DAY OF THE AFRICAN CHILD
2019

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT A RIGHT FOR CHILDREN IN EMERGENCIES

REPSSI leads in mainstreaming psychosocial support into programmes and services for girls, boys and youth in East and Southern Africa.

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Children are resourceful when negotiating the demands of day to day life. They are equipped with numerous abilities and skills which range from intellectual and emotional intelligence, creativity, social relationships, resilience and other internal factors to find appropriate ways of meeting their needs. Children also have the ability to determine instances when they have to rely on others, particularly their families and other adults around them, for support in difficult situations. Emergency situations may present challenges so great that many children find their own resources overstretched. During such situations, additional care and support may be necessary to help them to cope with the situation and regain a sense of control of their life and the ability to function as before.

Emergencies may have negative impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of children and the functioning of their families and communities. For children, emergencies present varied threats which include but not limited to their protection (physical and sexual exploitation, other forms of violence), emotional, mental and physical health, and overall development. Weighed down by the challenges and inability to perform their daily tasks, the child may start to feel helpless and hopeless. They may become disoriented, demoralised, depressed or perhaps angry. They may begin to question their capacities, skills, faith and hopes for the future. These emotions may drain them of the energy to thrive. It is at this point that they may need some extra love, care and support to regain a sense of hope, wellness and worth.

Separation of children from their families may occur during an emergency. The eldest children may assume roles that they are not physically, mentally and emotionally equipped to carryout, for example, taking the responsibility of heading household. They may also experience multiple loses for example, death of parents, caregiver, siblings, home and school. Children may be left with feelings of anxiety, sadness, fear, anger or guilt for having survived while others did not. Loss of structure, routine and predictability in the day-to-day lives of children can further undermine a child’s sense of stability and security.

Children rely on the structures in their families and communities for their emotional and social development. Children need to feel socially connected to a family and community to feel that they are part of a larger social world. Children desire to be active citizens whose values and aspirations are connected to their family and community. By actively participating in family and community activities, children can develop a sense of belonging, empowerment and self worth. Active participation provides them with a platform to learn social and cultural values and develop life skills. These are important concerns for psychosocial support interventions in emergencies. Efforts to promote children’s participation in programming will foster psychosocial wellbeing for both the child and their community.

In emergency settings children need strong and responsive care and support mechanisms to provide them with emotional and social support, protect them and promote their resilience, development, and a sense of wellbeing. It is in circumstances such as these that psychosocial activities are promoted and developed. These programmes foster emotional and social wellbeing of affected children. This goal is accomplished by strengthening the environments that protect children, re-establishing routines based on learning and play activities, fostering a sense of normalcy and giving safe opportunities for children to participate in their communities. Psychosocial needs are likely to persist over a much longer time frame than the usual intervention period of emergency services hence the need to have responsive psychosocial programmes.