



FACILITATING EXPRESSION THROUGH PHOTOVOICE:

AN EXPLORATION OF TURKISH AND SYRIAN CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES POST-EARTHQUAKE

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UNVEILING WORLDS: CENTERING CHILD VOICES IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS CASE STUDY SERIES

Young children from birth to 8 years old have a lot to contribute to how humanitarian programs are designed and the policies guiding them. Yet these programs and policies are often top-down and fail to consider children's perspectives, despite commitments stated in the humanitarian Grand Bargain to prioritize the participation of affected communities (Boyden 1994; Wessells 2021; IASC 2023). At the same time, humanitarian aid across all sectors is being slashed, adding challenges to the already limited 2-3% of annual humanitarian funding for young children's programs (Moving Minds Alliance 2020; United Nations 2025). Evidence has been emerging about the participation of affected people to inform humanitarian practices and policies, but this has not yet included young children, and it is not at the level close to achieving the Grand Bargain commitments (IASC 2023). The humanitarian community needs more evidence to move from rhetoric to reality.



Child
Voices
Series

To help address this gap and move the humanitarian space forward, the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution partnered with researchers and non-profit organizations to understand “How can participatory research approaches be used to actively engage and elevate children's voices in designing early childhood programs and policies in humanitarian contexts? How does centering young children's voices in designing programs and policies improve humanitarian response?” To answer these questions, we examined three child participatory arts-based research approaches: drawing, photography, and storytelling through play accompanied by conversations with children. These case studies span three humanitarian situations: the refugee crisis in Bangladesh, internal displacement due to earthquakes in Türkiye, and migration in Colombia. Through these case studies, we aim to help humanitarian

practitioners and policymakers think differently about young children's abilities, integrate their voices into future humanitarian program designs and policies, and contribute to fulfilling one of the many Grand Bargain commitments.

This second case study used photovoice to facilitate displaced children's active participation and illuminate their lived experiences to inform humanitarian practices and policies. The qualitative research highlighted some areas that adults, both implementers and the children's parents, had not considered before. Based on children's views from this study, the leading implementing collaborator, Save the Children Türkiye, modified some of their child protection and psychosocial support programs. Insufficient time and funding during the project period, however, limited the project's impact on the broader humanitarian architecture and government response in this part of Türkiye. Yet Save the Children plans to continue sharing the lessons of this approach with key humanitarian and donor stakeholders. Importantly, this research approach was low-cost, fast, easy to implement, and easily replicable to other humanitarian contexts.

WHY ARE CHILDREN'S VOICES IMPORTANT IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS?

Leveraging children's voices to inform practices and policies that improve their lives is not a new concept. Children, particularly adolescents, have been involved in activities to inform decisions about their lives in humanitarian and non-humanitarian contexts before (Checkoway and Gutiérrez 2006; Blakeslee and Walker 2018; Apollo and Mbah 2022; Plush et al. 2018). Children's abilities to express themselves—even if not using direct verbal language—and sharing their stories with others is not only possible, but fundamental, particularly in humanitarian settings. The 1989 U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms children's right to be heard in matters affecting them (UN General Assembly 1989), a principle that has gained recognition as essential in crisis response and recovery. Research has found that encouraging children to articulate their experiences contributes to their psychological healing and increases their sense of agency after trauma (Hart et al. 2004; Denov and Shevell 2019). Allowing children to participate in humanitarian work by soliciting their lived perspective also makes humanitarian intervention more relevant to children's needs (Larkins et al. 2014). While it is often not feasible to engage children in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or crisis when speed and efficiency are essential, given the protracted nature of crises, there are often opportunities to bring in children's perspectives once acute response has passed.

Moreover, storytelling and creative expression provide avenues for children to communicate beyond traditional linguistic or cultural barriers, especially when mainstream forms of participation are inaccessible (Mitchell et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2018). In contexts of displacement or conflict, these practices not only validate children's experiences but also challenge deficit-based narratives that portray them solely as passive victims, instead recognizing their insights, resilience, and potential to shape their own futures (Erdemir 2022; Sorensen 2022; Tomsic and Zbaracki 2020).

Yet in most humanitarian contexts (and non-humanitarian contexts), children's voices, especially those of young children, are not typically considered in programming, policy, or funding decisions (Alier 2024; Wessells 2021). While young children, who are still developing their oral and written communication skills, may not be able to express themselves in the same way as older children and adults, there is evidence of their expressive abilities through free and imaginative play, drama, art, dance, photography, and more (Blaisdell et al. 2018; Allmark et al. 2017; Wall and Robinson 2022).

The gap in young children’s voice in programming, policy, and funding decisions is a critical issue that needs to be addressed. A young child has a different perspective on the world from adults due to various factors, including their smaller physical size, stage of development, the culture of the environment in which they live, and more. These differences affect the types and intensities of risk they face in humanitarian emergencies. Further, children see the world differently from adults. Research in Kenya revealed that children consistently did not like screaming and sounds of their parents fighting—which could have included physical and psychological violence—while their parents never identified these things as issues (Kostelny et al. 2013). While parents and caregivers can share perspectives on behalf of the child, they cannot see the world from a child’s eyes. They often bring their own lenses and biases.

While donors and humanitarian program implementers, mainly at the global level, emphasize the importance of valuing lived experiences and perspectives, this has not yet translated into concrete actions that consider children’s voices in humanitarian programming or policies (Hirono and Nurdin 2024; Rogoff et al. 2018). Where such listening and elevation have occurred, especially in global forums, it has often been extractive and tokenistic, with significant adult molding and shaping. Young children’s authentic voices and narratives are essential to bring about changes in humanitarian services that focus on their learning and development, protection, and health. They also matter when humanitarian aid agencies conduct needs assessments, request funds, and consider policies that affect entire camps or displaced communities.

BACKGROUND: CHILDREN'S EXPRESSION THROUGH PHOTOVOICE

Photography can raise awareness among humanitarian and government decisionmakers about the conditions of affected communities. Children's photographs can illuminate adult decisionmakers on how children perceive the world and what is important to them. Facilitated dialogue with children about their photos can provide further insight into their priorities for programs and services (Karadag Caman 2021; Crabtree and Braun 2015; Ruiz-Canela López 2023; Saksena and McMorro 2020).

Photovoice—a participatory research approach—enables individuals to visually document and share their lived experiences and perspectives (Wang and Burris 1997). This methodology can give young children a way to share their hopes, dreams, fears, and more. The approach emphasizes the power of images as a means of communication and informing practice and policy. Participants capture images of their everyday lives, expressing their emotions and experiences. Facilitated discussions among photographers, implementers, researchers, and local decisionmakers can cultivate a shared understanding and uptake of new ideas. When implemented effectively, research suggests that this process can extend beyond dialogue to foster action and change at the individual, community, or policy level (Fournier and Bilash 2016). For the individual, the approach can empower photographers, help them process trauma and connect with peers and members of their community, and more. At the community level and beyond, it can inform and ensure that community-based decisions about humanitarian services and broader policies are based on children's needs, desires, and lived experiences (Pfeiffer 2013; Strack et al. 2004).

Since its development in the early 1980s, photovoice has evolved and been adapted to various cultural and social contexts to address policy-relevant issues such as mental health, services for the elderly and those with disabilities, and environmental issues (Catalani and Minkler 2009; Wang and Redwood-Jones 2001). While most examples come from adults or older children, there are a few photovoice projects that have focused on young children, including those with children aged four to six in Switzerland and Argentina (Butschi and Hedderich 2021). Applying this approach with young children in the context of humanitarian response is a promising way to inform humanitarian and government policies for displaced children, as was done in Türkiye.

CONTEXT: THE TÜRKIYE EARTHQUAKE

On February 6, 2023, residents near the Türkiye-Syria border were awakened by a devastating 7.8-magnitude earthquake. A powerful aftershock followed soon after. Damaged roads and other infrastructure, along with harsh winter conditions, made emergency response more challenging to administer. It is estimated that more than 9 million people were impacted—including 6.2 million children—with 56,000 killed and 2.4 million displaced (OCHA 2023; Save the Children 2025). The damage was felt in both Türkiye and Syria.

As of February 2025, one in four children displaced by the earthquake remain in camps with cramped living conditions and varying availability of education, health, nutrition, and protection services (Save the Children 2025). Overall, the earthquake exacerbated poor conditions in regions of Türkiye and Syria where children had already been struggling with the impacts of war, violence, displacement, economic collapse, food insecurity, COVID-19, and cholera. Syrian children in Türkiye experienced a multi-emergency, having already been displaced in Türkiye due to war in Syria and then impacted by the earthquake.

The national and local Turkish governments, as well as the international humanitarian system, were activated to support these displaced children and families, including agencies such as Save the Children, UNICEF, UNOCHA, and numerous Turkish organizations. As this was an internal displacement situation rather than a refugee crisis, humanitarian action was under the umbrella of the national government in Türkiye (Luhn 2023).



RESEARCH DESCRIPTION: USING PHOTOVOICE IN TÜRKİYE

The Türkiye photovoice project, implemented and researched by Save the Children Türkiye, the University of Virginia Humanitarian Collaborative, ChildArise¹, and Üsküdar University, engaged Turkish and Syrian children aged five through 10 in documenting and sharing their experiences living in two displaced persons camps. The exploratory study used qualitative methods over four months (from February to May 2024) in two camps in Hatay, one of the areas hit hardest by the earthquakes.² The sample included 23 children who were selected through purposive sampling. They were all already participating in activities in child-friendly spaces in the camps and were selected from both Turkish and Syrian backgrounds. After children were trained in how to use cameras and photography to share their experiences and perspectives, they received open-ended and broad prompts about what they liked and disliked in the camps. They were asked to capture what was important to them and what they wanted to see change. The research team used broad questions to enable the children to truly lead the process and share what they wanted to share with limited adult molding. Because the children had disposable cameras and therefore limited shots, they had to think about what they wanted to photograph before they took the photos. All photos were checked for the consent of anyone shown. If permission was not given or the person could not be found, these photos were only shared with the child and not made publicly available.

Complementing the children's photos were key informant interviews with each child and a series of focus group discussions—two with the children and two with caregivers and other adults in the camp. Each of the interviews/focus group discussions lasted approximately one hour and involved reviewing the children's photos, discussing what the participants noticed, what meaning they attributed to them, and what they thought could be helpful for children in the camp. Text from the key informant interviews and focus group discussions was used in the analysis. This triangulation reduced the likelihood of the researchers overinterpreting the photos or molding the findings based on their lenses.

1 Lucy Bassett and Sweta Shah are co-founders and board members of ChildArise.

2 Üsküdar University obtained research approval for the exploratory study. Save the Children conducted all child protection safeguarding and obtained informed consent from participating children and their families.

The research team conducted two phases of analysis of the 737 photos the children took.³ First, the team used thematic analysis to identify patterns across the children's photographs and accompanying narratives from the interviews and focus group discussions with children, their caregivers, and community members. Next, they used Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, which focuses on assessing visual and narrative elements concurrently, providing a more in-depth analysis of the identified themes. They then selected a subset of photos (five to 10 per child) that represented these themes and were also the most visually compelling (in terms of clearly illustrating the theme, captivating an audience's attention, and encouraging ongoing engagement with the image). After the analysis, the research team shared the findings with the Save the Children team, who work closely with children in the camps, to cross-check and validate the findings based on their experience with the children. Finally, each child selected one photo to be featured in a public exhibition, which was attended by community members, local policymakers, and donors.

3 In total, the children took 770 photos, but 33 were discarded from the analysis due to the following reasons: they were too blurry to identify the content, there were fingers on the photo frames, some photos just showed the ground, or photos had burn marks.

RESULTS: CHILDREN'S PHOTOS

Through photos, key informant interviews and focus group discussions, five key themes that are important to children⁴ emerged, which are explored below. For each theme that the children alluded to, a few key photos illustrate the theme below.

Theme 1: Relationships and human connection



The largest share of the photos (40% in camp one and 51% in camp two) depicted children's trusted family members (parents, siblings, grandparents and others) and friends, showing the importance of connections and relationships. During the debriefing sessions, the children discussed how family, friends, and other trusted adults, such as teachers and activity facilitators, provided them with a sense of security and care. Akmal, age five, said "I love my dad, and he loves me. That's why I wanted to take [this photo]." A strong bond with at least one caregiver (which could be a biological or adopted adult) is critical for young children's overall development and especially brain architecture (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2004). Other studies have shown that playing with peers is also crucial for children's development. Relationships and connections can create a sense of safety and emotional bonds that can decrease symptoms of trauma (Cohen and Gadassi 2018; Kinoshita and Woolley 2015; Ohnogi 2010).

FIGURE 1

Photos of family and friends



Photo by Kutlu, five years old



Photo by Yaprak, eight years old

4 Note that all children's names have been changed to protect their identities.

Theme 2: Desire for safety and home



Many of the children's photos displayed the interiors of their current homes, including kitchens and common living spaces, as well as of their mothers preparing food. These images, along with the children's comments on these photos, conveyed a desire for safety and home. The comfort of home that many children expressed was despite cramped spaces and limited resources: Most container homes (which are temporary shelters) are just 21-32 square meters (UN News 2023). Other photos, especially those taken by the older children who traveled back to their original homes to document the destruction and rubble, depicted a longing for their previous homes and familiar places. Hande, age seven, who took a photo of the rubble that was once his home, said:

"[This is] our home. But our home is destroyed...I still want to go there...I feel happy there."

This desire is common, especially among displaced or vulnerable children. Other research found a similar focus on safety and home (Akesson and Coupland 2018; Holton 2016; Morshedi and van den Scott 2025).

FIGURE 2

Photos of home (current and former)



Photo by Hande, seven years old



Photo by Hande, seven years old

Theme 3: Desire for free movement



Numerous photos depicted the sky, fences, bicycles, and cars around the camp. Several children mentioned the importance of bikes to them. One child said, “When I ride a bike, it’s really fun.” The presence of motifs like bicycles and cars could represent a desire for mobility, while fences could represent the limits to their movement. Research indicates that transportation enhances children’s social connection and influences their life satisfaction, and Waygood et al. 2020 find that cycling has associations with feelings of freedom, enjoyment, and fun (Handy and Lee, 2020). In humanitarian contexts, even in internal displacement situations such as Türkiye, there are limits to movement, especially for children. It is normal for children to feel trapped in their camp environment (Hazar and Gredebäck 2023). While photos and conversations depicted a desire for free movement, the next theme highlights that children simultaneously felt a feeling of hope for their well-being.

FIGURE 3

Photos of children’s modes of movement



Photo by Ulya, six years old



Photo by Mahmut, six years old

Theme 4: Hope



The theme of hope for their own positive well-being emerged in the children’s photos of small home gardens, reaching for the sun, and gazing at the sky despite also feeling trapped and wanting free movement. Photos of the sky were interesting, as conversations with children illuminated their feeling of wanting to go outside of the camp but also seeing the sky and feeling hopeful about their future. These types of photos were featured in more than one-third of all photos in both camps. The comments on these photos suggest that they may represent the children’s vision of/desire for the wider world beyond the camp. Selin, six, took a photo

of a small garden she and her family established at the door of their temporary shelter while Mahmut, six, asked his mother to take a photo of him reaching for the sun. In conversations, the friend said, “I wanted to hold the sun.” Five-year-old Kutlu’s mother explained that he “liked the clouds here very much...It is an empty space. Both as a landscape and the clouds, as a different space from this container environment, it gives a nice feeling, it gives comfort and peace.” A parent in camp two said, “It depicts how limitless the sky is and how it gives peace to humans.” Akmal, age five, described his photo of the sky, saying:

“When you look at this photo, I want you to see the world.”

These sentiments are consistent with research that indicates how participants felt improved hope and well-being by looking at the sky (Conway 2019). Additional research indicates that nature and being outside are important elements for children’s health and well-being, bringing them a sense of hope (White, 2006; Berger and Lahad, 2010; Chawla, 2015).

FIGURE 4

Photos representing hope

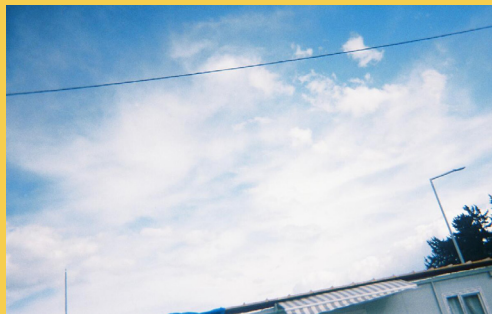


Photo by Akmal, five years old



Photo by Selin, six years old



Photo by mother of Mahmut, six years old

Theme 5: Play and creative expression



Numerous images featured toys, games, bicycles, pets, and children engaged in joyful, playful moments, particularly in the photos of the younger children. Children said things like, “I love the park. I play games here. I slide down the slide.” Five-year-old Kutlu’s mother said, “He loves to play ball. Even if it’s raining, I will go out and play ball. He wants to play outside.” The numerous references to play in the children’s comments show the critical importance of play in their sense of happiness in the camp setting. They were happy to have peers and adults to play with, playthings to use, and spaces for play. Children’s photos support existing research on the critical importance of play post-disaster, as it can help children regulate and process emotions, help them act out how they would handle a situation before it happens, and strengthen friendships that may have weakened due to displacement. It can also help children better learn about the world around them (Bateman et al. 2013).

FIGURE 5

Photos depicting play



Photo by Haldun, 10 years old



Photo by Selin, six years old

Additional insights from children

In addition to the themes that emerged from the children’s photos, focus groups, and key informant interviews, children also highlighted how the photovoice activity positively impacted them. Multiple children stated that they enjoyed participating and felt a sense of importance. For example, one six-year-old said: “I wanted to lay the camera next to me while sleeping.” Many children—both those who had participated and those who had not—asked for opportunities to continue similar activities such as photography and other forms of creative expression. Adults also noted positive experiences for children. Through focus group discussions and interviews with caregivers, parents consistently reported that the children felt empowered and developed stronger senses of self-efficacy, responsibility, and hope. One parent of a six-year-old said her daughter “felt special and valuable. It was a project that had a great impact on [her] development... Despite being the youngest, she started behaving differently, more mature, after this task.” While

photovoice is used primarily for research purposes, this experience indicates that it could be used as a psychosocial intervention to help children process their experiences and emotions, gain confidence, and make friends.

Additionally, parents started seeing how children's views are different from adults'. One parent said:

“The children did a great job. For us, the container home in the photo is just a container, but for the children, it means many different things.”

This can be seen in another couple of quotes: A seven-year-old described a photo she took of the camp, saying “these containers and laundry [are] beautiful,” while a mother said, “Actually, they can be happy with small things. I don’t think it was like this before the earthquake.”

Lastly, while the general themes emerged from both camps, there was a difference between the focus of younger children (five to six years old) and older ones (seven to 10 years old). The younger children had a greater focus on art and creative expression, whereas the older children placed more emphasis on their previous homes and familiar places. This could be because the younger children would have been between three and four years old when the earthquakes occurred and so had fewer memories of their life during this time whereas the older children could have been between five and seven years old, retaining more memories of their life and homes pre-earthquake. This is consistent with child development research that indicates that children begin remembering and being able to verbalize past experiences starting from age three, with the average adult recalling a memory from around three and a half years (Bauer et al. 2010). There is a marked difference in early memory from three years to seven years which likely accounts for this difference.

Towards child-led program design

The initial earthquake response, led by the Turkish government, focused on undertaking search and rescue and providing for basic needs such as shelter, food, water, security, and health care (OCHA 2023). Child-focused organizations, such as Save the Children and UNICEF, post-initial search and rescue, targeted children through the establishment of child-friendly spaces, temporary learning spaces, and a container library to enable children to learn and recover from their experiences. They also identified and reunified separated

and unaccompanied children and provided mental health support through arts and sports activities (Ferguson 2023). In a humanitarian context, speed is of the essence, and the first step is just to set up safe structures, as was done in the Türkiye response.

Children's photos and narratives one year after the earthquake indicate, however, that the first step of simply setting up structures is not enough. Children's priorities were often deeper than the general humanitarian focus on providing shelter, food, water, and healthcare. Children were not simply focused on establishing safe shelters, child-friendly spaces, and temporary learning centers; they cared about how these spaces looked, what activities occurred in them, and how these spaces made them feel. The themes they identified: relationship and home connection, home and safety, desire for free movement, hope, play, and creative expression, all point to modifications in program design and policy focus that would promote their psychosocial well-being and resilience.

Children need adult and peer relationships, a home, and freedom to move around to feel physically and psychologically safe. Home often symbolizes safety and security (Kachak 2024). Children need hope to buffer against negative feelings that can come from a displacement situation (Sparks et al. 2021; Valle et al. 2005). And lastly, they need opportunities to play so they can return to what is natural and comfortable and gain a sense of normalcy in their lives (Chatterjee 2018).

Their contributions point to modifications for the whole camp area, including placement of homes and play and learning facilities so children are safe, secure, and have easy access to important services and family and friends. Additionally, their photos and perspectives point to how the design of specific spaces such as homes, playgrounds, child friendly spaces, temporary learning spaces, and more could better support their need for psychosocial well-being and resilience. Adopting their ideas requires a real shift in power and viewing children not just as passive beneficiaries, but important contributors. A child involved in a disaster risk reduction program in Thailand said, "Adults may want to do it themselves. They may think we don't have the capacity—that we can't do it. But actually, if given a chance and some guiding directions we children can do anything." (Back et al. 2009)

Human-Centered Design methodology, child friendly schools' education quality framework, and child friendly cities' governance framework, as a few examples, all aim to include children's voices in program design and policies but do not consistently shift power to them (Giacomin 2014; Soni et al. 2022; UNICEF 2009; UNICEF 2018). Building on these existing experiences, child-led program design could go a step further to more actively engage children, ensuring designs and policies are based on their specific local contexts and shifting power to them during humanitarian responses. In the next section, we provide key recommendations for child-led design based on children's insights for practitioners and policymakers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND POLICYMAKERS

Insights from children's photos, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews lead to five recommendations for people leading the design of humanitarian programs and the policies underpinning them—whether they are community-based organizations, international non-profit organizations, or local government.

1. **Integrate child voice into humanitarian assessments.**

During a humanitarian crisis, the acute stage is usually focused on immediate life-saving. In the context of an earthquake, the focus of key humanitarian actors, including the Turkish government, was to find and rescue people trapped under rubble and obtain key data to get various sectors such as health, shelter, and food up and running. So, the initial responses did not include the views of children or any affected people (Government of Türkiye 2023).



Yet evidence shows that when children are asked about their views, what they want, and how they feel, they may identify things that adults do not consider, and these things differ between younger and older children (Kostelny et al. 2013). Children may also identify things without considering what sector they lie in, thereby naturally crossing sectoral siloes whereas most humanitarian response is conducted along sector siloes (Wessells 2021). Including children's voices in subsequent humanitarian response design could have illuminated the importance of supporting their relationships and ongoing human connection; their desire for safety, home, and freedom; and their need for play and creativity to sustain hope despite challenges. It could have resulted in different placement of shelters and learning and play spaces within the camp and the internal design and environment of the specific spaces.

2. **Give children more say and decisionmaking power in program design.** As the photos and conversations with children indicate, they have many ideas that could enhance the design of programs. Actively engaging young children can give them opportunities for connection and build in elements that they care about, such as play and nature. If humanitarian actors had heard children's views, they could have supported enhancing child-friendly spaces, temporary learning spaces, and community areas to integrate greater opportunities for interaction with family members and peers, toys and bikes to facilitate play, and elements of nature like plants and small gardens.



The physical design of the camp could also be considered to ensure play spaces and promote social interaction. There could also be volunteer roles for parents in the child-friendly spaces or temporary learning spaces so they could strengthen connections with their children and others in the community. Additionally, shelters—one of the first responses after search and rescue—are small, often with shared toilets and other facilities (around 21-32 square meters), sometimes set up on main roads, and often with inadequate lighting inside and outside, making family privacy harder and protection risks higher (UN News 2023; UNFPA 2023). Inadequate lighting pushed one family to pull electricity from a nearby lamppost, which resulted in a fire in a shelter where two children died (Günaydın 2024). Listening to children could have prevented difficulties and ensured greater safety and security, as they requested.

3. Expand family-focused programs to strengthen connection between children and families.

Expanded family-focused programs rather than child-only or adult-only programs can support children's needs for greater connection with family members. This is happening to some extent through multi-sectoral spaces for children and families called Birlikte Hubs (UNICEF 2023). These temporary hubs support children, adolescents, and families. They are temporary container structures like shelters but used as a community space. They offer different activities for different age groups, but they can all meet in the same space.



This type of multi-aged community space can help young children stay with family members who participate in activities. Yet these efforts must be expanded—it has thus far reached only close to 640,000 people out of the approximately 9.1 million affected (UNICEF 2023; UNICEF 2024; UNFPA 2025). UNICEF, in partnership with local organizations and the Ministry of Health, also established Mother-Baby Corners, which serve as safe spaces for women and their young children. They offer information and support to mothers about infant and young child feeding and nutrition but also support the prevention and response to gender-based violence. They have also been places where over 1,500,000 children have accessed vaccines (UNICEF 2024).

4. Improve child and family psychosocial well-being.

Psychosocial challenges are heightened for displaced children and their families; children highlighted this through their photos and focus group discussions. While many children and families are resilient and can bounce back from difficult circumstances, humanitarian practitioners and local policymakers can take steps to provide more opportunities for children and their families to reduce the stress they may be experiencing and increase their hope and psychosocial well-being (Hazer and Gredebäck 2023; Nguyen et al. 2023; Temelturk et al. 2025).



The children's photos depicted many images of plants, flowers, and the sky—this could be a signal for modification of programming. Gardening is recognized for its positive environmental, social, and psychological benefits, including improvements in mental health

and support for trauma recovery (Van Den Berg and Custers 2011). Activities could include planting, gardening workshops, and other initiatives to incorporate natural elements into the container camp environment. A variety of gardening projects have been implemented and shown positive results for participants in different refugee camps, such as the “community greening” initiative in Jordan (UNRWA 2023), micro-gardens in Domiz refugee camp in Iraq (Regenerosity 2020), and more.

5. Expand opportunities for play and creative expression in programming. Children conveyed strong desires for opportunities to play and creatively express themselves, build more social connections with other children, and feel a sense of freedom and control. These needs could be addressed by integrating play and child-led play (rather than adult-directed play) into existing spaces such as child-friendly spaces and temporary learning spaces.



There is widespread evidence that play is essential for children’s development, enjoyment, healing, and coping (Chatterjee 2018; Mariam et al. 2021). In emergencies like the earthquake in Türkiye, play can also help children develop social connections with other children and adults, thereby strengthening bonds that have been weakened by a humanitarian crisis (Ardelean 2021; Chatterjee 2018; Mariam et al. 2021). Evidence shows that there is a spectrum of play that promotes learning, ranging from free play to more adult-led activities. Guided play, which is child-led but scaffolded by adults, is particularly valuable (Zosh et al. 2017).

Through their photos and narratives, children expressed that they appreciated the available play spaces but also wanted more places to play in the camps. Expanding places to play could include setting up more child-friendly spaces, playgrounds, or open spaces near shelters. There is currently one temporary library in Hatay which could be expanded to have many libraries that can promote children’s play and learning (Aktas 2023). Children also mentioned a desire for physical play and free movement, which could be addressed through the provision of more bicycles, tricycles, and scooters.

Making more of these available to children could contribute to their sense of playfulness and freedom and provide them with better experience of their living conditions. One possibility to support this is a child-focused bike-share model.⁵ Opportunities for creative expression could include activities using available materials or simple art supplies that NGOs can procure. For example, in the Paint Outside the Lines project in refugee camps in Iraq (The Guardian 2014), artists worked with children and provided training in painting and opportunities to transform their communities through art and share their work at an international level at exhibitions. Activities that involve parents and other family members within the spaces mentioned could also enhance children’s sense of safety and belonging.

⁵ Models include the Minibicicletar program in Brazil, in which small bikes with retractable training wheels children can check out for free once their parents have approved (Gauquelin 2018), and P’tit Vélib in Paris, which provides balance bikes and bikes with stabilizers for children as young as two years old (Coldwell 2014). The authors could not find examples of bike-sharing in camp settings.

CONCLUSION

In an earthquake context, the first step is always search, rescue, and ensuring children are physically safe. Yet most earthquake and other humanitarian situations take years to recover, so there is a chance to fulfill the Humanitarian Grand Bargain's commitment to greater participation of affected people post-immediate acute phase of response, despite decreasing humanitarian aid for young children (IASC 2023; Moving Minds Alliance 2020).⁶ There is a growing movement for putting children at the center of humanitarian response, but it is not being implemented widely and has not become ingrained in the practice or policies of humanitarian and host government stakeholders (Baidya et al. 2020; Beeman et al. 2023; Boyden 1994; Brown et al. 2019; Chabbott 2004; IASC 2023; Robehmed 2019; Wessells 2021).

Photovoice has been used for decades; however, its application with young children in humanitarian contexts is still in its infancy. This research aimed to fill an evidence gap to support the humanitarian architecture to better include young children's voices in the design of humanitarian programs and policies. This research found that participatory work with young children can be conducted in a humanitarian context on a limited budget, can be completed within a short timeframe (four months), and can enable positive child and family experiences. However, the project was only conceived as a small-scale pilot and therefore did not come with resources and time to bring about policy change at either the camp or regional level. Still, this project chipped away at adults' notions of young children's capabilities to contribute to decisions about their own lives. Save the Children modified some of their program activities as a result of the research. And while other agencies did not change anything concrete at the end of the research project, municipal leaders, U.N. agency representatives, and local NGO representatives viewed children's photos and listened to their views at a public event. While changes in practice, policy, and public views of displaced young children take time to shift, using photovoice post-acute emergency response can bring us one step closer to ensuring that limited funding is used efficiently and that children have the chance to actively engage in decisions that impact their lives.

6 According to U.N. OCHA's Financial Tracking Service, for the Türkiye earthquake response, the Education and Protection humanitarian clusters, which tend to provide the most support to young children, received only 4.1% of the total 2023 humanitarian funding request. This percentage, however, does not disaggregate by age so it includes all ages, including adults. OCHA's tracking for 2023 indicates that the Education Cluster was funded at \$23,665,835 and the Protection sector was funded at \$35,608,174. The total funding to Türkiye in 2023 was \$1.44 billion. This comes to 4.1%. Source: OCHA: Financial Tracking Service. 2023. "Türkiye Earthquake Flash Appeal 2023." <https://fts.unocha.org/plans/1150/summary>.

ANNEX 1:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTERS AND RESEARCHERS FOR RESPONSIBLY USING PHOTOVOICE

This project used a collaborative approach to the research, involving both program implementation and research teams. The recommendations, therefore, target integrated program/research teams, but can also be used for either of these groups.

- 1. Ensure a sense of safety and trust for and with children and families.** Building a sense of safety and trust is critical in humanitarian contexts. Save the Children did this by selecting facilitators who were trained in mental health and psychosocial support and had existing trusting relationships with the children. Understanding the critical nature of relationships with children, they also suggested limiting outsiders during implementation to one researcher and one photographer.



The activities were implemented in child-friendly spaces where the children regularly participated in play-based activities. While the children already felt safe in these spaces, the facilitators used play, songs, dance, and other activities to help them feel present and relaxed before implementing the project. Additionally, intense and continuous safeguarding practices and consent protocols are critical to ensure a sense of safety in participation. Protocols and procedures should be developed in advance of implementation and consistently applied throughout the project's lifetime. This includes proactively asking children and families about their interest in participating, as well as training the children to ask for consent from people who appeared in their photos. No images of people who did not give their consent should be shown publicly. In some instances, it may be helpful to use pseudonyms for children's names to protect their identities.

2. Plan additional time and flexibility in implementation and research design. Even for implementers with existing relationships with the children, eliciting responses from the youngest participants can be more challenging than from the older children. One-off interviews or focus groups may not be sufficient for young children, who often require more time or different settings to express themselves effectively. If children are distracted, hungry, or otherwise not well prepared for the activity, they may have a difficult time concentrating and providing answers to some questions, or their answers may be quite brief.



Therefore, it is essential to allocate additional time and consider multiple opportunities for interaction with young children. Furthermore, if children are not engaging, it is essential to remain patient and quiet, rather than prompting or using leading questions to encourage them to say more. In this project, when that happened, children tended to agree with what was proposed (e.g., “Were you happy in this photo?”), but it wasn’t clear that that was their original perception.

3. Design implementation and research with program and policy implications in mind. For children’s voices to inform humanitarian policy and programming decisions, their active participation must be built into project design and fully funded from the beginning. This project was designed with limited funds and time for dissemination and lacked a dedicated advocacy phase. To enhance policy impact, children could be given a specific question to respond to, and the project could have a clear theory of change to bring about change in practice and policy.



For example, children could comment on how to design a play space in a camp or ask how a specific program/activity could be improved. A theory of change could involve defining different messages and communication strategies tailored to various audiences such as municipal governments and humanitarian organizations. Also, sharing information on both the process and the impact of a project like this with other practitioners and researchers can build capacity and motivate others to implement similar interventions. This can lead to additional funding and scaling of the approach. In the case of this project, Save the Children shared findings internally, and another country’s office became interested in implementing the strategy. Due to U.S. federal funding cuts at the beginning of 2025, however, this had to be abandoned.

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