

CHILDREN IN CONFLICT ZONES: NOTHING BUT VICTIMS

In recent months, many parts of the world have been caught up in intense and destructive armed conflicts. Tragically, young people and the most vulnerable are often those who suffer the most from these situations. According to *Save the Children*, an international organisation that has been defending children's rights worldwide for over 100 years, and the *International Paediatric Association* (IPA), more than 460 million children live in areas affected by armed conflict (1,2). In 2023, over 30,000 verified cases of grave violations against children's rights in conflict zones were reported – but the actual figures are likely much higher, as many cases go unreported. Thirty thousand Ukrainian children have been forcibly deported by Russia, tens of thousands of children have been killed or are dying in Gaza, and countless others have died in Sudan. Those who flee are also affected by violence, as demonstrated by the attitude of certain governments who, without hesitation, separate immigrant families, taking children away from their parents.

Our country and the Belgian paediatric community are trying to respond and take a stand on these issues. In August 2025, the *Belgian Society for Paediatric Haematology and Oncology* (BSPHO) coordinated the evacuation of four young cancer patients from Gaza in collaboration with the Ministries of Health, Foreign Affairs and Defence. A similar humanitarian operation for four young cancer patients and their relatives had already occurred in July 2024, following a request from Egypt and the *World Health Organization* (3). The BSPHO also coordinated the arrival of 14 Ukrainian children for treatment in Belgium in 2022 and 2023. The *Belgian Academy of Paediatrics* (BAoP) recently established a "Disaster Medicine" working group, led by our colleagues Els Duval and Gerlant van Berlaer, set up to understand, monitor and better anticipate the impact of disasters on children. In this way, we aim to prepare the paediatric community in Belgium for the growing challenges of the 21st century. This new issue of the *Belgian Journal of Paediatrics* (BJP) features a cover and editorial relaying the statement which was made by BAoP in June 2025. It advocates for the protection of all children worldwide and clearly expresses the profound and lasting impact of conflict and war on children and future societies (4):

- **Death and injury:** thousands of children are killed or maimed each year.
- **Forced recruitment:** children are forced into armed groups as soldiers and human shields.
- **Sexual violence:** heightened risk of rape, exploitation and abuse.
- **Displacement:** loss of home and family as children are torn from their communities.
- **Psychological trauma:** PTSD, depression, anxiety and lifelong emotional scars.
- **Disruption of education:** schools destroyed, education halted, compromising children's future.
- **Severe malnutrition and disease outbreaks:** due to food shortages, poor sanitation, lack of clean water, and attacks on hospitals and health workers.
- **Cycle of hatred and revenge:** children who lose parents, siblings, relatives or classmates may grow into adults filled with hatred towards perceived perpetrators, further delaying hopes for world peace.

Our role as paediatricians is to stand firm, not aligning with any party but guided by humanity and universal rights. We know that the roots of conflicts are sometimes very complex and historical. However, as human beings, we have also learned from history that the law of the strongest is not necessarily the right. In his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, historian Yuval Noah Harari explains how *Homo Sapiens* became the dominant species on Earth. This was not because they were the fastest, the strongest or the best at night vision.... Thanks to their cognitive abilities, our ancestors were able to develop complex and nuanced communication, uniting around shared narratives and values. While certain civilisations have dominated the world at times, it is societies that are capable of uniting, innovating, and adapting to change that ultimately lead the way. Let us keep this in mind and try to pass it on to our children through our daily choices and actions!

In this issue, we are also very proud to publish several research articles. Laura Noppe and colleagues report on a qualitative study investigating parental perspectives on children with bedwetting. Dorian Deroo and his team study the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on the oral ingestions of toxic substances in children. Loes Tanghe and colleagues review the effectiveness of the Buzzy device in managing needle pain in children. Sidney Van Leynseele and colleagues analyse the clinical outcomes of Belgian children following kidney transplantation from 2005 to 2022. Several case reports illustrate the dynamism of Belgian paediatric teams. We round off the issue with a State-of-the-Art article edited by the *Vlaams Netwerk Zeldzame Ziekte/Epilepsy* (VNZZ) members on the top 10 guidelines for following up a person with epilepsy.

On behalf of the editorial team, we hope this issue offers reflection and inspiration and we wish you a pleasant autumn season.

Christophe Chantrain and Marc Raes

Sources: (1) https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/protect-children-conflict-unicefs-call-action-2025?utm_source=chatgpt.com"nearly. (2) <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-Children-and-Armed-Conflict-Covering-2024.pdf>. (3) <https://bspho.be/en/news/gaza-patients-august25>. (4) <https://baop.be/en/information/item/statement-baop-children-conflict-zones-nothing-victims>.

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