

With Gaza still in ruins, children rebuild resilience with education and play

By Charmaine Steitz

GAZA, State of Palestine, 22 March 2016 - Gaza's youngest have experienced three major military confrontations in six years, each bringing with it a wave of destruction and fear before receding and leaving behind the scars of trauma.

Children have lost family members and seen their once-familiar neighbourhoods turned to ruins, in many cases unrepaired. As a result of the 51-day outbreak of hostilities in the summer of 2014, UNICEF estimated that at least 373,000 children—nearly half of Gaza's children—required direct and specialized psychosocial support.

With support from the government and people of Japan, UNICEF and its partners are working to break this cycle, providing opportunities for children to return to school and make up lost time and address trauma through play and community.

LOST LEARNING



12-year-old Randa (center) attending remedial classes supported by Japan in Gaza in 2015.

“This past school year was the most difficult one for me because it started right after the war,” says Randa, 12. “I could not focus on my lessons anymore and found it hard to study.”

Randa broke the monotony of the summer months by joining in an activities program to help her catch up in school and relieve stress. She took classes in Arabic and Math to make up lessons that she hadn't been able to attend.

“I missed many because I was so shocked by what happened during the war,” she says. “There were airstrikes close to my home and I was really afraid. I am also going to a summer camp where I can play, dance and watch puppet shows with my friends. Usually during the summer I stay home because there is no safe play area for me to go to.”

The activities saved Randa from dull hours at home in cramped quarters. The family's television is broken, its repair too costly, and frequent electricity outages limit fun activities and create tension between family members. Over the summer break, some 4,800 students in grades 5-6 took catch-up classes in Math and Arabic and did sports and arts activities in 60 different Gaza schools.



12-year-old Khaled participated in sport and theater activities to help him relieve stress and bring back a sense of normalcy and safety to his young life.

“I live in Khan Younis,” says 12-year-old Khaled, “and usually, there is nothing to do during the summer except stay at home and be bored.”

Another 10,164 students in grades 3-6 participated in remedial classes in the fall.

SAFE SPACES FOR CHILDREN

Activities sponsored by UNICEF and its partners with support from Japan bring children together to play in safe spaces, teaching critical educational and life skills using innovative techniques.

“We didn't know how to add or divide numbers but now we excel in it and we are able to do multiplication as well,” says 12-year-old Dia'a Yassin. “We have fun while studying, we carve in clay, we made many structures and played the drum. We hope that this programme expands and we are able to conduct trips to see historical and pretty places.”

Adolescents are now able to find communities online through two portals funded by UNICEF. Al-Nayzak's initiative “Bader” or “I can” encourages scientific curiosity by allowing teachers or students to share research ideas online that groups of students can collaborate on. The initiative allows young people in Gaza and the West Bank to share ideas and experiences, despite the presence of checkpoints that restrict their movement.

'RECOVERING' IN GAZA

Once the escalation in 2014 was over, life did not pick up and carry on in a normal fashion, especially for Gaza's children.

It took time for them to return to school, as 281 schools suffered light to severe damages during the war and two public schools were completely destroyed.

And even at the end of 2015, more than 16,000 families (three-quarters of those displaced) remained without homes as a result of the 2014 Gaza-Israel hostilities, which destroyed 11,000 homes and severely damaged or rendered uninhabitable an additional 6,800 homes.

Wood planks, cement, gravel and other building materials are restricted from entering the Gaza Strip by Israel, which considers them “dual-use,” or able to be used by armed groups for military

purposes. The closure has been in effect since 2007, and has cut Gaza's GDP in half, according to the World Bank.

Unemployment in Gaza was 43 percent in 2014 – the highest in the world, and most Gazans rely on some form of international assistance. The entire population experiences electricity blackouts from 12-16 hours a day, and many have cut-offs in running water.

Children make up half of Gaza's 1.8 million people.

CREATING NORMALCY

UNICEF and its partners in Gaza are working to provide children with an environment where they can play and develop and dream, despite the violence and hardships they have seen.

Psychosocial programs that encourage expression and play are the key to children's resilience. Children learn about their rights as children and participate in arts and crafts and games.

In 2015, the Government of Japan generously donated USD 11,660,000 to support cross-sectoral activities benefiting children in the fields of child protection; education; adolescents; water, sanitation and hygiene; health and nutrition; and social protection.

"I want to become a doctor when I grow up," says nine-year-old Mustafa at one of UNICEF's education and play activities in Gaza. He beams when asked how he likes the program.

"I like all my teachers because they like me," he says.