

3

EFFECTS OF CONFLICT ON CHILDREN'S WELLBEING AND LEARNING



1 hour 30 minutes



Paper, flipchart, pens, markers, Classroom Wellbeing Portfolios,
Handout 6: Common Signs of Psychosocial Distress in Children



By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Understand the range of effects that conflict can have on children (and adults)
- Understand indicators of stress/distress over time by age group
- Understand how crisis and stress affect children's wellbeing and learning.



Introduction




20–30 minutes



Paper, flipchart, markers and pens



Whole group

- ➔ Display the learning objectives for the session. Invite a participant to read them.
- ➔ Ask participants to fold a blank piece of paper in half and on one side draw a picture of a child who is experiencing distress (without naming or identifying them).
 - How do they appear?
 - What words might you use to describe their feelings, life and situation?
- ➔ Next, on the other side of the paper, ask participants to draw a picture of what a child looks like when they are not experiencing distress.
 - Does their appearance change?
 - What else changes?
- ➔ Ask a few participants to describe/show their drawing. Notice and reflect on the following points:
 - Any commonalities observed in the drawings
 - Any interesting differences between how girls and boys might present
 - Any differences between age groups
 - Did anyone draw a child who, by looking at them, you might not be able to tell that they were in distress?
- ➔ Explain that children express distress and cope with conflict and adversity in many ways and that each child is unique, with different experiences of the war and conflict, or adversity more broadly. Some may have lost family members, be living in a single-parent household because a parent is serving in the army or internally displaced and uprooted from their homes.
- ➔ Ask participants to think about their drawing of a child experiencing distress and list all the stressors/adverse events they might be experiencing.
 - *Examples:* displacement, loss of a loved one, living in a single parent household, war, fear for their own and others' safety, poverty, loss of/limited access to learning and social interactions, etc.
- ➔ Ask participants to list these stressors out loud and write them on a flipchart. In the middle of the flipchart, draw a backpack and surround the backpack with the stressors that are common to all participants' drawings.
 -  Use a virtual board to create the list.





- ➔ Explain that when children show up in the classroom, they often carry these stressors with them. As teachers, we're often not aware of all the stressors children bring with them to school, which are often shared by their caregivers and teachers, especially in times of conflict and war.
- ➔ Ask participants to think about both their drawings (the child experiencing distress and the child not experiencing distress). List all the things that bring joy to children's lives and the factors that promote resilience in children.
- ➔ Review the definition of psychosocial wellbeing on the flipchart from the previous session and ask participants to think about the wellbeing flower they created.
 - **Psychosocial wellbeing** describes the positive state of being when a person thrives. In children and adolescents, it results from the interplay of physical, psychological, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual aspects that influence their ability to grow, learn, socialize and develop to their full potential.

- ➔ Make the connection between children experiencing distress and the effects it has on their psychosocial wellbeing.

Say, for example:

"War and conflict can affect every aspect of wellbeing (remind participants of the wellbeing flower), including physical, psychological, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing. Today we're going to discuss ways to identify signs of distress in children."

Key Points

-  Each child is unique and may process and deal with conflict and adversity differently.
-  As teachers, it's important to remember that children can show up to school carrying the weight of the stressors in their lives in their "backpacks". This may show up in their behaviour and unexpected responses in the classroom.



Background / Theoretical Explanation



15–20 minutes



Handout 6: Common Signs of Psychosocial Distress in Children



Facilitator explanation

➔ Explain that children who have experienced prolonged conflict or war and been out of school and separated from peers and teachers, may experience anxiety, extreme worry and sadness, and a feeling of powerlessness and uncertainty. Some may be worried about continued shelling or air raids. Some may have been isolated at home, or in a bomb shelter or other safe place. Some may have had to flee their homes many times. Under these difficult circumstances, children's wellbeing and development may be affected by the lack of stimulation, routine, safety and security. One very common reaction to conflict and war is a lack of trust in others.

➔ Describe some **common ways** children react when they are stressed using Handout 6: Common Signs of Psychosocial Distress in Children. Link these to the examples that participants gave at the beginning of the module.



The handout can be sent as a PDF.

COMMON SIGNS OF PSYCHOSOCIAL DISTRESS IN CHILDREN

Physical reactions

People of any age may experience physical reactions to distress. Some may experience several reactions, some none or very few. The physical reactions could also be signs of physical illness. If a child's symptoms persist, become worse or in other ways are a cause for concern, the child should see a doctor.



- Extreme tiredness
- Stomach ache
- Tight chest
- Dry mouth
- Muscle weakness
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness
- Shaking
- Headaches
- General aches

Age	Reaction
0–3 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinging to their caregivers more than normal • Regressing to former (younger) behaviours • Changes in sleeping and eating patterns • Higher irritability • Increased hyperactivity • More afraid of things • More demanding • More frequent crying
4–6 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinging to adults • Regressing to former (younger) behaviours • Changes in sleeping and eating patterns • Higher irritability • Poorer concentration • Becoming more inactive or more hyperactive • Stop playing • Take on adult roles • Stop talking • More anxious or worried
7–12 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming withdrawn • Frequent concern about others affected • Changes in sleeping and eating patterns • Increasingly fearful • Higher irritability • Frequent aggression • Restlessness • Poor memory and concentration • Physical symptoms/ psychosomatic • Frequently talks about the event or repetitive play • Feels guilty or blames themselves
13–17 years (teens) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intense grief • Shows excessive concern for others • Feelings of guilt and shame • Increasingly defiant of authority • Increased risk taking • Aggression • Self-destructive • Feeling hopeless

Adapted from: UNICEF. 2022. *Common signs of psychosocial distress in children.*



➔ Explain that each child will cope with conflict and adversity differently. It's important to look for changes in behaviour over time as an indication that a child might be in distress. Many of these reactions last for only a short time and are normal reactions to stressful events. However, if they last for a prolonged period, the child may need further support. Inform participants that further support will be discussed later in the training.

If a child is usually outgoing and talkative and becomes withdrawn, this might indicate that something is wrong. If a young child stops playing and engaging in activities that previously brought them joy, this might indicate that something is wrong.

Say, for example:

"Difficult experiences can lead to impulsive and aggressive/irritable behaviour and to impaired concentration and memory. Sometimes this can be difficult to notice because some children keep their inner life to themselves. When children grieve, for example, they seem to move in and out of the pain – sometimes playing and interacting as they would usually. Then, maybe because of a memory, word, smell or other trigger, they may react with outbursts of anger or sadness. It's important to tell the children that this is common and perfectly normal, and that there's nothing shameful in reacting in this way."

Unlike with a broken arm or leg, it's difficult to know when a child is experiencing distress or struggling. As a teacher, you see most

of your students every school day and might be able to notice a change in a child's behaviour or mood. Teachers can serve as an entry point and an important link with school psychologists or counsellors who are trained in supporting children in distress. In addition, teachers can use the skills and techniques taught in this course to support children.

➔ It's important to remember that children are also resilient. Their resilience can be bolstered when they have access to safe (emotional and physical) learning spaces, a range of nurturing and supportive relationships with peers and adults, and play-based social and emotional activities.

Key Points



Distress can take on many different forms depending on age and other factors. Changes in children's behaviour and mood over time might be an indication that they are experiencing distress.



Children are incredibly resilient and teachers can promote this resiliency by creating safe, predictable learning environments that include play and social and emotional activities.



In some countries, teachers work with and refer to school psychologists when they believe a child might need extra support.



Practice: the connection between conflict, wellbeing and learning


 30 minutes

 Flipchart, markers and pens

 Small group, whole group

- ➔ Explain that in this activity, participants will brainstorm ways in which students' ability to learn and engage in the classroom may be affected by the ongoing conflict.
- ➔ Remind participants that one of the guiding principles of the course is conflict sensitivity. In education, using a conflict-sensitive approach involves being mindful of how the conflict affects students' wellbeing and designing a learning environment that is sensitive to what children have and continue to experience.
- ➔ Break participants into groups of three or four (depending on the number of people in the training) and ask them to write (on a flip chart) all the ways in which students' ability to learn and engage in the classroom and with their peers may be affected by the ongoing conflict. Explain that as children come back to school

after being out of school for a long time or return to in-person classes after attending school online, it's important to think about some of the challenges they might face and come up with ways to mitigate them.

 Divide participants into virtual breakout room groups for the brainstorm. If possible, provide each group with a virtual board to co-create their list.

- *Examples:* difficulty concentrating for long periods of time, fear of loud noises, difficulty separating from their caregivers, poor memory, etc.
- ➔ Ask each group to present their thoughts to the group and notice and reflect on the following points:
 - Were there commonalities across group responses?
 - Did anything surprising come up?
 - ➔ Explain that throughout the course, participants will learn a lot of skills and techniques to help mitigate the challenges that students may face when returning to school. Anticipating these challenges will help teachers to feel better prepared to support students and plan for their return.



Conclusion



5–10 minutes



Classroom Wellbeing Portfolios, markers and pens



Whole group review, individual drawing/writing

➔ Recap what has been learned (ask questions of the group or invite one or two participants to provide a recap).

- Conflict affects each child differently and every child responds differently. But knowing the common signs of distress can help teachers to notice when a child might be struggling and in need of support.
- Children are resilient. Nurturing supportive relationships and access to safe learning environments and social and emotional learning can bolster their resiliency.

➔ Invite participants to take five minutes to add notes in their Classroom Wellbeing Portfolio.

- How might children respond to adversity and distress?
- How might they mitigate some of the foreseeable challenges when children return to school?

