



Child Helplines in Emergencies

Roles & Best Practices



Child Helplines in Emergencies: Roles & Best Practices



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EMERGENCIES AND CRISES PUT CHILDREN IN DANGER

Adverse childhood events (ACEs) – meaning events happening between the ages of 0-17 that are potentially traumatic – can have devastating consequences for a child, not only physically but also psychologically, socially and developmentally¹. Unfortunately, we know that the risk of children experiencing these ACEs – including neglect, abuse and exploitation – rises during emergencies².

Emergencies, here defined as **a situation that poses an immediate risk of health, life, property or the environment over the course of days to years**, expose children to greater risk of victimization in three principal ways:

- Emergencies can cause children to become **separated from their caregivers**, teachers, neighbours, and friends, who are usually the first points of prevention of risks to children and social protection.
- Emergencies can cause a **decline in the economic and mental wellbeing** of families, as well as an increase in substance abuse. These are risk factors for Violence Against Children, including exploitation, even in the absence of emergencies³.
- Emergencies can cause a **weakening in the child protection system** as a whole. Unfortunately, offenders can use this opportunity to abuse and exploit children without being worried about detection and punishment.

Worryingly, there is the phenomenon of “polyvictimization”⁴: exposure to one ACE is a risk factor for exposure to a second, third and fourth. In other words, if children are exposed to conflict, this makes them more likely to suffer other negative events, such as exposure to domestic violence, neglect, abuse, exploitation and substance abuse difficulties.

In Europe, we have seen these risks play out in real time following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Frontline workers, state agencies and international organizations have raised concerns about the risks of children being exposed to various forms of Violence Against Children, including sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking. For instance, during the UN General Assembly of 2022, the UN Special Representative of Violence Against Children stated: *“too many children are left behind, at risk of becoming victims of trafficking [...] in the ongoing Humanitarian Crisis, the War in Ukraine.”*

It is therefore **critical that child helplines act as frontline responders during situations of emergency and crisis.**



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CHILD HELPLINES SUPPORT CHILDREN DURING AND AFTER EMERGENCIES

During times of emergency, whatever their nature may be, children and young people turn to whom they trust the most. Child helplines should be ready to be **one of the first resources children can call upon**. This has been the experience of child helplines responding to emergencies, from natural disasters to armed conflict, pandemics and economic crisis.

The role of child helplines in an emergency is multifaceted, in terms of service delivery in the immediate aftermath, including:

- Rescuing children.
- Reuniting families.
- **Ensuring the basic needs of children are met.**
- Monitoring children's wellbeing.
- Providing **emergency mental health and psychosocial support** (MHPSS).
- Setting up rapid responses (e.g., walk-in centres, child-friendly spaces).
- Supporting and training humanitarian staff in adopting the right approach to children suffering from trauma.
- Providing up-to-date and reliable information regarding the emergency response for children via appropriate channels.
- Referral to other emergency responses and agencies (e.g., UNHCR).

Indirect services and advocacy include:

- Collecting and monitoring **data** on children's issues and violations of children's rights.
- Providing allied services with data.
- Flagging gaps in the child protection system and emergency response.
- Holding stakeholders accountable.

Systems-based aspects of the humanitarian response include:

- Assessing whether entitlements are secured, that material compensation is being organized, etc.
- Identifying and working closely with relevant agencies and the larger child protection system responsible for **long-term rehabilitation** – family, community, foster care, adoption, etc.
- Ensuring that the rights of disaster-affected children are secured, taking into consideration the emerging risks so that services can be adapted.
- Joining cluster groups and ensuring **referral mechanisms** are in place.

The role that child helplines play in trauma counselling and MHPSS is important in light of the risks that children are subjected to during emergencies and conflict. These risks are acute, and all agencies involved in the emergency response mechanism should focus on the specific dangers that children face during all phases of the response.

Finally, the **role of child helplines in the aftermath of an emergency cannot be understated**, as the needs of children and young people do not dissipate once a humanitarian response is in place. This is especially true for mental health and psychosocial support. Trauma as a result of an emergency can last a lifetime and ongoing counselling and support are often provided by child helplines, especially those in post-conflict zones.

CHILD HELPLINES' PREPAREDNESS FOR EMERGENCIES

QUALITY STANDARDS FOR CHILD HELPLINES

Effective emergency preparedness is essential to respond quickly and adequately to emergencies. Our **Core Quality Standards (CQS) Framework**, which was developed together with our child helpline members, describes minimum requirements for child helplines to operate responsibly in emergencies. According to the detailed standard related to emergency preparedness, child helplines shall develop a contingency plan considering different types of emergencies ranging from natural disasters, pandemics or significant public health concerns to armed conflict and terror attacks. Plans need to be updated at least every four years. To ensure that children are protected in times of such an emergency, the contingency plan shall address at least the following:

- Human resources in emergencies;
- Information management systems and technology pathways to access reliable information in an emergency;
- Coordination in emergencies;
- Specific risk analysis for a country or region where child helplines are operating.

BEST PRACTICES

The readiness of European child helplines was tested following recent crises and emergencies, including the Russia-Ukraine war and the coronavirus pandemic. During discussions with representatives of some of the child helplines that are part of our network, we identified **examples of best practices that could be used to prepare for a potential emergency**.

In response to the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, one of the initial measures was to increase the number of staff available and extend shift hours. Having an **emergency human resources plan** before the emergency onset proved beneficial in this regard. The plan outlines protocols for the rapid hiring and training of new personnel and may include rosters of standby staff at the regional or global level. Moreover, the war revealed the importance of procedures to broaden child helpline services to include the language spoken by children in need, in this case Ukrainian. It is also important to remember the **wellbeing of counsellors** during times of crisis. Child helpline counsellors working near or in war zones often encounter challenging cases and are at a higher risk of burnout and secondary traumatic stress. Therefore, ensuring that staff receive support and training on maintaining counsellors' wellbeing is crucial.

Another set of best practices relates to **technology use**, particularly in securing proper information management systems (IMS) and enabling **remote work** when necessary. Information management systems are crucial for child helplines to store and process information related to emergencies and the children affected by them. In this context, it is necessary to establish processes for setting up and managing IMS, including data protection procedures and data ownership contingencies. Another use of technology in emergencies is related to enabling secure remote work, thanks to which operations can continue even during a pandemic or a war. For instance, the GBV Area of Responsibility agency has developed best practices for remote delivery of gender-based violence services during

5. <https://www.sddirect.org.uk/resource/covid-19-guidance-remote-gbv-services>

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

emergencies⁵, showcasing the potential of modern technology to continue essential services. One of the most crucial best practices for emergency preparedness is having a clear **mapping of other humanitarian organizations**, to facilitate *cooperation* and *coordination* of activities rapidly following the onset of an emergency. In one of Ukraine's neighbouring countries, 20 independent child helplines were established to address the needs arising from the crisis. One can imagine that with more coordinated actions, it would be possible to provide aid more efficiently and effectively, utilizing fewer resources. As part of the trainings we conducted in countries responding to the Russia-Ukraine war⁶, we addressed the emerging challenges faced by child helpline counsellors, such as increased rates of *child abuse*, *child trafficking*, *gender-based violence* and *unaccompanied and separated children*. This showed the importance of establishing national and international **referral pathways** ahead of time to effectively address these phenomena during emergency as well.

PRELIMINARY DATA FROM THE 2022 CORE QUALITY STANDARDS SELF-ASSESSMENT IN EUROPE

Self-assessments against our Core Quality Standards are undertaken by our member child helplines on an annual basis. The purpose of these annual self-assessments is to provide quality indicators and a reflective tool for child helplines to identify areas where improvements can be made in their functioning. Each child helpline assesses itself by responding to a series of questions on adherence to requirements for each standard. Responses range from "Not at all" to "Completely", and a mean score (0-100%) is calculated for each standard.

In Europe, following the 2022 self-assessment exercise, the average result for the detailed emergency preparedness standard was 65%. Although we aim for all of our child helpline members to adhere to at least 75% of the criteria, some of the respondents fell slightly below. We learned, however, that many members faced a steep learning curve for child helpline emergency preparedness due to recent crises. They needed to adapt quickly, and as a result they gained valuable experiences and learnings that they can now translate into more generic plans and procedures applicable to future emergencies. We also plan to further support our members with **newly developed knowledge products**, including training and document templates, to **improve their emergency preparedness**.

THE ROLE OF PARTNERSHIPS

As a result of ongoing emergencies, conflicts and crises, we have cemented several partnerships to fulfil three goals: first, to enhance the coordination, planning and response to emergencies; second, to ensure that child helpline services are integrated into cluster groups at a national level; and third, to avoid duplication of services.

One such partnership is that with **Child Protection Area of Responsibility⁶ (CPAoR)**, a division of the UN, whose aim, as an Area of Responsibility within the Global Protection Cluster, is to **lead the coordination of child protection efforts in humanitarian settings** to ensure children in emergencies are protected from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence. By partnering with CPAoR, we can quickly disseminate information and foster contact with national and regional actors in times of emergency, linking up child helpline services, supporting rapid scale-up and expansion of services and, in some cases, the start-up of new services. As a result, both partners have integrated practices of using child helpline data to inform partners about the gaps and needs felt by children in an emergency and humanitarian setting.

Furthermore, to avoid duplication of services, a toolkit resource⁷ was developed to guide government and UN agencies when a new child helpline service was needed in response to an emergency.

6. <https://childhelplineinternational.org/responding-to-the-crisis-caused-by-the-war-in-ukraine>

7. <https://www.cpaor.net/>

8. <https://childhelplineinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Child-Helpline-Starter-Kit-Aug-2022.pdf>

Considering the risks that emergencies and crises pose to the physical and mental wellbeing of children and young people, as well as the direct and indirect role child helplines have in response to them and the crucial role of child helplines in responding to the needs of children in emergencies, child helplines must be properly prepared. Here, we have outlined a few concrete actions child helplines could and should take, from having a human resources plan for the prompt up-scaling of their service, to the implementation of technology that will enable reliable data storing and processing during emergencies, and the mapping of relevant partner organisations to facilitate coordination in times of crises.

Child helplines' actions in preparation for and in time of emergencies are part of **our broader recommendations**:

- 1 Every child and young person should have free and unrestricted access to child helpline services.
- 2 Child helplines should receive consistent funding and support towards the implementation of, among other things, effective data collection and analysis, and quality standards.
- 3 Policy and decision-making that affects children and young people's lives should be informed by child helpline data and youth participation.
- 4 Structured partnerships should be established to help to eradicate violence against all children and young people.



Every child has a voice. No child should be left unheard.

Child Helpline International is a collective impact organization with 155 members in 133 countries and territories around the world (as at June 2023).

We coordinate information, viewpoints, knowledge and data from our child helpline members, partners and external sources. This exceptional resource is used to help and support child protection systems globally, regionally and nationally, and to help our members advocate for the rights of children and amplify their voices.

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