



PROBLEMS OF REFUGEE CHILDREN'S ADAPTATION: CHALLENGES, APPROACHES, AND PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The article addresses the challenges of adapting refugee children in the context of forced migration. It examines the socio-psychological difficulties they face, such as trauma, cultural isolation, language barriers, and educational segregation. The study highlights the role of international legal frameworks, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Global Compact on Refugees, in protecting and supporting refugee children. A critical analysis of scholarly debates provides insights into the most effective approaches to integration, such as access to quality education, psychological rehabilitation, and family support. The article also presents statistical data and successful case studies from countries like Germany and Sweden, offering practical recommendations for improving adaptation policies. The study emphasizes the need for comprehensive and collaborative efforts to ensure refugee children have a secure and inclusive future.

Introduction

The adaptation of refugee children in migration conditions is one of the most complex challenges facing the modern global community. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of the end of 2023, the number of forcibly displaced persons reached over **117 million**, with approximately **43%** of them being children¹. These children experience multiple stress factors, including the loss of home and family, language barriers, cultural differences, and traumatic experiences of war and violence. Humanity must address this complex issue to ensure the safety and freedom of children worldwide.

The importance of theoretical understanding of this issue is emphasized by active discussions on refugee problems at the **United Nations (UN)** and other international organizations.

Migration and Its Impact on Children

¹ <https://www.interfax.ru/world/966425>



Migration refers to the movement of people associated with a change of residence. Forced migration places children in the most difficult circumstances. At the same time, youth is often seen as an unstable and potentially conflict-prone category. According to **UNICEF**, the number of refugee children today is around **50 million**. This unprecedentedly high number is a direct consequence of prolonged crises, including acute and protracted conflicts, instability in countries, and climate change-related disruptions. Forced displacement and instability tend to spread rapidly.

Over the past decade, the number of refugees worldwide has more than doubled, with almost **half** of them being children. According to **UNICEF**, more than a third of displaced children live in **Sub-Saharan Africa** (3.9 million, or 36%), **a quarter in Europe and Central Asia** (2.6 million, or 25%), and **13% (1.4 million) in the Middle East and North Africa**².

Categories of Displaced Persons

Based on the factors causing displacement, people who leave their homes can be divided into four categories:

- **Voluntary migrants** (moving for work, education, family reasons, etc., and settling permanently);
- **Refugees** (forcibly displaced due to war, natural disasters, and resettled in other countries under international agreements);
- **Asylum seekers** (choosing to leave their region for self-preservation and to avoid persecution);
- **Temporary residents** (staying for a limited period with a specific goal, such as foreign students, seasonal workers, or expatriates on long-term assignments).

Challenges Faced by Refugee Children

Refugee children find themselves in an extremely vulnerable position, as their way of life is disrupted in multiple aspects:

1. **Psychological trauma** – Studies show that **50–70%** of refugee children suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)³, often caused by war experiences, loss of loved ones, and adaptation difficulties.
2. **Cultural isolation** – Differences in traditions, behavior norms, and religious beliefs complicate integration. For example, children from Arab countries often face discrimination in Western societies⁴.
3. **Language barriers** – According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 68% of refugee children in Europe struggle with their education due to a lack of proficiency in the host country's language, significantly slowing down their social and academic integration.
4. **Educational segregation** – Refugee children often study in isolated schools or classes, limiting their integration opportunities. A UNESCO (2021) study found that only **24%** of refugee students have access to full secondary education.

² <https://www.interfax.ru/world/966425>

³ [Kimberly A. Ehntholt, William Yule](https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2006.01638.x). Practitioner Review: Assessment and treatment of refugee children and adolescents who have experienced war-related trauma. <https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2006.01638.x>

⁴ Fazel, Reed et al. Mental health of displaced and refugee children resettled in high-income countries: risk and protective factors. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0140673611600512>



International Legal Framework for Protecting Refugee Children

International law plays a key role in protecting refugee children's rights. Major legal documents regulating their rights include:

- **The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)** – Articles 22 and 28 guarantee refugee children's right to education and humanitarian aid.
- **The 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol** – Mandate equal access for refugees, including children, to social support.
- **The Global Compact on Refugees (2018)** – Stresses the need for refugee children to receive quality education, medical care, and psychosocial support.
- **The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2030) – Goal No. 4** focuses on ensuring universal access to quality education, including for refugee children.

Despite these frameworks, significant gaps exist between declared rights and their practical implementation. **UNHCR reports** indicate that only about **35%** of refugee children receive necessary psychological support, despite international obligations.

The Adaptation Process and Its Key Aspects

Refugee children, placed in an entirely new society, face numerous adaptation challenges:

- Establishing new social connections;
- Evaluating new objects, processes, and phenomena while re-evaluating previous ones;
- Developing favorable relationships with new people and adjusting to a new reality;
- Adopting new habits and lifestyles.

Children arriving from war zones and ethnic conflicts face even greater difficulties compared to those who migrated voluntarily. Many of them become **homeless**, increasing the risk of exploitation, abuse, and recruitment into criminal groups.

Since not all refugee children find themselves in good conditions or under adult supervision after being forcibly relocated, they may begin to lead a chaotic lifestyle. In general, they may join the group of homeless minors, face a high risk of skipping school, becoming victims of violence, joining criminal groups, or falling into depression due to social discrimination. Furthermore, many refugee children lose their native language and cultural identity, leading to communication difficulties in their new environment. Additionally, many become orphans, which has a deep psychological impact.

Among the common problems faced by underage refugee children are the following: difficulties in communicating with classmates; manifestations of migrantophobia from both peers and adults; struggles with the school curriculum, which lowers their self-esteem; disruption of familiar cultural and communicative, family, territorial, and other connections; relocation of migrant families, even within the same region, leading to difficulties in social and medical services and integration into the additional education system; identity crisis, inconsistencies in values and social norms; general dissatisfaction with various aspects of life and with themselves; difficulties in adapting to a new social environment, often resulting in feelings of alienation and rejection, anxiety and psychological tension, aggression, and increased conflict; adaptation challenges for newly arrived children and adolescents to the education system, as well as the lack of necessary conditions and quality education.



A critical issue in this topic is the insufficient provision of safe housing for all children. Statistics and research show that many refugee children remain at borders without shelter or access to emergency medical care. Another major concern is food insecurity, as 150 million children suffer from malnutrition. There is also a lack of regulatory oversight, leading to an increasing number of homeless refugee children. Additionally, there is a shortage of child psychologists, as children who have undergone drastic life changes require specialized support. Lastly, education remains a major challenge, **with** 100 million children still not attending school, 60% of whom are girls⁵.

Efforts by International Organizations

Organizations actively addressing refugee children's problems include:

- UN agencies, providing assistance in various sectors;
- The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO);
- The International Labour Organization (ILO);
- The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA);
- The World Food Programme (WFP);
- The World Health Organization (WHO).

Approaches to Refugee Children's Adaptation

Scholars debate the most effective adaptation strategies for refugee children.

- L. Fazel and V. Betts argue that education is the most critical integration tool.
- L. Fazel emphasizes equal access to quality education, showing that refugee children in regular schools learn languages and cultural norms faster⁶.
- **V. Betts**, however, highlights overcrowded schools and lack of resources for children with PTSD, stressing the need **for** NGOs and digital learning solutions.
- **E. Egberg** advocates for psychosocial rehabilitation and stress management programs in schools. However, some critics argue that existing programs often focus only on individual aid, neglecting social and cultural aspects of integration.

On the other hand, critics point out that such programs often focus on individual assistance while ignoring social and cultural aspects.

Some studies emphasize that children's adaptation is closely linked to supporting their families. It is suggested to implement programs for the social integration of parents, including language courses and professional training.

Successful Adaptation Models

Some countries have successfully implemented refugee adaptation programs:

- **Germany** – The "Integration through Education" program has improved refugee children's academic performance by 25% in five years.
- **Sweden** – The "Barn och Migration" program, focused on family support and psychological aid, has reduced refugee children's depression rates by 40%.

Improving the situation of refugee children is a crucial task that requires a comprehensive approach and coordination of efforts among various structures and

⁵ https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/declarations/worldchild.shtml

⁶ Fazel, Reed et al. Mental health of displaced and refugee children resettled in high-income countries: risk and protective factors. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0140673611600512>



organizations. Here are some measures that can help improve the situation of refugee children:

- **Ensuring access to education:** Providing refugee children with access to quality education, including language adaptation, psychological support, and integration into the educational environment.
- **Providing medical care and social support:** Ensuring access to healthcare, psychological support, and social services for refugee children and their families.
- **Protection from violence, exploitation, and discrimination:** Developing and implementing programs to protect refugee children from violence, exploitation, discrimination, and child labor.
- **Rehabilitation and integration:** Providing psychological assistance and support for refugee children, as well as working on their integration into a new environment, including language training, skill development, and employment assistance.
- **Collaboration and coordination of efforts:** Strengthening cooperation between government institutions, international organizations, NGOs, and other stakeholders to coordinate efforts in assisting refugee children.

Conclusion

These are just some of the measures that can be taken to improve the situation of refugee children. All these measures must be based on the principles of child rights protection, well-being, and safety.

Therefore, the adaptation of refugee children requires a comprehensive approach, combining educational, social, and psychological measures. Despite the existence of international legal mechanisms, many gaps remain in their implementation. For successful integration, it is essential to strengthen interagency cooperation, increase funding for educational and rehabilitation programs, and develop local initiatives that consider cultural specificities.

Only coordinated efforts at the state, societal, and international levels can ensure a dignified future for refugee children.

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