This document forms part of the 4th edition of the UNHCR Emergency Handbook and was generated from the digital Emergency Handbook system.

# Child protection

**Key points**

- Link identification, screening and prioritisation of children at risk to registration processes, so that children who are most in need are identified quickly and efficiently.
- Set up a simple, easy to manage Best Interests Procedure procedures early on, and ensure that they link to referral mechanisms for assistance and support. Consider linking these procedures to registration.
- Make sure that child protection programmes engage actively with the community, to identify excluded children who may be in need of assistance.
- Involve adolescents and young people in the design and delivery of child protection services.
- Design child protection services to be as decentralised as possible. This approach should be taken to community activities at neighbourhood level, centre-based programmes, and activities that link with services in other sectors such as education, nutrition and health.
- Consider developing protection activities in urban contexts, using sport and recreation or child friendly spaces as entry points, for example.

## 1. Overview

UNHCR acts to protect children (persons who are under 18 years of age) by responding to their specific needs and the risks they face. It protects, and campaigns, against all forms of discrimination; prevents and responds to abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation; ensures immediate access to appropriate services; and provides durable solutions in the child's best interest. Situations of forced displacement and emergency have devastating effects on children's lives, and boys and girls are uniquely vulnerable due to their age and social status.

The international humanitarian system recognizes child protection is a life-saving priority. Child protection prevention and response mechanisms responses must be established from the start of an emergency, or children's lives and well-being will be put at risk. The most important outcomes of child protection are to prevent violence, abuse and exploitation, and to ensure displaced children access to protection services, by establishing or supporting national and community-level child protection systems.

## 2. Protection objectives

Priority objectives during the first phase of an emergency:

- To ensure that girls and boys are safe where they live, learn and play.
- To strengthen the capacity of children to participate in their own protection.
- To give girls and boys child-friendly access to asylum, refugee and other legal procedures, and to essential documents.
- To ensure that girls and boys with specific needs receive targeted support.

## 3. Underlying principles and standards

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Core principles include: the child's survival and development, best interests of the child, non-discrimination, children's participation.

- Sphere, Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, and its core principles and standards for child protection work (see the diagram below).
- Rights-based approaches, including age, gender, and diversity mainstreaming (AGD).

UNHCR seeks to empower individuals and communities to exercise their rights, rather than solely viewing them as ‘beneficiaries' of assistance. It works to ensure that women, men, girls and boys of all ages and diverse backgrounds enjoy their rights on an equal basis and are able to participate fully in decisions that affect their lives.

- Full integration of child protection.

UNHCR engages with partner organizations across all functions to ensure that child protection is integrated in all programming as part of the humanitarian response.

- The InterAgency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children

These principles provide definitions and key standards and principles for preventing and responding to family separation, and on working with unaccompanied and separated children.

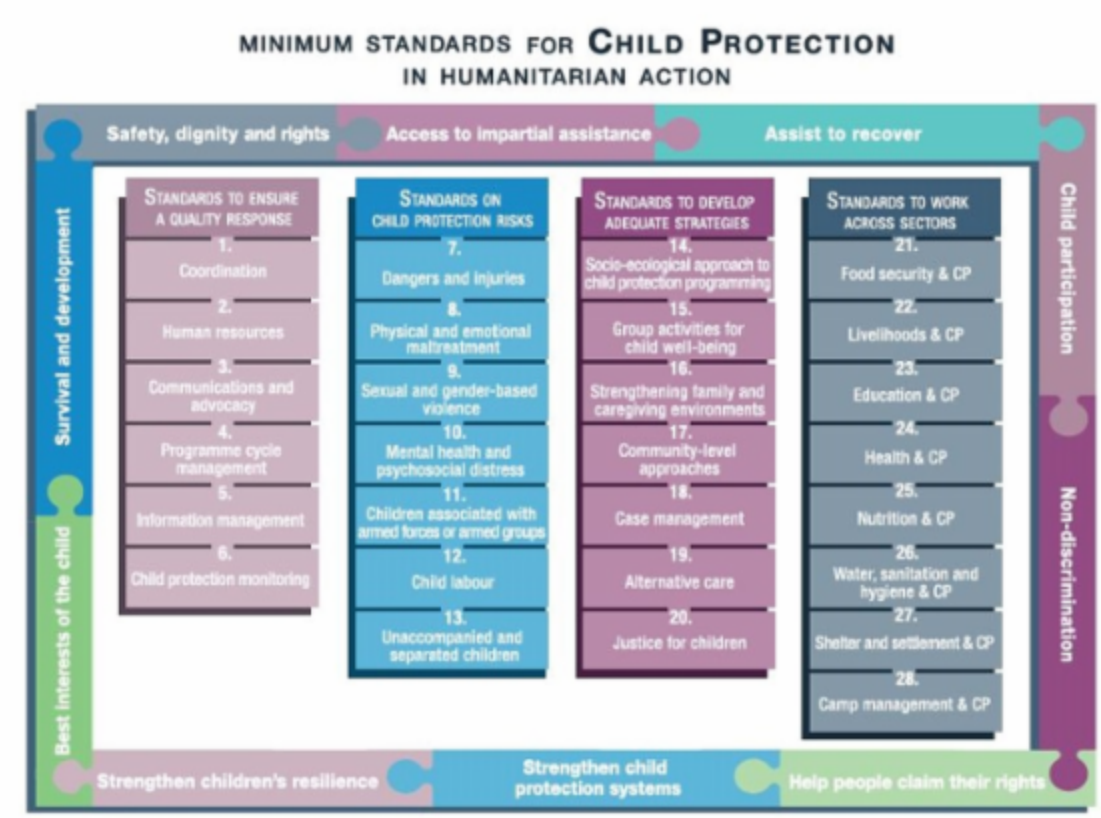



Diagram of Standards

## 4. Protection Risks

- Lack of access to asylum procedures or procedures that a child-friendly. If asylum processes are not child sensitive, children may not be able to exercise their right to seek asylum, or may be put in a position where they are easily exploited by adults.
- Separation from parents and caregivers. Children can become separated from their parents and caregivers before or during flight or while in displacement. They can be sent away, abandoned, or encouraged to live alone (because, for example, their carers believe they will receive more support). UASC are often particularly at risk of violence, exploitation, abuse or neglect.
- Sexual violence and sexual exploitation. Displaced children are particularly at risk of sexual violence and exploitation. A high proportion of survivors of sexual violence are girls, but boys are also affected.
- Mental disorders and psychosocial distress. In contexts of forced displacement, children are exposed to traumatic events as well as high levels of daily stress. Without adequate support, many are likely to develop health issues.
- Children associated with armed forces and armed groups. Refugee and displaced children, especially adolescents who are not in school, may be recruited by armed forces and armed groups. Such children are often exposed to extreme violence and may be abused, exploited, injured or killed.

- Trafficking, smuggling, sale and illegal adoption, inappropriate adoption. Displaced children may be targeted for trafficking, smuggling, sale and illegal adoption. UASC are particularly at risk.
- Physical violence and harmful practices. In displacement, children are at increased risk of domestic violence, abuse and corporal punishment, because their families are under acute strain and community protection mechanisms are disrupted. In their efforts to cope, families may adopt harmful practices, and children may adopt negative coping mechanisms, including substance abuse.
- Child labour. When families lose their income and assets, children are more likely to become involved in the worst forms of child labour (WFCL), such as forced or bonded labour. Children may be used in armed conflicts, trafficked for exploitative work or sexual exploitation, engaged in illicit work, or forced to do work that is likely to harm their health, safety or morals.
- Dangers and injuries. Children living in insecure or unsafe conditions are at greater risk of injury and disability. When they are in, or travel through, conflict zones, for example, they risk injury from unexploded ordnance and landmines.
- Detention. Particularly in the context of political conflicts, children who participate in political activities (or are perceived to have participated in them) are commonly detained. Children seeking asylum may also be detained. Especially when they are held in facilities alongside adults, children in detention are at risk of psychological, physical and sexual abuse and other harms to their development.

## 5. Other risks

- Reputational risks. Should UNHCR fail to protect children adequately, this will harm its credibility and moral authority.
- Should UNHCR staff or the staff of partner organizations exploit or abuse children, it will also jeopardise the organisation's credibility with communities, governments and the media, and harm its ability to operate. (See the Entry on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse : PSEA).

## 6. Key decision points

It is vital that protection of children is prioritised. These should determine programme design, alongside factors such as the number of children at risk, and assistance and protection services that are already operational. It is important to continuously monitor and analyse the nature and scale of risks to children, the capacity of populations of concern and the child protection system to address those risks.

## 7. Key steps

**Analyse child protection needs and capacities and plan the response**

- Assess child protection needs and risks and prioritise them in terms of severity and scale. Base initial assessments on pre-crisis and secondary data, and that risks for children are prevalent even if there is no data to substantiate this.

- Consider what further information is needed. This can be collected by including child protection questions and issues in initial rapid needs assessments (within 1 – 3 weeks), or specifically assessing child protection concerns (within 4-6 weeks, ongoing as required).
- Assess the capacity of the child protection system, of UNHCR, partners, and other key actors. Look for ways to connect with and build on existing capacity.
- Monitor and report on child protection issues and violations. There is a specific obligation to monitor and report on grave violations against children in countries where the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) operates under Security Council Resolution 1612.
- Identify gaps in UNHCR capacity and the need for dedicated child protection staff. Review the percentage of children in the population and the severity of the child protection risks. Consider asking UNHCR HQ to deploy additional child protection personnel and provide expert guidance.
- Establish or strengthen coordination mechanisms for child protection. To start with, focus on technical and strategic guidance, identifying gaps, and ensuring that services are not duplicated.
- Develop a capacity building strategy for volunteers, partners, Government and different categories of UNHCR staff. UNICEF is often able to support capacity building technically. Consider coaching, mentoring, self-learning, and other methods in addition to training, and tie training to performance outcomes.

**2. Establish mechanisms to identify, prioritise, assess and refer children at risk**

**At registration**

- Include clear guidelines and screening questions in Level 1 and 2 registration procedures that will identify vulnerable children.
- Assign child protection staff to registration points and establish a child protection desk.
- Establish referral pathways and criteria for prioritizing identified children at risk. Prioritization should be based on an evaluation of exposure to risk, and referral pathways should be part of the operation's best interests procedure for children at risk.
- As soon as possible, train registration and other key staff to identify and refer children at risk, and in how to communicate with children.
- Ensure registration environment and process are child-friendly, including providing communication material and information that are accessible to children of different ages and abilities.

**At camp / site / city level**

- Set up a functioning best interests procedure (BIP) and ensure that enough UNHCR and partner staff are available for implementation.
- Agree on prioritisation criteria, referral pathways, and BIP Standard Operating Precedures (i.e. SOPs for case management) of children at risk.
- As part of the BIP, establish clear roles, responsibilities and mechanisms to ensure that Best Interest Assessments (BIAs) are systematically conducted for UASC and other children at risk.

- Information recorded in relation to cases of individual children at risk should be stored securely and confidentially using the Child Protection Module in proGres V4 wherever this is in use. The Child Protection Information Management System or other systems may be used by some partners, in which case UNHCR will need to find ways to share information appropriately.
- Ensure that asylum and assistance procedures are child-friendly, for example by consulting children on UNHCR and partner procedures and integrating their feedback, and providing information to children in a format that they can understand.
- Coordinate with health centres to ensure that birth notifications are issued for new-borns and that steps are taken register births properly through civil registration authorities.

**3. Prevent, and respond to, separation of children from parents and caregivers**

- Put in place measures to prevent separation during arrival, relocation and evacuations. (Ensure families are kept together, do not transfer children alone without screening first, etc.)
- Ensure that assistance procedures do not encourage deliberate separation (for example by targeting UASC, or encouraging families to split in order to receive additional assistance).
- Ensure that mechanisms are in place to identify, refer, document, trace and reunify children. Coordinate with ICRC and national Red Cross/Crescent Societies.
- Support or establish tracing activities (community-based tracing mechanisms, listening posts, children's desks, phone calls, progress searches, etc.), as necessary.
- Ensure that Best Interests Procedure is in place for all children who require tracing and reunification. (See the Entry on Best Interests Procedures
  .)

**4. Ensure adequate alternative care services**

- Seek to understand traditional care strategies for UASC (including potential protection risks linked to these). Assess the capacity of the community to absorb children that need care, and the complementary support that is potentially required.Complementary support be based on the family's vulnerability rather than the fact that the family is caring for UASC, so as to prevent deliberate separation in the hope of assistance.
- Conduct BIA for all children are considered for, or who are in, alternative care. If numbers are high, prioritize younger children and unaccompanied children.
- Identify a range of alternative care options for children in different situations. Prioritize younger children for family-based care, and keep siblings together. Options are likely to include foster care, and supported/suprevised independent living for older children or child-headed households, for whom family-based care has been explored and proven to be unfeasible. Residential care arrangements in family-like settings may be considered if the community's foster-care capacity is overwhelmed. Institutional care should be a last resort and for the shortest possible time.
- Mobilize community leaders and community-based organizations (such as foster parents' associations) to support alternative care.

**5. Provide psychosocial support for children, parents and caregivers**

- Provide parents and caregivers with information on child psychosocial distress, and on how they can support their children to recover, as well as access services.
- Establish regular structured recreational activities, led by community volunteers, and coordinate these with education activities. This may include child friendly spaces, ensuring that age and gender-sensitive activities are developed and implemented for teenagers.
- Ensure that psychosocial support activities link to and support safe emergency education of good quality.
- Work with other sectors to ensure that they consider the protection and wellbeing of children. Assist them to make their services child-friendly and accessible.

**6. Prevent and respond to sexual violence and exploitation**

- Ensure that measures to prevent sexual violence and sexual exploitation include children (for example, by identifying risk factors specific to children).
- Ensure that response and referral mechanisms are adapted to the needs of children and link to Best Interests Procedure (including, but not limited to, alternative care, BIP) where necessary.
- Provide information on access to services and child protection. Make information child-friendly. Access to information helps to prevent sexual exploitation.
- Put in place immediate safety and security measures. These include policing and emergency lighting at displacement sites, and screening procedures at points of entry to and departure from affected areas, to prevent abductions, trafficking and violence, and accommodating child-headed households close to vetted community households.

**7. Strengthen community-based child protection mechanisms and national child protection system**

- Identify community-based mechanisms, traditions and practices that contribute to the protection of children. Identify, training and mobilise resource people who can identify and refer protection risks and children at risk.
- Promote community-led initiatives to strengthen the protective environment (awareness-raising, referrals, follow-up of children at risk, etc.).
- Map the structure, capacity and procedures of the national child protection system, degree to which children of concern to UNHCR have access to these, and support needs.
- Work with national authorities and UNICEF at the national level and the field to strengthen capacity, quality and responsiveness of the national system, and advocate to ensure children of concern have non-dissimilatory access.

**8. Prevent recruitment and support the release and reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG)**

- Ensure screening and identification procedures are in place for CAAFAG and that procedures for ex-combatants are child-sensitive.
- Do not detain children unless absolutely necessary. If detention is unavoidable, detain children separately, and avoid separating siblings.
- As a prevention and response strategy in all contexts, ensure that children have access to psychosocial, educational, livelihood and recreational activities that are not stigmatizing.

## 8. Key management considerations

- Legal and policy framework. Do you need to advocate in support of strengthening and/or implementing policies? Do any legal barriers prevent children from accessing the protection system or protective measures?
- Knowledge and data. Is information available on children at risk? Is it disaggregated by sex and age? Is child protection reflected in situation reports? Is the planned response evidence-based? Are adequate information management systems for child protection budgeted and in place? Are child protection programmes systematically monitored? How are the programmes monitored? Has a monitoring and evaluation framework for child protection programmes been developed? Is it integrated with other programmes?
- Coordination. Are mechanisms in place to coordinate child protection responses? Do they consider child protection effectively? Are a child protection strategy and plan of action in place? Have partners been consulted in their development? Are there gaps or duplications in the response? Are child protection, SGBV, and education programmes linked? Are child protection concerns mainstreamed in other sectors?
- Human and financial capacity. Is the budget for child protection adequate and linked to the protection of children of concern? Is child protection adequately reflected in appeals and strategic plans? Are more dedicated UNHCR child protection staff needed? Have managers trained on child protection? Emergency partners, including Government agencies, may require UNHCR leadership to help them to develop sustainable programmes while funding is available.
- Prevention and response. Have preventive child protection programmes been established promptly and effectively? Are they appropriate and adequate? Do they build on existing systems and capacities? Do SGBV and education programmes consider the needs of child survivors? Is the child protection programme focusing narrowly on UASC at the cost of other protection issues or other children at risk? Are specific programmes for adolescents in place?
- Advocacy and awareness. What is the advocacy strategy? Are child protection issues that require advocacy regularly raised at management meetings and meetings with key partners?

## 9. Resources and partnerships

**Staff**

- At the start of an emergency, it is recommended that UNHCR should deploy specialist expertise in child protection (at P3 level) to help assess risks, set up systems, and build capacity. Additional specialist national and international staff should be hired or deployed as required (taking account of the number of children in need, the capacity and availability of child protection partners, and the risks to children). Information on staffing norms (in particular the number of staff per child for case management and activities involving children) may be found in Child Protection Minimum Standards and associated resources.

**Partnerships**

- Key partners for child protection usually include relevant Government department(s), UNICEF, the UN Mission (where present), international NGOs, national NGOs, and local and community-based organizations.

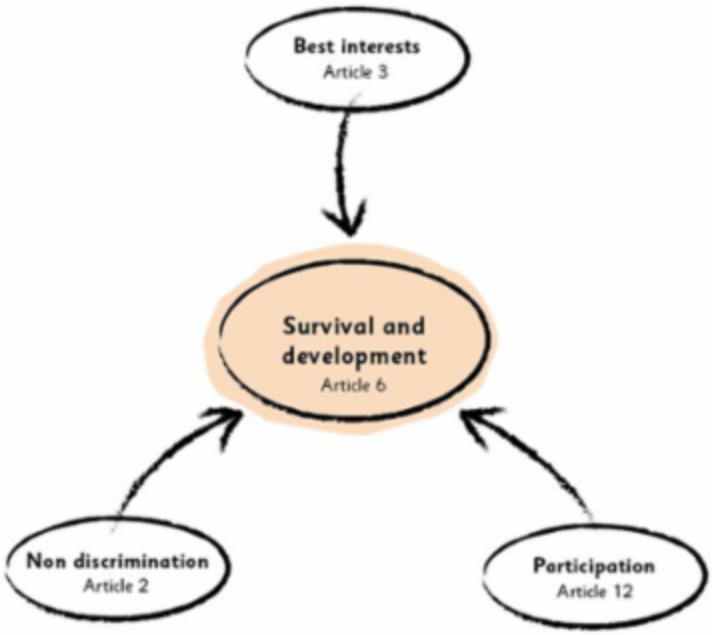
**Financial requirements**

- Ensure that the budgets for programming, technical support and supervision, and ongoing capacity building are sufficient. Recognise that case management requires sufficient staffing and allocate resources accordingly (see UNHCR BIP Guidelines). Child protection budgets should include staff, infrastructure, equipment, material assistance, and capacity building. Child protection budgets should include staff, infrastructure, equipment, material assistance, and capacity building.

**Materials**

- Kits are normally required for case management, tracing, and child friendly spaces. (UNICEF is often able to provide the latter.) Tents may be required in the short term.

## CRC guiding principles

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Action for the rights of children
ARC resource pack

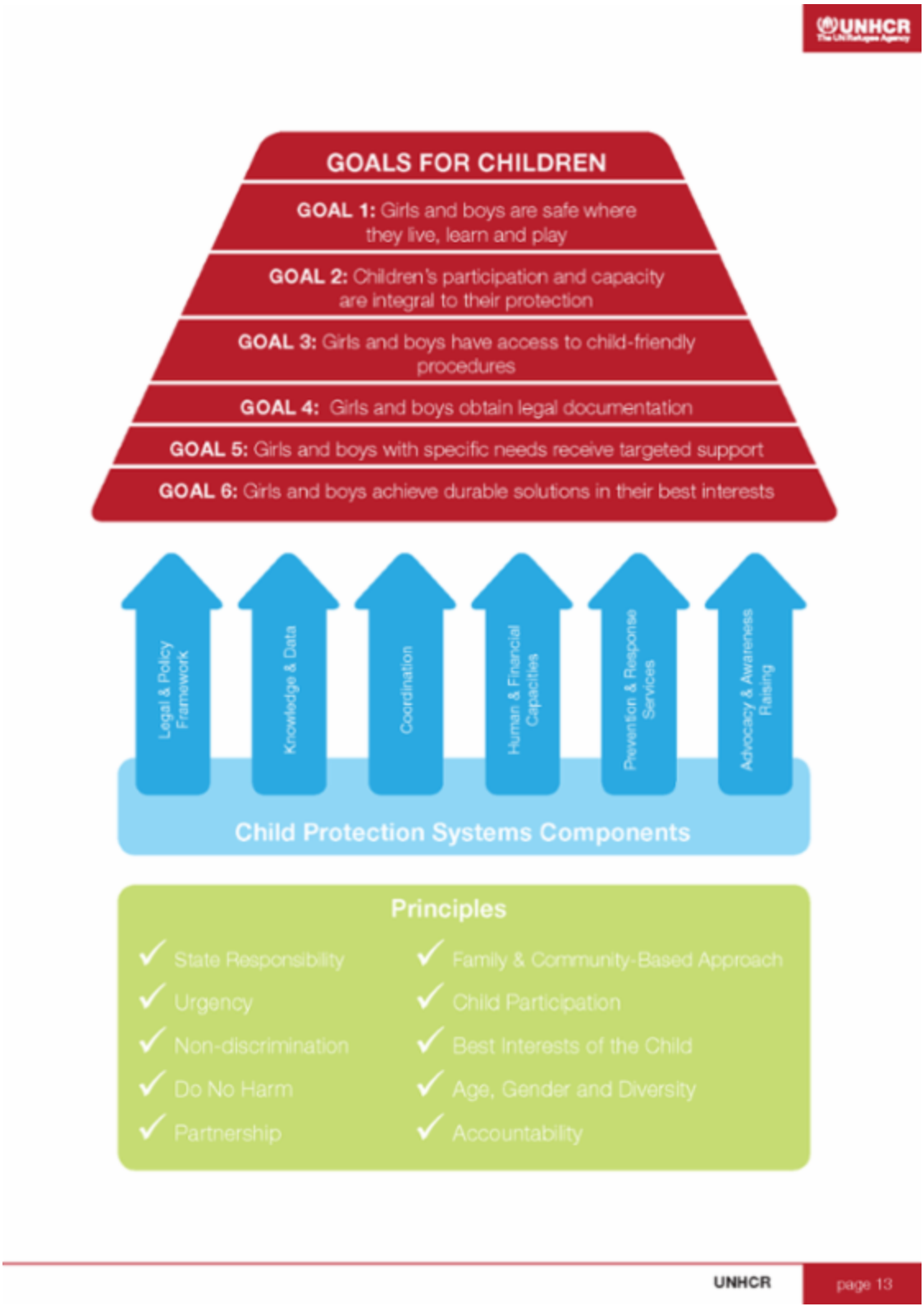
The BIA and the BID are two key tools for the implementation of BIP. Other tools can be used at different stages of BIP as seen in the table below. Note that examples of these tools can be found in the SOPs Toolkit.

| Step* | Tools |
|---|---|
| Identification and Intake | Prioritisation criteria; Identification form; Screening tool; Consent form. |
| Best Interests Assessment | Best Interests Assessment example forms: Rapid BIA form (Annex 6); Comprehensive BIA form (Annex 7). |
| Case Planning | Case plan form. |
| Implementation | Referral form |
| Follow-up and review | Follow-up form |
| Case Closure | Closure form; child feedback form. |
| BID (can be initiated at any step) | BID report form (Annex 8); BID review form (Annex 9) |

* Note that the steps in BIP are the same as those outlined in the Interagency Case Management Guidelines.

* Note that all steps can be documented in proGres Version 4.

CRC Principles




Best Interests Procedure Diagram (UNCHR)

## 10. Links

Save the Children Resource Centre

Unaccompanied and Separated Children Handbook and Toolkit
UNCHR Child Protection Issue Briefs on specific areas of child protection

Refworld Children and Youth page
Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action

UNHCR, Engagement in Situations of Internal Displacement, Provisional Guidance, 2016
Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action

**Need help?**

**CONTACT** As a first port of call, the UNHCR Dep. Representative (Protection), UNHCR Asst. Rep. (Protection), and/or Snr Protection Officer in the country; or the UNHCR Snr. Regional Protection Officer (SGBV/Child or Community-based). The Child Protection and Youth Unit in DIP can also be contacted for technical support.

**Annexes**

- UNHCR, Child Protection Framework, 2012
- UNHCR, Executive Committee Conclusion on Children at Risk, no. 107, 2007
- UNHCR, Child Protection Checklist, Protection in Emergencies Toolbox, 2013
- UNHCR, Guidelines on Assessing and Determining the Best Interests of the Child, 2018
- UNHCR, Field Manual for the Implementation of the Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child, 2011
- UNHCR, Heightened Risk Identification Tool and Guide, version 2, 2010
- UNHCR, Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls, January 2008
- Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019
- Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children, 2004
- CPWG, Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit, 2013
- IRC and UNICEF, Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse

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