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Guidance for protecting displaced and refugee children in and outside of Ukraine

How authorities and aid workers can help keep children displaced by the war in Ukraine safe from trafficking and other forms of exploitation and abuse.



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nations. Roughly half of those displaced are children. Among them, many are unaccompanied or have been separated from their families.

Children on the move in and outside of Ukraine are at heightened risk of violence, exploitation and abuse.

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danger escalates. In addition to the risk of being injured or killed by [weapons and explosive munitions](#), displaced children face numerous challenges in transit. As fighting intensifies, they have few – or no – options to move through safe pathways, whether on their own or with their families. They may be caught up in violence, while cut off from essential medical care, clean water and food. They may be subjected to human [trafficking](#), forced into [child labour](#), or exposed to aggravated smuggling. Displaced women and girls are especially at risk of [gender-based violence](#) when sheltering or seeking asylum.

The war in Ukraine is exacting a harrowing toll on children. UNICEF is on the ground in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, scaling up life-saving support for children and their families.

[>>Read: War in Ukraine poses immediate threat to children](#)

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2. Are any of these children unaccompanied?

Many children on the move in and outside of Ukraine are unaccompanied or have been separated from their parents and family members. Nearly [100,000 children](#) in Ukraine were living in institutions – residential care and boarding schools – when the crisis escalated. Almost half of these children live with disabilities.

Children without parental care are at heightened risk of violence, abuse and exploitation. When these children are moved across borders, the risks multiply. The risk of trafficking also soars in emergencies.

[>>Read: How UNICEF protects children separated from their families during crisis](#)

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3. What's happening to children in institutional care?

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be granted. Moving children to safety must not hinder their prospect for family reunification in the future. Under no circumstances should families be separated as a result of relocation or evacuation movements.

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A family fleeing Ukraine enters Romania at the Isaccea border crossing in March 2022.

4. What about the risk of trafficking?

As families transit to and through neighbouring countries in search of safety, they may find it difficult to identify trustworthy help. Volunteers have turned out by the thousands to support refugees at border crossings and guide them to protection. But the outpour of care, especially among unregistered volunteers, also provides

cover to violent and unlawful groups, like traffickers, organised crime groups and

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care, education and more), but to exploit them.

Children who are unaccompanied or who have been separated from their families are particularly vulnerable to trafficking. For women and girls, especially those travelling on their own, [gender-based violence](#), which includes trafficking for sexual exploitation, is a real and harrowing danger.

The risks of abduction, trafficking for sale and exploitation, and illegal [adoption](#) of children may be even greater where there are pre-existing child rights violations or large numbers of people crossing borders.

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5. How can volunteers and Good Samaritans help protect children from trafficking?

Volunteers in and around host communities have turned out by the thousands to welcome refugees and guide them to safety. Many are unregistered, acting in goodwill to link families to government registration and other critical services. But the outpour of help at border crossings also provides cover for traffickers and other predators seeking to exploit women and children fleeing war. For refugees under unthinkable duress, especially unaccompanied children, distinguishing Good Samaritans from traffickers can be impossible.

If you're an unregistered volunteer providing assistance, follow these protection guidelines **should you encounter a child who is alone**:

- Do not immediately assume that she is lost. Verify that the child is unaccompanied or has been separated from her family. Do not separate a child from her parents, siblings or other family members with whom she travelled.
- Since the child's caregiver may be close by, ask refugees in the immediate vicinity if they know the child. Do not leave the child. Unless there is imminent danger, remain at that location with the child until you can verify the caregiver's

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been separated from the family, ask the child for the name, age, hometown and information about his family. Record any additional information that may help authorities with family tracing and reunification. If the child is unable to provide this information, ask other refugees travelling near the child what they know.

- Keep the child's clothes and belongings with her at all times. These might help authorities trace her family.
- Contact a competent authority – such as the local municipality government, border police, Ukraine's consular services in the host country, or officials from UNICEF. Share the child's information and location, and follow the authority's instructions. Do not leave the child.
- Do not share information about the child with anyone else, aside from competent authorities.
- Explain to the child what will happen next. Do not promise that you will find his parents: This could cause him additional confusion and distress if he's received, instead, by the safe hands of a competent authority/child protection officer.
- Do not leave the child until she is in the safe hands of a competent authority/child protection officer. Do not leave the child with anyone else.

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Olga, 31 years old, fled Ukraine with her two children: Timor, who is almost 3 years old, and Vladimir, 7 years old.

6. How should institutions and care facilities in Ukraine move children to safety?

Under specific circumstances, humanitarian evacuations of institutions providing residential care are necessary to bring children to safety. Those legally responsible for children in institutions in Ukraine must ensure that such evacuations are done in line with national authorities' instructions. The Government of Ukraine has issued [clear directives](#) to all child-care facilities, including residential care and boarding schools, on how to organize necessary evacuations. Movements must be reported to competent authorities in Ukraine and neighbouring countries immediately upon crossing the border, and, as far as possible, children should be evacuated with their identification papers and case files.

To provide maximum protection, UNICEF calls on all those legally responsible for children in institutional care to:

- Comply with national authorities' instructions for the evacuation of care

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neighbouring countries, if possible, before departing and as soon as children have crossed an international border.

- Designate an adult to be responsible for children and to carry a copy of their identification papers, a recent photo of each child, and a copy of each child's case file, including information about their family, history, care needs and special needs.
- Ensure that all children are carrying their identification papers and case file – which should include information about their family, history and care needs – as well as contact information for a responsible adult, in case children get separated while travelling.
- Cooperate with competent authorities to enable swift reunification with parents when in the child's best interests, and the provision of temporary, safe and appropriate care in the meantime.
- Ensure children are not separated from their siblings, if jointly evacuated.

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7. What should neighbouring countries do to protect unaccompanied children?

UNICEF, together with UNHCR, [urges all neighbouring and impacted countries](#) to ensure the immediate identification and registration of unaccompanied and separated children fleeing from Ukraine, after allowing them access to their territory.

For children who have been displaced across borders without their families, temporary foster or other community-based care through a government system offers critical protection. Adoption should not occur during or immediately after emergencies. Every effort should be made to reunify children with their families when possible, if such reunification is in their best interest.

To protect all children from exploitation and abuse, States should offer safe

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temporary care while reunification efforts are underway. Per UNICEF guidelines, family-based and community-based care should be promoted in these circumstances, with institutional care being used only as a last resort and for the shortest duration possible.

Specifically, neighbouring and impacted countries should:

- Establish and strengthen screening processes to identify unaccompanied and separated children at the borders, including the immediate screening of mini-buses and buses that are transporting multiple children.
- Establish and strengthen safe spaces for children at border crossings and other strategic sites, including by staffing them with social workers and child psychologists, where identified children can be referred and provided immediate support.
- Link safe spaces with national [child protection systems](#), and rapidly expand the capacity of emergency alternative, family-based care arrangements and other critical child protection and gender-based violence services, including family tracing and reunification services.
- Put in place child safeguarding procedures to prevent violence, exploitation and abuse of children throughout the displacement, care and family tracing processes.

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8. What about adoption?

Children separated from their parents during a humanitarian emergency cannot be assumed to be orphans and are not available for adoption. For this reason, adoption should not occur during or immediately after emergencies. Until the fate of a child's parents or other close family members can be verified, each separated child – even those who were living in residential care before the war – is considered to have living close relatives. Every effort should be made to reunify

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Displacement in an emergency should not be used as justification for expediting adoption or circumventing international standards. Adoptions should always be made in the best interests of the child, with full respect for her rights.

UNICEF supports intercountry adoption when pursued in conformity with the standards and principles of the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoptions. In an emergency situation, it can be near impossible to ensure that the standards and safeguards of the convention are respected. This escalates the risk of child abduction, sale, or trafficking, and of illegal adoptions.

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A group of refugees seeks support and information at the first established Blue Dot, at the Sighetu Marmatiei border crossing in Romania, on 1 March 2022. In addition to providing services, Blue Dots

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critical information and services. Blue Dots ensure families are aware of their rights as refugees and help them access health care, education, psychosocial support and more. They identify and register children travelling on their own and connect them to protection services. Blue Dots also offer referral services to women, including for gender-based violence.

UNICEF, together with UNHCR and local authorities and partners, is scaling up Blue Dots in Moldova, Romania, Poland and Belarus to protect children on the move and others at risk of exploitation and abuse.

Help us help them

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Support UNICEF's work with children in Ukraine

10. What is UNICEF doing to protect displaced children and their families?

DONATE NOW (HTTPS://HELP.UNICEF.ORG/UKRAINE-

UNICEF is working day and night to **EMERGENCY** life-saving operations for children, both in and around Ukraine. This includes:

- Providing [vital humanitarian supplies](#) to conflict-affected areas – including medical supplies, surgical equipment, midwifery kits and oxygen concentrators – and trucking in safe water for drinking and hygiene.
- Supporting mobile teams to reach children with psychosocial care, mental health support, and protection services.
- Establishing Blue Dot hubs at border crossings in neighbouring countries to connect refugees to critical information and services, and identify and register unaccompanied children.
- Supporting national and local partners in Ukraine and neighbouring countries, while working hand-in-hand with UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies.
- Continuing emergency response efforts to address the COVID-19 outbreak.

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📄 Appeal

War in Ukraine: Support for children and families

UNICEF and partners are on the ground providing support to children and families in desperate need of safety, stability and protection

[> View the appeal](#)



🔗 Link

UNICEF's work in Ukraine

Read more about how UNICEF is helping children and families in the country

[> Visit the site](#)

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📄 Appeal

Ukraine and Refugee Outflow Appeal

Humanitarian Action for Children 2022

[> View the appeal](#)



📄 Programme

Protecting children in humanitarian action

Before the eyes of the world are there, UNICEF is there – protecting children in violent conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies

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