Walking alongside children on the move

A reflection guide on psychosocial support for all service providers



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We encourage organisations and practitioners to adapt the manual to their local context and to translate or modify activities where appropriate.

Funded by the European Union
Contracted by ICMPD International Centre for Migration Policy Development
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Definition of children on the move: Children directly or indirectly affected by migration and displacement including child migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, internally displaced children and child victims of cross-border trafficking[1]

1 Adapted from: International Data Alliance for Children on the Move, Children on the Move: Key terms, definitions and concepts. (2023) United Nations Children's Fund. p. 7

Who is this guide written for?

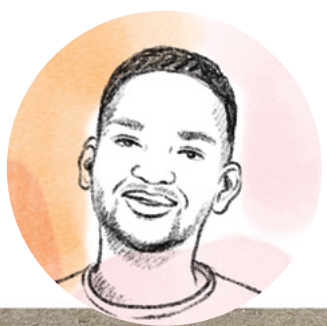
Service providers who don't work directly in psychosocial support.

You may be a social worker dealing with foster care, a clerk registering a child, a legal advisor trying to access documentation or a Family Tracing and Reunification officer. All of you interact with children who may have been through traumatic experiences, have lost people they cared about or are in a new and unfamiliar place. They will have many feelings chasing around in their heads and hearts. This guide is not trying to make you an expert in psychosocial support but to help you reflect on how you can be sensitive to children's socio emotional needs as you do your work. The ideas can be applied to any age group. It will help you "do no harm" and create a sense of physical and emotional safety so you can play your part in helping children move forward.

Service providers who work with children in psychosocial support projects.

You will have had some training in psychosocial work, or even be a psychologist, but it is always valuable to continue reflecting on how you are accompanying children on their journey to feel safe and happy.





Written by service providers for service providers

We have all had the experience of looking at a new guide or manual and thinking 'Mmm I am not sure this will work in my context'. Those of us who worked on this guide wanted to write something that was built on real life. So, we gathered a group of experienced child support workers from South Africa and Uganda to help us. These colleagues work in rural areas, cities and refugee settlements and have experience in counselling, alternative care, family tracing and reunification, legal support, social work, drop-in centres, psychosocial support groups and all the many other services that children on the move need.



You will find their reflections and ideas throughout the guide. In the guide we call them the 'co-writer team'.

Why do we need to reflect on our work?

As service providers we work very hard to support children on the move, but this work can be difficult and lonely. There is often no time to talk with colleagues about the work. Paolo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher describes why it is important to talk, think and reflect while we are working.

> "People are not built in silence, but through words and work, through action and reflection."[2]

If we are to build the children we work with and build ourselves, we need to talk and reflect about how we work and why we work that way. A counsellor who worked with us to write this book told us about a team reflection meeting held every two weeks in the centre where she works.

> "We share, we say, 'This has happened to a client and how do I fix this?', we engage with each other, we don't avoid hard things, we face and deal with them together. Sometimes we even disagree about what is the best way to work with a child. There is honesty and transparency about ourselves and our work. You feel you can work better, more confident and not alone." (Counsellor)

Think or talk about these questions:

- How does this team build each other?
- How does this discussion help them build the children they work with?

This booklet is designed to help you to run a group like this where you can talk, discuss, speak out and even disagree with each other to come to a solution.
You can also use this book on your own. Maybe you are not part of a team, or you are a person who prefers to reflect alone.

Aren't there enough manuals on psychosocial support?

This guide is a bit different from a manual or a training. It is not sharing skills or activities, it is designed to allow you to think about what you do, how you do it and why you do it this way; to reflect on your practice.

2 Adapted from Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translation: Ramos, M. B. (2005) p. 88. Continuum.

Think about the children you work with



Think or talk about this drawing:

- What do you notice about the children in the drawing?
- Choose a few and say what they may be thinking?
- What things do you notice about the children on the move that you work with?
- How would you describe what they are like?
- Are any of them like the children in the drawing?
- How different are they from the children in the drawing?

On the next page the co-writer team reflect on the children they work with.

The co-writer team describe the children that they work with:

"It's a mixture. They have a mixture of different feelings, different situations."



"They are pushing you away, not trusting."



"There are deep unanswered questions."

"Young people become very good at manoeuvering through the system. There's a lot of lying."

"They are very adaptable."

"They face a lot of psychological distresses such as anxiety, hopelessness, feeling a lot of fear and worries."



"They are very, very mature young people."



"There's a high, deep-seated trauma in them from all the past experiences."

"When they have caregivers or people who are taking care of them, they seem to be calmer."



"There's a lot of confusion. 'Why am I here?' 'Where am I?' 'I don't know what's happening.'



"A sense of unworthiness very deep in them, because they are often abandoned or lose their parents along the way."

Think or talk about the quotes

- Which of the quotes describe the children you work with?
- Are there any you disagree with?
- The quote below is from one of the co-writers. Talk about what you must do make sure you don't 'generalise'
- Talk about children you know that illustrate this quote. What different things affect how children respond, cope and recover?

"Every child has a different story, we need to understand the child at an individual level, not generalise. The different environments and families they have been raised in, the experiences they have gone through, or their personality, or the support they have, all of these affect their behaviour and how they cope and recover. If you understand the child as an individual you can see the issues that are making the child to act the way they are, then you can give them the necessary support that they need." (Director of a children's centre)

Welcoming children

















Think or talk about these drawings:

- What do you see in each drawing? How is each of the practitioners interacting with the children?
- Choose one that you like, why do think the support worker chose to work with the child or children like this? Is there one where you think the practitioner could behave differently, what would you suggest? Why?
- Which of these is most like the way you interact with children the first time you meet with them? Is it always possible to interact the way you wish to?

On the next page the co-writer team reflect on how they welcome children.

How we help children to relax a little and begin to trust us



"You will not come with your serious face. You have to soften up and be at a level with them. A child is not going to open up to you when you are moody or when you 'wear a tight vest' like an important person."

"Last week before I called in each child to ask them for information I saw the girls were skipping and I joined them, they laughed at me as I am not very good at skipping."



"As an individual child walks into my office I greet them with a small word game or funny greeting in their language. I learned one from a teenager in the camp, it works well, they always smile when I use it."



"I always tell them my name. I explain who I am and what my job is, they need to know what is happening otherwise they are confused."



"They have to feel safe, sometimes they need to be very sure that no one else can hear you talking with them."

"Small toys like cars, little dolls or soft toys help the young ones to feel safe. I let the older girls choose a funny cute looking soft toy to hold while we talk if they want to do so."



"We engage them in any space where they are. The office is a very threatening space. Having those informal conversations helps them to ease up a little bit. Actually a lot."

"I bring out the Ludo (board game) and we sit and play. You get to participate with them and it makes them feel that you are part of them."



"I make sure that I am always on time, that we meet in the same space and we sit in the same way. This routine helps them feel safe."

Think or talk

- Choose one quote that you think is important.
- Talk about the activities you do to help children feel calm.
- Is there something new that you have learned from these ideas?
- If your role is to gather information for family tracing or legal issues, for example, what could you do at the first meeting to make a child or young person feel safe?

A challenge: Try out one of the ideas the co-writer's suggest. Afterwards reflect with colleagues on how it went.

At the end of this guide you will find resources with games that you can play with groups or individuals.

Past and present affect children

We had a group counsellor in our co-writer team, Patience. She told us this story.

"Eziahs is raised by a single mother who is from DRC. His father passed away when he was very small. He's in a family of four, two girls and two boys. He was fighting a lot at school, beating other children. In 2024 he lost his older brother, and the behaviour became even worse. His mother came to the counselling centre to ask for help. He joined one of our groups.

Phew! From the beginning he was beating other children, swearing even at me. He was even cutting Aunty Klara's flowers. She is working in the office, and she was always planting flowers. He used to look very dirty compared to other children, untidy. Sometimes he wore one sock, socks dirty and the uniform! Sometimes there's no belt and he would tie it with his shoelaces. The mother was making him to wear the old uniform that the brother left, even the big shoes that were not his size. He would sit in the corner when we played.

Then I thought maybe he's going to talk through art. I gave him paper and crayons, and he gave me back a blank paper and said, 'I don't want to do it'. Then I said, 'Okay, you can go and play outside'. I thought forcing was not going to help. I wanted him to know, 'I'm not your mother or your teacher, I'm Patience. I'm different, yeah!'

Then the one day he drew his brother's coffin. That's when I said to myself, 'Maybe I can take it from here'. Then he talked to me. He said that he's very angry because no one told him what happened to his brother and now, he's alone, the only boy in the house and the sisters and mother just talk to each other and leave him out. His mother never talked to him she just beat him for being naughty. He told me that one day he was so angry with his mother for not talking to him that he even turned the table over just to make the mother angry. We started to get the mother to come to individual counselling.

I think it takes time for children to speak, sometimes the child is not ready. I think he started to be ready to talk because he saw the way I was treating him and that I never judged the other children in the group. I was not harsh with them. I never judged him either, I saw the behaviour was coming from his past, from losing his brother and his mother's response; beating him a lot. I just said to myself, he is not his behaviour, he is a boy who needs love and compassion. Over time he was no longer fighting, and he even helped other children with the activities. It will take time to learn to control his anger but at least he has a connection to me and the group. Oh, and he has stopped cutting Auntie's flowers!

Patience is trained to do counselling, but even if you are doing other work such as getting documents or doing family tracing the story is still valuable.

Think and talk about these questions

- Why do you think Eziahs was behaving the way he was?
- Choose one thing that Patience did that you agree with, was there anything you disagree with?
- Do all children behave with anger because of what has happened to them, how else do they show difficult feelings from their past experiences?

On the next page the co-writer team reflect on how they think about different behaviours.

Shift from 'what is wrong with you' to 'what happened to you?'



"Not judging is important. Some are always fighting, others not talking. So, you have to get to understand that these children have been through a lot and that is why they are like this, be empathetic."



"I work with documentation, not counselling but it is still important for me to understand that their life experiences have affected them. Creating a sense of safety and support is part of my duty of care and helps me gather the information I need without causing further psychological harm."



"I want to see the child, not the behaviour. I think to myself, you haven't done anything wrong, it is your past and now we must work together. I look for the child."

Think and talk about this

- Talk about the heading of this page, what does it mean?
- Talk about the word 'empathetic'. Give an example from your experience about a time when you were empathetic.
- What is 'duty of care'? Give an example of when you applied this principle.

Here is another idea to keep in mind

A traumatic experience can influence how children think, feel, and behave. Psychologist Ann Masten[3] reminds us that recovery is supported by the "ordinary magic" of caring relationships and an everyday protective environment. We also need to avoid defining children by their traumatic experiences and instead recognise their strengths and capacity for recovery.

How could the idea 'not what is wrong with you, but what happened to you', change your behaviour towards the children and young people you work with?

- How would it change the activities you do with children?
- Talk about what you think the words "ordinary magic" mean.
- Talk together about the quote below from one of the co-writing team.

"I always think, I'm facing a human being like me. So, whatever I do I start from there."

- How does this quote make you feel about your work?

3 Masten, A (2001) Ordinary Magic: Resilience Processes in Development. *American Psychologist*. 56(3), 227-238 DOI: 10.1037//0003-066X.56.3.22

Building agency

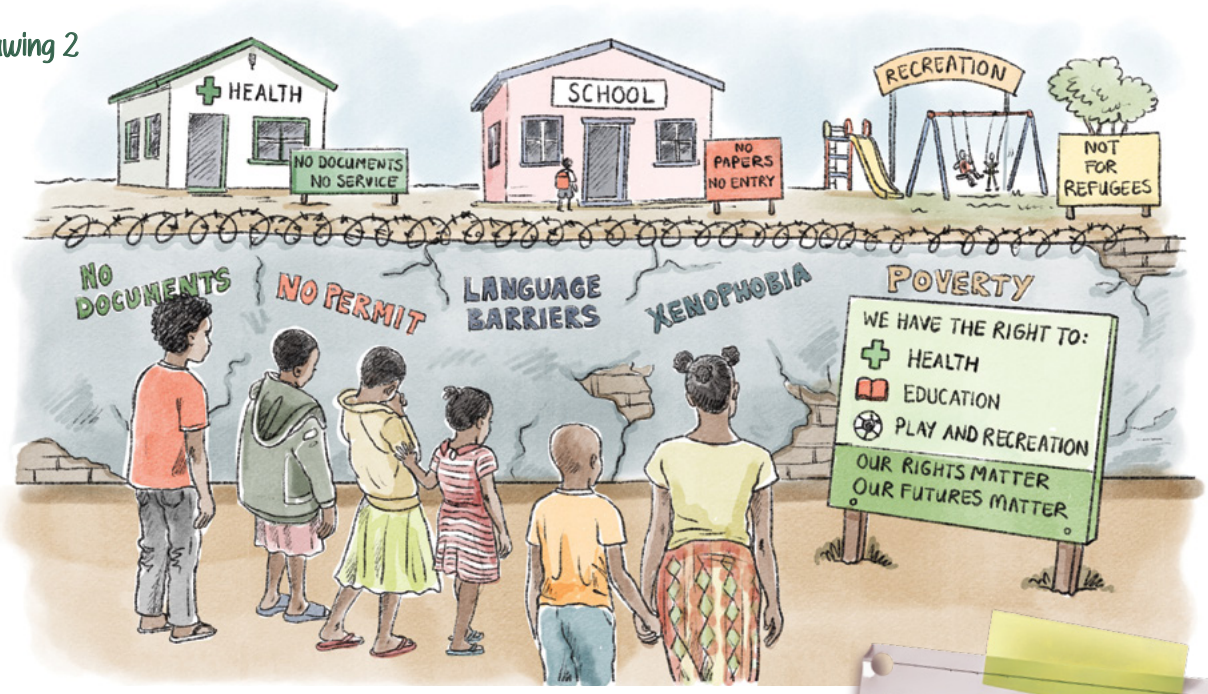
Think or talk about these drawings

Drawing 1



- Look at Drawing 1 – describe the way the children are walking. What does this say about them?
- In whatever work you do, can you build children to be more like the children in Drawing 1? How would you do this as a health service provider, as a social worker responsible for foster care, as a worker in a child care home, in any other role you play?

Drawing 2



- What does Drawing 2 tell us? What barriers can get in the way of children on the move? Who creates these barriers?
- Can children always use their strength and agency to get the things they need?
- Why is the board on rights in the drawing?
- How do you feel when the outside barriers get in the way of you assisting children to be more like the children in Drawing 1.

On the next page the co-writer team reflect on how they feel about the barriers children face and how they help them to build some sense of agency.

Children are amazing but they face barriers

"Yeah, children are amazing I would say. They have a lot of potential and agency to exercise. If we give them the right environment we can be greatly amazed by what they can do."



"Some days I fight with the hospital management to allow a child to be treated and then again they are denied. I go home so sad."



"We have a group for the very young children. We have some toys, balls, blocks, seeds, sticks, stones and paper for drawing. We put the different things out and they choose. They don't have any choices in their lives, but when they come here, they can choose what to play with. This makes them to feel they have agency."

"Children already know something so I am always trying to make sure that I build on what is already known by the child to help them build creativities and other skills around independence and making choices."



"One child is tutoring other children in Maths and Science and he does it with so much grace. He's a quiet and reserved child but he is passionate about education. I believe that when they give back to each other, it just gives them hope."



"I always ask one of the little ones to fetch my register or the ball we will play with or to suggest what game we will play. This makes them to feel important."



"I work so hard to do the best for each child but sometimes it is heavy! We can't get them to school because of no documents, the health centre doesn't have the medicine they need. We talk a lot about this in our team and it does help a bit but I still feel angry."

"We have young people here who have good exam results when they leave school but the law means they cannot get into tertiary training. I talk a lot to my colleague about what we can do, we really feel powerless to do anything."

There are two big ideas on this page:

1. Children face barriers that are not easy for us as individuals to change. This can feel frustrating. Look on page 19 and 20 for ideas to help you with these strong feelings. Do you think that group action can help reduce barriers?
2. There are ways we can help children build their individual, internal agency. Find examples of these on this page. Think of some ways you can do similar things.

Being a reflective practitioner



Think or talk about this drawings

- What is happening in the drawing?
- How is the service provider feeling?
- How do you think the child feels, the caregiver?
- What might this service provider notice if she paused to reflect? How could that change the experience of the caregiver and child?

On the next page the co-writer team talk about the different ways they reflect on their work.

Building reflection into your everyday work

> Experience becomes a source of learning when we make connections between what we do and what happens as a consequence.[4]
> We make connections by reflecting on what we do.

This idea comes from the famous education philosopher John Dewey. We hope that this guide has helped you to find ways in your busy lives to reflect on your work, to make connections, to say 'oh, that happened because I took this action'. This will make you a better practitioner but it is also an act of selfcare. Sitting quietly alone or talking in a group can help us process our feelings about the difficult work we do. There is no right or wrong way to reflect on your practice, you can find a way that best suits you and your co-workers. The co-writer team shared some ideas on how they reflect on their work.

"I sit down at the end of a week and spend just 30 minutes writing whatever comes into my head about that week. Some of it is personal, how I feel right now, how a meeting with a child went, how frustrating it is to be blocked all the time by institutions."



"I draw patterns on a paper and while I do this I think about my week. I come up with ideas about how to solve problems with clients. It is relaxing too."

"I am a manager of a multifunctional team and I sometimes do not attend so they can be more open."

"I knit and I think about my day."



"We laugh a lot at ourselves, making jokes about what we have done but it is all caring and helps us to relax."

"We chat together as colleagues while we drink tea, we naturally compare what went well or not and problem solve."



"Sometimes our work is so heavy, and you feel it. When we are in the group space we can take the feelings out. You know that the others understand, there is no judgement"



"I keep a notebook with three headings: This week I learnt/ I was surprised by/ Next time I will."

4 Based on Dewy, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process.* D. C. Heath.

Important foundation ideas

When you build a house you need to start with the foundation so that your house is a 'good house'. Our work as service providers can be guided by foundation ideas. This section of the manual discusses some of the foundation ideas we used when writing this guide. Expand your learning by reading and talking about this section of the manual.

Foundation idea one: A trauma-informed approach

"Behind every action I take is the idea that children on the move may have had bad experiences or are struggling with life now. At the same time, I keep their strength and ability to recover in my mind"



The service providers or co-writers you have met in this guide build there work on an important foundation idea that can be called a "trauma-informed approach". This means that they work in a way that acknowledges the following:

When children have experienced traumatic events these have an effect on them.

- The effect will be different for each child. Go back and read the quote at the bottom of page 6.
- Experiencing or seeing violence, losing a parent or sibling, living in a threatening environment and even moving and losing familiar things can make children feel they are completely unsafe, at risk all the time. Go back to page 6, find examples of behaviour that shows that children can feel unsafe after bad experiences.
- Our brains are designed to protect us, they go into survival mode when bad things happen, we freeze or run or stay very quiet. In many children this survival mode affects behaviour for a long time, they may become very quiet and withdrawn, they may do things like fighting with others or being rude to grown-ups. Go back to the story on page 9, why was Eziah's so angry and disruptive?

Ask 'What has happened to this child?' not 'What is wrong with this child?'

- Knowing about the effect of traumatic experiences on children means understanding their behaviour as a form of communication and a coping response to traumatic experiences. Look at page 9, how did Patience respond to Eziah's behaviour? How was she applying a trauma-informed way of working?

Children have strengths that have helped them to survive, they also have the capacity for resilience and recovery.

- It's important not so see children only as victims, as people who are damaged for life. Some children need extra care and support to recover but many children have already found and used their strengths to start their own recovery.

Foundation idea two: A sense of safety and relationship

"I always give the children a bottle of soda and a snack to eat while they wait in the queue for me to talk about the details I need to know to do family tracing."



Agnes gives each child a soda to help them feel that the person they will talk to and the place where they are is safe. This is why small actions like this are important:

A child or young person who has had a traumatic experience may remain in a state of survival, where their brain is still telling their body that everything is frightening, even an ordinary situation.

- Only when the body experiences a sense of safety can emotions start to calm. This will allow the thinking brain, not the survival brain to begin to work. This means they can then hear information, and make reasoned decisions. Why do you think Agnes sees the soda as important?
- A feeling of safety also comes to children when the adults around them listen carefully and never say anything judgemental or show shock or judgement on their face. Find a quote on page 8 that describes a facial expression that could make children feel safe.
- Children may see the world as unpredictable; they don't know what will happen next. This is why it is important to be consistent, be on time, meet in the same place. Adults need to become a reliable presence if children are to feel safe.
- Routine helps children feel safe. A simple action such as moving the chairs in your office every time you meet, 'Let's turn our chairs so we can see each other'.

Traumatic experiences can make children feel disconnected from other people and from themselves.

- Children on the move have a hard time with this as they may have lost not only people but the spaces they knew. They also often move from place to place and may experience discrimination from the people around them.
- Relational presence is an important idea, children need the people who work with them to show them that they genuinely see them, value them and accept them. They need to know they are held in someone else's mind and heart. How would you show a child that you work with they were valued? Page 12 has an example of this idea.
- First meetings are so important. Being welcomed in a way that is sensitive to their culture, language and traditions helps create a sense of comfort and familiarity. Find out how to say, 'Hello' or 'Welcome' in children's own language. It is a small action but it shows that you 'see' the child.

Foundation idea three: Managing emotions (regulation)

"I love using the game where the children sit in a circle with their backs to each other and tap or 'play the piano' gently on the back of the child in front of them. They are feeling what it is to have a calm emotion."



The co-writers of this book use different ways to help children learn to manage their emotions. This is because they understand the following:

When a child (and an adult) has a traumatic experience they cannot always say how they feel. Their bodies and brains feel very stressed like a bottle of soda that has been shaken and is waiting to pop. The emotions can come out as anger, fighting with other children, saying bad words or jumpiness.

- Getting angry or impatient or beating children because they show difficult behaviour will not help. It is important to be calm and patient and always respond gently. This will help children feel safe and slowly find their emotional balance. Go back to page 9. How did Patience respond to Eziahs?
- A fast run around a space or a game with jumping movement can help children get rid of negative feelings before and after a group meeting. If you are working with them alone, you can do some simple exercises or stretches.

Foundational idea four: Cultural humility



"I often talk to my colleagues about the fact that much of the theory we are taught about psychology mostly has its roots in a western cultural worldview. Other cultures have different ways of seeing the body, the mind and the emotions. I think it is so important to show cultural humility as we work with different children."

Being a person who has cultural humility is a foundational idea. Cultural humility comes from recognising that we cannot fully know or understand another person's culture, and that we need to remain open to learning from the children, their caregivers and other people in their community.

Here are two examples of service providers reflecting on culture:

"Foster carers asked us to hold a workshop to help them because the children were often sad. We asked them what they, or their parents and grandparents did when a child was sad. One said they sang a happy song, another said her grandmother had played a traditional game with clapping. Some said they sat quietly with the child. I found that people from Sudan had different strategies than those from DRC."





"In our children's home we knew the children felt safe but we worried that they did not have a sense of identity and confidence that we knew was important for them to build a future. We met as a team and realised that noticing silence is as important as hearing voices. The children did not talk about their past as this made them too sad, but with no connection to their past they could not find this part of their identity. We started to encourage the children to cook food from home, to speak their own languages, to play the music from their countries. This made them see they were 'somebody who belonged somewhere'.

Foundational idea five: Understanding and looking after ourselves

"In my first year as a social worker I struggled so much with my own feelings. My supervisor helped me to be more self-aware to know what in my past and present triggered my emotions, what my strengths where and where I needed help."



Children are highly attuned to the adults around them and respond best to those who are genuine and emotionally available. A calm, regulated practitioner is better able to respond thoughtfully to challenging situations rather than one who reacts impulsively because they are feeling emotional.

Working with children who have experienced trauma is emotionally demanding. It is important to give ourselves the same compassion we offer to the children. Knowing when we need to pause, take a break or seek help is important. Here are some of the strategies[5] the co-writers use to look after themselves.

Ideas for self care

Get enough sleep – if you struggle to fall asleep, do breathing exercises before going to bed.



Make time every day to sit alone and just relax for a few moments.



Talk to fellow volunteers about difficult situations – share how you feel. You can keep details confidential.



Keep alcohol and tobacco use low.



Make time to laugh and have fun with friends, family members or your children.



Take time for prayers and other spiritual practices to seek out calm and peace.



Ask for help if you feel you are not coping – do not be ashamed, we all feel that way sometimes.



5 Adapted from The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2021). Community Child Protection Volunteers Training Manual; Part 1: Volunteers' Roles Supporting Case Management

Ideas for self care continued

Learn about traditional self-care methods, such as prayer, meditation, or songs. Ask someone who knows these traditions to teach them to you.



Make time for loved ones – play with your children, chat to your wife or friend.



Exercise regularly – a long walk every day is an easy thing to do.



Find a friend, someone who works as a community volunteer that you can trust and talk to. Agree to meet regularly and share stresses, feelings, and experiences.



Share work – take turns to be on duty at night or over the weekend.



Take care of your body – See a doctor if you are ill, take your medication.



Books and websites with games for groups and individuals



Ask the children to teach you the games and songs they know.
You can play games you know from your childhood.

The Activity Catalogue for Child Friendly Spaces in Humanitarian Settings. Published by World Vision International and the IFRC in 2018. This is the perfect resource for group work with children and many of the games can be adapted for use with individual children. You can download it:
https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/activity-catalogue-for-child-friendly-spaces-low-res.pdf

The International HIV/AIDS Alliance (2002). 100 ways to energise groups: games to use in workshops, meetings and the community. The International HIV/AIDS Alliance.
This manual is written for adults but has games that children can play. You can download it:
https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/alliance_100_ways_to_energise_groups.pdf

Team Up is a War Child project. During Covid they created a great book At Home Activity Book". Many of the games are suitable for young children. You can download it:
https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/teamup-support-refugee-children-worldwide

Parenting On the Move (POM) and Save the Children have written a set of cards with ideas of activities to do with older and younger children. You can download them:
https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/pom-cards_english.pdf

https://preparecenter.org/toolkit/kidskit/
This is a website with wonderful simple games. The website was made during Covid but there are other simple games especially for younger children. Many can be done with individual children. Look up this example:
https://preparecenter.org/resource/symbol-of-strength

