

# PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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## Children at Risk

Children are the world's future and every community's current joy. And childhood--a loving, long, secure, challenging, and joyful childhood--is the time and space they ask us, the adults, to help them create for their healthy development. A healthy childhood, with a balanced, developmentally responsive offering of protections and challenges, empowers them to grow at their own pace into socially engaged community activists, creative and productive workers, loving parents, and fulfilled and focused adults.

At birth, among the young of all species, human infants are unique in the extraordinary quality of care that they require from others of their species to survive and thrive. And the span of childhood in the human species is also a uniquely long one. That has been underscored by recent brain imaging studies indicating that even adolescents' brains are still very much in a process of maturing. Such a lengthy period of maturation makes childhood a time of special resilience and opportunities.

But it also creates significant vulnerabilities. Far too many children in the United States and around the world are growing up at risk. Because of their vulnerability, they are at the epicenter when major social and environmental problems confront their families and communities. Worldwide, millions of children's physical and psychosocial well-being is now threatened by a toxic combination of preventable risks.

The greatest risks often stem from structural violence, such as social exclusion, racism, discrimination, and chronic poverty. Children also suffer disproportionately due to community emergencies, especially armed conflicts and natural disasters. In many crises, children are at risk of attack, displacement, sexual violence, losses of home and belongings, separation from their families, recruitment or kidnapping into armed forces and armed groups, exploitation in dangerous labor, trafficking, and exposure to HIV/AIDS, among many others.

Teenagers are among the children most at risk. They lack positive life options in many war zones and economically marginalized communities. Consequently, they are often drawn into gangs and criminal violence in Western as well as developing countries. Also at great risk are young children under 7 years of age who need the care and protection of competent adults.

However, children are not doomed to be passive victims. They are active agents who cope and engage with adversity. Many children have significant capacities as peacebuilders. It is possible to protect children's rights and prevent children from being the pawns who continue cycles of violence and oppression. To do so, it is vital to build comprehensive systems of child protection, provide far more support for children's resilience, and focus on new and traditional ways to enable children to become effective peacebuilders and agents of positive social change.

*Psychologists for Social Responsibility seeks to bring greater psychological knowledge and public awareness to the issues highlighted in this brief overview. For more information, please contact us at [info@psysr.org](mailto:info@psysr.org). We encourage new PsySR members to join in these efforts. Media inquiries are also welcome.*