

International Day of Peace, September 21, 2026

Invest in Children, Invest in Peace: Advancing Children's Rights in Conflict and Displacement

Peace begins with children. [1] Lasting peace is built on safety, dignity, and social justice. And this begins with children, who are the most vulnerable to the consequences of conflict and humanitarian crises. By the end of 2024, close to 50 million children were forcibly displaced by conflict. [2] For too many children, conflict and displacement can be a death sentence and result in separation from caregivers; disruption of education and healthcare; lack of play; and exposure to violence, exploitation, discrimination, and xenophobia. They may also face detention and other restrictive migration practices that can cause profound and lasting trauma. The consequences can reverberate across communities and generations, perpetuating cycles of exclusion, instability, and violence. [3]

The science is clear: early childhood is a uniquely sensitive period for cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development. Prolonged exposure to trauma, violence, and insecurity can have lifelong consequences, leaving inheritable markers on a person's genome that persist over multiple generations, including grandchildren, even if they had no direct exposure to warfare. [4] Scientific findings also indicate that investments in high-quality Early Childhood Development (ECD) are particularly beneficial in humanitarian settings - protecting children from the detrimental effects of toxic stress, supporting caregivers, and disrupting intergenerational cycles of poverty and violence. [5] New evidence is emerging on how ECD can rebuild trust and reconnect groups that have been in conflict with one another, resulting in more resilient, inclusive, and peaceful societies. [6] A recent study also found that investing in ECD yields a high economic return, particularly in crisis settings. [7]

A child's right to safety, development, and dignity does not disappear when that child crosses a border or has an uncertain status. **Binding and non-binding legal instruments commit to robust protection for children in humanitarian settings**, including access to safety, medical attention, education, and family reunification. United Nations General Assembly and Security Council Resolutions increasingly recognize the importance of interventions for the youngest children trapped in crises. **The international obligations and commitments articulated in these legal frameworks rarely translate into implementation.** The 2026 Report of the UN Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict documented that grave violations against children have reached unprecedented levels for the third consecutive year, while shrinking humanitarian funding undermines UN protection capacity. [8]

Investing in ECD should not solely be a reactionary response to crisis; it is a prevention strategy that can mitigate the developmental, psychological, social, and intergenerational consequences of violence while strengthening the conditions for peace and social cohesion.

We call upon the United Nations Member States and the International Community to:

- **Improve implementation of the existing legal obligations regarding children's rights in conflict and humanitarian settings by investing in trauma-sensitive and culturally-responsive ECD programs.**
- **Invest in implementation science to strengthen ECD programs in policy and practice.** [9]
- **Invest in local actors, as a peacebuilding strategy, to improve program delivery and strengthen local ownership, social cohesion, and community resilience.**
- **Invest in rights-based alternatives to child immigration detention that protect children on the move, preserve family unity, and uphold the best interests of every child.**

References:

[1] The United Nations has recognized this for decades, declaring that a Culture of Peace is built in the earliest years. Resolution A/RES/53/243, Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace,” adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on September 13, 1999. See also [3].

[2] UNICEF. “Close to 50 million children had been displaced due to conflict and violence globally by the end of 2024.” June 2025. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/displacement/>

[3] J.F. Leckman, C. Panter-Brick, & R. Salah. *Pathways to Peace*. January 2014.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272887510_Pathways_to_Peace_MIT_Press

[4] C.J. Mulligan, C. Panter-Brick & R. Dajani, et al. "Epigenetic signatures of intergenerational exposure to violence in three generations of Syrian refugees." *Scientific Reports*. February 2025.
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/40016245/>

[5] Early Childhood Peace Consortium. “Contributions of Early Childhood Development Programming to Sustainable Peace and Development.” November 2018.
https://ecdpeace.org/sites/default/files/files/background_paper_ecpc_issues_brief_2018.pdf

[6] Desrosiers & T.S. Betancourt, et al. "Task-sharing to promote caregiver mental health, positive parenting practices, and violence prevention in vulnerable families in Sierra Leone: a pilot feasibility study." *BMC Psychiatry*. November 2024. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39529061/>

[7] Early Childhood Development Action Network. “Global Financing Forum in Kigali Surfaced Strategies for Financing Holistic Services for Young Children.” May 2026.
<https://ecdan.org/news/global-financing-forum-in-kigali-surfaced-strategies-for-financing-holistic-services-for-young-children/>

[8] Children and armed conflict – Report of the Secretary-General (A/80/723-S/2026/357). June 2026.
<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/children-and-armed-conflict-report-of-the-secretary-general-a-80-723-s-2026-357/>

[9] T.S. Betancourt, L. Rawlings, & R. Subrahmanian. “Strengthening adaptive social protection for children in crisis: The role of implementation science.” World Bank Blogs. June 2025.
<https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/investinpeople/Strengthening-adaptive-social-protection-for-children-in-crisis>