



# Fragile Beginnings: The impact of conflict and displacement on early childhood development

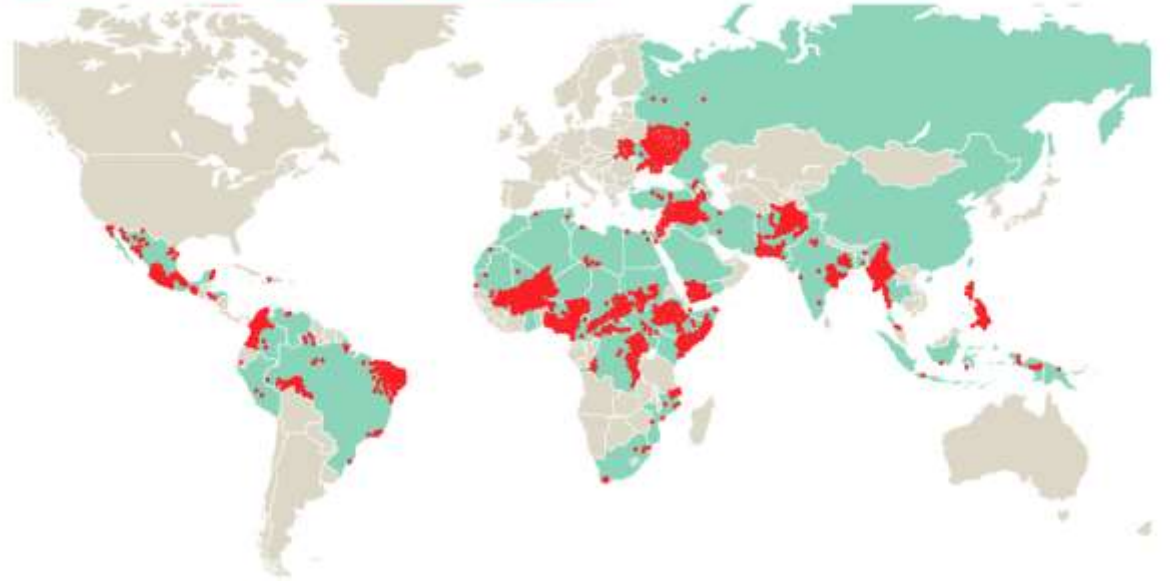
# A world more dangerous than ever for children

**1 child in every 6** around the world is living in or fleeing from conflict zones today \*

**More than 600 million** women and girls lived in conflict-affected countries in 2022, a 50 per cent increase since 2017 \*\*

Conflict and displacement **negatively affect every aspect** of a stable nurturing environment that children need to grow and develop

FIGURE 1: CONFLICT-AFFECTED COUNTRIES AND CONFLICT ZONES, 2023



CREATED BY PRIIO, USING UPPSALA CONFLICT DATA PROGRAM GEOREFERENCED EVENT DATASET (UCDP GED)

Sources:

\* [Save the Children. Stop the War on Children – Pathways to Peace, 2024](#)

\*\* [Conflicts to Watch in 2024: Implications for Women, Peace and Security – GIWPS\)](#)

# Consequences of conflict and displacement

## Community

- Lack of access to sanitation or safe drinking water
- Limited access to nutritious foods
- Lack of health/social services
- Breakdown of community-level supports/ community violence
- Societal stigmatization

## Parents/Caregivers

- High levels of stress or trauma
- Depression and ill health

## Family

- Crowded/chaotic home situations
- Economic constraints/poverty
- Lack of legal status

## Children

- Undernutrition, hunger
- Childhood illness, injuries
- No or limited access to safe spaces for play and recreation
- Disrupted education

**Caregivers and children experience fear, anxiety, mental ill health**



# Adversity and stress responses



Brief increases in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels



Serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by responsive relationships



Prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships

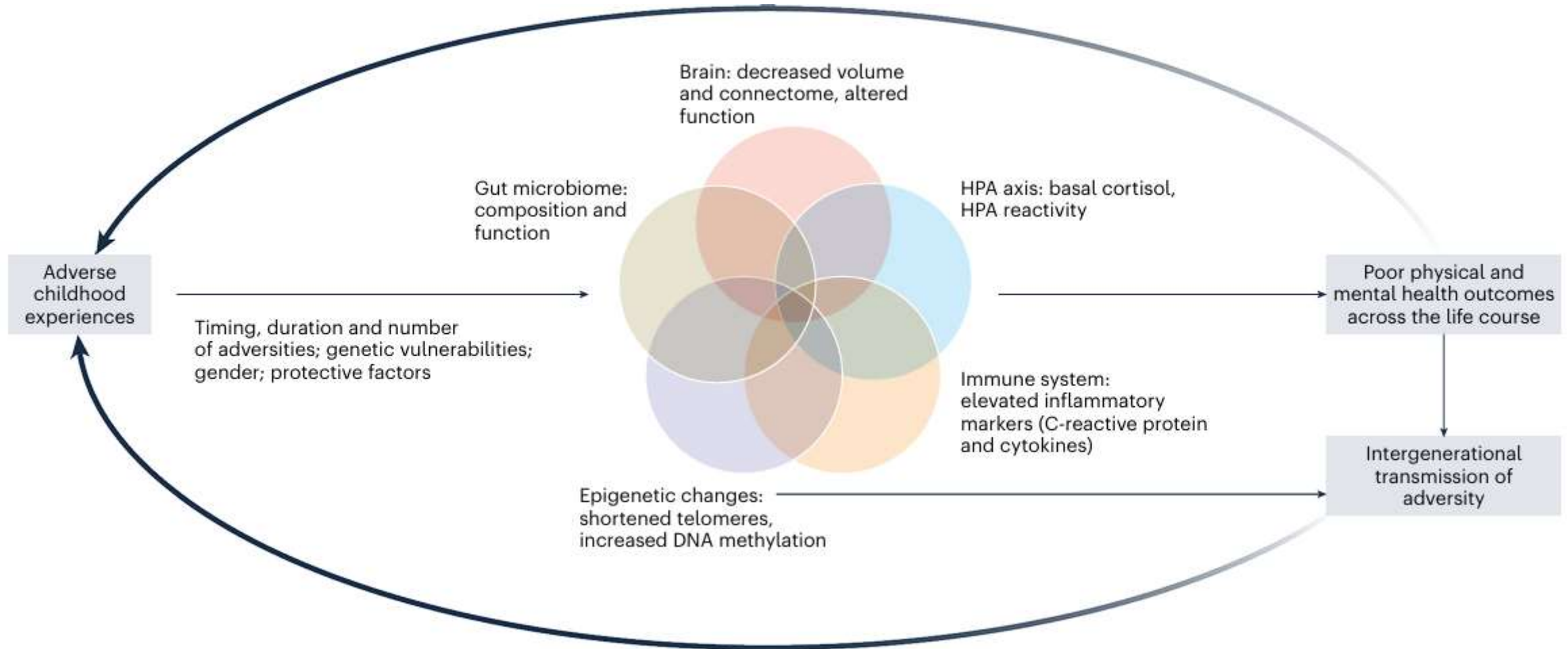
# Consequences of toxic stress on childhood development

- Effects strong on neurodevelopment especially during critical periods of sensitivity and developmental plasticity
- Impacting executive functioning and the body's stress response
- Affecting more complex skills building like language, attention, and decision-making
- Short-term, medium-term and long-term negative consequences for physical and mental health
- Greater risk for heart disease, diabetes, substance use and mental illness later in life



Source: Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University

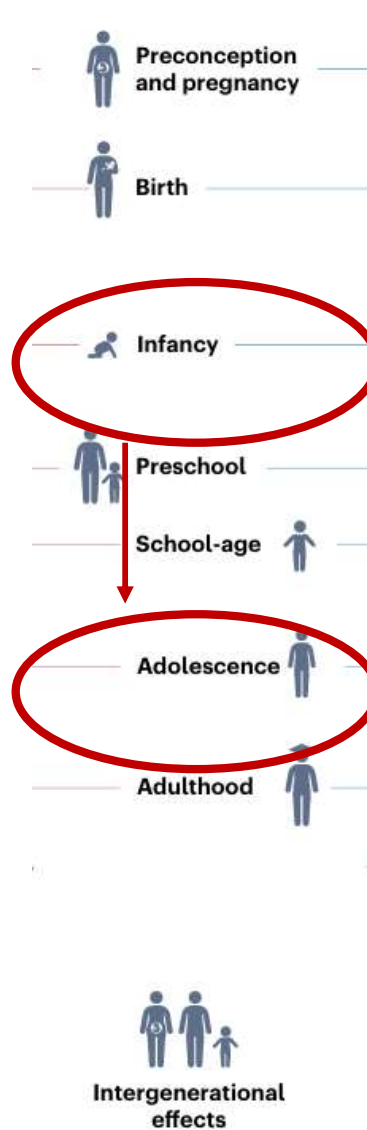
# Mechanisms by which adverse childhood experiences affect neurodevelopment



## Exposure to adverse experiences

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Maternal malnutrition	Maternal depression
Lack of shelter	Exposure to violence
Lack of clean water and sanitation	Lack of responsive care
Poor feeding and nutrition	Anxiety
Childhood illness	Loss of community
Injuries	Interrupted education
Lack of preventive and curative health care	Lack of mental health and psychosocial support



## Interventions areas and approaches

Quality ANC and birth care	Maternal nutrition
Quality postnatal care	Maternal mental health care
Optimal infant and young child feeding & nutrition	Prevention and management of childhood illness
Support for responsive caregiving	Learning opportunities and education
Violence prevention	Safe and secure places for play and recreation
Care for child mental health	Group sessions and peer support
Individual counselling	Digital care solutions

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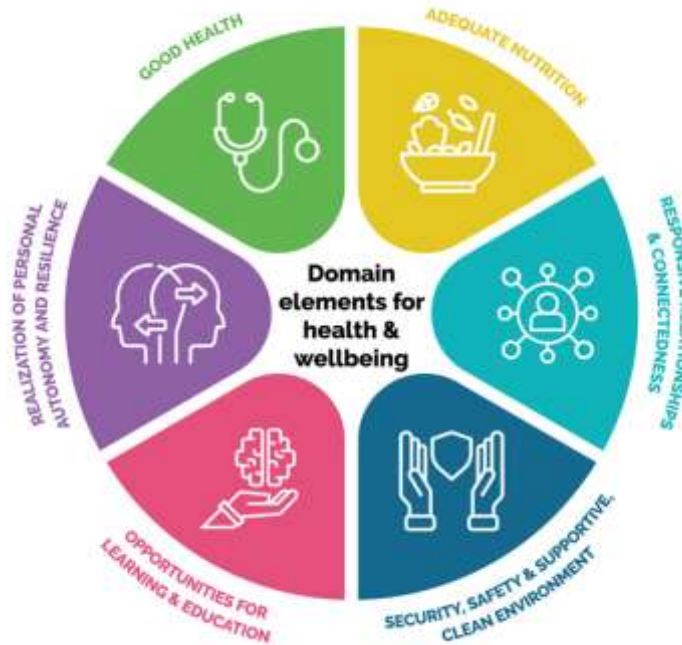
# Evidence of effectiveness

- Caregiver testimonies confirm the beneficial impact of *digital* outreach ([Parenting for Children in Crisis — Parenting for Lifelong Health](#))
- Evaluation of a multi-faceted interventions in middle eastern countries has demonstrated positive impact ([Children affected by the Syrian refugee crisis are effectively learning numbers, letters, and 'emotional ABCs' through the Ahlan Simsim initiative](#))
- More investment needed in implementation research to uncover *how, why, and under what conditions and settings* programs are effective ([Implementation research for early childhood development programming in humanitarian contexts – PubMed](#))





# The role of the health sector



[Investing in our future: a comprehensive agenda for the health and wellbeing of children and adolescents](#)

- Conduct **rapid response assessment** of the needs of pregnant women, children and their caregivers
- Bolster **staff capacity** to support all components of nurturing care for childhood development
- Support and strengthen **community networks** in collaboration with civil society and aid organizations
- Sustain **essential interventions** for children relevant to the setting and the phase of the emergency
- Protect caregiver **mental health** and provide **psychosocial support**
- Promote **protective play, learning and healing** spaces for children and their caregivers
- Engage with **community, school and after school-based** interventions



*Children look through a hole in a wall at a destroyed residential area in the Gaza Strip, occupied Palestinian territory.*

*Photo : WHO*

# Thank you

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