

Terre des hommes Magazine

Courage

Mental health
A silent crisis

Gaza
**drawings express
the unspeakable**







“Mental health must be at the heart of every emergency.”

Maria Bray, Mental Health, Psychosocial Support and Protection Manager at Terre des hommes Lausanne

Healing children’s invisible wounds

Can we really talk about mental health and psychosocial support, when injustice is constant, systemic, and brutal? When one emergency follows another and everything collapses, talking about wellbeing seems almost out of place. And yet it is precisely here that mental health must take its rightful place.

In Gaza, for example, the level of inhumanity is such that distributing food is no longer enough to restore a sense of security. During online meetings with colleagues, I don’t even dare ask them how they’re doing, because this question can already reveal their fragility, and I know that they could break down at any moment. However, it is exactly in these moments when the adults should hold firm so that the children can feel good.

But what exactly does it mean to feel good? If you’re in Gaza, Switzerland, Ukraine or Myanmar, the answer will be different. I remember a mission to Sri Lanka during the war, where we asked children about their fears as the bombs fell. Surprisingly, they were not afraid of the explosions but of the fences being destroyed, which protected them from the elephants that could trample their houses. This highlights the importance of listening to children.

At Terre des hommes, we work with children and youth to define their needs and expectations. This is precisely what you will discover in the following pages of our magazine, which takes you to the heart of the war in Ukraine or to the scars left by the recent earthquake in Myanmar: at the height of crises, despite death, hunger or forced displacement, your support allows us to help many children regain a sense of normalcy, rebuild their routines, and find safe spaces to connect with others. We also engage their trusted adults, who must be able to pass on a sense of safety and confidence. We know that trauma cannot be erased but through our psychosocial support it becomes part of a story. As children receive support and build confidence, they can move forward.

It doesn’t take much to restore hope: a moment of play, a steady presence, a comforting word. The smallest act can help a child feel okay. I never give up—I fight. When I speak passionately about this cause, people sometimes say, “But you’re not saving lives.” And they’re right; I don’t save lives. But helping one child feel good, even just one... it’s worth it.



Maria Bray

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A report at the heart of humanitarian crisis

Mental health: The silent emergency

Amid the rubble left by the earthquake, Khaing and Thune—two children from Myanmar—struggle to find their footing. In Ukraine, Kyrylo has lived under the threat of bombs for over three years. Despite their disrupted daily lives, these three children carry on. They talk, they play... and above all, they still dream. Their words, gestures, and silences show us what it means to grow up in the heart of chaos. Most importantly, they reveal that a listening ear, a safe space, or a caring adult can be lifelines. In this magazine, we take you closer to their stories. More than a testimony to their suffering, it is proof of their courage...

We are in Sagaing, a religious and monastic hub north-west of Myanmar. Here, every district, every alley bears the scars of the devastating earthquake of March 28, 2025. It is on the temple ground of one of the many pagodas in this city of 300,000 inhabitants that we meet 13-year-old Khaing Min Thant. He is one of the survivors of a tragedy that officially claimed over 3,700 lives—a chilling toll that many experts believe to be underestimated. The boy remains emotional, his gaze evasive, despite all the progress made since this painful episode in overcoming the trauma. This disaster only added to an already grim situation in a country torn by internal strife.

“I was at the Dhamma school in the monastery when the earth shook. I screamed for everyone to run.”

Khaing Min Thant, 13 years old

“We were on the first floor. By the time we got downstairs, I had already seen horrible things,” shared Khaing when asked about this dreadful day. Separated from Mandalay by the legendary Irrawaddy River, Sagaing still seems haunted by the disaster. Some neighborhoods are in ruins, and makeshift shelters of tin and bamboo, exposed to wind and rain, stand among piles of debris left by the quake. Stories here are harrowing: an elderly man who died after being urgently evacuated, or a mother who recounts the agony of her six-year-old son, who begged for someone to pull him out of the rubble. Months have passed, but time is not enough to put this heartbreaking event behind them. Fear still lingers in the streets: in Sagaing, rumours predict the imminent arrival of another earthquake and children who are

still in school are sent home, causing panic to break out. In Mandalay the next day, a distraught woman runs through the streets claiming a tremor has just knocked down a tree—yet no one else felt it. These are the lingering scars, physical and emotional, of that fateful day on March 28. There are still small aftershocks, but the ground in Myanmar no longer shakes, but adults have lost their balance—and children no longer know what “normal” means, living under constant stress.

Did you know?



1,600


children receive monthly psychosocial support following the earthquake in Myanmar

Khaing saw the house where he lives with his grandmother, uncle and aunt shaken by the earthquake.



©Tchi/Nyan Zay Htet

Built on bamboo stilts and now dangerously tilted, it stands near the railway, shaded by a large tamarind tree where neighbors gather under the watch of a peaceful cow. Khaing no longer climbs up that tree. *“Before the earthquake, I loved picking leaves from it for cooking. Now, even the smallest height terrifies me.”* The teenager recalled seeing his childhood friend die in front of his eyes—crushed by a classroom

 **Khaing looks away while telling his story. His house was partially destroyed by the earthquake and is now patched up with green tarpaulins.**

blackboard. With sadness in his eyes and Thanakha powder on his cheeks, Khaing struggles to express himself. He hasn't told his family what he saw. *"I said I was fine, so they wouldn't worry."* Now, he finds refuge at the Shwe Si Gon Pagoda, where Terre des hommes (Tdh) has set up a Child-Friendly Space (CFS).



©Tdh/Myan.Zay.Htet

"When I come here, I forget the earthquake. It feels good singing, doing origami, playing, and reading."

Khaing Min Thant, 13 years old

Keeping hope alive through education

These activities are part of Tdh's response in Myanmar, where mobile teams reach as many children as possible. Since the earthquake, 5,000 children have received mental health and psychological support. In Sagaing, children of all ages sit cross-legged on colorful mats laid directly on the ground. They play cards, fold paper, choreograph dances—and most of all, they laugh. Laurence Gaubert, head of Tdh's Emergency Response Unit, explains how they had to organise themselves without any reception facilities: *"With hardly any intact buildings left, our mobile teams operate in streets, parks, or monasteries that are still standing. We try to offer basic education—math, dictation—so the children stay connected to school. Many ask for this routine they miss."*

Khaing is one of them. He proudly shows his school notebook, diligently maintained despite everything. His drawings are precise, and his captions carefully written. Tdh's activities give him hope, one of the pillars of the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) framework

defined by Tdh (see box 1). He therefore wants to hold on to his right to education. *"Many parents say reading and writing is enough. To them, what matters most is earning money quickly."*

"But I want to learn, become an engineer, and build homes for the homeless."

Khaing Min Thant, 13 years old

The 5 pillars of wellbeing

Tdh defines five pillars of wellbeing in its MHPSS framework: **feeling safe, connected, dignified, respected, and hopeful.** These pillars guide Tdh's activities, which are adapted to children's cultural contexts and personal stories. The goal is to reduce suffering, enhance psychosocial wellbeing, and strengthen resilience—not only in children but also in their close circle.



↪ Ma Zin Mar Win, a social worker, runs a music and dance workshop at a Child-Friendly Space in Sagaing.



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Did you know?

48,800

children received
psychosocial support
from Tdh and its
partners around the
world in 2024



Khaing's friend Thune Yati San, 13, has also been deeply affected by the events of March 28. She now sleeps in a temporary shelter with her family. *"Whenever someone walked on the wooden floor, it creaked, and I thought another earthquake was coming."* Like Khaing, she views the CFS as an escape. *"I love singing and dancing, but I prefer sports and team games. I love competitions! It feels good to have a safe space to play, because playing outside is too dangerous now—there's broken glass everywhere."* The sports activities are complemented by conversations to help ease children's minds.



©Tdh/Nyan Zay Htet

"At our first session, we sat together and talked about what happened during the earthquake."

Thune, 13 years old

Her mother is grateful for the support she couldn't provide herself: *"I'm grateful the CFS offers food and a space for children to play. Without it, I don't know how we would've coped. I especially value the emotional support. The*

children need it—us parents are overwhelmed and busy dealing with the aftermath of the earthquake: where to find shelter, what to eat, how to plan for the future... The CFS is safer than letting kids play outside, amid the rubble."

Distraction is crucial to help with recovery. The traumatic event itself may be over, but the long weeks and months that follow are filled with cumulative stress. Leaving your home, your city, or country is especially hard on children, as Laurence explains:



"Each forced displacement is mourned by a child—it is a complete rupture from familiar reference points and an immense mental burden."

Despite the emergency, the positive impact of Tdh's actions is already evident in Myanmar—and also in Ukraine, where war seems never-ending. There too, the activities help children to cope. Already present in Ukraine since 2015, Tdh has drawn on its ten years of experience in the field to better support children. From the city of Kharkiv, in the northeast of the country, it takes just over an hour to reach the village of Rizunenkovo. Nestled in the plains, it's surrounded by endless fields. At times, the tranquility of nature is shattered by destroyed roads and buildings. Yet, despite



©Tdh/Christina Paszkina

the heavy atmosphere and grey skies, the Child-Friendly Space established by Tdh is full of color—on banners being waved, on children’s drawings, on the slides in the playground, hoola-hoops and poles set up for activities. But colors alone can’t make people forget the war.

Karina Mala, a 22-year-old facilitator, reveals the dark side of everyday life: *“Every day, we have to protect ourselves. Fear of bombs is our biggest challenge—not only for classes but for our lives as well. The children come in frightened, not knowing what to expect. But we create an atmosphere of trust and a safe space.”*



Kyrylo plays ‘Who am I?’ with his mates at Rizunenkovo’s CFS

“I’m always happy when I arrive or leave this place.”

When the alarms don’t pierce the plain, the children are happy to get together. Many of them have been displaced to this area with their families, away from the front line. Usually, they stay confined to their homes or temporary accommodation, where time passes too slowly. But at the Rizunenkovo CFS lingers a school playground atmosphere. Here, there is no room for boredom: childhood is back on track with laughter, drawing, running, jumping and academic support.

Sitting in a circle on the grass, they’re children of all ages—6 to 17, blonde or brunette, quiet or playful. All they want, says 14-year-old Kyrylo, is: *“to be with friends.”* The CFS is in an empty school building here, but in other areas, it might be a bunker or any surviving secure structure. *“I’m always happy when I arrive and when I leave,”* shares Kyrylo, who does not want to talk about the war. Friends who have left the region, air raid sirens, long days spent locked up, families torn apart... For Kyrylo, like his classmates, the CFS is his escape. His safe haven. *“I have many dreams... but I’m keeping them secret for now,”* he says with a serious yet hopeful tone.

Did you know?

9,750

children benefited from Tdh’s MHPSS programme in Ukraine in 2024



Children draw strength from the support of adults—who, in turn, are inspired by their resilience. As Karina explains: *“When I see a child opening up, dreaming again, making friends, and reconnecting—it gives me incredible energy! I too am psychologically affected by the war. One day, a shell landed, and I had to dive and shield a friend’s body with mine.”*

As we follow the children through their routine, a powerful symbol emerges: the clouds part, and their activities continue under a brightening sky, hinting at the arrival of summer. Today, there were no sirens, no bombs. A peaceful day in the CFS does wonders for the children. Between eyes marked by hardship, sparks of joy emerge. Even fleeing reality for just a few seconds can make a difference, as Laurence explains: *“In emergencies, parents don’t have time to explain what’s happening. Kids imagine anything and everything. A child needs to play, to laugh, to shake those fears out of*

Parents need support too

“The facilitators support our children—but they help us stay strong too, and that’s crucial in wartime,” says Svitlana, Kyrylo’s mother. She attends Tdh’s positive parenting workshops, which help parents better understand and respond to their children’s behavior. Karina values these sessions: *“Parents are in better spirits. They need social interaction too.”*

Iryna, Anastasia’s mother, says: *“It’s wonderful for parents—we gather, talk, and share tea.”* With stronger, better-supported parents, children benefit too. A more stable family structure is key to surviving the daily hardships of war.





©Tdh, Christina Pashkina

↪ **The youngest have fun playing with a colourful parachute.**

their head. Taking time to explain, to entertain them—it's essential."

But it must be clear that just as there is no health without mental health, there is no mental health without basic needs. Laurence emphasizes this point: *"You can't establish mental health activities if people don't have food, shelter or a roof over their heads. You have to meet basic needs first and*

make sure it's done in a protective environment, otherwise it doesn't make sense."

Meeting basic needs and doing everything possible, even if it's not much, to make children feel good is Tdh's goal. Khaing, Thune, Kyrylo and so many other children did not choose to live through an earthquake or a war. But they draw on their inner strength to

keep going. To get better. With guidance, they understand that they do not have to bear the responsibility for these tragedies alone.

Because mental health is a right, that simply.

Marc Nouaux

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A word with

Anastasiia Brieieva and Ma Yu Yu Maw

Anastasiia Brieieva has experienced war from the inside: she spent seven months under occupation. This tragedy transformed the young woman who has been a facilitator at Terre des hommes (Tdh) since 2024. Based in the Kharkiv region, she explains how she uses her pain as a driving force to help children feel better. 7,000 km away, in Mandalay, Ma Yu Yu Maw has been working as a social worker in training and reintegration at Tdh since 2019, drawing strength from her own difficult personal journey. When the earthquake hit her community, she had to rapidly adapt—reorganizing her daily life and acquiring new skills to meet the urgent needs of the children affected. From Ukraine to Myanmar, a joint interview with two women of strength who make children’s mental health their daily priority.

What motivates you to continue your work every day despite the difficulties and risks?

A. B.: Making children smile. I want them to trust themselves, to trust us, to dream and believe in a better future. I make sure they are heard and that they know we are listening to them. I tell them that emotions are normal and that they can express them. My message is: *“You are a free person in a free country and you have the right to communicate freely and do cool things.”*

M. Y. Y.: My motivation comes from my personal story: My parents could not raise me as they were working away from my hometown. When I was little, I was taken in by my brother, and my sister-in-law mistreated me. I wasn’t given enough to eat, I slept in a separate building from the house, and my birthday was never celebrated. That’s why I know how important family and emotional security are. As a child, I wasn’t protected: today, I want every child to have the chance to live with their family and be properly cared for.



How have you been affected by the events in your country?

A. B.: I experienced the occupation from the inside. At the beginning of the war, I was stuck at home for seven months. It was a period of uncertainty, with restrictions on freedom of choice and expression. I was cut off from all information, and when you don’t know what’s going on, you’re bound to be afraid. I started having nightmares and living under constant stress, losing all sense of security and humanity. It had a profound effect on me, but I’ve taken something positive from it because it helps me to better understand other people’s emotional states. I have more empathy and patience. It’s good that other victims of the occupation are able to talk about the war without shame or fear of the consequences.



“It was seven months of fear, uncertainty and restrictions on freedom.”

Anastasiia Brieieva, facilitator, with Tdh since 2024, Kharkiv office

M. Y. Y.: I was at the office when the earthquake struck and it was terrifying. In the days that followed, although emergency response is not my field, I helped distribute food and water. It was hard because I saw death, despair and sadness in the eyes of the people we were helping. I struggled to sleep because of the aftershocks and nightmares: when I closed my eyes,

I always saw myself trapped in a collapsed building. I was determined to get back to the office to work, and I really had to overcome my fear to do so because I was driven by a single goal: to help the children. That is what I will do until my last breath.



“I have seen death, despair and sadness.”

Ma Yu Yu Maw, social worker, with Tdh since 2019, Mandalay office

How has your daily work been since then?

A. B.: When a siren sounds, we have to quickly get the children to safety. It’s scary, so they find it harder to concentrate on what they’re doing. Some of them are very emotionally unstable and can be playing and shouting one minute and crying the next. Others show aggressiveness and need attention. Here, we live in constant danger and the children are very withdrawn. Mental health must be a priority in any situation. Fortunately, since we arrived, there have been very positive changes thanks to our activities and, above all, because we listen to them to determine how we can help them.

M. Y. Y.: I am primarily responsible for overseeing the family reintegration process for children from youth training schools (formerly known as detention centers), which includes family tracing and providing tailored support. But after the earthquake, I had to adapt and learn new skills to be able to coordinate activities at the Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS). I really enjoyed being able to help in any way I could because the most important thing is the wellbeing of the children. I watched a lot of dance routines on YouTube and learned origami techniques and poems to use in activities with the children. Since the earthquake, everyday life has been more difficult and dangerous, but thanks to our help, children are better able to cope with these challenges! At the same time, we support parents so that they can better manage their own stress and thus be a better support for their children.

What results have you noticed in terms of improving children’s mental health?

A. B.: Now they are more confident in expressing their opinions and they communicate better with each other. They have more friends, whereas before they were mostly shut away at home, which is not normal at their age. Some have told us: *“Thanks to you, we have learned to listen to each other, interact and come up with new projects for our village, school and community.”* And thanks to our initiatives to support parents, family ties are stronger. I was touched when a child said to me, *“Thank you, because now my mum understands me better and asks me more questions.”* That shows the impact we’re having.

M. Y. Y.: In my daily work, I meet many children who have been in youth training schools. They sometimes refuse care or our offer of training. I help them feel safe and trust me. I always tell them to use their ears rather than their mouths, and to listen more and talk less. One boy once said to me: *“If I hadn’t been detained, I could have achieved many things. Children shouldn’t learn to read for pleasure or knowledge: they have to do it to be able to think logically and philosophically.”* Shortly after completing his training, he called me to tell me that he was now safe. I am very proud of what he has achieved.



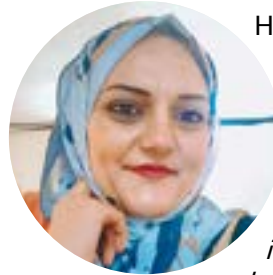
Perspectives

In Gaza, drawings express the unspeakable

A house in flames, bodies lying on the ground, ambulance lights flashing, bombs falling from the sky, armoured vehicles, families separated. Tears, lots of tears. This is what the drawings of children in Gaza look like in 2025.

The drawings shared here reflect traumatic experiences that may be disturbing to some readers.

The children expressed themselves on paper during a workshop led by Hadeel Abu Qamar, a facilitator with Terre des hommes (Tdh). To help them, Hadeel played soft music in the background. *“One young girl became visibly moved as she started drawing, and I gently encouraged her to let it out however felt safe for her. Her peers embraced her—offering comfort, listening to her, and supporting her emotionally. That solidarity and shared healing was beautiful to witness.”*



Hadeel hears these stories whenever she spends time with children and teenagers living in the Gaza Strip: *“The war has had a profound and visible effect on children’s mental health. We see signs of trauma in almost every session. Children show aggression, frequent outbursts, trouble sleeping, nightmares, fear, and even loss of appetite. Any sudden sound—like gunfire or a car backfiring—can trigger panic. These aren’t isolated cases. The behaviors we’re seeing are direct responses to the extreme conditions they’re living under: displacement, instability, shared spaces with strangers, loss of privacy, and the erosion of their sense of safety. Their psychological state is a natural reaction to an entirely unnatural environment.”*

It would take more than an entire magazine to recount the tragedies and their consequences. Because Gaza is the unspeakable. Hadeel insists: *‘They’ve lost the essence of childhood. They now carry responsibilities far beyond their age—fetching water, helping parents, and queuing for aid. Emotionally and practically, many are no longer living as children.’*



“I’ve spent two years of my life in this war, but they felt like a hundred.”

Amal*, 15 years old

On that day, the children of Gaza expressed some of their trauma on paper. The captions and illustrations show how they have been robbed of their childhood. Children and teenagers should not have to live this kind of life. But it has been a long time since Gaza has been a place of normality.

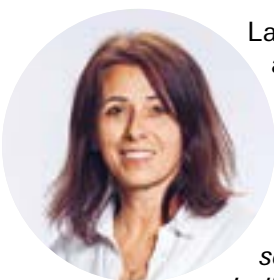
“I’ve spent two years of my life in this war, but they felt like a hundred,” says B F K, 15 (drawing 1), brutally revealing her feelings. ‘We lived through injustice, pain, hunger, and thirst.’ Her drawing is a tribute to his grandmother, who died in an explosion. *“The person I loved the most in the world is gone,”* reveals the young girl, whose grief remains undiminished. Further on, 14-year-old Reem* (drawing 2) shares her experience. *“My drawing shows the day my neighbour’s house was struck by a bomb. His young son was crying and calling “Baba!”—but I couldn’t help him. I felt so helpless.”*



“The person I loved the most in the world is gone.”

Reem*, 14 years old

In this context, Tdh does everything it can to offer them a few moments of childhood. As Laurence Gaubert, head of the emergency response unit, says, *“Making a child laugh, even for five minutes, is huge.”* In 2024, 61,000 children and their families received psychological support from Tdh in Gaza and the West Bank. And in 2025, despite the resumption of bombing in March, two safe learning spaces were set up in Gaza. Thanks to these spaces, 740 children are beginning to rediscover a sense of normality and continue their education. But all this is incredibly difficult to achieve because people are regularly forced to move. The brief 2025 ceasefire offered some relief but also triggered another wave of displacement. It is even estimated that since the beginning of the war, nearly two million people have been forced to move between ten and fifteen times.



Laurence explains how Tdh is adapting to keep track of the children. *“We remain mobile and as soon as we have the opportunity, we organize an activity. We have the phone numbers of the parents of some of the children we follow individually. We keep in touch to find out where they are. If we can reach them, we give them information about where we are and what activities we can organize... But what is happening in Gaza right now is unprecedented in humanitarian work... Our teams are doing what they can, but they are also keeping themselves and their families safe.”*

Continuing activities is essential because mental health must remain at the heart of emergency response, despite the complex organizational conditions. Hadeel describes these daily challenges: *“The biggest challenge is the setting itself. We work in tents, often under intense heat or poor conditions. Before the renewed escalation of violence, I used to run sessions in a school, where everything was structured—grouped classrooms, clear schedules, and coordination with school staff. It was much easier.”* The volatile environment and security situation make it impossible to plan ahead. Despite this lack of perspective, action must be taken because even the smallest gesture can have a positive impact and save lives. For example, some families, stunned by what they are going through, are no longer even trying to flee the danger, as Laurence explains. *“We see children playing in areas where unexploded mines could be triggered. When we tell their parents that it’s dangerous, they reply, ‘What do you want us to do? We can’t keep them locked up in a tent, it’s too hot.’ There are children scattered everywhere, there is no safe place in Gaza. So we have to help parents fulfil their role because children need to hear that everything will be alright.”*

Supporting parents also means giving them the tools to help their children get better. It means giving them something to hold on to when many of them have lost all hope. Hadeel has one wish: seeing the children of

Gaza dream again. *“I once asked a girl what she wanted to be when she grows up. She said, ‘I wanted to be a doctor... but not anymore.’ Many children don’t see a future for themselves,”* she explains.



To give them hope, Hadeel has an inspiring idea: *“I would like to invite children from different countries to create short video messages or drawings for Gaza’s children. Imagine what it would mean for a child here to see another child somewhere in the world saying, ‘We see you. We care.’ It would be a small gesture, but with a powerful emotional impact. Gaza’s children deserve to feel remembered—not invisible. And when children around the world connect with each other, that’s when empathy becomes action.”*



* Names have been modified.

Marc Nouaux



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Every child in the world has the right to a childhood. It's that simple.

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