



# PROTECTING REFUGEE CHILDREN

BACKGROUND GUIDE  
CHALLENGE TOPIC #2



The [MUN Refugee Challenge](#) is an initiative launched by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, to encourage students worldwide to shape solutions for people forced to flee their homes. This guide was drafted to help students prepare for their debates as part of the 2023 edition.

Syrian kids play in the informal settlement in Mhammara, northern Lebanon, where 29 families live with support from UNHCR.  
© UNHCR/Lorey Campese.

## THE CHALLENGE



Over 40% of the world's refugees and internally displaced are children. This means that 36,5 million children are forcibly displaced due to war and persecution.

Many refugee children spend their entire childhoods away from home, sometimes separated from their families. In situations of forced displacement, children are at risk of various forms of abuse, separation from their carers, violence, trafficking and recruitment by armed groups. Being forced to flee war and relocate to a new country can also severely affect their health, education and psychological wellbeing.

Finally, 1,5 million children are born into refugee status, meaning that their parents fled and became refugees before they were born. These children face specific challenges. Their parents might have difficulties registering their births, making it harder to receive assistance or rendering them stateless.

## WHY IS THIS ISSUE IMPORTANT TO ADDRESS?

Refugee children are children first and foremost, and as such, they need special attention. All children are entitled to protection and care under international law. Failing to protect address the challenges faced by refugee children not only impacts them but future generations.

Here are some of the key rights that every child must enjoy:

- The right to a name, legal identity and birth registration;
- The right to physical and legal protection;
- The right not to be separated from their parents;
- The right to provisions for their basic subsistence;
- The right to care and assistance appropriate to their age and developmental needs;
- The right to participate in decisions about their future;
- The right to education;
- The right to health services.

## KEY TERMS

### Separated children

Children separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other adult family members.

### Unaccompanied children

Children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.

### Children born refugees

Children who are born into refugee status.

“States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures shall, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or by any other person, receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention.”

— [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

## CHALLENGES FACED BY REFUGEE CHILDREN

### 1 UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN

Worldwide, there are approximately [153,000 unaccompanied and separated children](#). In 2021, [27,000 unaccompanied children sought asylum](#), which represents an increase of 6,000 asylum applications compared to the previous year. Unaccompanied children come from various countries, including Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan. In 2019, [around 85%](#) of unaccompanied minors traveling to the US came from Central America, specifically from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

Separation may occur accidentally when families are fleeing danger, or deliberately when children are abandoned or given over to the care of others (usually an act taken in the desperate hope they will have a better chance of surviving). Separated from their families or other caregivers when they need them most, some unaccompanied children may assume adult responsibilities such as caring for their younger siblings. Children without parental care are at a high risk of violence and exploitation and are in urgent need of care.



“The principle of family unity states that all children have a right to a family, and families have a right to care for their children. Unaccompanied children must be provided with services aimed at reuniting them with their parents or primary legal or customary care-givers as quickly as possible.”

[Inter-agency Guiding Principles on unaccompanied and separated children](#)

Fourteen-year-old Cordelia Atietie, and her cousins aged between three and six, walked unaccompanied for two days from Cameroon to Nigeria fleeing violence. © UNHCR/Simi Vijay

### 2 CHILDREN BORN TO REFUGEE PARENTS

Some children become refugees, when they flee war and cross a border. Others might be born into refugee status. This would be the case if their parents fled a conflict, and had them later on in the country where they found refuge. Additionally, data on births among refugee populations is often unavailable, incomplete or not properly recorded in national administrative systems. Registering children born as refugees can also be complicated for security reasons. However, UNHCR estimates that more than 1.5 million children were born into refugee life between 2018 and 2021, equivalent to 380,000 children per year.

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, all children should be registered immediately after birth. The child’s identity, the nationality and identity of his or her family must also be recorded and preserved. A birth certificate is vital to ensure that children receive adequate legal protection, care, assistance and access to services.



Burundian children are getting biometrically registered by a UNHCR colleague in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo. © UNHCR/Antonia Vadala

**3 EDUCATION**

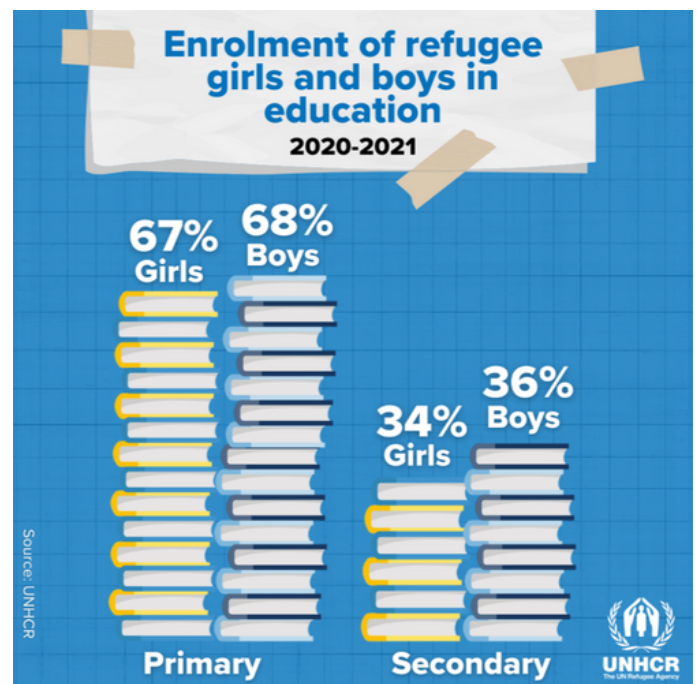
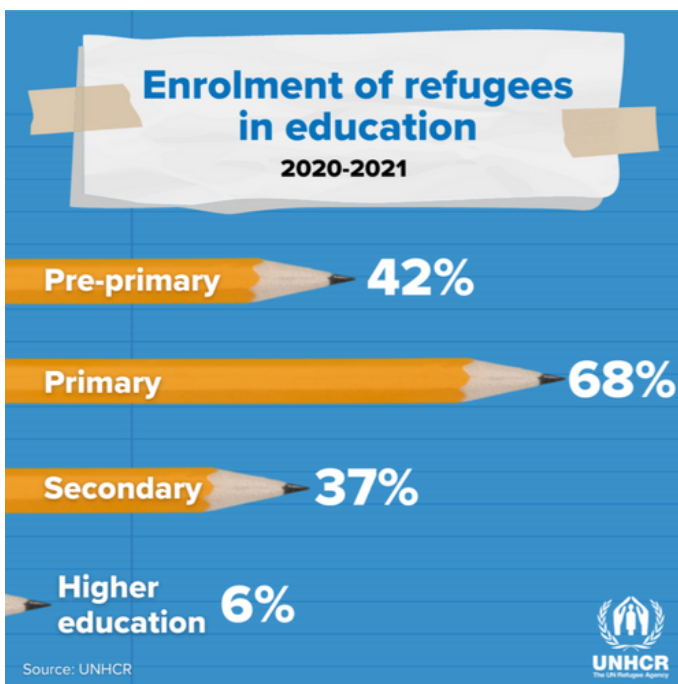
Forced displacement hinders refugees’ access to education, with 48% of all refugee children remaining out of school according to UNHCR’s latest [Education Report](#).

Education is an effective way to ensure the protection of refugee children. It helps them rebuild their life and find stability. It is protective and empowering, giving refugees the knowledge and skills to live productive, fulfilling and independent lives.

However, refugee children in many parts of the world face several barriers when it comes to education. They might face discrimination or limited access to schools when fleeing conflict or persecution. Refugee girls are less likely to be able to go to school than refugee boys due to being forced to do domestic work, a lack of toilet facilities, or sometimes fear that school will not be safe for them.

UNHCR’s 2022 Education report shows that 68% of refugee children are enrolled in primary school (as opposed to over 90% children worldwide) and 37% in secondary school (as opposed to over 80% worldwide). It also shows that refugee girls are slightly behind boys in terms of enrolment, with 67% vs 68% at primary level and 34% vs 36% at secondary.

**The 1951 Refugee Convention sets standards which are of special importance to children:**  
“Refugees must receive the same treatment as nationals in primary education, and treatment at least as favorable as that given to non refugee aliens in secondary education (art. 22).”



“ I had a tough time at school. I was told I wasn't smart because of my background and the colour of my skin. Nobody knows the struggle more than a young refugee

– Sir Lewis Hamilton, Formula 1 racing driver

**4 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL BEING**

The insecurity and disruption faced by refugee children when fleeing their homes can deeply affect their mental health. Children separated from their families or children who are victims of violence, exploitation and trafficking are particularly vulnerable.

Even once they have found safety, refugee children may still suffer because of what they have experienced - witnessing and surviving conflict or violence, leaving their home and sometimes losing family members. [Studies](#) show that among refugees aged 8 years and under, up to 80% experience problems that include depression, anxiety/PTSD, and behavioral challenges.

Refugee children must receive psychological support, which includes counseling and access to child friendly spaces to help them overcome trauma, depression or anxiety. Child-development professionals consider that a key element in promoting the child’s recovery is having structured activities to restore a sense of normalcy, along with care and nurturing. For example, practicing a sport or playing are great to help young refugees feel like children again and to make them feel included.



Children play chess with each other in a community center supported by UNHCR in Rural Damascus, Syria. Chess allows children to free their minds, exercise problem-solving and creative thinking.  
© UNHCR/Ola Kabalan

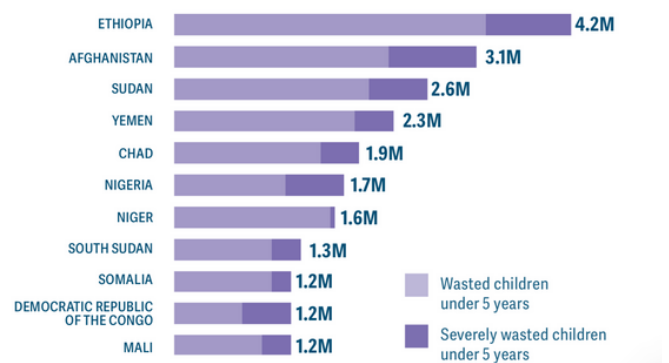
**5 HEALTH CARE & NUTRITION**

Refugee children often embark on long and exhausting journeys to find safety, which makes them vulnerable to injuries and diseases. Children in crowded environments such as refugee camps or reception centers are also at a higher risk of catching infectious diseases. Most refugee families and children have limited access to vaccines and health services and do not have the funds to get adequate treatment if needed.

[Studies](#) have shown that refugee children exhibit high estimated prevalence rates for anemia (14%), haemoglobinopathies - which regroups different blood disorders - (4%), latent tuberculosis infection (11%) and vitamin D deficiency (45%) on entry in reception countries.

Refugee children, especially if unaccompanied, are extremely vulnerable and in need of special food and care. A child is defined as 'wasted' if their weight is too low for their height. According to FAO, in Ethiopia there are 4.2 million wasted local and refugee children, followed by Afghanistan with 3.1 million, and Sudan with 2.6 million.

**Countries/territories with more than 1 million wasted children under 5 years in 2021**



Source: [FAO 2022 Global Report on Food Crisis](#)

## 6 CHILD LABOR

In situations of displacement and conflict, parents and children often face severe economic constraints. Adults may not be permitted to work in their host country and may engage in low-paying and risky informal employment. To ensure their survival, families may involve their children in helping generate additional income, thus resorting to child labor. Children living alone or separated from their parents are also more prone to work, especially if they are not included in any education systems.

In Lebanon, for example, [180,000 children](#), mostly refugees from Syria, were estimated to be working according to 2018 research. 60% of those interviewed said that they experienced some form of violence in the course of their labor. In Turkey, Syrian refugee children face a [similar issue](#), with 17,4% of 12-14 year-olds and 45,1% of 15-17 year-olds engaged in paid employment in 2021, many in the textile industry. The incidence of paid work is remarkably high among boys.

[Article 32 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation. This includes any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.](#)



Sam is an internally displaced boy from Yemen. When his family fled to Aden he had to get a fishing job to help support them. His father used to be a teacher but since losing his job, he has been staying home caring for Sam's mother who has a disability.  
© UNHCR/Mahmood Al-Falastiny

## 7 VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION

Refugee children are at a high risk of trafficking, kidnapping, sexual and gender-based violence, and forced recruitment into armed groups. They may face violence or exploitation at different stages: prior to fleeing their home, when they're fleeing their home or in their country of asylum. Unaccompanied and separated children are particularly vulnerable.

Some routes are particularly dangerous for children on the move. This is for example the case of the [Balkans route](#), where children from the Middle East travel through Eastern Europe, or the [route through Central America and Mexico](#).

Overcrowded conditions in refugees camps also lead to higher risks of sexual and gender based violence, especially for refugee women and children. On the [Greek islands of Samos](#), hundreds of refugees reported experiencing SGBV after arriving in Greece, back in 2017.



UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi meets young Venezuelan survivors of sexual exploitation at the Renacer Foundation in Colombia. © UNHCR/Santiago Escobar-Jaramillo

## WHAT IS CURRENTLY BEING DONE TO ADDRESS THIS ISSUE?



- UNHCR partners with governments and international organizations to [ensure quality education for refugee children](#). For example, UNHCR's partnership with [Educate A Child](#) is helping over 1.2 million out of school refugee and internally displaced children gain access to primary school, and reduces their risk of dropping out.
- UNHCR [supports the reunification of refugee families](#). For example, UNHCR acts as the Secretariat of the [Family Reunification Network \(FRUN\)](#), the first global platform devoted to family reunification for refugees.
- UNHCR helps refugee children [access mental health support](#). For example, UNHCR and UNICEF established dozens of Blue Dot Hubs hubs in countries hosting Ukrainian refugees. The "[Blue Dot Hubs](#)" are one-stop safe spaces equipped to provide information, counseling, mental health and psychosocial support, legal aid and protection services for refugee children.



### Family Reunification Example

Terrified that he would be recruited into the army, Numeir was forced to flee his home in Syria alone when he was only 15 years old. After spending three whole years away from his family, he managed to reunite with his loved ones in Germany thanks to the [Family Reunification Network \(FRUN\)](#). Read Numeir's story [here](#). In the picture above, Numeir embraces his mother as they are reunited at the airport. © UNHCR/Chris Melzer

## GOVERNMENTS



- Governments can protect unaccompanied and separated refugee children by [allowing them to access their territory, register and find adequate care](#). For example, the UK decided to revoke a discriminatory policy banning children under 18 from traveling without their parents or a legal guardian. The UK also introduced a [new rule](#) to facilitate entry of unaccompanied Ukrainian children.
- Host governments can [make it easier for refugee parents to register the birth of their children](#). For example, in 2018, [Lebanon introduced a new rule](#) to remove the need for costly court processes for unregistered births, easing access to education, health and other services for more than 50,000 children.
- Host governments can [ease refugees' access to education](#). For example, Jordan, is one of the countries which continues to lead the way in ensuring refugees' access to education. The [Jordanian government](#) is using a double shift school system to provide education to all, with Jordanian children attending in the morning and Syrian children attending the second shift in the afternoon.

## HOST COMMUNITY AND NGOS



- Local communities can help [integrate unaccompanied and trafficked children](#). For example, the [Refugee Council](#) in the UK helps trafficked and unaccompanied children to find shelter, go to school and access health and mental health services.
- Host community members and NGOs can [use sport and play as a method to help refugee children overcome trauma](#). For example, in Greece, [NGOs like MSF turn to games and play](#) to help children process their trauma and develop coping mechanisms.
- Host community members and NGOs can help [improve refugee children's access to education](#). For example, [Nour International](#) is an NGO made up of Lebanese and international students and educators supporting the Nour Center, a community school for Syrian and Palestinian children in the Burj Al Barajneh refugee camp in Beirut.



Refugee students enjoy a fun day full of extracurricular activities organized by Nour International in Beirut, Lebanon.

Nour International supports the Nour Center through providing financial support, school supplies, curriculums, lessons, and fun activities.

© [Nour International](#)



## Questions to Guide the Debate

- How can countries improve refugee children's access to school?
- How can we ensure that children born into refugee status are properly registered?
- How do we make sure that refugee children have access to safe and nutritious food?
- How can we ensure refugee children's access to physical and mental health services?
- What role can local citizens play to help refugee children in countries of asylum and host countries?
- What role can businesses play to support refugee children in countries of asylum and host countries?
- What can be done to prevent children from being separated from their families, and to facilitate the reunification of families?

## Useful Resources

- [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)
- [UNHCR: Refugee Children Guidelines on Protection and Care](#)
- [Inter-agency Guiding Principles on unaccompanied and separated children](#)
- [UNHCR's 2022 Education Report](#)
- [UNHCR Children on the Run Report](#)
- [UNHCR Child protection framework](#)
- [The Alliance: Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#)
- [UNHCR Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum](#)

## Contact Us

If you have any questions about UNHCR's MUN Refugee Challenge or this background guide, please visit our [webpage](#) or contact [hqmunrefugee@unhcr.org](mailto:hqmunrefugee@unhcr.org).