

[Home](#) > [Newsroom](#) > Safe Play Spaces Reduce Post-War Trauma in Children

Safe Play Spaces Reduce Post-War Trauma in Children

April 05, 2007, by Julie Poucher Harbin

In the immediate aftermath of last summer's conflict between Lebanon and Israel, war trauma translated into aggression among children in Lebanon. Some began acting up at school. Others dressed up in military uniforms and toted around toy guns. The boys bragged about becoming Hezbollah fighters when they grew up, and the girls rhapsodized about one day marrying a soldier in the resistance—their version of Prince Charming.

"Right after the war the children were furious with everything," says IMC's psychosocial program administrator in Lebanon, Zeinab Hijazi. "They had to leave their homes and evacuate their villages. They came back wanting to take it out on someone."

To respond to the children's psychological distress, IMC has established seven play spaces throughout Southern Lebanon where young people can exercise their creative and physical energy, free from the rubble and unexploded ordnance that remains in the war-affected region. In many communities, these spaces are the only recreational facilities available.

Today, seven months later, signs of trauma are beginning to wane among children attending the child-friendly spaces program. IMC staff say that there are still young boys who tell them they want to join the Lebanese Army or become resistance fighters when they grow up, but there appear to be fewer with these ambitions than there were right after the war ended last summer. During a recent visit to a child-friendly space in one village in January, for example, many boys said they hoped to be soccer players someday.

Immediately following the conflict, as noted in IMC's report "Children in the Crossfire," the lives of young people across Southern Lebanon were dramatically disrupted. Their play areas were disturbed by UXOs, autumn school openings were delayed, and mothers fretted about letting their children out of the house.

"Children feel free to be themselves here," says IMC psychologist Carol Tabbal, who regularly monitors and evaluates the child-friendly spaces program through site visits. "The children are less despondent and happier than they were when they first arrived. The process of natural healing is taking place."

Last September, IMC engineers began transforming spaces in schools and municipal buildings in seven villages into secure, welcoming play areas. There, young people can immerse themselves in a range of activities, such as art projects, dancing, drama, and sports for a few hours every Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Two more will open in April and IMC will install outdoor playgrounds at all nine later this spring.



PHOTO: Carol Tabbal

The children's artwork at the Aadaisseh space reflects a transformation in their psychological state. Today, they are drawing butterflies and flowers; whereas when they first arrived last fall, they were drawing implements of war.



PHOTO: Carol Tabbal

At the child-friendly space in the village of Aadaisseh, children immerse themselves in art projects, while soothing music plays in the background.

To help generate income, IMC employed several locals to clean up the spaces. Besides training more than 100 volunteers (who receive stipends to cover transport and food) to work at the spaces, IMC provided everything from furniture and heaters to sports equipment and art supplies. Clearly, these recreational spaces are fulfilling a need: The children line up at the doors long before they open and leave reluctantly at the end of the day.

Signs of healing in Khiam

IMC's first child-friendly space opened in September in the village of Khiam, five miles from the Israeli border. Approximately 80 percent of Khiam, including their play areas, was destroyed during the month-long conflict. The homes of more than half of the children attending the Khiam facility were either demolished or damaged. Months later, children still can't play safely outdoors. Unexploded cluster bombs lurk in deceptively benign grassy areas. The landscape is littered with detritus: piles of rubble, shards of broken glass, and stray garbage.

First created in September in temporary tents, the Khiam space moved to the headquarters of a local women's organization, then finally settled into a rehabilitated indoor space in Khiam's public middle school. Ninety children attended the IMC play space in Khiam the month it opened; as of February, the number had more than doubled.

Volunteer commitment is strong at the child friendly spaces. Hussein Abdullah, an elementary school PE teacher, volunteers for

IMC's Kham program, and he plans on putting together an inter-CFS soccer league this spring. "I do this work to prevent these boys from smoking and getting into trouble," he says. "Teachers and parents in the village are very happy with IMC because they have done so much for this village."

According to Manal Abo-Abass, a volunteer at the Kham space, the signs of post-war aggression in the children are largely gone. In an interview in January, she said some of these psychological changes are reflected in their art work. "At the beginning they drew rockets and other instruments of war," says Abo-Abass. "Now they draw pictures of flowers and Santa Claus." Those drawings are "indicative of inner calm and peace," according to Tabbal, who says that she is seeing this shift in subject matter across all of IMC's child-friendly spaces.

Visitors to the Kham play space are greeted with laughter, smiles, and excited chattering. While some children sit at circular tables concentrating on art projects, others sing, play soccer, and bounce through the room on big rubber balls.

Despite much improvement, however, a number of children still show signs of post-conflict distress. When volunteers recently asked children in Kham to draw their homes and their families, a young boy named Hadi colored his damaged house red, and above it, a bigger house in green—that, he told volunteers, was the house he'd like to live in.

Anticipating children's needs

IMC provided comprehensive training to volunteers to prepare them for dealing with the myriad issues they might face in working with children in the wake of the conflict. They were taught how to run effective programs for children, and how to recognize and address symptoms of post-war stress such as aggression, isolation, sleep disorders, anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic pains. Volunteers were also trained to identify children with potential mental health issues so that IMC psychologists could make assessments and, if needed, refer children to the appropriate professionals.

Lebanon's mental health services are expensive, and tend to be concentrated mainly in Beirut. Furthermore, there is a countrywide stigma associated with seeing a mental-health professional. IMC hopes to change that. "My observations in my travels are confirming more and more the need for mental health clinics in the villages," says Tabbal. "We are successfully creating awareness about symptoms of mental health problems among volunteers and parents, which has revealed a need for more access to treatment." IMC plans to address this need through mental-health training of GPs and nurses working in IMC-supported medical clinics-- enabling them to detect and treat minor cases, and to make referrals when needed.

Reaching out to parents

The parents of these children have their own psychological burdens. Many face financial hardship and some fear another war--either a civil war or war with Israel. "The parents are going through a lot," says program administrator Hijazi. "They are focused on getting back up on their feet again."

IMC has reached out to the children's parents by engaging them in training sessions covering communication with their children, the effect of home life on a child's psychological development, and child abuse prevention and awareness.

Some adults attend the child-friendly spaces with their children because they find it therapeutic to be in such a positive environment. Parents at the spaces in the villages of Kham and Jmaijmeh have even offered small financial contributions to the program, which is able to provide the kind of extras that the public schools cannot afford such as art, drama and gym activities.

IMC is helping volunteers and parents put together a strategy for making the child-friendly spaces program sustainable after IMC is gone. The organization plans to link volunteers, when possible, with nearby community development centers and IMC-supported health clinics. IMC included a session on sustainability at a recent intensive workshop for volunteers, and continues to conduct brainstorming and guidance sessions with them on fundraising.

Trainings for teachers, similar to those for volunteers and parents, were also recently adapted for teachers in all nine communities.

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PHOTO: Julie Poucher Harbin

A group of aspiring artists at the child-friendly space in the village of Kham, which was hit particularly hard by the war.

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