



The Importance of Early Childhood Care and Development in the Refugee Context
By Lori Jensen

I. The Situation of the Refugee Child

The challenges that refugee children face are staggering. They may be separated from their parents, either temporarily or permanently. They may have experienced direct hostilities, or witnessed gruesome atrocities. Their homes may have been destroyed, their family tortured or killed, or they themselves may have suffered abuse. Living in a refugee camp further compounds their problems, as they are in an artificial environment, removed from the comforts of home, and forced to take on new roles, a new community, and perhaps even a new language and culture. When these sorts of adjustments are forced upon a young child in the early stages of development, the effects can be even more traumatic.ⁱ

It is further documented that children who have been in refugee camps for extended periods of time (or have been born there) face specific risks. Those in “stagnant” situations, (such as in Mae La refugee camp which has seen an entire generation grow up over the last 20 years) are especially susceptible. Because of the restriction of movement and lack of economic and social opportunity, depression and despondency are common. Often this results in drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and even suicide. Children may react by becoming passive and submissive, or aggressive and violent. They may also face severe adaptation problems, if and when they finally relocate from the camp.ⁱⁱ

Part of why the effects of displacement are so severe upon children is inherent in the very nature of being a child. According to the UNHCR’s publication on the protection and care of refugee children, children have a need for special attention and assistance precisely for the following reasons:

Children are vulnerable. They are susceptible to disease, malnutrition, and physical injury.

Children are dependent. They need the support of adults, not only for physical survival, particularly in the early years of childhood, but also for their psychological and social well-being.

Children are developing. They grow in developmental sequences, like a tower of bricks, each layer depending on the layer below it. Serious delays interrupting these sequences can severely disrupt development.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, one of the proven ways of healing such damage is through education, especially when it is provided in a strong familial and community context.

II. The Value of Education for Children in Crisis

The benefits of education are clear. Obviously, literacy and numeracy are vital in any culture, and especially in our globalized world society. It is estimated that children need 4-5 years of consistent learning to master these basic skills, and often in the refugee context such mastery takes much longer, due to interrupted schooling, lack of resources, etc.^{iv}

Furthermore, education provides a critical form of protection for the refugee child. It provides physical protection in the form of a “safe space” where children can gather to learn and play. There is also the element of psychosocial protection, in that education provides a daily routine, a voice in creative expression, and the opportunity for social interaction. Thus, there is stability and security that is given through education.^v

Moreover, education is a source of family and community support. For instance, while the child is school, the parents or caregiver is given the opportunity to do household tasks, find and prepare food, or engage in income-generating activity. In many cases older siblings are given the role of caregiver in the absence of a parental figure. If the younger children can attend a preschool, the older siblings are afforded the opportunity to attend school themselves.^{vi} When cultural elements (such as native language, religious beliefs, traditional arts, etc.) are a part of the education, the community identity is reinforced and solidified.^{vii}

Finally, education is crucial in re-integration of refugees into life outside of the camp. Especially when children have grown up inside a refugee camp, it is vital that they are equipped to manage life “in the real world,” as a functioning and contributing citizen to their society.^{viii}

III. The Benefits of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD)

The advantages of ECCD, such as preschools, are well-documented. UNICEF goes so far as to say that every dollar invested in ECCD “yields a \$4-\$7 return in the long run to children, their families, and taxpayers.^{ix} Several studies in the United States have found that among poor and disadvantaged children, a preschool education provides both immediate and long-term results. In the short-term, there is measurable improvement in cognitive development which lasts for several grades. Long-term, there are socioeconomic effects such as higher academic achievement, a greater likelihood to complete their education, and even less juvenile delinquency.^x It is little wonder then that an estimated $\frac{3}{4}$ of young children in the US participate in some form of preschool program,^{xi} and some nations (such as France, Italy and others) have made pre-kindergarten education compulsory.^{xii}

Furthermore, when looking at ECCD among refugees and other children in crisis situations, it is clear that this crucial time in a child’s life must be nurtured and protected. Not only does ECCD provide a refugee child with a solid foundation for primary education, it contributes to lifelong learning and physical, emotional, and social health.^{xiii}

IV. Education in Mae La Refugee Camp, Thailand.

Looking specifically at the educational situation in Mae La refugee camp, it seems like primary and secondary education is well-established. According to the UNHCR, Thailand's 7 refugee camps (including Mae La) have only 5% non-enrollment of eligible children (as opposed to 50%-85% in camps in other nations), and only 3% of children did not complete their school year (vs. 30%-90% in some countries).^{xiv} On its own, Mae La camp (with some 40,000 people) was found to have nearly 100% enrollment and year-end completion.^{xv} Thus, it is clear that there is a strong system in place for primary and secondary education.^{xvi}

However, the need for early childhood education is still evident. Given the ongoing trauma that new refugee families have experienced, as well as the dismal prospects facing those who have been born in and grow up inside the camps, these children need all of the potential advantages that can be given to them. A preschool education is a significant means to give these children a solid foundation and a head-start in life, as they and their families look ahead with the hope of one day being able to return to their homeland and be conscious, contributing world citizens once again.

ⁱ Notes on Refugee Children. (UNHCR, 1987) Article 22.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., Article 37.

ⁱⁱⁱ Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care. (Geneva: UNHCR, 1994) p. 1.

^{iv} www.savethechildren.org.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Pigozzi, Mary Joe, Education in Emergencies and for Reconstruction. (New York: UNICEF, 1999) p. 15; Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care. (Geneva: UNHCR, 1994) p. 10.

^{vii} Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care. (Geneva: UNHCR, 1994) p. 11-12.

^{viii} Notes on Refugee Children, (UNHCR, 1987) Articles 47 and 51.

^{ix} www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/

^x Articles such as Schweinhart, Lawrence J., "Lasting Benefits of Preschool Programs," *Educational Research and Improvement Digest*, 1/1994; Sawhill, Isabel V., "Kids Need an Early Start," *Blueprint*, Fall 1999; Barnett, W. Steven and Jason T. Hustedt, "Preschool: The Most Important Grade," *The First Years of School*, April 2003 were just a few of numerous studies I found.

^{xi} Barnett, W. Steven and Jason T. Hustedt, "Preschool: The Most Important Grade," *The First Years of School*, April 2003.

^{xii} Sawhill, Isabel V., "Kids Need an Early Start," *Blueprint*, Fall 1999

^{xiii} Pigozzi, Mary Joe, Education in Emergencies and for Reconstruction. (New York: UNICEF, 1999) p. 17; Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care. (Geneva: UNHCR, 1994) p. 48

^{xiv} Refugee Education Indicators, 2003. (Geneva: UNHCR, 2004) p. 13

^{xv} Refugee Education Indicators, 2003. (Geneva: UNHCR, 2004) p. 12

^{xvi} This is due in 20+ years that the camp has existed, thus allowing the organization and regulation of the camp schools. There is a pervasive UNHCR/NGO presence in the camp, as well as presence of the Karen Education

Department (the refugees' own educational association). Furthermore, there is a strong cultural ethic of education among the Karen people, stemming in large part from the influence of Christianity among the tribe.