

## Supporting Children and Young People's Health and Wellbeing in Conflict Zones

### A statement from The Royal Australasian College of Physicians Paediatrics and Child Health Division

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) Paediatrics and Child Health Division (PCHD) is the authoritative expert voice of the College in paediatrics and child health. The PCHD represents paediatric Fellows and trainees, advocating for the health and wellbeing of infants, children, adolescents and young adults. The PCHD stands with those affected by conflict and is committed to their care, protection and future.

### All children and young people have the right to a safe and nurturing environment, regardless of birthplace or circumstances

As signatories to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>1,2</sup> Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand are obligated to uphold these rights. These commitments also align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to end poverty, ensure health and wellbeing, and promote inclusive, equitable and quality education for all children, including those affected by conflict.<sup>3</sup>

### Conflict threatens children and young people's development, health and wellbeing – both now and in the long term

From the earliest stages of life, from pregnancy through adolescence, violence, displacement and the breakdown of healthcare, education and social systems can cause profound and preventable harm. For example:

- Disrupted maternal, newborn and paediatric care increases the risk of premature birth, low birth weight, and maternal and infant mortality.<sup>4</sup>
- Poor nutrition impairs growth, immunity and development with lifelong consequences on health, education and economic potential.<sup>5</sup>
- Limited healthcare access heightens the risk of preventable illness, untreated conditions and injury.<sup>6</sup>
- Interrupted immunisation programs leave children vulnerable to deadly but preventable diseases.<sup>7</sup>

### All children and young people have the right to healthcare, nutrition, clean water, shelter and education

- We reaffirm that, in times of war and conflict, unimpeded access to humanitarian aid – including medical care, food, clean water, and shelter – is critical. This access must be protected and prioritised by all parties.
- Hospitals and healthcare facilities must be protected from attack or military use in accordance with international humanitarian law. Attacks on healthcare workers, patients, and

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

<sup>3</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

<sup>4</sup> James Keasley, Jessica Blickwedel, Siobhan Quenby - Adverse effects of exposure to armed conflict on pregnancy: a systematic review: BMJ Global Health 2017;2:e000377.

<sup>5</sup> Dahab R, Bécares L, Brown M. Armed conflict as a determinant of children malnourishment: a cross-sectional study in The Sudan. BMC public health. 2020 Dec ;20:1-0.

<sup>6</sup> Le K, Nguyen M. The impacts of armed conflict on child health: Evidence from 56 developing countries. Journal of peace research. 2023 Mar;60(2):243-57.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF Immunization Roadmap: [https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/UNICEF Immunization Roadmap 2018.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/UNICEF%20Immunization%20Roadmap%202018.pdf), January 2025  
IA2030 Global Progress Report 2024. Available at <https://www.immunizationagenda2030.org/>

infrastructure deny children and young people essential health care and are unacceptable under any circumstances.

- Safe border passage must be prioritised to prevent family separation and uphold children and young people's right to life and security.
- Often many children and young people are left homeless or without parents or are forced into unsafe conditions – underscoring the need for safe housing, social support, and long-term recovery efforts after conflict.
- Children and young people with disability and complex needs face even greater risks and require inclusive, targeted responses.

### **Conflict disrupts every aspect of childhood and adolescence**

Safe spaces to play, learn, and connect – essential for development – are often lost. Schools and early learning settings must be protected, as per international law, as places of learning, safety, and recovery.<sup>8, 9</sup>

Separation from caregivers/family, exposure to violence, being taken as a hostage or prisoner of war, displacement and instability in childhood causes lasting harm to children and young people, increasing the risk of lifelong mental health issues and perpetuating cycles of trauma and conflict across generations.<sup>10, 11</sup>

### **Children and young people must never be used as tools, targets, or as a form of retaliation or political leverage**

Such practices are grave violations of international law.<sup>12</sup> Children and young people must never be treated as combatants. They must never be drawn into conflict or used to serve the interests of any side in conflict. Their age, development, and capacity for consent must be recognised in all accountability processes. The psychological and social impacts of exploitation are serious and lasting.<sup>13</sup>

### **As paediatricians, we call for**

- Protection of children, young people and pregnant women from all conflict related harms.
- Safe access to maternal, newborn and paediatric care, including preventive, primary and specialist healthcare.
- Provision of clean water, adequate nutrition and safe shelter.
- Uninterrupted education and protection of schools and from military use or attack.
- Trauma-informed, age-appropriate mental health and psychosocial support services.
- Inclusive responses for children and young people with disabilities and complex needs.
- Restoration and protection of immunisation services in conflict zones.
- Long-term investment to support healing, resilience, peace, safe passage, family reunification and prevent exploitation and displacement.

### **The PCHD reaffirms its commitment to advocating – now and into the future – for the rights, dignity, health and wellbeing of all children and young people impacted by conflict**

<sup>8</sup> Ariyo E, Mortelmans D, Campbell L, Wouters E. The wellbeing of armed conflict-affected children in school: a qualitative study. Child indicators research. 2022 Oct;15(5):1673-91

<sup>9</sup> Winthrop R, Kirk J. Learning for a bright future: Schooling, armed conflict, and children's well-being. Comparative Education Review. 2008 Nov;52(4):639-61.

<sup>10</sup> Kadir A, Shenoda S, Goldhagen J. Effects of armed conflict on child health and development: a systematic review. PLoS ONE. 2019.

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<sup>11</sup> Devakumar D, Birch M, Osrin D, Sondorp E, Wells JC. The intergenerational effects of war on the health of children. BMC medicine. 2014 Dec; 12:1-5.

<sup>12</sup> Goldhagen JL, Shenoda S, Oberg C, Mercer R, Kadir A, Raman S, Waterston T, Spencer NJ. Rights, justice, and equity: a global agenda for child health and wellbeing. The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health. 2020 Jan 1;4(1):80-90.

<sup>13</sup> Kousar R, Bhadra S. Children in armed conflict: Concerns for safety and measures towards well-being. InChild Safety, Welfare and Well-being: Issues and Challenges 2022 Mar 22 (pp. 269-285). Singapore: Springer Singapore.