



Physicians for
Human Rights

Guidance on Creating Child-friendly Space for Forensic Documentation and Interviewing in Multisectoral Settings as part of Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) work on sexual violence in conflict zones

*Child-friendly space at Panzi Hospital,
Bukavu, DRC, 2024.
Photo: Physicians for Human Rights*



Objective:

This document outlines the key considerations and principles for developing a child-friendly space for forensic documentation and interviewing in a multisectoral setting. This may be a health center, a police station, a court or judicial setting, or a setting that includes actors from these different sectors working together. The document is meant to be practical and provide operational guidance for developing a child-friendly space based on existing guidance and toolkits and will be updated as additional guidance and resources are identified.

What Constitutes a Child-friendly Space: Purpose and Definitions

A child-friendly space is a safe, predictable, and stimulating place where a child can play, get support and be at ease. A child is defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as anyone under 18 years old.¹ Child-friendly spaces are often created for children experiencing humanitarian emergencies or displacement but can also be set up in non-emergency settings. Such spaces may be set up in distinct ways to reflect the context within which they are built. However, all child-friendly spaces must be accessible to children of different ages, genders, ethnicities, and abilities.² When possible and appropriate, child-friendly spaces should build on existing structures and capacities that exist within a community and be done in collaboration with the community and other organizations in a participatory manner.³

Child-friendly spaces can offer predictability, stability, and safety. Stability, the ability to play, and the presence of a consistent, trusted adult are very important to curtailing psychological distress and long-term trauma impacts.⁴

A child-friendly space should aim to offer the following while being adapted based on context and purpose:

- A secure and safe environment for children that is also stimulating and supportive⁵ (This could include fun activities, informal learning opportunities, and a chance to express feelings through creative play).
- Integrated services and programming that are inclusive and non-discriminatory.⁶
- A space where children can seek, share and obtain information, and gain knowledge and skills in a non-judgmental and safe manner.⁷
- A space to access gender-based violence response services and other related services (which may include health, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), education on sexual and reproductive health among others)⁸
- A space to develop peer-to-peer networks for support and psychosocial well-being.⁹
- A structured place offering an entry point to report protection concerns and voice needs, and free from harassment.¹⁰
- A space for parents/guardians to also access services for their children and identify their child's needs and available resources.¹¹

In addition to these goals, child-friendly spaces can serve as a critical focal point for providers to identify and refer children in need of further services and support. A child-friendly space may also offer an opportunity for parents and guardians to access information and resources to support their children or be paired with services for parents and guardians.

Staffing for child-friendly spaces may vary based on context but usually consists of those tasked with the management of the space, facilitators for the activities and services provided in the space, and community mobilizers who conduct outreach to promote usage of the space.¹² In selecting staff, it is recommended that the age and gender of staff, their experience and professional training working with children of different ages, and their familiarity with the context and the community all be taken into consideration.¹³

A child-friendly space for children who have experienced sexual violence should pay particular attention to multisectoral/interagency collaboration.¹⁴ These spaces for children who have experienced sexual violence are more likely to involve a wider variety of actors and may be located within institutions or facilities (health centers, police stations, courts, prosecutors, and others). Ideally, whenever a child interacts with a practitioner, this



*Jacqueline Muyisa, psychologist with HEAL Africa, speaks with a child in the child-friendly space at Bulengo IDP camp, North Kivu, DRC, May 2024.
Photo: Physicians for Human Rights*

interaction should occur in a child-friendly space.¹⁵ In some instances, the child-friendly space may constitute an entire facility, with multiple agencies and practitioners working together in a multi-disciplinary team in the same physical space. Nevertheless, it may also be represented by a clear referral pathway with multisectoral collaboration and child-friendly or child-sensitive spaces at all points along the way.

How Can Such a Space Be Structured to Allow Trauma-Informed Interviewing of Child Survivors of Sexual Violence: Key Guidance

Based on the guidance documents and literature reviewed, these are key elements that should be considered when developing a child-friendly space for forensic documentation and interviewing. This guidance seeks to address the problems that currently limit interviewing of children in many contexts including lack of space to ensure children's privacy, dignity and autonomy, and limited access to health care and justice actors.

[1] The space must be safe, private and comfortable.¹⁶

- Ensure that the space is sufficiently private. This includes considering if the survivor will be hearing comments, conversations and others from the general intake area and try to mitigate this if possible.
- Consider if whatever is done inside the space may be heard outside or in the general intake area and take steps to mitigate this.
- Install the space in a location that does not put survivors at risk for disclosure of their identities by others in the community or pose other physical safety risks for survivors when accessing the space
- If possible, consider co-locating the space in an area where other services are provided to ensure the anonymity of those entering the space while respecting privacy.
- Set up the space with elements (toys, drawing supplies, art, and child-friendly furniture or chairs and others) that make the child feel comfortable and safe.
- Ensure that the survivor and the interviewer are seated at the same height.

[2] Prioritize rapport building with staff/interviewer and ensure interviewees can take breaks throughout the interview.

- Ensure the survivor is given sufficient time to build rapport with staff and for their interview. The survivor should guide the interview and if they need to stop or take a break, it may be best to offer a second interview. If multiple interviews are scheduled, a follow-up plan should be set up.

- This means that there is a limit to the number of survivors that can be seen in one day and the configuration of the space.
- Consider the importance of staff gender and age in the ability to build rapport - also include community members if possible/appropriate to facilitate rapport building in the child-friendly space overall.

[3] **The space must be large enough to accommodate multiple people comfortably** including the person conducting the interview/evaluation, survivor, trusted adult (dependent on local laws), and interpreter (if needed).

- Remember that it is important to limit the number of people interacting with a child survivor during the documentation process.
- The inclusion of a trusted adult (for example, a parent/guardian) is required by Congolese law for the purposes of consent. In addition to consent from the adult, it is necessary to receive assent from the child victim in a way that is appropriate depending on the age of the child, their stage of development, and the nature of their relationship with the adult.
- Foundational principles for receiving informed consent and assent from both children and their responsible adults with consideration to evolving capacity should be considered and integrated into consent processes. Foundational principles can be found here.

[4] **Ensure inclusivity and accessibility to the space, this includes considering the infrastructure surrounding the space**

- Ensure safe toilets and access to water are close by.
- Ensure the space is accessible for individuals with disabilities, including children, trusted adults who may accompany them, and service providers.

Jean Bosco, a psychologist, talks to a young boy in a child-friendly space at Panzi Hospital, Bukavu, DRC, 2024.

Photo: Physicians for Human Rights



- Avoid stigmatizing signs outside or leading to the space to ensure that survivors feel comfortable accessing the space, including male survivors.
 - Design child-friendly spaces in collaboration with local community members to ensure the needs of commonly missed groups are met.
 - Employ staff of different genders and ages whenever possible.
- [5] In determining the **hours of operation**, think about **the times when the space will be open aligns with when survivors will be available to use the space.**
- Consider other spaces where children may be engaged (school, caregiving responsibilities, support to family) and how the child-friendly space can be open at a time that does not conflict with these responsibilities.
 - Though there will be timing constraints based on the availability of professionals and staff, there should be regular assessments to determine whether the timings align with the survivors' needs.
- [6] **Training for staff on how to document forensic evidence in child populations is critical.**
- The training should include the non-suggestive questioning technique (such as those outlined in the [NICHD \(National Institute for Child Health and Development\) protocol](#)), survivor-centered care, informed consent and assent, and forensic documentation.
 - The training should also include a safeguarding policy and procedures for documenting feedback about the experience of using the space, among others.
 - All staff should be oriented to the safeguarding policy, and the best practice is having systems for oversight as well as confidential complaints mechanism in place.
 - To increase uptake of the child-friendly space, it is important to think about the engagement of the community and what training could be provided to community leaders to facilitate forensic documentation.
 - Materials should be provided to staff working in the space that reinforces the principles of standardized documentation and trauma-informed care. This could include copies of the interview protocol to be used, the standardized medicolegal certificate, the safeguarding policy, and any other tools that help professionals reference key approaches.
- [7] **Information management systems are critical** for cases seen in the child-friendly space, interviews conducted, and referrals made.
- Information should be securely collected and stored. Remember to store data in a way that will not compromise the chain of custody.
 - Integrate case identification and referral tracking into this system using standard practices adopted already by actors.

Additional Resources:

- International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. World Vision. *Operational Guidance for Child Friendly Spaces in Humanitarian Settings*. 2018. <https://pscentre.org/?resource=operational-guidance-for-child-friendly-spaces-in-humanitarian-settings&selected=single-resource>
- Save the Children. *Child Friendly Spaces in Emergencies: A Handbook for Save the Children Staff*. 2008. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/child-friendly-spaces-emergencies-handbook-save-children-staff/>
- UN High Commissioner for Refugees. *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPMS)*. 2016. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/summary-minimum-standards-child-protection-humanitarian-action?gclid=CjwKCAjw2K6lBhBXEiwA5RjtCRSoyn-xNW7jhT7Qb84CYSCZmJdwldZ6fGkG9mKUGgLCxbW8V8L-ixoComoQAvD BwE>
- Save the Children. *Adolescent Girl Friendly Spaces: Guidance* https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Girl-Friendly-Spaces_Toolkit.pdf/

- Save the Children. *Adolescent Friendly Spaces: Guidance and Standards*. 2021. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Adolescent-Friendly-Spaces-Guidance-English.pdf/>
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Istanbul Protocol*. 2022. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/2022-06-29/Istanbul-Protocol_Rev2_EN.pdf
- *International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict*. 2017 https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/report/international-protocol-on-the-documentation-and-investigation-of-sexual-violence-in-conflict/International_Protocol_2017_2nd_Edition.pdf
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Citations

- 1 "Convention on the Rights of the Child," United Nations.
- 2 Plan International, "Child-Friendly Spaces in Emergencies"; World Vision Canada, "What's a Child-Friendly Space?"
- 3 "Operational Guidance for Child Friendly Spaces in Humanitarian Settings - Psychosocial Support IFRC."
- 4 Sisk and Gee, "Stress and Adolescence."
- 5 "Operational Guidance for Child Friendly Spaces in Humanitarian Settings - Psychosocial Support IFRC."
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Digital, "Adolescent Girl Friendly Spaces Toolkit"; Digital, "Adolescent Friendly Spaces."
- 8 Digital, "Adolescent Girl Friendly Spaces Toolkit"; Digital, "Adolescent Friendly Spaces."
- 9 Digital, "Adolescent Girl Friendly Spaces Toolkit"; Digital, "Adolescent Friendly Spaces."
- 10 Digital, "Adolescent Girl Friendly Spaces Toolkit"; Digital, "Adolescent Friendly Spaces."
- 11 Digital, "Child Friendly Spaces in Emergencies"; "A Practical Guide for Developing Child Friendly Spaces - World | ReliefWeb."
- 12 "Operational Guidance for Child Friendly Spaces in Humanitarian Settings - Psychosocial Support IFRC."
- 13 Ibid.; Digital, "Adolescent Friendly Spaces"; Digital, "Child Friendly Spaces in Emergencies."
- 14 UNFPA, "Women & Girls Safe Space: A Guidance Note Based on Lessons Learned from the Syrian Crisis."
- 15 Srinath et al., "Clinical Practice Guidelines for Assessment of Children and Adolescents,"; "Developing Rapport with Children in Forensic Interviews: Systematic Review of Experimental Research - Saywitz - 2015 - Behavioral Sciences & the Law - Wiley Online Library."
- 16 "Istanbul Protocol." OHCHR

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- World Vision Canada. “What’s a Child-Friendly Space?,” June 14, 2021. <https://www.worldvision.ca/stories/disaster-relief/whats-a-child-friendly-space>.