

TO PARENTS:  
**CHILDREN, ARMED CONFLICT  
AND FLIGHT**





# Children's reactions to armed conflict and flight

An increasing number of families and children are affected by armed conflict, forcing them to flee. Exile is often the last point of a long journey, which may have started many years before arrival in Norway. A family may have been refugees in their own country, living a life characterised by constant flight, restlessness and uncertainty. Many children have seen or experienced painful and difficult things. In addition to flight, separation from family and people they feel safe with is a great hardship for children.

Even if the family has arrived in a peaceful country, the stresses are not over. For those who are asylum seekers, living with uncertainty can be very challenging. Will Norway allow them to stay? Dare they hope for a better future, or a new and better life? In this brochure, you can read about children's natural reactions to the experience of war and flight.

## Children notice more than we think

How much of what happens around them do children actually understand or perceive? For us adults, it can be hard to tell how much children actually understand. Even relatively young children may register what is happening, or what is being said, around them. Older children often remain quiet, which makes it difficult to know how they feel about their experiences.

Sometimes, children may have heard adults talk about acts of war, police raids or the risk of deportation. Other times, children themselves have been subject to frightening acts, or they may have seen or heard that someone treated family members or others in a way that causes fear. Regardless of age, frightening situations and experiences, or sad atmospheres, can affect one's thoughts and feelings, causing fear and anxiety.

One can describe children with a refugee background as triple-burdened and traumatised:

- They may have experienced many difficult incidents in their home country, or while fleeing.
- They often live with traumatised, stressed parents.
- The living conditions of children who are asylum seekers can often be an even greater burden than memories of incidents from war.



## Children's reactions

Even children who do not talk can in various ways 'talk' about what worries them. Through their way of being and/or bodily reactions, they 'tell' us about their worries. Here are some reactions that are normal in children who have experienced frightening and/or traumatic incidents:

- Sleep problems. They have nightmares, or may not be able to sleep at all. They wake up in the middle of the night, or cry when one puts them to bed. Many do not want to go to bed.
- Psychosomatic problems. They do not want to eat, or they throw up, eat too little (or far too much) or get stomach pains. They have pain various places in the body.
- Sadness. They are often upset. They often cry. They lack a desire to play, or they become apathetic.
- Problems at school. Concentration problems and restlessness. They are never still. They create problems, or destroy things around them.
- Aggression. Hitting, biting or arguing with other children, or adults. This is often because the children are afraid.
- Fear and anxiety. They may be afraid of sounds, of people in uniform, of things or of people who remind them of their painful experiences. Some children can be so sad or confused that they have no desire to play.
- Some children develop language problems, or begin to stutter.

All these reactions are normal in children who have experienced difficult situations. Frightening incidents, repeated escapes, etc. are conditions that create uncertainty in children. This uncertainty can lead to them being afraid. They become afraid of being away from their parents, and they become afraid that the painful things will happen again.



Older children may be afraid that they have gone 'crazy' and do not want to talk about their thoughts. It is important that adults assure them that these are normal reactions to abnormal incidents, and that they most likely will pass with time. If they do not pass, it is important that one seek help from someone who can help both the child and the parents, such as a public health nurse, a doctor, a psychologist or a teacher.

### **The whole family is affected**

For us as parents, it can be tiresome to cope with children's reactions. It is easy to become irritated or angry with children who are demanding, especially for parents who themselves feel tired and insecure. However, yelling just makes children even more insecure and clingy. Talking to other parents in the same situation may be helpful. Children who have had to flee their home country, miss their home and the people they love. It can be hard to talk about this. The same may be the case for adults, and it may be hard to know what to say, or how to comfort our children. It is also natural for parents to want to shield their children. For fear of making our children even more upset, we may perhaps avoid talking about painful things.

Some parents are afraid that they themselves may begin to cry. Children tolerate this however, if one explains to them that it is not their fault. That mum or dad also miss granddad, the house, etc. As adults, we sometimes feel helpless when we see that children are in pain. Often, we tell them 'Don't think about it – play', 'Don't talk about that – do your homework', 'Don't pee yourself – you are big now' or 'Don't hit your brother – you are being mean'. However, children feel sad and lonely if they are unable to talk to someone about how they feel. Children need to express what worries them.

## What do children need?

- First, and foremost, children need physical and psychological closeness and care from their parents, and from other people close to them.
- Children need patience and a lot of attention.
- Children need clear boundaries, not punishment. Stop them if they are being aggressive or are destroying things, but do not hit or pinch them.
- Children need explanations underway of what is happening around them.
- Children need routines. Even if children do not go to school, or their parents are not working, it is important to get up, eat and go to bed roughly as one did in one's home country.
- Children need praise. Even children of three years can receive small tasks. When someone needs them, it makes them feel important.
- Children often need help from adults to find activities or toys. It is good if the adults participate, as this makes the children feel secure. Play is a child's own way of processing painful experiences.
- Listen to what children say about their experiences, and about their feelings, thoughts and what they miss. Share experiences – conversation is important.



- Let children draw what is on their mind. Look at pictures together.
- Let children tell fairy tales and sing. The older children can write a diary of their own thoughts, stories and poems.
- Show children that what they do is good, and that you are interested.
- Let children participate in religious ceremonies with you.
- Children need secure adults who are able to support themselves. Children's mental health can quickly worsen if their parents' ability to care for them is gone. It is therefore important that caregivers take care of themselves and their own health, both physically and mentally, and that they seek help when necessary.
- Try to communicate hope. As long as parents can communicate hope, comfort and security, and understand the child's needs, children will often do fairly well. Remember that no parents are always able to deal with their children in the perfect way. However, it may be a good idea to have as a goal to give the child some of what it needs during the course of a day.

Produced by the  
Regional centre on violence,  
traumatic stress and suicide prevention,  
Region Mid-Norway, 2023.

Telephone: 72 82 20 05  
Contact: [rvts@stolav.no](mailto:rvts@stolav.no)



[www.rvts.no](http://www.rvts.no)