



CHILD FRIENDLY SPACES IN EMERGENCIES IN THE PHILIPPINES

Philippine Red Cross

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Philippine Red Cross volunteer facilitating play activities with children at a Child Friendly Space
Photo credit: Philippines Red Cross

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Photo description: Philippine Red Cross volunteers conducting play activities with children
Photo credit: Philippines Red Cross

Background

The Philippine Red Cross (PRC) actively implements Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) as part of its emergency response, recognizing the unique vulnerabilities of children during disasters. CFS are designated safe spaces in evacuation centers or affected communities where children can play, learn, and receive psychosocial support in a structured and protective environment. These spaces are crucial for restoring a sense of normalcy, fostering resilience, and reducing the risks of violence, exploitation, and abuse.

The initiative is guided by the Children's Emergency Relief and Protection Act (Republic Act No. 10821), a national law that mandates government agencies and partners to uphold the rights and protection of children before, during, and after emergencies. The PRC, as an auxiliary to the government in humanitarian efforts, aligns its CFS programs with this law to ensure children's welfare is at the forefront of disaster response.

The CFS program is implemented by the PRC through its Welfare Services Department, with support from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and coordinates with local government units (LGUs), barangay officials, and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to localize implementation and ensure community ownership.

Culturally, the Philippines places a high value on family and community, and PRC's CFS activities reflect this by involving caregivers, community leaders, and local youth volunteers. The program was developed as a response to repeated natural disasters that disrupt children's lives and compromise their safety. PRC

recognized the urgent need to create safe, healing environments where children can be supported holistically while their families recover.

Who was Supported and How

The primary beneficiaries of the PRC CFS are children affected by disasters and emergencies. These children are provided with safe, supportive spaces where they can play, learn, express themselves, and begin to emotionally recover in a structured and nurturing environment.

The CFS initiative emphasizes gender and diversity by creating inclusive, child-centered spaces sensitive to age, gender, ability, and cultural background. Activities and materials are tailored to children's unique needs and identities. Special attention is given to children with disabilities, indigenous children, and those from marginalized communities to ensure full participation and protection. For example, games and learning exercises are adapted for different ability levels and cultural contexts, allowing all children to engage with dignity and comfort.

Core activities include structured MHPSS activities for children such as play, arts and crafts, storytelling, group games, and recreational activities. After each activity, processing sessions are facilitated to help children reflect on their experiences and emotions. Hygiene promotion and simple educational sessions are also integrated, especially in evacuation centers, where access to school and basic sanitation is often disrupted.

Staff and volunteers are equipped with Psychological First Aid (PFA) skills, they are trained to recognize signs of distress and respond with sensitivity and care. CFS implementations are closely monitored, and any safeguarding concerns are promptly referred to appropriate authorities. In several responses, children experiencing serious distress and concerns were successfully linked to professional support, Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), or local authority for continued care.

Beyond direct support to children, caregivers were also engaged. Sessions were held in evacuation centers to help parents and guardians understand how to emotionally support their children, even as they coped with their own stress and losses.

Through these efforts, PRC ensures that CFS are safe, inclusive, and responsive to the diverse needs of children during crisis situations.

Successes

The PRC CFS initiative has achieved meaningful results in both capacity-building and field response. One of the programme's most significant successes has been the implementation of CFS trainings that are grounded in Protection, Gender, and Inclusion (PGI), child safeguarding, and child protection policies. These foundational elements ensure that the support provided to children during emergencies is safe, appropriate, and impactful.

The CFS training is a comprehensive course designed for PRC's staff, managers, facilitators, and even volunteers - essentially anyone involved in supporting children in times of crisis. Prior to attending, participants are required to complete prerequisite sessions on the PRC's Child Protection Policy and Psychological First Aid. These modules lay the groundwork for deeper and more practical learning during the training.

The sessions include case scenarios, simulation exercises, and problem-solving activities that immerse participants in realistic field situations, helping them develop context-specific, child-centered solutions. One highlight from the training is PRC's setup of a Mobile CFS during the simulation exercise—offering participants a hands-on experience in building and running a safe space for children in emergencies.

In actual deployments, CFS activities were further enhanced by the use of “CFS Kits” a ready-to-use resources that facilitators can easily adapt to various contexts and cultures. In addition, Read and Play Kits were distributed for children to take home after the operation, extending the benefits of psychosocial support beyond the physical CFS space. These kits include age-appropriate books, creative toys, art materials, comfort items, and educational games, all carefully chosen to promote learning, emotional expression, and healthy coping.

The success of the programme stems from several key factors:

1. Deep Cultural Roots and Community Care

The initiative is deeply rooted in Filipino culture, which values community solidarity and care. PRC’s services are volunteer-driven, and our CFS activities are no exception. Most of our responders and facilitators are local volunteers—individuals from the same communities affected by the disaster; this means PRC CFS aren’t run by strangers—they’re managed by neighbors. People who speak the same dialect, share the same cultural nuances, and in many cases, already know the children personally. This familiarity builds natural trust and comfort, especially in the vulnerable context of a disaster.

2. Community Integration

PRC does not view CFS as a stand-alone intervention. Rather, PRCS embeds CFS into the social fabric of the community. It works closely with barangay officials, teachers, and health workers to co-create safe, healing spaces that reflect the needs and values of the people they serve. This participatory approach ensures relevance, ownership, and sustainability.

3. Local Tools, Local Faces

CFS tools and materials are culturally contextualized. While PRC draws from global standards—like those from the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement MHPSS Hub and PGI—the tools and materials are localized. For instance, materials are translated into Filipino or local dialects, and illustrations reflect the reality of Filipino children.

With that, the programme’s success lies in its holistic and localized approach, combining technical training, adaptable tools, emotional and psychosocial support, and strict safeguarding policies. Together, these elements create a safe, nurturing, and empowering environment for children, even in the midst of crisis.

Challenges and Difficulties

Key challenges faced by the PRC in delivering CFS include:

- The frequency and scale of disasters in the Philippines. Frequent and overlapping emergencies leave little time for recovery between responses. This continuous cycle places immense pressure on both the system and the people, leading to physical and emotional fatigue—and in some cases, burnout—among staff and volunteers.
- A unique and painful reality is that many of PRC’s responders are disaster survivors themselves. Some have lost their own homes or even loved ones, yet they continue to serve on the front lines. This selfless dedication, while inspiring, also underscores the urgent need for internal support systems. Recognizing this, the PRCS has prioritized peer support and debriefing sessions. The rollout of Psychological First Aid (PFA) specifically for volunteers and staff has also been integrated into post-operation protocols, reinforcing the principle that caregivers need care too.

- Another ongoing challenge is the limited funding and support for CFS operations. While the PRC benefits from the support of the IFRC, overall funding for CFS activities remains insufficient. This often constrains the scale, consistency, and sustainability of CFS interventions in the field.

Lessons Learned

1. Implementing the CFS program has deepened the PRC's understanding of how to protect and support children during emergencies in a way that is both structured and compassionate. A key lesson is that **effective child protection requires more than physical spaces** - trained personnel, community ownership, and culturally relevant tools.
2. Psychosocial support must extend beyond children. Many of our responders are members of affected communities, often coping with their own grief and loss. Recognizing this has led to the integration of Psychological First Aid (PFA) and peer support systems for staff and volunteers. This shift reinforced the idea that **those who provide care must also be cared for**.
3. **Sustainability is critical.** While CFS activities were well-received, recurring disasters and limited resources exposed the program's vulnerability. The importance of localized approaches, using community-based volunteers, and strong partnerships proved vital in maintaining quality despite these challenges.
4. **Integration of MHPSS and PGI principles into CFS activities significantly strengthened the overall impact.** Embedding MHPSS enabled more responsive and trauma-informed interventions, while PGI ensured that no child—regardless of gender, disability, or background—was left behind. This intersectional approach recognizes that experiences can deeply affect a child's behavior, reactions, and overall well-being. With this understanding, practices were adapted to be sensitive and supportive, rather than assuming negative behaviors were intentional. As a result, CFS became a safer, more inclusive, and nurturing environment for children during times of crisis.

To see videos of the CFS in action, see:

- [PRC sets up their Mobile CFS during simulation](#)
- [3-day Child-Friendly Spaces in Emergencies Training](#)