



LEARNING BRIEF

Spiritual Support to Children on the Move and Their Caregivers as a Source of Healing and Resilience

This is one in a series of three learning briefs presenting findings of an updated review of faith-based action for children on the move. A set of briefs was first published in 2018 to support the evidence base for the Faith Action for Children on the Move Forum, held in Rome 16–19 October 2018. To maintain an understanding of the current academic and practitioner landscape, those briefs have now been updated with recent literature and good practice examples. When developing the original briefs, which included an extensive literature review and review of case studies submitted from around the world, three key themes around faith engagement with children on the move emerged: Continuum of Child Protection, Spiritual Support and Peacebuilding. This brief is an update to the brief on Spiritual Support and similarly draws on data collected through literature review, ad hoc searches and direct submissions from faith actors. These briefs do not intend to provide an extensive overview of all available evidence on faith and children on the move. Instead, they aim to help faith actors, development and humanitarian practitioners, policymakers and donors increase their understanding of faith communities' contributions to supporting children on the move, and shape policy and practice.

The term “faith actors” is used to reflect a broad understanding of a diverse group of actors who are commonly referred to in different ways, including, but not limited to, local, national and international faith-based organizations (FBOs), faith communities and religious leaders.

The term “children on the move” refers to children (under the age of 18) who have been uprooted from their homes, for example international child migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and internally displaced (IDP) children.

Faith actors are important sources of spiritual support to children on the move, offering safe spaces which can contribute to building and sustaining a sense of identity and belonging. This is particularly important in contexts of displacement. Through spiritual practices and creative methods, they support resilience for children and their caregivers.

In the past few years, there has been an increase in appreciation for the importance of spiritual support and mental health, and for the fact that these are often closely linked. This has led to a rise in initiatives in this area, including the development of specific resources for different religious traditions and greater integration of spiritual and mental health dimensions to initiatives aimed at supporting children on the move.



The Role of Faith Actors in Offering Spiritual Support to Children on the Move

Evidence shows that spirituality² can **support children's resilience** during experiences of displacement.³ Resilience can be understood as the ability to 'anticipate, withstand, and bounce back from external shocks and pressures'⁴ in emergencies and fragile contexts.⁵ Faith actors support resilience by providing a sense of community, as well as space and resources for sustained and holistic care.⁶ All children have the right to spiritual development,⁷ which is particularly important to foster the resilience of children on the move.⁸

For example, in a 2018 report by Save the Children, World Vision and Plan International, Rohingya refugee children reported that religion brought them hope and unity during hard times.⁹ Children generally had positive associations of religion whereby, for example, the sound of the call to prayer evoked feelings of joy and familiarity.¹⁰ Similarly, a 2017 study examining the link between spirituality and resilience among Central American migrant children came to three key conclusions: (1) spirituality is an important element in building resilience in Central American migrant children; (2) migrant children's spirituality can be nurtured through ordinary, day-to-day activities ('spirituality is fostered when ordinary things are approached in a way that makes them become extraordinary'); and (3) intentionality and spiritual awareness are important prerequisites for spiritual care.¹¹

Faith actors often provide **safe spaces that are physical, spiritual and emotional** where children on the move can find refuge. For example, religious buildings and houses of worship can become places where people access psychosocial and spiritual support alongside other types of support, such as food distributions and informal education. In Australia, Ismaili mosques provided services including schools, meeting rooms, social spaces, gardens and libraries. This allowed space for young migrants from the community to stabilise their identity and sense of belonging, as well as strengthen bonds with others, ultimately building mental health resilience.¹² The mosques also provided direct spiritual support in the form of meditations, prayer and sermons.¹³ Previous studies of trauma in children in war contexts around the world found that local religious symbols (such as memorials) and rituals positively affected trauma responses, and that prayer was a key source of support in difficult situations for people from all cultures.¹⁴

Spiritual support for children on the move is particularly important because it fosters **a sense of identity, belonging and community**, something which is often disrupted by displacement.¹⁵ Religious meanings, networks and places can have a significant impact on the development of the individual and collective identity of children on the move.¹⁶ Religious spaces in particular, such as churches, mosques and temples, are often central points within a child's community and support community-building, as highlighted in research on Liberian refugees in Ghana.¹⁷ Religious spaces provide children with an opportunity to learn about values, morals and behaviours. In studies of ongoing work with street children in three different regions, in the cities

of Los Angeles, Mumbai and Nairobi, findings were similar: religious practices helped young people living in homeless shelters to develop their own spirituality. In turn, the stable relationships they developed through these practices helped them feel a sense of belonging and supported hope and ownership.¹⁸ Moreover, religious practices have been found to act as an element of reassurance for parents of displaced children who may be worried about them losing contact with their community, culture, traditions and faith.¹⁹

Spiritual support is important not only for children on the move **but also for their caregivers**. Spiritual support can be provided by multi-sectoral programmes which use holistic approaches for the promotion of resilience and psychosocial support among parents, caregivers and other members of the community. A study on displaced Syrian parents caring for their children found that faith was not only key in promoting parental wellbeing, but it had a direct positive effect on their parenting, providing hope, motivation and encouragement.²⁰ Parents reported that faith was central to them, motivating them to give their children better, safer lives.

Creative methods, based on the arts, are often linked with and can enhance spiritual support practices. For example, Islamic Relief has provided creative therapy through art, drama, sport and music for Syrian children in Lebanon.²¹ In Rwanda, religious leaders and parents have used drawings to assist children to tell their traumatic stories to God.²² Research on Iraqi refugee children from Qaraqosh living in Jordan reported that children found peace through drawings of religious symbols (such as the cross or Jesus) and of spaces (such as churches), describing their feelings of hope, calm and protection when visiting houses of worship.²³

Key trends

Faith actors have been offering spiritual support to children on the move for many years, indeed in many cases longer than the tenure of most humanitarian organisations. However, in the past five years we see certain trends emerging, most notably in the stronger link between faith actors' provision of spiritual support and mental health support in the context of a holistic approach to care.

1 Faith actors are developing programmes and resources to build their capacity to address children's mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) needs and spiritual needs.

While the link between spirituality and mental health is long-established²⁴, in recent years faith actors have increasingly become aware of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) as a field of engagement, and of the technical expertise which humanitarian and development organisations have put in place to support crisis-affected populations. As a result, they are becoming more intentional and proactive in addressing MHPSS and spiritual needs in an integrated fashion. In Ethiopia, the Outreach Foundation has supported South Sudanese children in refugee camps for several years through faith-based trauma healing, in collaboration with Presbyterian and Evangelical organisations.²⁵ In Nigeria, The Church of the Brethren has been running the interfaith "Healing Hearts Curriculum" with children affected by the violence of Boko Haram in the North-eastern part of the country.²⁶



A first comprehensive publication with guidelines on MHPSS using faith-sensitive approaches was published by Islamic Relief Worldwide and the Lutheran World Federation in 2018.²⁷ Although the guidelines do not have a child focus, they can help inform practice and policy responses as they highlight core support domains, such as health, education, community mobilisation and dissemination of information.

Equipping religious and community leaders with tools to provide faith-sensitive MHPSS to displaced children and families: Petra Institute's "Walking with Children Enduring Hardship" programme ²⁸

The "Walking with Children Enduring Hardship" programme is a MHPSS intervention for children which engages with faith, the faith community and faith relations as key elements in the healing process for distressed children and adults. While the narratives are from the Christian tradition, the content is presented in a way that Muslim participants have also been able to identify with the values and reported a strong sense of inclusion and respect.

Petra Institute implemented this programme in Palestine (2005-2018), Central African Republic (2015-2018), South Sudan (2004-current), Sudan (2004-2019) and Ethiopia (2006-current) with internally displaced people, in Uganda (2017-2019), Kenya (2006-current), Tanzania (2006-current) and Egypt (2005-current) with refugees, and in South Africa with migrants (2000-current). They also helped develop teams of MHPSS agents and training facilitators with their partnering organisation, Children Mission, in Ukraine, Russia, Armenia, Moldova and Georgia (since 1999).

The programme engages religious leaders (mostly Christian and occasionally Muslim), caregivers and other community members. The ultimate target group/beneficiaries are children and youth, and their families. It consists of three phases:

1. Skills training for community leaders to provide faith-sensitive MHPSS to children and families
2. Training to build their capacity to teach these skills to others
3. Training roll-out to other leaders in the community, as part of a cascading process.

Lessons learned:

- Faith leaders, who are trusted in a community and are well equipped with **values, skills and knowledge**, can have a distinct impact on the overall well-being of children and adults in communities.
- The key to children's (and adults') psychosocial health is found in "**healing communities**" - groups of people in close relationship with each other who are open to receive and provide healing to all their members. Faith communities, equipped and guided by mature and competent leaders, can be invaluable in providing MHPSS interventions.
- **Respect, inclusion, humility and relationality** are amongst the key values leaders need to be equipped with in any context. Everything starts with listening - to understand the needs, but also to understand and acknowledge the work already done by local leaders.
- Training should be **intentional and address real needs**. Skills, values and knowledge must be integrated. Learning, in particular skills acquisition, cannot be rushed. It is all about the development of principles-based habits.
- A **well thought through strategy**, including a workable process of cascading, should guide community-based projects.
- **Flexibility** is vital. The programme was designed for contact training, but because of COVID-19, Petra Institute had to radically adapt to online processes. Despite enormous challenges, the organisation was able to reach more of their goals than initially expected.
- **Ongoing mentorship** is very important. This can make a difference between short-term impact and real change in a community.
- **Impact assessment** is important. Although no formal study of the programme has been carried out yet, leaders reported increased trust in relationships between trauma-affected children and their families and community leaders, including faith leaders.



2 Evidence increasingly demonstrates the importance of integrating religious and spiritual dimensions into mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) programming. Recent evidence shows that MHPSS interventions and spiritual support can be mutually beneficial for children on the move. Humanitarian and development actors can ‘strengthen psychosocial support by securing more effective engagement with the faith resources of individuals and communities.’²⁹ For example, a 2021 academic article shows how school psychologists around the world can support young Muslim refugees by providing opportunities to practice and share their religious traditions.³⁰ There generally is wider acknowledgement that faith actors’ ‘understanding of the complexities of psychosocial issues and their situation within the community, often combined with an existing track record of pastoral care, serves as a potentially strong foundation for provision of such support,’³¹ including psychological first aid³² which might be required in emergencies.

Presenting evidence and recommendations on how to develop faith-sensitive MHPSS: Arigatou, KAICIID and World Vision’s “Faith-Sensitive MHPSS to Foster Resilience in Children on the Move” booklet.³³

In 2022, Arigatou International, KAICIID and World Vision International, with the support of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), published a booklet on Faith-Sensitive MHPSS with the intention of helping religious humanitarian actors, and MHPSS practitioners in particular, to improve their faith engagement and sensitivity. The booklet provides an overview of the evidence pointing at the importance of integrating faith-based perspectives and practices in MHPSS responses for children on the move, as well as several evidence-based examples from practice. Its recommendations for faith actors, governments and humanitarian actors include:

- Adopt a MHPSS approach as **part of the overall strategy** to foster peacebuilding and sustaining peace
- Build the capacity of local faith actors to **deal with the drivers of conflict and refugee crisis**, and effectively deliver faith-sensitive MHPSS programmes
- Engage local faith leaders to **transform migration management practices** that are harmful to children on the move
- Include **early childhood interventions** in faith-inspired MHPSS to support families of young children
- Empower **children to be agents of change** and facilitate and involve them in MHPSS interventions
- Develop new and adapt existing **monitoring and evaluation** frameworks
- Create long-term multi-stakeholder **partnerships** to support an integrated and holistic approach to faith-sensitive MHPSS.³⁴

The document also highlights stories from different continents and religious traditions. For example, it discusses how in India, Youth for Peace collaborates with local religious leaders to support Rohingya refugees living in the camps in New Delhi, specifically targeting children’s MHPSS needs. Interventions include building trust between adults and children and trainings on positive parenting for caregivers.



3 MHPSS and spiritual support for children on the move are being more widely included and addressed in programmes that do not specifically focus on mental health.

Faith actors often adopt a holistic perspective when they provide support to children on the move. Frequently, this includes an integration of spiritual care into other activities, such as those aimed at fostering children on the move’s livelihoods, health and education.

For example, World Vision’s “Church Refugee Engagement Fund” combines activities, such as IT and spiritual well-being and support for children’s caregivers. Santé et le Développement Holistique en Milieu Rural (Development in Rural and Suburban Contexts) integrates

spiritual well-being into education activities and vocational training, based on the need to fully understand and address different reasons for school drop-out.³⁶ Many such initiatives continue and have expanded in recent years.

Training faith actors and other stakeholders working with children on the move: The “Addressing the Impact and Trauma of Migration” workbook and seminars³⁷

Since 2020, Humanitarian Development Partnerships has been offering training based on an integrated ‘bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework’ for understanding trauma and resilience. Their workbook, called “Addressing the Impact and Trauma of Migration”, includes contributions by members of the Mennonite and Anabaptist communities, including a former child migrant and son of refugees. The resource is not focused specifically on children on the move, but it has been used to train ‘parent liaisons’ in the USA who are employed to build bridges between home and school, and who work with children and youth, some of whom have a displacement background.

This resource has been used to train a variety of stakeholders, including but not limited to faith actors. Among the participants have been members of organisations providing shelter to displaced people near the USA-Mexico border, and staff from Church World Service and the Mennonite World Conference (MWC-MCC) USA immigration network. MWC-MCC also provided support to organise some of these trainings at the border. The resource, which is available in English and Spanish, is also used more widely to raise awareness on the need to address the MHPSS needs of children and youth on the move.

Recommendations

- 1. Ensure faith-sensitive MHPSS with integrated spiritual support whenever possible and appropriate:** MHPSS interventions should be integrated with spiritual support, where relevant, as spirituality can act as an important coping strategy and source of resilience for children on the move, and can support their sense of identity and belonging.
- 2. Provide access to religious spaces:** Humanitarian actors, governments and faith actors are encouraged to give children on the move access to community spaces—including religious spaces—that contribute to their social, emotional and physical well-being by fostering their sense of belonging and supporting community building.

3. **Use creative approaches:** Thinking creatively is important for faith leaders, governments and all other community actors when developing activities for children on the move. For example, interpretative techniques, such as telling stories and legends orally and through community traditions, can be used to model how children can address trauma and overcome difficult situations.
4. **Develop tools, resources and guidelines on effective faith-sensitive MHPSS approaches for children:** Faith actors and MHPSS professionals/practitioners should partner to develop tools, resources and guidelines on effective faith-sensitive MHPSS approaches for children coming from different religious traditions. These should be designed to be used not only by faith actors but by all actors working with children on the move.
5. **Support parents and caregivers as essential actors for strengthening children’s spiritual, emotional and physical well-being:** Support for adults, particularly parents and caregivers, is fundamental when responding to the needs of traumatised children. Faith actors can also provide broader community and cultural support. All actors need to be aware that work with other stakeholders involved in the child’s life is equally important.

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¹ To read the 2018 version of this brief, please visit: <https://jiflfc.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Learning-Brief-Spiritual-Support-FINAL-electronic.pdf>

² Definitions of religion and spirituality are widely contested. The brief reflects this definition of spirituality: 'the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviours that arise from a search for the sacred,' and this definition of religion: 'religion involves this search for the sacred' and 'for non-sacred goals (such as identity, belongingness, meaning, health, or wellness) and the means and methods (e.g., rituals or prescribed behaviours) of the search that receive validation and support from within an identifiable group of people' (Taken from: The Lutheran World Federation and Islamic Relief Worldwide, 'A faith-sensitive approach in humanitarian response: Guidance on mental health and psychosocial programming' (2018), <https://www.wvi.org/publications/development-guide/faith-and-development/faith-sensitive-approach-humanitarian-response>, p.10

³ For a comprehensive overview of the literature, see Karolin Krause and Evelyn Sharples, 'Thriving in the Face of Severe Adversity: Understanding and Fostering Resilience in Children Affected by War and Displacement', in *Refugee in a Moving World: Tracing refugee and migrant journeys across disciplines*, ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (London: UCL Press, 2020): 306-322; See also: Maria Alejandra Andrade Vinueza, 'The Role of Spirituality in Building up the Resilience of Migrant Children in Central America: Bridging the Gap between Needs and Responses', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 22, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 84-101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2016.1278359>; Save the Children International, Plan International and World Vision, 'Childhood Interrupted: Children's Voices from the Rohingya Refugee Crisis' (2018), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Childhood%20Interrupted%20Non-embargoed%20low%20res.pdf>; Ofra Ayalon, 'Community Healing for Children Traumatized by War', *International Review of Psychiatry* 10, no. 3 (January 1, 1998): 224-233 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540269874817>

⁴ Joey Ager, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Alastair Ager, 'Local Faith Communities and the Promotion of Resilience in Contexts of Humanitarian Crisis', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 28, no. 2 (June 1, 2015): 202-221, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fev001>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Kaarina Nikunen, 'Emerging Transnational Sensibility among Migrant Teenagers: Lessons learned doing Media Research in Multiethnic Classrooms', in *Mediated Crossroads. Identity, Youth Culture and Ethnicity*, eds. Ingegerd Rydin and Ulrika Sjöberg, (Nordicom, University of Gothenburg, 2008): 354-61; Abby Hardgrove, 'Liberian Refugee Families in Ghana: The Implications of Family Demands and Capabilities for Return to Liberia', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 22, no. 4 (December 1, 2009): 483-501, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fev029>; The Lutheran World Federation and Islamic Relief Worldwide, 'A faith-sensitive approach in humanitarian response: Guidance on Mental Health and Psychosocial Programming' (2018), <https://jiflfc.com/resources/a-faith-sensitive-approach-in-humanitarian-response/>

⁷ Articles 17, 23, 27 and 32 of the 'UN General Assembly Convention on the Rights of the Child', United Nations, Treaty Series, Vol. 1577 (20 November 1989), p. 3, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b38f0.html>; Bethany Ojalehto and Qi Wang, 'Children's Spiritual Development in Forced Displacement: A Human Rights Perspective', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 13, no.2 (May 2008): 129-143, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13644360801965933>

⁸ Ager, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager, 'Local Faith Communities and the Promotion of Resilience in Contexts of Humanitarian Crisis.'

⁹ Save the Children International, Plan International and World Vision, 'Childhood Interrupted: Children's Voices from the Rohingya Refugee Crisis' (2018), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Childhood%20Interrupted%20Non-embargoed%20low%20res.pdf>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Maria Alejandra Andrade Vinueza, 'The Role of Spirituality in Building up the Resilience of Migrant Children in Central America: Bridging the Gap between Needs and Responses', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 22, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 84-101, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2016.1278359>, p.94

¹² Karim Mitha and Shelina Adatia, 'The Faith Community and Mental Health Resilience amongst Australian Ismaili Muslim Youth', *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 19, no. 2 (February 7, 2016): 192-207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2016.1144732>

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ayalon, 'Community Healing for Children Traumatized by War'

¹⁵ Isabel Berckmans et al., 'A Systematic Review: A Quest for Effective Interventions for Children and Adolescents in Street Situation', *Children and Youth Services Review* 34, no. 7 (July 2012): 1259-1272, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.02.014>

¹⁶ Kaarina Nikunen, 'Emerging Transnational Sensibility among Migrant Teenagers: Lessons learned doing Media Research in Multiethnic Classrooms', in *Mediated Crossroads. Identity, Youth Culture and Ethnicity: theoretical and methodological challenges*, eds. Ingegerd Rydin and Ulrika Sjöberg, (Nordicom: University of Gothenburg, 2008): 354-61

¹⁷ Abby Hardgrove, 'Liberian Refugee Families in Ghana: The Implications of Family Demands and Capabilities for Return to Liberia', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 22, no.4 (December 1, 2009): 483-501, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fev029>

¹⁸ Berckmans et al., 'A Systematic Review: A Quest for Effective Interventions for Children and Adolescents in Street Situation'

¹⁹ Nabih Hasan, Diane B. Mitschke and Kristen E. Ravi, 'Exploring the role of faith in resettlement among Muslim Syrian refugees', *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 37, no.3 (May 2018): 223-238, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2018.1461045>

²⁰ Aala El-Khani et al, 'Syria: Coping Mechanisms Utilised by Displaced Refugee Parents Caring for Their Children in Pre-Resettlement Contexts', *Intervention* 15, no.1 (March 2017): 34-50, <https://doi.org/10.1097/WTF.0000000000000136>

²¹ For a more detailed description, see the 2018 version of this brief

²² Referenced in Ayalon, 'Community Healing for Children Traumatized by War'

²³ Sinaria Jabbar and Amy Betawi, 'Children Express: War and Peace Themes in the Drawings of Iraqi Refugee Children in Jordan', *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 24, no.1 (2019): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2018.1455058>

²⁴ Alison Schafer, 'Spirituality and mental health in humanitarian contexts: A response to the commentaries', *Intervention* 9, no.1 (March 2011): 74-77

²⁵ For a more detailed description, see the 2018 version of this brief. See also: <https://www.theoutreachfoundation.org/>

²⁶ For a more detailed description, see the 2018 version of this brief. See also: <http://www.brethren.org/news/2016/childrens-disaster-services-trip-to-nigeria.html>

²⁷ The Lutheran World Federation and Islamic Relief Worldwide, 'A faith-sensitive approach in humanitarian response: Guidance on Mental Health and Psychosocial Programming'

²⁸ Submitted by Dirk Coetsee, Strategic Relations lead at Petra Institute the organization who designed and implement Walking with Children Enduring Hardship programme

²⁹ The Lutheran World Federation and Islamic Relief Worldwide, 'A faith-sensitive approach in humanitarian response: Guidance on Mental Health and Psychosocial Programming', p.7

³⁰ Diana Maria Diaków, and Anisa Naomi Goforth, 'Supporting Muslim Refugee Youth during Displacement: Implications for International School Psychologists', *School Psychology International* 42, no.3 (January 2021): 238–258 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034320987280>

³¹ Ibid

³² Jamie D. Aten, 'Disaster Spiritual and Emotional Care in Professional Psychology: A Christian Integrative Approach', *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 40, no.2 (June 2012): 131–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009164711204000209>

³³ Submitted by Andrea Kaufmann (WVI). See <https://www.wvi.org/publications/policy-report/faith-and-development/faith-sensitive-mental-health-and-psychosocial>

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ For a more detailed description, see the 2018 version of this brief

³⁶ For a more detailed description, see the 2018 version of this brief

³⁷ Submitted by Andrew Suderman, Secretary, Peace Commission, Mennonite World Conference and Saulo Padilla, Migration Education Coordinator, Mennonite Central Committee. See also: https://hdpi.org/migration_trauma_resilience/