

Declaration of Berlin 2004:

Assuring Mental Health for Children and Adolescents

In a time when the world is flooded with images of violence and brutal acts of aggression, we must be more concerned than ever with the impact of multiple adversities on the normal psychological development of children. In this era of globalization, the mental health of children is at risk in new ways that are difficult to fully appreciate.

The exploitation of children and adolescents and their use as combatants in war-affected regions of the world is a human tragedy. It is a challenge to all to better understand and to facilitate the possible pathways to healthy mental development for children and adolescents in the current world situation.

Children and adolescents develop in a dynamic fashion, interacting throughout their formative years with parents, caregivers, peers and their community. Among the earliest of life events, we now know that intrauterine stressors and genetic factors influence the pattern of temperament with enduring consequences for personality and social relationships.

Failures in the ability to achieve secure attachment to a caregiver leads to consequences for relationships in early childhood and later life. Neglect and maltreatment in early life may lead to depression, substance abuse, conduct disorder and suicide in adolescence as well as in adult life. Children with handicapping conditions are at particular risk. The precise mental health consequences of long-term exposure to the violence now being experienced in the world remains to be determined.

In contrast, we know that consistency in caregivers, stability in life situations, the freedom to enjoy play, and the ability to learn are all important parts of healthy development and lead to resilience in the face of life adversities. All of these essential conditions for healthy development are supported in the framework of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In situations of war, displacement, continuing threat, exploitation, starvation, and physical violence, all of the essential ingredients for normal development are severely compromised.

It is wrong to assume that nothing can be done to support healthy trajectories for mental development in these difficult circumstances. In conditions of continuing threat, interventions are possible to moderate the impact of adverse events on children:

- Regardless of the exposure to traumatic events, the provision of education to mothers and other primary cares about normal emotional development, reactions to be expected under stress, and ways in which mothers and fathers can support their children are important normalizing interventions.
- Providing a secure environment pregnant women and new mothers so that they can focus on the wellbeing of their child and have positive expectations.
- Providing opportunities for very young children to engage in play and interact with peers.
- Continuing or initiating attendance at school provides stability and structure supporting children during conflict and in post conflict situations.
- Ensuring the intactness of families and fostering family reunification supports children and adolescents.
- Providing training and education for future lives to adolescents offers hope and a vision of a better future.
- Intervening to treat depression and anxiety removes a burden that keeps children and adolescents from being full participants in the future of a society and reduces the likelihood of suicide.
- When efforts to prevent or ameliorate the negative impact of events fail, it must be recognized that remediation, therapeutic intervention and rehabilitation can bring children back to a more normal development path. The resiliency shown by children and adolescents is often remarkable if they are given appropriate help and support. Therapy of many types can free up the psychological capacities to regain a mentally healthy life trajectory.
- Cognitive behavioural therapy can reduce post traumatic maladaptive psychological responses.
- Proper child psychiatric diagnostic procedures can facilitate the provision of appropriate care for seriously disturbed children and adolescents in post-conflict refugee camps to reduce the likelihood of communal disruptions and the persistence of impairment in the individual.
- Individual psychotherapies of many types can ameliorate stress, resolve disorders,

and enhance family functioning.

Appropriate use of medications, if possible with a psychotherapeutic intervention, can reduce psychoses and ameliorate significant anxiety and depressive disorders.

- The provision of a safe and secure base enables the rehabilitation of vulnerable children and enhances the efficacy of all interventions.

The knowledge now exists to help governments, non-governmental organizations, communities, schools and others to put in place appropriate diagnostic and treatment services that are culturally and financially appropriate for low-income developing countries and countries continuously impacted by strife. Models for policy development to be incorporated in governmental and legal structures now exist.

Governments, communities, professionals, and families have an obligation to do whatever they can to preserve and strengthen the generation to come. The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by nearly all the countries of the world provides a powerful tool to advocate for and implement those initiatives to support children and adolescents to achieve healthy mental lives. A failure to ensure healthy mental development detracts from the capacity of societies to be productive, to avoid conflicts, and to advance in the modern era.

As articulated by the member societies of the International Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions (IACAPAP), the concerns and suggestions for action contained in this declaration can:

- inform governments developing post conflict programs,
- support national policies to foster mental health independent of political philosophies to ensure continuity in programs,
- be included in treaties of reconciliation as part of essential guarantees at the cessation of hostilities,
- inform the efforts of non-governmental organizations in efforts to build and sustain mental health programs for children and adolescents.

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