



Save the Children

TRAPPED

TRAPPED & SCARRED: THE COMPOUNDING MENTAL HARM INFLICTED ON PALESTINIAN CHILDREN IN GAZA



MOHAMMED ZAAANOUN/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images

“Before this war, my children still felt some comfort and reassurance as we were in our home. They still felt joy and used to play. But after the war began, so did their terror, screaming and crying. Instead of sleeping, they curled up with their hands over their ears. After we were displaced from our home, we didn’t have the basics we needed to survive. And with the terrifying sounds of bombs, and the scenes of blood and people being killed in front of them, their psychological state deteriorated more and more.”

Some of my children can’t concentrate on basic tasks anymore. They forget things that I’ve told them immediately and can’t remember things that have just happened. My daughter used to love drawing – she drew celebrations, family, and life. Now she draws soldiers, blood, war. My children also have to eat whatever they can find, even if they hate it, so they don’t die of hunger.”

I wouldn’t even say that their mental health has deteriorated – it’s been obliterated. **Complete psychological destruction.**”

Amal*, mother of four children between the ages of 7 and 14 in Gaza

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“My son has stopped eating from fear and has become so thin now. All the time he asks me, ‘Daddy, are we going to die? There is nothing I can do to help them as their father, I don’t know what to say to them. They keep on asking this same question, but I have no answer for them.’”

Samer*, father

No child in Gaza has known life outside of interminable cyclical violence and a life-limiting land, air and sea blockade imposed by the Government of Israel. They have repeatedly experienced or witnessed traumatic events and an evisceration of their most fundamental human rights. This has taken a devastating – and compounding – toll on children’s mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, even before the latest escalation.

The almost 17-year blockade has led to chronic poverty, created a humanitarian crisis, and has undermined children’s rights – particularly the rights to freedom of movement, to an adequate standard of living, health, education, work and family life,¹ and to play.² The relentless instability and violence have left children killed and maimed, destroyed their homes, schools, hospitals and any sense of security, and ripped families and communities apart.

Children can be more vulnerable to certain mental health stressors such as traumatic experiences, conflict, or significant changes in their environment, due to their ongoing development and limited coping mechanisms. As such, any mental (and bodily) harm inflicted on children must be interpreted in line with their distinctive needs and vulnerabilities.

Since October 7th, the situation has deteriorated to previously unplumbed depths, prompting the Emergency Relief Coordinator, Martin Griffiths, to describe Gaza as ‘uninhabitable’. Griffiths added that children are experiencing ‘No food. No water. No school. Nothing but the terrifying sounds of war, day in and day out.’³ UNICEF estimates that almost all of Gaza’s 1.2 million children need mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS).⁴

In 2018 and 2022, Save the Children conducted research on the impact that living under blockade and cyclical violence has had on children’s mental health in Gaza (see ‘Methodology’ below for more information). Due to the current level of hostilities and insecurity, as well as the restrictions on providing meaningful follow-up support to children, it is not possible to conduct research meaningfully and responsibly on the same scale. However, given the concerns over the expected decline to children’s mental health and their ability to cope, Save the Children is presenting insights to its previous research.

These demonstrate that further severe mental harm has been inflicted on Gaza’s children over the past few months, compounding the pre-existing mental health crisis:

- All parents, caregivers and partners consulted reported that this **escalation is unlike any that came before**. Participants attributed this to the intensity, duration and conduct of hostilities; the widespread, systematic and repeated displacement; the lack of access to essentials necessary for survival; and the decimation of public services.
- For children, this translated into a **destruction of the fundamental tenets of childhood**. Participants reported that children have no escape from the reality of war, no stable routine, no opportunity to learn or play – and for many, no family.
- Mental Health and Child Protection experts from Save the Children stated that the **normal protective factors such as stable routine, opportunity to play, family** that prevent a large portion of a population from potentially developing severe and long-lasting mental health conditions have been eliminated. The conditions in Gaza **currently represent text-book risk factors for lasting mental harm** for children.
- Correspondingly, every person consulted stressed that they had witnessed a **dramatic deterioration in the mental health of children**, including compared to previous escalations.
- This manifested in **symptoms of severe emotional distress and trauma** such as fear, anxiety, disordered eating, bedwetting, hyper-vigilance, and sleep problems.
- **Behavioural changes** were also reported including introversion, separation anxiety or changes in attachment style with parents, regression, and aggression. Children were reported to be constantly fearful of their own death, as well as the death of their parents.
- Some parents noted that their children now have **curtailed dreams and aspirations**. Some children struggle to see a future for themselves, are simply focused on survival, or have changed their aspirations to jobs necessitated by the conflict, such as selling biscuits on the street, or driving a donkey cart to deliver aid.

1 https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/gaza_blockade_mental_health_palestinian_children_2022.pdf/

2 UNCRRC articles 31 and 39

3 <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/war-gaza-must-end-statement-martin-griffiths-under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-5-january-2024-enhear>

4 <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/stories-loss-and-grief-least-17000-children-are-estimated-be-unaccompanied-or>

- Parents and Save the Children partners also highlighted the compounding nature of multiple cycles of violence, with children’s **resilience and coping mechanisms eroded**. This has been reportedly exacerbated by parents’ and caregivers’ lack of ability to cope with the situation because of their own mental harm.
- Children consulted in the West Bank shared the significant impact of **hearing dehumanising language** on their mental health. They reported feeling pain, anger, weakness, and that ‘nobody wants us to exist on this planet’. They also stated that the lack of action in response to these statements made them lose faith and trust in the international rules-based order.

Without an immediate and definitive ceasefire, an end to the siege, including unimpeded humanitarian and commercial access, there will not be any immediate and permanent removal of the stressors in children’s lives. Children who survive will face further severe long-lasting mental harm, with severely diminished ability to recover. Children’s futures, in addition to their lives, are an unacceptable cost of this conflict.

“My children ask me ‘Daddy can we go home?’ I have to tell them that our house was destroyed, that it’s gone. They start crying and I comfort them by telling them that I’ll get them another one. What can I say? I can’t see a life for them anymore, or a future. Life is so difficult for them now. We live in such a small place, they cannot breathe. The streets are full of children. The whole of Gaza is in Rafah now, people are stacked on top of one another. Sometimes, I try to take my children for a short walk and all they do is cry. What can we do?”

Ahmad*, father of three children aged 6 to 11

Methodology

Background:

In 2018, Save the Children conducted research on the impact that living under blockade and cyclical violence has had on children’s mental health in Gaza.⁵ In 2022, after another escalation in violence in 2021, Save the Children consulted a further 488 children and 160 parents and caregivers to see how things have changed for children living

in the Gaza Strip.⁶ The research found that, since 2018, the psychosocial wellbeing of children, young people and their caregivers had declined dramatically to alarming levels.

Aim:

Given the concerns over the expected decline to children’s mental health and their ability to cope, Save the Children identified the need to present an update to its previous research. This paper aims to provide an insight into the mental harm of Gaza’s children.

Methodology:

In January 2024, Save the Children:

- Carried out interviews with four partners of Save the Children in Gaza, who were providing Child Protection services prior to the escalation. The partner staff consulted included Mental Health experts.
- Interviewed four parents and caregivers in Gaza about the psychosocial wellbeing, behaviour, and coping mechanisms of their children since the escalation.
- Conducted Key Information Interviews with Mental Health professionals based in the region (one in Amman, one in Ramallah), a Child Rights Organisation working in Ramallah, and the Palestinian Commission of Detainees based in Ramallah.
- Carried out Focus Group Discussions with 32 children (17 girls, 15 boys) in the West Bank about how hearing dehumanising language about Palestinians impacts their mental health.

Limitations:

Due to the current level of hostilities and insecurity, as well as the restrictions on providing meaningful follow-up support to children, it was not possible to conduct research meaningfully and responsibly on the same scale as our previous research. There is too high a risk of re-traumatisation considering the likely degree of mental harm. Similarly, due to access being denied to children detained from Gaza by Israeli authorities, insights are gleaned by adult detainees who have been released.

⁵ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/decade-distress-harsh-and-unchanging-reality-children-living-gaza-strip/>

⁶ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/trapped-the-impact-of-15-years-of-blockade-on-the-mental-health-of-gazas-children/>

PRE-CONFLICT BASELINE: MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

Before the current escalation starting on October 7th there was a pre-existing mental health crisis facing children in Gaza. Save the Children conducted research on the impact that living under blockade and protracted crisis has had on children's psychosocial wellbeing and mental health in both 2018 and 2022:

- Children were experiencing higher levels of **severe emotional distress** (an average increase by 25% from 55% in 2018 to 80% in 2022). For example, children reported feeling fearful (84%), anxious (80%), sad (77%) and grief (78%) in 2022, compared with fearful (50%), anxious (55%), sad (62%) and grief (55%) in 2018.
- Children's distress was exhibited by an uptick in **concerning behaviours**, such as bedwetting (increased by 26% from 53% in 2018 to 79% in 2022) and reactive mutism (increased by 17% from 42% in 2018 to 59% in 2022), and they were less likely to be able to find positive ways to cope with their situations.
- In 2022, more than half of the 164 parents and caregivers reported noticing a trend in **harmful coping mechanisms** among children and young people, including substance abuse, self-harm (59%) and suicidal thoughts (55%). An increase in the number of children and young people using negative coping mechanisms in 2022 compared with 2018 tends to further compound distress, creating a cascade of new physical, mental and social problems.

As these results show, children's psychosocial wellbeing has been on a dangerous trajectory for years due to long-term exposure to extreme stressors and traumatic experiences. The more extreme stressors children (and their caregivers) are exposed to, and the longer the escalation of violence lasts, the more difficult it is going to be for children to recover and live the life a child deserves.⁷ Children cannot, should not, be expected to endure even more violence, for longer, without any protection or support. Mental harm is already visible.

FACTORS CAUSING SEVERE MENTAL HARM – “A WAR LIKE NO OTHER”



Destruction in Khan Younis. Credit: Bisan Owda/Save the Children

Before the current escalation, the factors driving children's mental health crisis included: cyclical escalations of violence; and the impacts of the 16-year blockade such as severe restrictions on freedom of movement, limited life opportunities, restrictions on access to essential services, economic collapse, and separation from family and friends. Furthermore, the medical, educational and protection systems in the Gaza Strip provided limited MHPSS services, which have not been sufficient to meet the needs of Gaza's population. **Since October 7th, these factors have been dramatically exacerbated, and additional factors have emerged.** Parents, caregivers and Save the Children partners outlined some of the factors that have inflicted even greater mental harm on children:

Scale, conduct and duration of hostilities

“Children here have seen everything. They've seen the bombs, the deaths, the bodies – we can't pretend to them anymore. Now they understand and have seen everything. Now, my son can even tell what types of explosives are falling, he can hear the difference.”

Waseem*, father

⁷ For more information on Child resilience, see [Resilience \(harvard.edu\)](https://www.harvard.edu), Harvard Center on the developing Child

For months on end without respite, grave violations affecting and against children have been committed by parties to the conflict in Gaza, including killing and maiming, abductions, attacks on schools and hospitals and the denial of humanitarian assistance. Conditions to provide meaningful humanitarian assistance to children – their only lifeline – are absent due to intense fighting, the denial of lifesaving missions, delays to and restrictions on aid entering Gaza and only partial functioning of crossings.⁸

As of March 9th, and according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, at least 12,900 children, have reportedly been killed. It is unlikely that a single child in Gaza has been untouched by personal bereavement or loss. A further 8,100 people – the majority women and children – are missing, presumed dead under the rubble. This lack of clarity over the fate of loved ones will cause intense anguish for children. There are reports that people have not undergone customary burial procedures. Health workers have resorted to digging graves around hospitals to manage the overwhelming number of bodies and there are reports of corpses being found buried in black bags in an UNRWA school.^{9,10} These are things no child should have to see or experience. Not knowing if their families or friends are dead or alive, seeing the accumulation of dead bodies, and a lack of proper burials will disrupt children's grieving. Grief can be further disrupted by the silence from part of the international community, its refusal to unanimously condemn this violence, which can serve to invalidate the losses.¹¹

“Now when I leave the house, I say goodbye to my wife and children...with the way the situation is unfolding, you cannot guarantee life, even for one moment...I no longer have the energy or stamina to continue. When I leave the house, it's very possible I won't return. This has happened to a lot of families we know around here – they leave and never come home.”

Samer*, father

The Israeli military campaign in Gaza following the attack on Israel now stands among the deadliest and most destructive in recent history.¹² Widespread, catastrophic damage has been inflicted upon infrastructure critical for children as well as essential services, affecting families' ability to maintain their dignity and basic living standards. Much of this

damage has been caused by airstrikes conducted by the Israeli forces with large, air-dropped munitions with heavy explosive payloads, including 2,000-pound unguided bombs that lack the accuracy needed to ensure that civilians and civilian infrastructure are not harmed and damaged when such munitions are used in populated areas.¹³ For example, a 2,000-pound bomb, with an estimated crater size of 14 meters,¹⁴ was used in the Jabalia refugee camp airstrike that killed at least 126 civilians, including 69 children, on 31 October 2023.¹⁵ With Israeli airstrikes on civilian spaces in Gaza including schools and hospitals sheltering families, the violence, fear, grief and uncertainty is causing serious mental harm for children with no safe place to go.

Forcible displacement

“This war is very different. The violence of this war is different. Previously we didn't have to leave our homes, but now we have no place to go. We've been displaced six times. We went to a safe place and then they bombed it. This war has no safe place. This has affected our children. Even their games have become about war.”

Maher*, father

Those consulted for this paper underscored that the forcible – and often repeated – displacement of their families have been a major factor in children's emotional distress. Displaced families face acute shortages of food, water, shelter and medicine. Participants highlighted that displacement presented multiple risks and stressors to the psychosocial wellbeing of children.

Those consulted expressed the feeling that there was 'no safe place left' in Gaza, and 'no escape'. As a consequence of being displaced, children are forced into areas where they are denied access to essential services, including healthcare and life-saving health messages, to meet their basic needs. This has also led to poor living conditions, exposing children to the risk of disease. Those consulted also highlighted another problem being a lack of privacy, leading to tensions and frustrations.

Participants also reported feelings of loss and grief over their home, belongings, and their communities. For children particularly, the loss of their homes, schools, playgrounds, toys, and friends represents the removal

8 <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-110>

9 <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-100>

10 <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-108>

11 Disenfranchised grief following African American Homicide loss: [an inductive case study - PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#); Recognizing with Disenfranchised Grief | Sage Therapy Blog (sagetherapychicago.com)

12 <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/explosive-weapons-monitor-december-2023>

13 Ibid.

14 Pax and Article 36 (2016). 'Areas of harm: Understanding explosive weapons with wide area effects'.

15 8 Airwars (2023). 'Incident Code ISPT07083'

of fundamental pillars of stability and safety in their lives. In Save the Children's Child Protection programmes, we often ask children to picture places and people who make them feel safe or calm. If everywhere they have ever felt in safety is damaged or gone, the people dead or harmed, they struggle to picture what the idea of safety looks like now, or in the future.

"Children say that they don't want anything from the world anymore, they just want to go home. But their home has been destroyed by the bombs. Children feel very unsafe...they can't feel safe unless they are in their homes, their playgrounds, their neighbourhoods - and with their toys."

Ali*, Save the Children's partner staff member



A child's backpack and toy amid the rubble. Credit: Bisana Owda/Save the Children

Repeated denial to essentials necessary for survival

"There is no electricity at all, no clean water, no food, no clothes. There are few recreational or play activities for children. We try our best but this environment is very crowded, which has a big impact on children. There is no place for rest or to find safety. The mental pressures on children continue to build and one aspect of this is that there is no privacy between families."

Ibrahim*, Save the Children's partner staff and a father

"Children are living in the streets now and are exposed to disease, due to unclean water, malnutrition and an unsanitary environment. Sewage now floods the streets. I have three children, and all of them have got diarrhoea and are vomiting."

Omar*, father

"Unlike previous wars, this time children don't have food or water, they have no clothes. We left our home and I was planning to come back for everything - our belongings and clothes. But our home was bombed. There is nothing to eat in the market, only a few cans. And I can't even buy them, as everything is so expensive."

Daila*, mother



People queue to fill jerry cans of water. Credit: Bisana Owda/Save the Children

When considering the **deprivation of food**, it is important to note that the amount of food that would ultimately lead to the death of an adult is different than that which would lead to the death of a child. Similarly, the medical and development needs of children are different than those of adults, and these differences need to be taken into account. Put simply, children have distinct and additional vulnerabilities that must be duly accounted for in additional legal rights and protections. Almost all children in Gaza are facing imminent famine, while truckloads of food are being denied access just a few kilometres away. Previous research demonstrating a strong correlation between food consumption scores and psychological distress - lower food security is strongly correlated to higher psychological distress.¹⁶ Researchers have also found that childhood hunger is a predictor of depression in adolescence and young adulthood and may also play a part in contributing to mood, behaviour and substance abuse disorders.

¹⁶ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099153502102330181/pdf/P17925303fca130e30936d016a378b6a1e9.pdf>

“A few days ago, one of my children told me, ‘I want to eat healthy food. I really want to go to school and live my old, normal life. And I want to play.’ Their lives now are just deprivation, their childhoods have gone. They don’t have food and they can’t play.”

Maher*, father

Furthermore, lack of commercial access and the decimation of people’s livelihoods have increased the already high rates of deprivation. Research shows that the impacts of exposure to traumatic experiences are reinforced by the economic disempowerment and loss of sense of agency in a context of high unemployment with a lack of economic prospects.¹⁷ Parents and partners consulted reported that this deprivation is causing children to have to go out in search of food, water, or engage in labour such as selling goods on the street in an effort to support their families. This is exposing children to further bodily and mental harm.

“Communications blackouts are a major problem. When my mum and sister go to the market, they always say goodbye, as there is no way to stay in touch when they leave. So, when the bombing starts, you never know if your family are amongst the dead or not.”

Samer*, father

Electricity has been cut off since October 11th, and Israeli authorities have repeatedly shutdown all communications inside Gaza, denying people from contacting loved ones, ringing emergency services, or accessing lifesaving information. A recent study demonstrated a link between electricity issues and serious mental health concerns, including anxiety and depression, particularly when combined with other stressors associated with living in Gaza.¹⁸

LOST CHILDHOODS & TOTAL COLLAPSE OF A PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT

“Children are no longer having childhoods. They spend their days like an adult, trying to survive. They wake up in the morning and look for water, look for food. That’s what they think about now, their lives have changed. Children are no longer children. They don’t play in a playground anymore or do sports. They queue for water or sell little things on street corners to make some money.”

Ali*, father and Save the Children’s partner staff member



A boy stands outside tents, Al-Mawasi. Credit: Bisan Owda/Save the Children

Participants underscored that the ‘unprecedented’ nature of this conflict translated into a **destruction of the fundamental tenets of childhood**. Participants reported that children have no escape from the reality of war, no stable routine, no opportunity to learn or play – and for many, no family. These are essential protective factors that children need to mitigate against the risk of lasting mental harm.¹⁹ A stable routine and play are necessary for children to maintain a sense of normalcy, predictability in their lives and to express and process difficult experiences and the distress associated with these. These skills that children may have used in the past are no longer realistic options due to the ongoing and changing conflict.

“The children suffering the most are those who lost parents, either one of them or both. These children have had severe mental harm inflicted on them due to this loss. But this will also manifest later on, as now they are trying to survive, to find water and food like everyone else. The shock has not yet hit them – they are consumed in finding the basics to survive that are not easily found. But after the war, they will suffer.”

Ali*, Save the Children’s partner staff

¹⁷ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099153502102330181/pdf/P17925303fca130e30936d016a378b6a1e9.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37675921/>

¹⁹ Neil Boothby, “Political Violence and Development: An Ecological Approach to Children in War Zones,” *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 17, no. 3 (2008), 297-514; Frounfelker R. et al. (2019). *Living Through War. Mental Health of Children and Youth in Conflict Affected Areas*. International Review of the Red Cross, 101 (911), 481-506. Children and war; International Committee of the Red Cross (2023). *Childhood in Rubble. The humanitarian consequences of Urban Warfare on Children*.

Family is recognised as the most important protective system for children and youth as the primary place where children develop and where their basic protections and needs are met.²⁰ In Gaza, families have been separated, bereaved, and in many cases completely eradicated due to ongoing hostilities. Medical professionals in Gaza have shared that the number of children without surviving family members arriving for medical care is so high that a new acronym for medical professionals worldwide has been coined to identify them – “WCNSF” (Wounded Child No Surviving Family). UNICEF estimates that at least 17,000 children in the Gaza Strip are unaccompanied or separated.²¹



A baby sleeps in a crib outside a tent, Al-Mawasi. Credit: Bisan Odwa/Save the Children

Outside the family, schools and religious institutions are important social foundations which contribute to a protective environment for children – an environment which is crucial for children’s survival and well-being, and which is critical for safeguarding children from violence, exploitation, and abuse.²² In Gaza, 90% of all school buildings have sustained significant damage²³ and others are not operating as schools anymore. While education can provide a sense of hope, there has been no access to education for more than 625,000 students and 22,564 teachers as a result of the current conflict.²⁴ According to OCHA, at least three churches and 183 mosques have been damaged in Gaza.²⁵

Collapse of MHPSS services

The latest escalation in violence and Israeli-imposed siege have caused a total collapse of mental health services in Gaza – the six public community mental health centres and Gaza’s only inpatient psychiatric hospital, with a capacity of 50 beds to serve five governorates in Gaza²⁶, are no longer functioning – some have been destroyed or damaged by bombing, others have run out of medications, and online therapy cannot be implemented because of the lack of internet connection.²⁷ The collapse of those services also means the loss of a variety of psychosocial support, counselling, rehabilitation services, programmes and activities that benefitted to children, youth, women, including persons with disabilities. Those consulted also stated that children have few outlets to discuss their emotional wellbeing with their families. This was reportedly because their parents were equally suffering, or that everyone is in survival mode – just trying to access the essentials needed to get through the day.

“Children can’t even talk or complain to anyone, even their families, as the basic needs are too great. All they can do is survive.”

Ibrahim*, father and Save the Children’s partner staff

REPORTED IMPACT: A DETERIORATION IN CHILDREN’S PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING

In correlation to these increased risk factors and the total collapse of protective factors, **every person consulted stressed that they had witnessed a dramatic deterioration in the mental health of children**, including compared to previous escalations.

20 Alexander J, Boothby N, Wessells M (2010) Education and protection of children and youth affected by armed conflict: an essential link. Protecting education from attack: a state of the art review, pp 55–67

21 <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/stories-loss-and-grief-least-17000-children-are-estimated-be-unaccompanied-or-separated-gaza>

22 Neil Boothby, “Political Violence and Development: An Ecological Approach to Children in War Zones,” Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America 17, no. 3 (2008), 297-514.

23 <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-118>

24 Idid.

25 Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel - reported impact | Day 120 | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - occupied Palestinian territory (ochaopt.org)

26 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1125712>

27 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(23\)00398-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(23)00398-X/fulltext)

This manifested in **symptoms of severe emotional distress and trauma** such as fear, anxiety, disordered eating, bedwetting, hyper-vigilance, and sleep problems.

“My children have started fighting with each other. They are scared of the dark. Even if someone knocks on the door, they are scared. They have no safety here. They are scared of everything.”

Dalia*, mother

“Things I have observed in children are severe fear and stress, bed-wetting, and problems sleeping.”

Ibrahim*, father and Save the Children’s partner staff member

Behavioural changes were also reported including introversion, clinginess to parents, regression, and aggression. Children were reported to be constantly fearful of their own death, as well as the death of their parents.

“This is the worst time. Our children have changed completely. I told my wife, the behaviour of our son has regressed completely... This has all resulted in violence in the children, who have become very aggressive.”

Maheer*, father

“The children won’t stop hugging me and crying due to fear.”

Samer*, father

Some parents noted that their children now have **curtailed dreams and aspirations**. Some children struggle to see a future for themselves, are simply focused on survival, or have changed their aspirations to jobs necessitated by the conflict, such as selling biscuits on the street, or driving a donkey cart to deliver aid.

“One of my sons dreamt of becoming an engineer and the other a policeman. Now one wants to drive a donkey and cart – because he sees this reality, the ceiling of his dreams is being affected... [My other son’s] dream is selling biscuits in front of the house.”

Samer*, father

Parents and Save the Children partners also highlighted the compounding nature of multiple cycles of violence, with children’s **resilience and coping mechanisms eroded**.

“Our children have already lived through different wars. They already lacked resilience and now it’s very difficult to cope. The children are scared, angry and can’t stop crying. Even many adults do the same. This is too much for adults to cope with, let alone children.”

Dalia*, mother

This erosion of resilience has been reportedly exacerbated by **parents’ and caregivers’ lack of ability to cope**.



Caption: A boy walks through the streets in Gaza. Credit: Bisan Owda/Save the Children

“Once we, as adults, were fearful, our children also feel very unsafe...When my friend was killed, I was really affected – I was crying all the time and not eating. My oldest son saw this and his psychological state deteriorated and changed after this.”

Samer*, father

Already in 2018, caregivers were expressing fears that their capacity to support their children was being pushed to the limits by the blockade, chronic poverty, and insecurity, and would most likely be destroyed in the event of another military escalation.

MENTAL HEALTH EXPERTS: PROJECTED MENTAL HARM

“My children are suffering from really difficult feelings and have started behaving in an unstable way. Most of the time, they can’t stop crying, or they just keep repeating ‘we don’t want to die’. They often say that they want to go home and sleep in their own beds. They’ve become aggressive with each other now and shout at each other. Their games now are war games – they mimic the sounds of bombs and explosions. They shout in loud voices now – or are totally silent, not talking to anyone. They also hug me all the time. They are also worried that I will be killed. They ask me ‘what would happen if you died and left us, Mama? How would we live? Who would take care of us?’”

Amal*, mother



A child standing amid rubble. Credit: Bisan Owda/Save the Children

Mental Health and Child Protection experts consulted emphasised that the situation unfolding in Gaza is likely to **cause lasting psychosocial impacts, unless**

urgent action is taken. This is due to the fact that protective factors have been ripped away, while simultaneously, trauma, with all the textbook risk factors for lasting harm are present.²⁸

In any humanitarian context, when a group of children experience a distressing or traumatic event, if safety, security, access to basic services, are restored, and family and community supports available, a majority of children can be expected to recover.²⁹ This is premised on the assumption that children are resilient, and that at least some protective factors for mental health and wellbeing are maintained, despite the disaster. Building on these protective factors, and with the support of family, community and peer groups-based interventions, a large proportion of children can restore positive coping, and gradually return to normal functioning in their daily lives, with limited need for focused or specialised support.³⁰

However, in the context of the current unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, **all the factors reported indicate that the mental health consequences of this crisis will be more severe, and more long-lasting than in other situations.**

Furthermore, these risks are known to be cumulative - the more risk factors children face, the greater the likelihood of poor and lasting mental outcomes.

DEHUMANISING LANGUAGE

“First and foremost, I feel oppressed. These words are racist and barbaric – there is no need for them to be said. Why is the world staying silent while these words are being said to civilians? Why are they treating racism and brutality as if it’s normal?”

Aisha*, 16

Since October 7th, there has been a significant uptick in statements issued by Israeli officials that have characterised Palestinians as less than human. For example:

- On October 15th 2023, the Prime Minister, Netanyahu, stated that Israeli soldiers should stand ready “to defeat the bloodthirsty monsters who have risen against [Israel] to destroy us.”³¹
- On October 9th 2023, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant advised that Israel was “imposing a complete siege on Gaza...We are fighting human animals and we are acting accordingly.”³²

28 For more on this, see Hazer, L., Gredebäck, G. The effects of war, displacement, and trauma on child development. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 10, 909 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02438-8>; Miller, k. (2023). War, Toxic Stress, and The Mental Health of Children. *Psychology Today* <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-refugee-experience/202311/war-toxic-stress-and-the-mental-health-of-children>

29 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) (2007). *IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings*. Geneva: IASC; Save the Children (2023). *Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Technical Guidance*

30 Idid.

- On October 9th, Israeli Army Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories stated: “Human animals are dealt with accordingly.”³³
- On November 3rd 2023, the Prime Minister, Netanyahu, stated in a letter to Israeli soldiers and officers that “this is the war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness”.³⁴ He stated again in his Christmas message that “we’re facing monsters, monsters who murdered children in front of their parents... This is a battle not only of Israel against these barbarians, it’s a battle of civilisation against barbarism”.³⁵

The UN has also reported that dehumanising language has been used against Israelis.³⁶

There is ample evidence that dehumanisation fuels discrimination, aggression, and violence against the target group.³⁷ Dehumanisation, both through verbal expression and policy implementation, can cause a ripple-effect – fostering instances of violence carried out by state actors and maintaining power and control.³⁸ The use of dehumanising language can only further intensify and strengthen long-standing hostile sentiments and hate speech, and multiply and promote manifestations of intolerance.³⁹

We consulted 32 children in the West Bank about how these statements made them feel, as it is not ethical or responsible to interview children in Gaza currently and the impact of dehumanising language is universal to all Palestinian children. The children reported that they felt ‘pain’ and ‘anger’ at these statements. They were made to feel ‘weak’, ‘full of sorrow’, and that ‘nobody wants us to exist on this planet’. This is in line with previous research that shows that the cognitive and emotional consequences of those on the receiving-end of dehumanisation are feelings of sadness, anger, and shame.⁴⁰ Moreover, children overwhelmingly reported that these statements – and the consequent inaction from the international community – made them lose faith in the international rules-based-order.

“My heart burned when I first heard it, I knew that something bad was going to happen... These statements mean that I no longer believe in the value of international law and child rights – because if they had value, they would have been stopped. Now the world is allowing them to commit these crimes, in the future, anyone will think that they can do the same.”

Abeer*, 14

“The whole world can see what’s happening, but they are silent. We can’t pretend that nobody knows. These words make me feel like there aren’t as many good people in the world. I used to think that people will stand up for what’s right, but now I don’t think that’s true.”

Farah*

Some children reacted with a sense of pride and indignation in the face of such comments. Tamer*, 16, said:

“I feel like the authorities are trying to scare and discourage us. But these words only make us stronger. There is a huge difference between our rhetoric and theirs.”

Child Protection and Mental Health experts at Save the Children consulted for this paper advised that hearing such dehumanising statements – not just since the escalation, but historically – is likely to take a significant toll on children’s mental health. Children’s psychological development and sense of self is based on feedback you hear from others, especially those in authority positions. If a child hears dehumanising statements, this may be consequently internalised, leading to self-dehumanisation. Children exposed to such language may internalise feelings of fear, shame, and worthlessness, affecting their self-esteem and contributing to long-term psychological harm.

31 Israel Prime Minister’s Office, PM Netanyahu asks Ministers to Rise for a Moment of Silence (15 October 2023), <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spoke-start151023> (emphasis added).

32 Statement by Yoav Gallant, 9 October 2023, 9 October 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nxvS9VY-t0>. Translation in Emanuel Fabian, “Defense minister announces ‘complete siege’ of Gaza: No power, food or fuel”, The Times of Israel (9 October 2023), https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/defense-minister-announces-complete-siege-of-gaza-no-power-food-or-fuel/

33 Video address by Ghassan Alian, 10 October 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/5a0EWv-o7mE>

34 Prime Minister’s Office in Hebrew published on X (formerly Twitter) on November 3, https://twitter.com/IsraeliPM_heb/status/1720406469055500583

35 Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Christmas message from Prime Minister Netanyahu, December 24, 2023 : <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/christmas-message-from-pm-netanyahu-24-dec-2023>

36 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/israeloccupied-palestinian-territory-un-experts-deplore-attacks-civilians>

37 Kteily, N., Hodson, G. and Bruneau, E. (2016) They see us as less than human: metadehumanization predicts intergroup conflict via reciprocal dehumanization. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 110, pp.343-370.

38 Fischer, V. and O’Mara, S. M. (2023). ‘They deserve it for what they’re doing’: dehumanising rhetoric as a facilitator of the recourse to violence against the defenceless. *Behavioral Sciences*, 51, pp.2352-1546.

39 Letter from Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, to Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (20 April 2021), available at <https://rm.coe.int/letter-to-mr-ilham-aliyev-president-of-the-republic-of-azerbaijan-by-m/1680a2364c>.

40 Bastian, B. Haslam, N. (2011) Experiencing dehumanization: cognitive and emotional effects of everyday dehumanization. *Basic Appl Soc Psych*, 33, pp.295-303.

The impact of detention on mental health

Since early December 2023, footage and reports,^{41,42} surfaced of children from Gaza being rounded up and arbitrarily detained by Israeli forces. There have been very concerning and disturbing reports of mass detentions, ill-treatment and enforced disappearances in the North of Gaza, by Israeli forces. Reports claim that children as young as 12 and persons as old as 70 were among those detained. Most concerning, those detained were reportedly subjected to serious ill-treatment that could amount to torture in some instances.⁴³ As of December 16, 2023", there were approximately 140 women and girls arbitrarily detained by Israeli forces in undisclosed locations.⁴⁴ Save the Children consulted detention experts, including the Palestinian Commission for Detainees and Ex-Detainees Affairs, who confirmed that children are among those detained in Gaza, based on their interviews with adults who had been released. These interviews also highlighted extreme ill-treatment and abuse, inhumane conditions, and no access to healthcare or legal counsel. Those released from detention detailed being stripped, starved, beaten, and held in "cages". They also said that an unknown number of people had died in detention.

There is scarce and restricted access to information on the children who have been detained, including their whereabouts – which is itself, a cause of great concern. Testimonies from adult detainees indicate that cruel and inhuman treatment is occurring, and basic due process rights violated. Save the Children's previous research^{45,46} with children in the West Bank who are detained reveals the enormous and lasting mental harm inflicted by this abusive detention system.

Emotional distress was a key symptom of detention, including sleeping issues, nightmares, feeling angry, feeling afraid to be alone, crying 'all the time', and living in a perpetual state of fear after detention, impacting their sense of safety. Detention was also shown to deteriorate children's physical health, including physical pain such as headaches, chest and muscle pains, breathing difficulties, shaking or shivering, issues with eating and appetite. Children detained from Gaza are highly likely to also suffer these same devastating impacts, according to expert interviews conducted.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"One of my children is so scared, he's started wetting the bed. All of my children have a lot of fear. Every time they hear an airplane, rocket or any loud noise they get really scared. Their lives are so difficult, they need psychosocial support, we need doctors to come and help them. They need to recover too by being able to play."

Waseem*, father

As Save the Children's previous research has shown, children's repeated and long-term exposure to traumatic events and oppressive living conditions in Gaza had already created a mental health catastrophe. The psychosocial wellbeing of children and young people in Gaza, and their capacities to cope and recover, were already eroded. The insights gained from experts, partners and parents indicate that since October 7th, every stressor on children's psychosocial wellbeing has increased exponentially, while every protective factor has simultaneously been decimated.

40 Bastian, B. Haslam, N. (2011) Experiencing dehumanization: cognitive and emotional effects of everyday dehumanization. *Basic Appl Soc Psych*, 33, pp.295-303.

41 <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-62-enarhe>

42 UN Human Rights Office - OPT: Disturbing reports from the north of Gaza of mass detentions, ill-treatment and enforced disappearances of possibly thousands of Palestinians

43 ACAPS, *Thematic report* February, 1st 2024,

45 <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/INJUSTICE-Palestinian-childrens-experience-of-the-Israeli-military-detention-system-SC-July-2023.pdf/>

46 https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/defenceless_the_impact_of_israeli_military_detention_on_palestinian_children_0.pdf/

With adequate support, these negative impacts can be reversed; throughout childhood, there are critical windows of opportunity where appropriate interventions can offset the impact of conflict—assuming that safety, security and nurturing environments are restored. **However, the longer the conflict persists without an immediate, definitive ceasefire, without protective factors being restored and strengthened, the more likely the potential for lasting mental harm.** The long-lasting effects of mental health impacts are also well documented, including in contexts such as Rwanda and Cambodia, where children were diagnosed with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression up to 12 years after violence ended.^{47,48} **The sole way to ensure MHPSS services are delivered at the scale required to prevent permanent harm to children is through an immediate ceasefire.** It is possible to do, it's been done before - but the current conditions do not exist to make this possible. Parties to the conflict and the international community must act decisively now to prevent irreparable mental harm being done to a generation of Gaza's children.

Children are disproportionately affected than adults in this unprecedented crisis. That is why it is of utmost importance to recognise and account for the fact that the threshold at which children suffer long(er)-term damage to their capacity to recover and live the life they deserve is lower than that of an adult.

Save the Children is urging the Government of Israel to:

- Agree to an immediate and definitive ceasefire.
- Take urgent steps to protect children and families from further mental and bodily harm by respecting international humanitarian and human rights law.
 - Constant care must be taken to respect and protect civilians and civilian objects, including schools and hospitals, in adherence with International Humanitarian Law (IHL).
 - End the siege on Gaza in its entirety. All crossings must be (re)opened to allow goods in accordance with IHL obligations for parties to the conflict – both commercial and humanitarian.

- Facilitate the safe and unimpeded access of humanitarian personnel to civilians throughout Gaza.
- Reinstatement services critical to the survival of the population, including water, electricity, communications, protection, mental health, and education.
- Stop the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.
- Immediately end the forcible displacement of the civilian population.
- Take all the necessary steps to respect the obligation under IHL to avoid separation of members of a family and facilitate the reunion of dispersed families.

Save the Children is urging the de facto authorities in Gaza to:

- Agree to an immediate and definitive ceasefire.
- Take urgent steps to protect children and families in both Gaza and Israel from bodily and mental harm by respecting international humanitarian and human rights law.
- Unconditionally and immediately release all hostages, including children.
- To take all the necessary steps to respect the obligation under IHL to avoid separation of members of a family and facilitate the reunion of dispersed families.

Save the Children is urging the international community, including donors, to support:

First and foremost: an immediate and definitive ceasefire

- Take every step possible, including through diplomatic and political leverage, to ensure an immediate, definitive ceasefire. **Without an immediate and definitive ceasefire, there is no immediate and permanent removal of the stressors in children's lives, children will suffer further severe long lasting mental harm.**

47 Bolton, P., Neugebauer, R. and Ndogoni, L. (2002) Prevalence of depression in rural Rwanda based on symptom and functional criteria. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*. 190(9), pp. 631–637.

48 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/10504817/>

Without an immediate and definitive ceasefire, children will continue to be killed and maimed indiscriminately, with no accountability, and conditions will remain unsafe and insufficient for a meaningful humanitarian response.

Humanitarian access

- Take all possible steps to facilitate safe, unfettered access to enable the massive scale-up of the humanitarian response that is needed.

Services - when safe and unimpeded humanitarian access is a reality

- Prioritize urgent accessible and inclusive MHPSS approaches and services in all humanitarian aid for Gaza and address scaling up of urgently needed MHPSS service delivery.
- Mainstreaming of MHPSS across sectors to enhance coordination and across the different phases of the response, to meet protection and wellbeing needs for children (e.g. health, mental health, shelter, nutrition, education).
- Build on remaining child protection capacity to set up protective environment for children and families.
- Ensure access to MHPSS orientation, and training for and supervision of health workers, teachers, child protection workers, community members and caregivers on psychological first aid and on existing and available MHPSS services.
- Develop and support adequate MHPSS response for unaccompanied children.
- Urgently recognise the need for and fund education in emergencies within the first phase of the humanitarian response by providing immediate, cross sectoral lifesaving, resources to caregivers, communities and partners to support children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive safety and wellbeing.

Support to UNRWA

- Strengthen, maintain, and in some cases reinstate, support to UNRWA, especially in anticipation of the further and ongoing complex humanitarian challenges ahead and the preparation needed to reconstruct essential services once hostilities cease.

Respect for IHL

- Must take all possible steps, including through diplomatic and political leverage, to respect and ensure respect of international humanitarian law in all circumstances, including by urging all parties involved to respect their obligations.

- Take active steps to promote the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure and the respect for the Geneva Conventions, including through public and private statements.
- Urge Israel to ensure effective implementation of the provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).
- Stop providing military aid to the Government of Israel and Palestinian armed groups, including the transfer and sale of arms, parts and ammunition.
- To take all the necessary steps to ensure the respect of the obligation under IHL to avoid separation of members of a family and facilitate the reunion of dispersed families.

Accountability

- Encourage all efforts to advance accountability for all grave and other serious violations affecting and against children. This includes:
 - Politically and financially support and cooperate with all existing international accountability mechanisms (non-judicial and judicial) to document, investigate, collect and preserve evidence of all potential violations and crimes, especially those affecting and against children.
 - Ensure that all accountability mechanisms integrate a child-rights approach at all phases of their documentation and investigations work to fully capture the breadth of children's violations and crimes, including the impact of mental harm. This also means ensuring that gender and child rights expertise are embedded in all accountability mechanisms.
 - When appropriate and feasible, put in place all measures to ensure the voices of survivors are supported to be part of their own justice processes.
 - Ensure all relevant recommendations of accountability mechanisms are supported, followed and implemented.

Save the Children is urging the UN Secretary General to:

- Ensure that all parties to conflict, including the Israeli Defense Forces, the Qassam Brigades (Hamas), and Islamic Jihad, are added to the list of perpetrators of grave violations against children in armed conflict, until such a time as grave violations are no longer committed, and enter into action plans to ensure and strengthen the protection of children.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was authored by Claire Nicoll at Save the Children. Special thanks are due to Lucy Hawkins, Rana Burqan, Yasmeen Sous, Farah Malek-Bakouche, Elizabeth White, Jessica Hazelwood, and Marta Petagna for their expertise and invaluable work on the paper. **Most of all, we are grateful to the Palestinian experts, colleagues, partners, parents and children who took the time to share their experiences, challenges and hopes for the future with us, at the most difficult time.**

All names have been changed to protect the identity of individuals.

Save the Children © 2024

This publication is copyrighted but may be reproduced by any method without fee or prior permission for teaching purposes, but not for resale. For copying in any other circumstances, prior written permission must be obtained from the publisher, and a fee may be payable.



Save the Children