii) the social-emotional impact of the virus (and measures to control it) on children; (iii) the role children play as vectors of the infection; and (iv) the underlying biology and optimal treatment for the newly identified PMI syndrome that is associated with COVID-19. A more **evidence-based understanding** of these issues will help governments in their decision making about opening or closing ECD centres and schools at various stages of the pandemic.

### MEDIUM-TERM

- Ensure an **inclusive approach** for **all children and their families** living in situations of violent conflict, military occupation and fragility, including **migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons**, who have a **right to the highest attainable standard of health** ([OHCHR](#)). Those children should be **entitled to protection** for themselves and their families, including having access to testing and early detection for COVID-19, and the means to physically distance, self-isolate and take other appropriate physical and mental health measures ([IASC](#)).
- Uphold the **rights of vulnerable children and their families** as we emerge from this pandemic into recovery. It is vital to have ECD programmes that are **multileveled**, benefiting the child and parents/caregivers, the community, and institutions at national, regional and local levels. Programmes should be safe, protective, inclusive, accessible and most importantly, **culturally sensitive**, to allow children and their families the space they need to be the driving force for social change.
- **Protect women’s and girls’ rights** in particular, without discrimination, and support **community-based action** through gender-based analysis to favour their **empowerment and social inclusion**.

### LONG-TERM

- **Build** on the extensive body of international research on the power of ECD to promote peace and sustainable development.

- Invest in **strengthening systems** (e.g. through financial resources, capacity building and personnel training) with a **holistic and whole-of-government** (multi-ministry) approach.

## CALL TO ACTION

1. **Reaffirm** commitment to human rights and the rights of children that are being undermined during the global pandemic crisis.
2. **Prioritise** investment in the survival, development and protection of children living in situations of conflict, military occupation, and displacement.
3. **Protect** and **prioritise** investments in Early Childhood Development programmes and services in the global pandemic response and recovery efforts.
4. **Ensure** that gender equality, inclusion and empowerment of children, parents/caregivers, families and communities be at the centre of COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.
5. **Implement** more effective and **inclusive** policies and practices in all countries, ensuring that early childhood programmes and services are essential in promoting The Culture of Peace ([UN Resolution A/RES/74/21](#)) and in sustaining peace.

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In this global pandemic that warrants the participation of all members of society for containment, and where inequalities become starkly evident and pose greater risks to the vulnerable, **engaging families and children is imperative**. ECD services can be a cost-effective and sustainable way to **empower families and communities** to interrupt cycles of poverty and violence, as well as build resilience and social cohesion.

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## INVEST IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AS A FOUNDATION FOR PEACE AND SECURITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL COHESION.

## ENDORSEES - THE MEMBERS OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD PEACE CONSORTIUM

### UNITED NATIONS AGENCIES

**Najat Maalla M'jid, MD**—Executive Committee ECPC; Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, United Nations

**Pia Rebello Britto, PhD**—Vice-Chairperson ECPC; Global Chief and Senior Advisor, Early Childhood Development, UNICEF Headquarters

**Nada Elattar, MPH**—Secretary ECPC; Early Childhood Development Specialist – Emergencies, UNICEF Headquarters

### EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

**Rima Salah, PhD**—Chairperson ECPC; Former Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations, Former Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, served on the United Nations High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, currently at the Yale Child Study Center, United States

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## RESOURCES / MATERIALS

For evidence-based resources including information and policy briefs developed by our Consortium of global experts, please visit “Future Child” by the Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC) at [futurechild.org](http://futurechild.org).

## CONTACT US

To receive print copies of this Call to Action and/or to schedule a brief virtual or in-person presentation by a consortium member having expertise in your area of interest, please contact us at [covid-19@ecdpeace.org](mailto:covid-19@ecdpeace.org). We will be pleased to meet you, provide you answers to questions, as well as supply you with additional materials to help you Build Back Better after Coronavirus COVID-19 using early childhood development strategies.

*[Revised 15 June 2020, nsf]*