



As missionary disciples, we are called to urgently respond to the needs of migrants and refugees. Today, a staggering seventy million people are currently displaced, many as a result of conflict and violence. Families are forced to flee in search of safety. Children suffer especially from this experience and often have long-term emotional, physical and cognitive setbacks. We can lead the way to support displaced families, including establishing spaces where children can heal and regain a sense of security.

Safe spaces heal trauma

With perfect posture and a radiant smile, eight-year-old Soraya stands in a circle with her classmates, singing.

The children sway to the music, their hands performing playful gestures that accompany the song. Gradually, under the care of trained teachers in this child friendly space in the Philippines, healing is happening.

Soraya's family is one of over 70,000 families forced from their homes in Marawi City, Philippines when fighting broke out in 2017. They have not been able to return.

Initially, the family lived in a tent at an evacuation center where it was not possible for Soraya to attend school. She did, however, visit a mobile child friendly space sponsored by Catholic Relief Services, which gave her the chance to begin working through trauma she experienced after witnessing violent conflict.

CRS upholds human dignity across the life cycle, believing that children who are healthy in mind and body can become healthy adults. We recognize the need for traumatized children to process their experiences in child friendly spaces—immediately after conflict and in subsequent years—in order to reach their full potential.

Child friendly spaces don't replace primary education, but they do serve a unique need for emergency-affected children. Through participation in free and structured play, child friendly spaces offer children a safe place to learn and heal. Art projects encourage team building. Structured games create cooperation and trust or demonstrate important hygiene behaviors, like hand-washing. Child friendly spaces also serve as venues for identifying vulnerable and at-risk children, so that they may be referred to immediate and appropriate care.

In 2019, Soraya and her family moved to the CRS-supported Pantaoon shelter site, where she is now able to attend a school close to home.

The child friendly space was critical to re-establishing a sense of normalcy in Soraya's life. She enjoyed activities like drawing and coloring, made new friends, and returned home daily with songs and stories to share. These are small steps in creating stability in what is an unstable world for children.

Pope Francis reminds us that supporting migrants and refugees is "a tremendous responsibility, from which no one is exempt if we wish to fulfill the mission of salvation and liberation, in which the Lord himself has called us to cooperate."

CRS leads the way in creating programs that offer emotional and psychological healing to those affected by trauma, never forgetting our moral charge to help the most vulnerable—especially children.

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