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Israel National Council for the Child
المجلس الوطني لسلامة الطفل

CODE RED

The Rights of Children and Youth in the Iron Swords War

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The National Council for the Child

July 2025

The National Council for the Child ('NCC') is a non-for-profit organization that aims to advance and safeguard the rights and well-being of all children and youth in Israel.

Since its establishment in 1986, the NCC has been a key actor in all children and youth related issues on a national level. It engages, among others, in initiating and promoting public policy, offering direct programs and services for children, developing innovative models and programs on children's rights and participation, issuing numerous publications and statistical data on children in Israel, forging cross-sector partnerships, and operating as a main source of information for professionals, government and the civil society.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Preface

This report, Code Red: The Rights of Children and Youth in the Iron Swords War, addresses the far-reaching impact on children and youth in Israel of the war that began on October 7, 2023.[1] The report focuses on three core themes and is based on a unique combination of policy research, legal analysis, quantitative data, interviews with professionals, and participatory processes with youth. Through these methodological tools, the report presents a comprehensive and up-to-date picture regarding violations of children's rights during the war, both at the policy level and "on the ground."

While the report provides in-depth documentation of the war's impact on children and youth, its purpose is not historical. Rather, the report aims to serve as a forward-looking policy tool for the current emergency period, the subsequent recovery phase, and future emergency preparedness—whether in times of war or other crises. Accordingly, each chapter concludes with meaningful, practical recommendations in areas such as policy, governance, resource allocation, education, and training—designed to enhance the protection of children's and youth's rights in both routine and emergency times, with a focus on the lessons learned from the war.

Alongside an assessment of the impact of the war and actionable recommendations, this report also seeks to promote a deep shift in Israel's public policy approach—through the systemic mainstreaming of a child rights-based approach, aligned with the principles and spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This approach requires that children and youth be seen first and foremost as rights-holders, with a voice of their own, entitled to be heard, to participate, and to influence decision-making and policy-making that affects their lives—even, and especially, in times of emergency and war.

In recent years, there has been significant progress in adopting a child rights-based approach among state authorities, government ministries, civil society organizations, and professionals. The National Council for the Child (NCC) plays a central role in this trend and consistently works to advance actions and policies grounded in the principles of the CRC. For the NCC, this approach is not only a

1. In this report, the term "children and youth" refers to any person under the age of 18, in accordance with the definition set out in Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). The use of the phrase "children and youth" is intended to emphasize that the report addresses a broad age range. For the sake of clarity, any instance in which the term "children" alone is used (for the sake of drafting convenience), it refers to individuals under the age of 18, of all genders.

goal in itself but also a vital tool for shaping public policy that promotes the well-being and best interests of children and youth. This approach frames the state's responsibility and obligation toward children and youth; identifies them as a distinct group with unique rights and needs; and lays the legal and ethical foundation for the development of state responses, services, and mechanisms.

As part of its work, the NCC has succeeded in integrating a child rights-based approach into various centers of influence—through legislative and policy initiatives in the Knesset and government ministries, developing innovative service models for children and youth (and promoting their institutionalization as public services—"social exits"),[2] publishing professional guidance and information on diverse child rights issues, and other actions.[3] Over the past decade, the NCC has also led efforts to promote youth participation in national policy-making and is increasingly expanding these efforts at the local level. This work is anchored in the Youth Parliament, a unique model based on the CRC and its principles (specifically art. 12).[4] Through this model, the NCC has conducted dozens of participatory processes with youth from diverse backgrounds, whose insights and proposals have contributed to the development of nation-wide programs and implementation of practical recommendations (NCC, Youth Parliament (n.d.). The model has been cited in academic and professional literature (Zlotnik Raz & Almog, 2023; Na'amat & Zlotnik Raz, 2023a; NCC, 2023), and has been recognized and commended in national and international conferences and forums.[5] This work directly reflects the NCC's deep commitment to implementing children's rights in Israel—not merely at the declarative level, but as a guiding principle for action.

2. For example, the work by the NCC's Center for Child Victims of Sexual and Violent Offenses and advocacy of children and youth in civil proceedings. Also see: Windman & Solomon, 2008.

3. See, for example, NCC (2003); Zlotnik Raz et al. (2023); Zlotnik Raz & Windman (2023); NCC, Digital library (n.d.).

4. The NCC's Youth Parliament is a unique and innovative model for youth participation in policy-making processes, designed to facilitate meaningful dialogue between youth and government ministries, as well as professionals and academics, on all matters affecting the lives of children and youth in Israel. Operating since 2018, the Youth Parliament engages adolescents from diverse population groups across the country. This comprehensive program includes training sessions for both youth and decision-makers; structured consultations between youth and government officials; and the development of practical policy recommendations based on the perspectives of the youth themselves. The project's goal is to promote legislative and policy changes in Israel that recognize adolescents' right to be heard and to influence decisions that affect their lives, in the spirit of the CRC. It also seeks to promote the establishment of a sustainable national-level mechanism for youth participation (for further details: Na'amat & Zlotnik Raz, 2023b).

5. The Youth Parliament model ("A Seat at the Table") has received broad recognition both in Israel and internationally. It has been presented at high-level professional and academic conferences and forums, including a prominent event held at UN institutions in Geneva in 2022. This event, entitled A Seat at the Table: Best Practices for Children's Meaningful Participation in Policy-Making, was a joint initiative of the Permanent Mission of Israel to the UN in Geneva, the Intersectoral Partnerships Unit in the Israeli Prime Minister's Office, and the NCC.

It is important to emphasize that the effects of the war, as presented in this report, are inherently related to the state of the systems and public services for children and youth prior to October 7. In addition to the new challenges created by the war, many of the issues identified in this report stem from longstanding systemic failures and unresolved consequences of previous crises—foremost among them the COVID-19 pandemic (Morag et al., 2021; NCC, 2020). Accordingly, this report addresses two types of challenges: those that predated the war and were exacerbated by it, and those that arose as a direct result of it. The report offers recommendations aimed at improving not only emergency responses but also the day-to-day functioning of systems and services for children and youth.

The complex, multifaceted consequences of the war—and the government's responses to the war—not only highlight the importance of a child rights-based approach, but also the considerable conceptual and practical distance from its adoption. This report aims to help bridge that gap by outlining necessary policy steps and encouraging a rethinking of public policy and professional practices through the lens of child and youth rights, particularly in emergencies. On the surface, this may seem as two separate spheres of action: conceptual and practical. However, we believe that short-term measures that are not grounded in a coherent worldview are unlikely to yield sustainable change. Abstract visions that are not translated into concrete, data- and research-driven action plans grounded in field realities—including children's voices—are equally unlikely to do so. Bridging these two realms—vision and implementation—is therefore a foundational condition for the realization of children's rights in practice. This integrative perspective underpins this report and reflects the urgent need to connect long-term strategic thinking with concrete insights and voices from the field, especially those of children and youth themselves, in order to better respond to emergencies and war, and prepare for optimal recovery and rehabilitation.

2. The Impact of War on Children's Rights Through the Lens of the CRC

The foundational legal framework for the rights of children and youth is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The CRC enshrines a broad spectrum of rights for children from birth to adulthood, including civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian rights. It obligates State Parties, including Israel, to take the legislative, administrative, and other necessary measures to implement the rights set out therein (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990, art. 4; CRC Committee, 2003, para. 1), both in times of peace and during emergencies.

Since its adoption by the United Nations in 1989, the CRC has become the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. Israel also signed and ratified the Convention in 1991. This near-universal ratification reflects broad international consensus on the importance of guaranteeing children's rights. Over the years, the CRC's impact on the status of children worldwide has been profound: it serves as a foundation for legislative and policy development, influences judicial decisions in both domestic and international forums, and inspires the development of programs and services for children and youth (Doek & Liefaard, 2015; Sloth-Nielsen & Liefaard, 2019).

Beyond its legal scope, the CRC has also introduced a conceptual change in attitudes toward children and their status. In contrast to historical views that regarded children merely as "objects" in need of protection and care, the CRC reflects a new approach that recognizes children as "subjects"—complete human beings, rights-holders with unique voices that must be heard and considered in decision-making processes, and meaningful members of society in the present—not only in the future (Morag, 2014; NCC, 2023). As a result, the CRC serves as the leading legal and normative framework for addressing all issues related to children, including the obligations of the state toward them during times of war and emergency.

Since Israel ratified the CRC in 1991, it has taken significant steps to promote its implementation, including the establishment of a dedicated committee to examine Israeli law in light of the CRC (Committee for the Examination of Fundamental Principles in the Area of the Child and the Law and their Implementation in Legislation, 2003),[6] integration of the Convention's principles into legislation (e.g., the Students' Rights Law, 2000), and, more recently, the establishment of a governmental coordination unit for children's and youth's rights. Nonetheless, a child rights-based approach is still evolving in Israel, particularly when it comes to the review and evaluation of governmental operational policies—both in times of routine and especially during emergencies and wartime (Gal, 2023). By using the CRC as a normative legal framework and a roadmap for analyzing the impacts of the war on children and youth in Israel, this report contributes meaningfully to the advancement of this approach.

A discussion of children's rights is especially important in times of war and emergency. During such times, children and youth are subject to severe risks, including violence, discrimination, violations of rights, and unequal access to essential services (CRC Committee, 2013, para. 72; CRC Committee, 2016, para.

6. The Committee for the Examination of Fundamental Principles in the Area of the Child and the Law and their Implementation in Legislation ("the Rotlevy Committee") was a public committee established in 1997 to examine the body of legislation in Israel regulating issues concerning children and youth, with the aim of ensuring that the State of Israel meets its obligations under the CRC. For further information: Committee for the Examination of Fundamental Principles in the Area of the Child and the Law and their Implementation in Legislation, 2003, pp. 31–37.

79). The social and cultural structures that support the development of children and youth are damaged by war and emergencies, together with the continuity, stability, and safety children rely upon. As Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict Graça Machel (1996) wrote, war disrupts "the entire fabric of their society" (p. 15) —their homes, schools, communities, playgrounds, and the public systems that serve them.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee) has long recognized the deep, grave, and traumatic effects of war on children and youth, both in the short and long term. It has called on State Parties to take necessary measures and allocate appropriate resources to ensure the full range of children's rights, even during armed conflict and crises. The CRC Committee has emphasized that the protections set out in the Convention must not be diminished during emergencies (Ang, 2005; CRC Committee, 1992, paras. 63, 67, 73; CRC Committee, 2022, paras. 4, 7, 10, 20, 26–27, 30). Moreover, the CRC Committee has recognized that the effects of war extend beyond the cessation of hostilities, necessitating physical, emotional, and social rehabilitation for affected children, youth, and their communities (CRC Committee, 1992, para. 63). Rehabilitation and recovery require a holistic approach that considers infrastructure, economic, social, cultural, and emotional dimensions.

The CRC Committee also underscores the importance of including children and youth—including those from marginalized groups whose voices are often unheard—in recovery and rebuilding processes following war or emergencies. It recognizes that children and youth have a potentially significant contribution to make to these efforts and establishes that their participation, when conducted safely and in a trauma-informed manner, can help restore their sense of control over their lives, support their rehabilitation, and foster resilience (CRC Committee, 2009, paras. 125–126; CRC Committee, 2016, para. 80; Machel, 1996). The CRC Committee has further called on State Parties to involve children and youth in developing emergency preparedness and response plans and in monitoring and evaluating them. Such participation is required not only due to the unique vulnerabilities and challenges children and youth face but also as a matter of their right to be heard, to participate, and to influence decisions that affect their lives—including the design of responses and action plans, especially in emergencies (CRC Committee, 2009, para. 126; CRC Committee, 2016, para. 80).

Clearly, the rights of children and youth are neither nullified nor suspended in times of war and emergency. On the contrary, such events impose an increased duty on the state to guarantee the protection of those rights, while identifying the unique challenges children and youth face. Doing so requires responses grounded in a deep understanding of reality—based on the integration of research and data, the experience of professionals on the ground, and attentive listening to the experiences, insights, and proposals of children and youth

themselves. This report proceeds from that very foundation. It seeks to present a comprehensive picture of the effects of the Iron Swords War on children and youth in Israel through a child rights-based perspective—not only to clarify the challenges of the moment, but also to lay the groundwork for systemic rights-based thinking, recovery planning, and future emergency preparedness that places the rights, needs, and voices of children and youth at the center.

3. Purpose, Contribution, and Innovation of the Report

This report provides an up-to-date and in-depth analysis of the impact of the Iron Swords War on children's and youth's rights in Israel. The report maps the main systemic challenges and failures that emerged during the war in relation to children and youth, based on a broad range of quantitative, qualitative, and legal research sources and firsthand accounts from the field. Based on this analysis, the report offers practical recommendations relevant for the emergency period, the subsequent recovery and rebuilding phases, and for future emergency preparedness.

The report is intended to serve as a practical guidance for government bodies, professionals, researchers, and civil society organizations working with and on behalf of children and youth, especially in times of emergency and crisis. The report's distinctiveness and innovation are evident in three key aspects:

- The adoption of a multi-dimensional approach that combines a child rights-based framework with a current, evolving database that was collected and analyzed during the emergency period itself. The report includes legal and policy analyses, findings from interviews with professionals and civil society actors active in the field, as well as insights and proposals from children and youth—both Hebrew and Arabic speakers.
- Practical and forward-looking recommendations aimed at driving policy change and responding to needs identified on the ground. The recommendations address immediate challenges, guide the stages of recovery and rebuilding, and help shape future emergency policies.
- Writing and research carried out in the midst of an ongoing crisis. The report was written during the war, before its conclusion, and thus reflects the complex effects on children and youth in real time. This process of writing from within an evolving reality positions the war as a significant case study for reevaluating children's rights in emergencies—both in Israel and in international contexts.

4. Methodological Foundation and Structure of the Report

4.a. Methodological Foundations

This report focuses on three core themes concerning the realization of children's and youth's rights during the Iron Swords War: education, health (with a particular emphasis on mental health), and digital media. These domains were identified as especially critical in the context of the war, and as areas requiring significant operational changes in order to guarantee the rights of children and youth. The analysis of these themes and their related challenges pays special attention to children and youth in Arab society and to evacuee children and youth from communities in the north and south.

The report was developed based on an in-depth examination of each of these core themes, through analysis of a variety of sources, including official governmental and parliamentary publications, academic research, civil society reports, legal sources, media reports and statistical data collected and processed within the statistical yearbook Children in Israel, published annually by the NCC. For the first time, the 2023 and 2024 editions of the yearbook included chapters dedicated to the impact of the war on children and youth. These chapters were compiled through an accelerated joint effort of the NCC and relevant government ministries, in response to the urgent need to collect and analyze real-time data. This was based on the understanding that the war fundamentally disrupted the lives of children and youth, and that early identification of trends and effects relating to them was critically important (NCC, 2024; 2025).

In addition, for the purposes of this report, the NCC conducted a dedicated survey of 500 parents, examining the emotional impact of the war on their children (NCC, 2024). This survey supplemented the statistical data and institutional and professional sources, by offering insights into the lived experiences and emotional state of children and youth during the war, which could not be gleaned from official data alone.

In addition to these materials, the report integrates insights and proposals collected from interviews with professionals and civil society actors who worked "on the ground" with children and youth—including Arab youth, at-risk youth, and youth evacuated from their communities—and who possess unique familiarity with the needs, gaps, and challenges faced by children and youth during the war. The report also incorporates insights and proposals developed through a number of participatory processes conducted by the NCC's Youth Parliament program between 2023 and 2025, at the onset and during the war. These processes involved more than 120 Hebrew- and Arabic-speaking youth,

including representatives of the Israeli National Students and Youth Council and evacuated youth from southern and northern communities (for more information see NCC, forthcoming). These participatory processes focused on the themes of the report and aimed to reflect the needs, experiences, and suggestions of youth—in their own voices and from their own perspectives.

4.b. Structure of the Report

Each chapter in the report is dedicated to one core theme and includes three main components:

- A **normative analysis** of the relevant rights enshrined in the CRC and the obligations these rights impose on the state, based on the authoritative interpretations provided by the CRC Committee.
- A **review and analysis of the current situation concerning the implications of the war** related to the chapter's topic, including policy and implementation challenges—whether these stemmed directly from the war or were exacerbated by it. This analysis includes specific attention to children and youth in the Arab society and displaced children and youth, and is based on publications, reports, data, interviews with professionals working "on the ground," and findings from participatory processes involving children and youth.
- **Practical recommendations** for the government and state authorities for promoting children's and youth's rights in the themes under discussion—both during the emergency period and in the recovery and rebuilding period. The recommendations address aspects such as policy, resource allocation, the development of training and knowledge, awareness raising, and other areas. They are intended to also serve as a foundation for forward-looking policy design that supports appropriate, child rights-based preparedness for future emergencies.

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CHAPTER 1

Children and Youth's Right to Education During the Iron Swords War

1. The Right to Education in Light of the CRC

Article 6 of the CRC anchors children's right to life, survival, and development, and has particular relevance to the field of education. These three core rights—life, survival, and development—are understood as complementary and inseparable (Zlotnik Raz et al., 2023). The CRC Committee recognized Article 6 as one of the four general principles that guide the legal, interpretation, and implementation of all other rights in the Convention—including those related to education (CRC Committee, 2003, para. 12).

The right to development in particular is considered unique to children and is based on the recognition that children and adolescents are in a vulnerable and sensitive stage of rapid and continuous development. Consequently, the right to development imposes a positive obligation on States Parties to take the necessary steps to ensure the child's optimal development into adulthood, addressing all dimensions of the child's life with a forward-looking approach (Morag et al., 2021). The CRC Committee called for a broad and holistic interpretation of the term "development" that includes children's emotional, social, and educational development (CRC Committee, 2003).

During times of emergency and war, this right becomes especially critical. In addition to the state's fundamental duty to protect children's lives and ensure their survival, it must also maintain the safe operation of both formal and informal educational settings. Such protection is vital not only for safeguarding children's lives and well-being but also for maintaining educational spaces that are critical for children's emotional, social, and cognitive development.

Articles 28 and 29 of the CRC specifically establish children's right to education. The Convention obliges States Parties to take measures to progressively realize this right "on the basis of equal opportunity" (Article 28(1)). Specifically, it mandates the provision of free, accessible compulsory primary education, outlines the aims of education, and establishes that children's education should be directed to "the development of the child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (Article 29(1)). The CRC Committee affirmed that children's right to equality and non-discrimination also applies to access to education for all children (CRC Committee, 2001, paras. 11–12).

The right to education holds special importance during wartime. In situations of uncertainty, danger, and hardship, schools can give children a sense of protective routine and serve as a critical setting where additional rights, including development, are realized. Schools offer children peer interactions and ongoing relationships with teachers and counselors who can help them develop resilience and coping skills. The CRC Committee stressed that a decision to

reopen schools must consider children's physical and mental safety and well-being (CRC Committee, 2022, para. 35). The state must take steps to maintain educational routine to the greatest extent possible—even and especially during times of war and emergency, subject to safety and protection considerations (Machel, 1996).

Regarding online learning, the CRC Committee acknowledged that in the absence of in-person education—for example, during emergencies—digital technology can serve as a substitute for in-person teaching. However, in such cases, the state must ensure the existence of adequate digital infrastructure to support accessible and equitable education for all students (CRC Committee, 2021, paras. 100–102). That said, the CRC Committee noted that digital technology is not an adequate substitute for children's need for direct social interactions. In other words, online learning cannot serve as an exclusive or long-term solution and/or fulfill children's need for social interactions and shared leisure activities (CRC Committee, 2021, para. 15).

In relation to early childhood, the CRC Committee has long recognized that quality early childhood education—including during emergencies—is essential for a child's development and has a positive impact on school readiness, academic progress, and long-term social adjustment. The CRC Committee views early childhood education as encompassing both education and care (referred to as "educare"), and held that this term reflects a holistic approach to early childhood education and its components (CRC Committee, 2005, para. 30). In addition, the CRC Committee stresses that even when non-state actors are heavily involved in services for young children, the state remains responsible for monitoring and overseeing the quality of education in order to safeguard children's rights and interests (CRC Committee, 2005, para. 32). Therefore, even in emergencies—and even if early education and care services shift to temporary or private settings—the state remains responsible for ensuring accessible, safe, and high-quality education for all.

2. Introduction: Realizing the Right to Education During the Iron Swords War

The right to education is a fundamental right of children and youth in Israel. Providing access to both formal and informal educational settings—along with ensuring their quality and appropriateness for children and youth—is a crucial component in the realization of this right. The right to education is not limited to the acquisition of knowledge and skills: It plays a vital role in supporting children and youth's individual development, building their social and life skills, forming their meaningful social relationships, instilling values, and establishing

a sense of belonging and security across all ages. In this respect, guaranteeing the right to education significantly influences the intellectual, emotional, and social development of children and adolescents—both in the present and into the future.

In times of emergency, as in the Iron Swords War, ensuring the right to education becomes all the more important. In a survey conducted by the NCC during the war, nearly 60% of parents reported that school-led social activities helped sustain social ties. Parents also identified the homeroom teacher as one of the three most significant figures supporting their children in coping with emotional, social, or academic challenges (NCC, 2024a). In general, both formal and informal educational settings serve as key arenas in the lives of children and youth and their continued operation during emergencies helps restore a sense of normalcy and control. Beyond maintaining routine academic instruction that follows, as far as possible, the general curriculum and developmental-educational goals (e.g., reading and writing skills in early grades), educational spaces are also uniquely positioned to mediate emergency situations in an age-appropriate manner, constitute settings for discussions of problems and distress, provide emotional support, facilitate peer interaction, and offer recreational activities or opportunities for ventilation—all of which contribute to children and youth's sense of security and belonging. In this respect, ensuring the right to education does not stand alone but constitutes an anchor for guaranteeing additional important rights of children and youth, including the right to development, protection, mental health, play and leisure, and access to needed support and services. For this reason, prolonged disruptions in educational activities—particularly in times when they are most needed—can have serious negative consequences for children and youth and exacerbate existing educational, social, and economic disparities. Students who struggle academically in routine times or come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to be disproportionately affected by the absence of supportive educational frameworks.

Ensuring the right to education during emergencies and war requires, first and foremost, adequate safety and security measures to enable in-person schooling; appropriate digital and human infrastructure (e.g., access to devices for temporary online learning; sufficient, qualified staff and learning frameworks and methodologies suitable for online education; appropriate emotional support services for children and adolescents; an emphasis on empowering education and civic engagement (e.g., supporting volunteerism and participatory processes that allow students to voice their needs); and data-driven oversight and monitoring mechanisms that are responsive to on-the-ground needs (Machel, 1996). However, as detailed below, the Iron Swords War revealed significant challenges in ensuring the right to education and implementing these elements for all students in Israel.

Although the education system has official guidelines for operations in times of emergency, and although Israel is a country experienced with wartime, the education system is struggling to adapt to the current protracted wartime situation —due to both structural resource deficits and insufficient emergency preparedness. What does this mean in practice? When the war broke out, all students in Israel experienced a full and extended suspension of their schooling, losing many school days. Later, they transitioned to partial and hybrid learning arrangements and short school days, which adversely affected the quality of education. This situation generated uncertainty, academic challenges, emotional difficulties, and social disconnection—and in some cases were preventable (e.g., given additional resources or better planning, more educational activities could have been held without a security risk). In addition, the prolonged duration of the war gave rise to new needs and also exacerbated existing problems, including gaps in access to digital devices and a shortage of qualified educational staff (Buchriss, 2024; Datal, 2023a; Hazan et al., 2024). Moreover, the situation demanded that particular attention be directed to specific groups of students, especially the 40,000 students and more who were evacuated with their families to evacuation centers. These students were completely uprooted from their routine lives and were required to transition and adjust to new educational settings (in other municipalities or within the evacuation centers). Some were relocated more than once, facing disrupted educational routines and conditions that undermined their right to education. In frontline areas where evacuation did not occur, children and youth were forced to continue learning under security risks, even months after the war began.

The inadequate preparedness of the Ministry of Education suggests that lessons were not learned from the COVID-19 crisis (2020–2022), which also caused prolonged and significant disruption to the education system. **This underscores the urgent need to learn from the war and implement these lessons in order to ensure effective organization in future emergencies, as well as during the recovery and rebuilding phase.** In this context, it should be noted that, as with the COVID-19 pandemic, the full impact of the war will become clear only after it ends and the country—including border regions—returns to normalcy during the recovery and rebuilding period. This chapter identifies key issues in the field of education that require a broad range of responses, including policy measures, development of services and programs, and the allocation of resources to ensure the right to education in emergency, recovery and rebuilding phases, as well as in future emergencies.

3. Key Challenges

3.a. Gaps in Protective Shelters in Educational Institutions

As noted, both formal and informal educational environments are essential for realizing the right to education and its associated benefits, as well as other related rights of children and youth—particularly during emergencies. Therefore, it is critically important to ensure protective infrastructure in educational institutions to enable continuous and safe routine operations for students, even during emergencies and wartime. However, during the Iron Swords War, the need to maintain a full educational routine encountered a major obstacle due to the limited availability of standardized protected spaces and shelters for students and educational staff. This situation compromised students' safety and well-being, created stress and uncertainty for students and their parents, and impeded schools' ability to operate fully and consistently. The education system's lack of preparedness in terms of protective infrastructure led to a prolonged disruption of in-person schooling, with significant social, emotional, and academic costs for students—requiring both immediate responses and future preparedness.

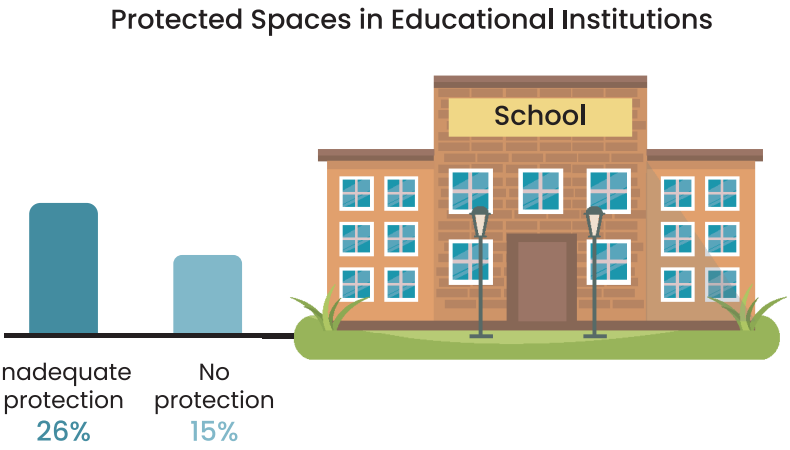
The issue of protective infrastructure in educational institutions involves two distinct issues: compliance with existing protection standards, and the need to update those standards and reconcile the requirements of the Home Front Command with those of the Ministry of Education.

3.a.1. Compliance with Protection Standards

Responsibility for the construction of educational institutions—including the creation of protected spaces and shelters—is shared between the Ministry of Education, which approves and funds construction plans, and the local governments, which are responsible for the actual building process in their jurisdictions according to plans aligned with the Ministry's standards. As a rule, construction plans include specifications for protected spaces in the institution in accordance with the guidelines and standards of the Home Front Command. However, in many educational institutions, the existing protected space falls short of the area required by the Home Front Command's standards. According to the Ministry of Education, these discrepancies are the result of a long-standing situation shaped by government decisions over the years and the fact that the reference scenario for emergency preparedness is based on a war lasting only about three weeks, leaving the system unprepared for a prolonged conflict (Faybish & Vininger, 2024).

Data from the Ministry of Education show that at the start of the war, in the 4,800 schools included in the Ministry's database, the discrepancy in protective coverage amounted to approximately 26% (i.e., protected spaces were smaller than the required area). It should be emphasized that many educational institutions were not included in this database, meaning that their protection status is unknown. Among the schools included, about 15% had no protective space at all, and another 21% had limited or partial protection. Based on a standard of 0.5 square meters of protected space per student, this means that approximately 472,000 students in these institutions lacked access to standardized protective areas. These figures indicate that, beyond protection gaps stemming from older buildings that were not constructed according to the current standards (as detailed below), even some newly built schools had not been constructed in accordance with standards that ensure sufficient protective space for students and staff (Vininger, 2023; see also State Ombudsman, 2023). Furthermore, in early October 2024, it was reported in the Knesset that 30% of schools along the northern border lacked sufficient protection spaces, and that hundreds of educational institutions were not compliant with protection standards (Knesset Education, Culture and Sport Committee, 2024c).

In addition, a comparative nationwide review conducted at the beginning of the war revealed that the largest protection gaps were found in the Jerusalem District (approx. 35%) and Haifa (approx. 33%) District, with significant variability across regions. For example, in the Jerusalem area (which is smaller than the Jerusalem District) and in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area (Gush Dan), protection gaps were approximately 45% and 31%, respectively, whereas in the Shfela region and in northern frontline areas, the gaps were 16% and 9.5%, respectively. In the Gaza Envelope (Otef Aza) area, no protection gaps were found. The smallest gaps were recorded in the Central District (about 10%), and in the North and South Districts—around 20% each. Furthermore, inspections conducted in educational institutions under Ministry of Education supervision between 2018 and 2023 revealed that protection gaps were significantly higher in the ultra-Orthodox (33%) and Arab public education (29%) sectors than in the Hebrew secular public (13%) and religious public (12%) sectors (Vininger, 2023).



Approximately **26%** of educational institutions in Israel under the supervision of the Ministry of Education are **insufficiently protected.** About **15%** of institutions **lack any protection at all.**
In the **southern and northern districts,** about **20%** are **insufficiently protected,** and **10%** have **no protection at all**. In schools located in **Bedouin localities in the Negev,** about **21%** have **no protection at all.**

Source: NCC, 2024b.

With regard to Arab society, a preliminary mapping conducted in October 2023 examined 45 Arab municipalities that serve approximately 250,000 students. According to data gathered from heads of municipal education departments in those municipalities, there was a significant shortage of protected spaces in the schools and kindergartens surveyed—an estimated total deficit of 85,000 square meters. When compared to the standard of 0.5 square meters of protected space per student, this indicates that at least 170,000 Arab students lack access to protected spaces. The data regarding protection gaps were particularly severe in the Negev (a lack of 35,000 square meters), even though the mapping did not include all Arab students in the Negev, such as students in unrecognized villages and/or in temporary or mobile educational structures lacking shelters or other forms of protection. According to the mapping's authors, even these figures were an underestimation, since not all municipalities and educational institutions were included (Knesset, 2023; Multisectoral Round Table, 2024b; National Committee of Arab Local Authorities, 2023; Yechimovich-Cohen et al., 2023). These protection gaps pose an immediate threat to children's rights to life and to education and reflect deep inequalities for students in the geographic periphery, in Arab society, and in the ultra-Orthodox sector—requiring urgent structural redress.

In early December 2023, during the war, it also became clear that the available shelter space in schools was often insufficient for all currently enrolled students (Kadari-Ovadiah, 2023a). As a result, even in areas classified as "green zones" where educational activity was formally permitted —including major cities in central Israel—many schools operated only partially to ensure that all students could reach shelter in time if needed. In schools with insufficient protected

space, classes had to be split into two shifts or alternated attendance by day or age group. Consequently, protection gaps prevented many students across the country from returning to school. They lost school days, and were forced to make do with temporary, partial solutions that compromised both learning quality and safety.

Even in institutions with some form of shelter, students often did not have sufficient time to reach it during an emergency. This situation naturally affected students' sense of safety and willingness to attend school. For example, in a participatory process held by the NCC with youth participants, the youth expressed deep concern about their school's protection arrangements. Several noted that during drills, they either could not reach the shelter in time or found it full and had to remain outside—realizing that during an actual attack they would have been in "genuine danger" (Na'amat & Zlotnik Raz, 2023a, p. 4).

In northern communities, significant protection deficits were recorded, along with delays in constructing and installing protective facilities and a lack of secured transportation to educational institutions. As a result, many parents feared sending their children to school, and in some cases, education was conducted under suboptimal conditions (e.g., combining multiple age groups into one classroom; Knesset Education, Culture and Sport Committee, 2024b; 2024c). Pnina Bornstein, Community Director at Kibbutz Kfar Szold (personal communication, November 5, 2025), described the situation for children and youth in the north. According to Bornstein, even more than one year after the outbreak of the war, the protection status of schools in frontline areas had not changed. Almost no additional shelters had been supplied, and existing ones were very old, in poor physical condition, and generally too small and poorly ventilated for extended use. Consequently, schools in the north often operated remotely, with significantly reduced school hours—negatively impacting student learning. Bornstein described at least one case in which a school reopened and children traveled to it on unprotected roads under missile attacks. This situation underscores the urgent need for protective solutions both at school facilities and along student travel routes (e.g., protected vehicles and safe access roads).

Sivan Mazar Mordechai, Director of the HILA Program[1] in South Tel Aviv (personal communication, January 1, 2025), noted inadequate shelter arrangements and disconcerting guidelines issued by the Home Front Command (e.g., instructions to lie on the floor with hands over one's head), which led to reduced student attendance and a partial return to remote learning—similar to the COVID-19 period, but with diminished effectiveness. The solutions adopted by various local governments reflected deficits in preparedness: For example, two kindergartens

1. The HILA program for disengaged youth and youth at risk operates under the Youth at Risk Advancement Section of the Ministry of Education's Youth and Society Administration. The program provides complementary education for youth who have dropped out of formal education settings.

were merged into one that had a shelter and activities were relocated from schools without shelters to alternate buildings with protected spaces. Even the reliance on the Ministry of Education's "Safest Possible" framework—which classified protection levels and established differential guidelines for action during emergencies—was problematic: It effectively sanctioned partial protection and fell short of providing full safety for all students (Ministry of Education & Homeland Defense 2024; Ministry of Education et al., 2024).

In the aforementioned youth participatory processes, participants expressed confusion and anxiety regarding the inconsistent levels of protection and conflicting instructions across schools, creating uncertainty and anxiety about whether the protection provided was truly sufficient. For example, in one classroom they were told to stand against the wall, while in another they were instructed to evacuate to a shelter (Na'amat & Zlotnik Raz, 2023a).

3.a.2. Updating Protection Standards

In addition to the substantial protection deficiencies in educational institutions described above, the existing standards for protected spaces and shelters are outdated and do not appear to meet current needs.

The body responsible for determining protection specifications for schools is the Home Front Command, which operates under the Civil Defense Regulations (Specifications for the Construction of Shelters), 5750-1990. A 2023 report by the Knesset Research and Information Center pointed to both deficiencies in the specifications in place before the war and long-standing defects in implementing relevant procedures (Vininger, 2023). According to the report, the current specifications for school shelters (published for public comment in November 2023 yet nearly identical to the previous version of the specifications dated July 2023) defined requirements for shelter planning in schools, including the area, location, construction thickness, and accessibility of a protected space, and its distance from classrooms. However, these requirements apply only to new school construction or new expansions to existing institutions. Moreover, the rules are based on standards developed after the Gulf War and have been in effect since 1997. In practice, many schools were built before 1997 and do not meet these standards. Despite the passage of nearly 30 years, no decision has been made to require those schools to make adjustments to ensure student safety.

Furthermore, according to State Comptroller reports from 2016 and 2018, the standard for protected areas in schools—defined in 1997—is significantly lower than the standard required for civilians in public shelters. The current standard—15 square meters per protected classroom and 0.5 square meters

per student—effectively caps classroom size at 30 students although in practice, many classrooms exceed this number. As a result, even schools that meet the current protection standards may have to cancel in-person learning during emergencies due to the large number of students per class, creating unnecessary educational and social harm.

In conclusion, this situation highlights the urgent need for a revised, systemic national plan for protected spaces and shelters in educational institutions. Such a plan would allow for the continuation of in-person education even during emergencies and guarantee the right of children and youth to education. A lack of adequate protection—whether due to outdated standards or institutions' non-compliance—causes serious harm to children, especially at times when maintaining educational and social routine is critical.

3.b. Lack of Adequate Emotional Support

During the war, children and youth experienced a range of educational, social, and emotional challenges. A letter sent by the National Students and Youth Council (n.d.) to representatives of the Ministry of Education and others during the early days of the war highlights several of these difficulties. The letter included proposals and requests aimed at alleviating the strain, such as limiting the number of school hours, focusing on review rather than new material, not requiring students to turn on their cameras during online lessons, and allowing youth to volunteer (National Students and Youth Council, 2023). In the NCC participatory processes, participants noted that while returning to school was beneficial, it was in practice unbalanced and not aligned with their genuine needs—classes were overly focused on academics and preparation for matriculation exams, and characterized by an insistence on "normalcy" in circumstances that were far from normal. The youth also reported a lack of opportunities for emotional ventilation and relaxation through homeroom or life-skill classes. Upon returning to school in-person, students spoke of classmates who were absent from school due to anxiety, stress, and depression, and mentioned that some parents opposed sending their children to in-person schooling (Na'amat & Zlotnik Raz, 2023a; NCC, forthcoming).

The concerns raised by youth were echoed by several professionals interviewed by the NCC. According to a social worder who works on youth advancement in Jersualem (personal communication, January 9, 2025), the war compounded the challenges that students had already faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in what she termed a "second trauma." These effects were seen even in students who were not directly or personally impacted by the war, manifesting as anxiety, lassitude, depressive symptoms, difficulty with basic functioning, sporadic participation in activities, and widespread "hidden" dropout rate. She

also noted a rise in aggressive behaviors—both verbal and physical—and drug and alcohol use. Despite significant investment in resilience building among professionals and through partnerships with mental health providers and civil society organizations, the demand for emotional support far exceeded supply. Specifically, she pointed to a shortage of social workers and educators, especially in youth advancement services.

Sivan Mazar Mordechai, director of the HILA program in South Tel Aviv (personal communication, January 1, 2025), described growing social anxiety among youth aged 16–18, widening educational gaps, prolonged idleness on the streets, and a rise in risky behaviors. In her view, familiar challenges had become more severe due to the war. She criticized the formal education system for prioritizing achievement metrics at the expense of attention and care. Additionally, she noted that poor working conditions and low salaries were causing experienced professionals to leave the field, making it difficult to retain staff, ultimately harming the children and youth served.

A director of after-school centers for at-risk elementary school children in central Israel (who wishes to remain anonymous; personal communication, January 8, 2025) described the students' heightened anxiety and emotional distress. Despite joint efforts by the Ministries of Welfare and Social Services and Education to provide resilience-building training for staff, significant shortages—particularly of personnel—persisted for more than a year and a half into the war. In the fields of healthcare, long wait times for occupational therapy, speech therapy, psychology, and psychiatry appointments, led to parental despair and many refrained from seeking help altogether. She also observed that many children were spending extended time on screens without content monitoring, as their parents were themselves in "survival mode." She recommended increasing children's access to emotional support services and establishing support groups for parents. A staff member at a high school for students with mental health conditions also pointed to irregular attendance and dropout, particularly among boarding school students. She also recommended the establishment of support groups for parents in order to help the children.

Pnina Bornstein, community director at Kibbutz Kfar Szold (personal interview, November 5, 2024), identified developmental regression among young children and a rise in risky behaviors and alcohol and drug use among adolescents in her area in the north. She suggested organizing educational activities for youth preferably within their peer communities, including afternoon activities and emotional support services, outside conflict zones. Bornstein also recommended designating education professionals as essential workers and increasing their entitlement to emergency benefits to reflect their demanding work.

Ravit Hasson, principal of a secondary school (grades 7–12) in the Upper Galilee (personal communication, January 8, 2025), described an acute teacher shortage (over 20 of 50 staff members in her school has been evacuated) and

growing social fragmentation among students. Over time, this led to feelings of loneliness, lassitude, impatience, a lack of sense of safety, and fatigue. In the absence of adequate governmental support, the school made extraordinary efforts to cope using its own resources (including efforts by teachers and other staff), such as running educational activities from morning to evening. From the start, the school prioritized emotional and social needs over academic ones—organizing dialogue circles, home visits, guidance counselor meetings with the children and staff members, and resilience and coping workshops. These decisions, Hasson stated, proved effective for students. She recommended granting schools greater autonomy to adapt to their students' specific needs, deprioritize academic standards during emergencies (e.g., avoiding compulsory Meitzav exams), allocate and staff additional positions for mental health professionals, strengthen teaching teams to avoid relying on volunteers or uncertified staff, and create open spaces for emotional care and extracurricular activities without requiring parental funding.

Avinoam Rosenzweig, a social worker who directs the NOCHAM (Disconnected Ultra-Orthodox Youth) program under the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services in South Tel Aviv (personal communication, January 2, 2025), noted that the war led to increased hidden dropout and a decline in willingness to commit to the program due to widespread disruption of routines. He also observed that the age of participants declined, with youth under 15 joining a program designed for ages 16–18. In some cases, he detected despair and low resilience among the youth. In the ultra-Orthodox community, where digital learning is uncommon and telephone-based alternatives proved ineffective, maintaining educational, social, and emotional continuity was particularly difficult. Rosenzweig stressed the need to establish consistent and meaningful educational anchors to maintain even minimal routine during emergencies and in wartime.

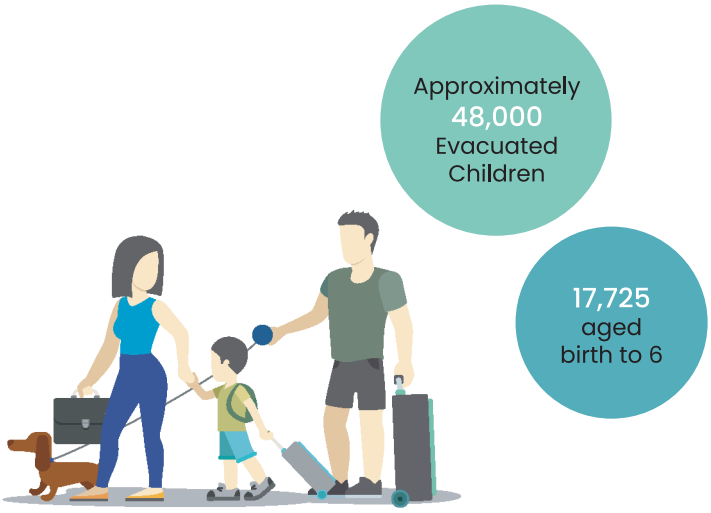
Emotional and social challenges related to the transition to digital learning also emerged in NCC youth participatory processes that included Jewish and Arab youth. The youth noted practical challenges such as retrieving study materials from school at the start of digital learning, insufficient time to prepare for classes, and technical problems accessing online platforms. Arab youth in particular reported widespread non-participation due to a lack of computers and Internet access at home (NCC, forthcoming). This challenge had already been noted in the 2021 State Comptroller report on the COVID-19 pandemic, which found that at least one-quarter of Arab students lacked appropriate tools for digital learning. In many localities, Internet infrastructure was inadequate, and 135,000 students reportedly had no personal computer or tablet (National Committee of Arab Local Authorities, 2023; State Comptroller, 2021). Despite some efforts by the Ministry of Education, these issues had not been fully resolved. Until they are, the right to education will continue to suffer preventable and serious harm.

Another important factor affecting students' emotional well-being is the

presence—or absence—of open, sensitive dialogue in educational settings about the war. This issue holds particular significance for youth in Arab society. According to a 2024 survey, 30% of Arab youth respondents reported that no one had spoken to them about the war—three times higher than among Jewish respondents (Hebrew University of Jerusalem and aChord Center 2024).

3.c. Educational Challenges for Evacuated Children and Youth in Evacuation Centers

At the outset of the war, tens of thousands of children and youth were evacuated to evacuation centers—first from the south, and later from the north. Being uprooted from their homes and distanced from their social, communal, and educational environments—particularly under traumatic circumstances—heightened the vulnerability of these children and youth, and raised serious concerns about their safety and well-being in the evacuation centers, both within educational settings and more broadly.



At the end of December 2023, about 48,000 children of compulsory education age were evacuated from their communities due to a government evacuation order. This group included 17,725 pre-school children (aged birth to 6). Many more children evacuated independently with their families.

Source: NCC, 2024b

The issue of ensuring the safety and protection of children and youth in evacuation centers was addressed by the Multisectoral Round Table on Children and Youth during the War. This initiative was jointly led by the Government Coordinator for Children and Youth Rights in the Social Affairs Division of the Ministry of Justice, representing the government, and the Executive Director of

the NCC, representing civil society.[2]

In early November 2023, the Round Table published initial recommendations and guidelines related to safeguarding, including regulating the activities of volunteers in evacuation centers and requiring police clearance for volunteers providing services to children or youth, such as mentorship or educational services; development of a reporting mechanism for safeguarding and protection-related concerns; and publishing schedules for children and youth activities, including educational programming (Multisectoral Round Table on Children and Youth during the War, 2023). Subsequently, a dedicated governmental task force was appointed to coordinate the issue of child and youth safeguarding in evacuation centers. The task force presented a series of recommendations, including the mandatory appointment of a Protection Coordinator in each center, and published a dedicated guide outlining the steps needed to ensure child and youth protection at the evacuation centers, during war, and in future evacuations (Ministry of National Security & Ministry of Justice, 2024)These recommendations led to a government resolution that, among other steps, tasked the National Authority for Community Safety with developing a child protection protocol for reception centers (Government Resolution, 2024a, 2024b). Despite their importance, these recommendations and resolutions were adopted and implemented after significant delay.

Evacuation created a unique and complex situation with respect to the education of children and youth housed in evacuation centers. Despite immediate actions taken by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Justice, 2024), numerous challenges and difficulties affected the efforts to ensure the right to education for evacuated children and youth, such as poor governmental organization and coordination of educational activities in evacuation centers, and lack of data-based supervision regarding the students' location and their specific needs on site. As a result, the educational environment for many evacuated children and youth was chaotic, and it was difficult to identify needs and provide appropriate support. In such circumstances, many displaced communities had to rely on temporary or incomplete solutions, as well as on the efforts of private actors—some of whom lacked appropriate training in education.

2. The Multisectoral Round Table on Children and Youth in Wartime was established under the Prime Minister's Office to provide a broad perspective on children and youth, for the purposes of coordination, needs assessment, and development of response strategies. The roundtable includes approximately 200 representatives from government ministries, local governments, civil society, and philanthropy. It is jointly led by the Government Coordinator for the Rights of Children and Youth in the Social Affairs Division of the Ministry of Justice (representing the government), and the Executive Director of the National Council for the Child (representing civil society). For additional information, see Ministry of Justice (2023) Round Table on Children and Youth during the War.

As of the end of December 2023, of the students from evacuated communities:

- About 21,100 were in Yachad Centers (hotels and evacuatation centers)
- About 17,100 were registered at addresses in the community
- For about 7,900 students, the Ministry of Education had no information about their whereabouts or educational placement

Source: NCC, 2024b

3.c.1. Gaps in Defining Educational Responsibility Between Hosting and Evacuated Authorities

At the outset of the war, no clear protocols were established to define the division of responsibility between hosting and evacuated municipalities. The hosting municipalities were the first to mobilize to support evacuees now residing within their jurisdiction, acting as intermediaries with various government ministries. In the absence of clear regulations, these municipalities were forced to provide educational services for evacuated students using their own resources, without immediate governmental support. Only later, after receiving multiple appeals from municipalities that had absorbed large numbers of evacuees, the Ministry of Education announced the allocation of resources for such educational activities (Ben Moshe, 2024; Datal, 2023b). The responsibility of the evacuated authorities (i.e., the origin municipalities of the evacuated students) remained unclear and was not sufficiently defined in the Ministry of Education emergency guidelines (Weissblai, 2023).

3.c.2. Reliance on Volunteers

In the initial months of the war, educational activities in the evacuation centers relied heavily on volunteers and civil society organizations. Even later,

volunteers continued to play a central role in the educational framework. They led many of the educational efforts for extended periods, replacing evacuated educators who were unable to work due to own personal challenges of evacuation. Although they effectively replaced educators, volunteers' activities, qualifications or suitability were not sufficiently regulated. As the war continued, the number of volunteers declined, and educational services began to depend increasingly on professional staff. A tripartite model was adopted to reintegrate students into educational routines in educational settings within evacuation centers, temporary education settings outside evacuation centers, or existing schools in the hosting municipality. New schools were also established in areas that received many evacuees, including Eilat, the Dead Sea, and the Central Arava (Ben Moshe, 2024; Weissblai, 2023).

3.c.3. Organizational and Coordination Challenges in Education

Providing education to evacuees required rebuilding educational frameworks and establishing partnerships and interfaces among various stakeholders, including employing and assigning teaching staff from the evacuated municipalities in the new institutions. All this occurred under conditions of uncertainty, frequent policy changes, and the personal impact of the war on education staff (Schwarz, 2023). Additional challenges arose when evacuees from the same municipality were dispersed among multiple hosting municipalities and their students enrolled in schools in different communities. This created difficulties in information sharing between the Ministry of Education, the evacuated municipality, and the host municipality (Weissblai, 2023).

These challenges were echoed in interviews with field professionals conducted by the NCC. Ido Zolti, Head of the Welfare Department in Sderot (personal communication, September 19, 2024), described a complex situation in which approximately 10,500 children (ages birth to 18) from the city were evacuated to five different regions. To coordinate services, the department developed a model of direct communication between the Mayor of Sderot and the heads of each hosting region. The challenges he noted included the need to establish new educational settings in evacuation centers and integrate children into those systems. Even by the end of their stay in evacuation centers, the state had not yet conducted a full numerical mapping of this population, its distribution, or its needs.

Similar sentiments were expressed by youth from the Nofei HaBesor boarding school—an affected community that suffered heavy losses during the war—at a May 2024 meeting organized by the NCC and the Government Coordination Unit for Children and Youth Rights. The youth recounted how they had to

pressure the Ministry of Education to be housed together in a single boarding school environment, which ultimately provided much-needed support and was, described as a "breath of fresh air" despite the difficulties of returning to routine (NCC, forthcoming). These accounts suggest that geographical concentration of evacuees from the same municipality or school would have resolved many of the issues they encountered, and this need should be taken into account.

Furthermore, in many evacuation centers, especially in the early stages, classes were limited to around four hours a day. This was partly due to the lack of designated educational space in hotels, which led to the creation of makeshift learning environments, such as tents (Kadari-Ovadiah, 2023b; Weissblai, 2023). The Multisectoral Round Table published a document listing additional challenges: evacuees were housed in school buildings, continuous data on children needing special care or supervision was lacking, and there was a shortage of age-appropriate services. By the end of the first school year during the war, many evacuated students still did not have access to adequate education. Instruction in core matriculation subjects remained limited, learning conditions were poor (e.g., overcrowded classrooms, mixed age groups and academic levels). Communication between the Ministry of Education and parents was also lacking—leaving families in states of fear and uncertainty (Datal, 2024c; Multisectoral Round Table, 2024a; Knesset Education, Culture, and Sport Committee, 2024c).

Various actors in the field also reported irregular attendance among evacuated students, especially in higher grades. A January 2024 report published by ELEM noted that 51% of youth surveyed reported "disconnection from social frameworks and drifting toward the social margins." The survey was based on responses from approximately 700 evacuee students from the north and south, residing between Tiberias and Eilat (ELEM, 2024A; Eylon, 2024). Such irregular attendance could lead to future dropout, and indeed, ELEM's follow-up report six months into the war (in April 2024: 2024b) identified a direct link between disconnection and potential dropout. Prof. Doron Gothelf, Chair of the Israeli Society for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (personal communication, August 27, 2024), also pointed to a potential correlation between prolonged school absence and increased risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol use.

The burden of dealing with dropout and absenteeism fell heavily on school attendance officers (known in Israel as Regular Attendance Officers), who are responsible for preventing dropout, tracking student absences, facilitating school transitions, and supporting emergency responses (Baruch-Kovarksy & Gilad, 2023). For example, in an interview, a regular attendance officer in northern Israel (who wishes to remain anonymous, personal communication, October 6, 2024) noted that not all children were assigned school placements in the areas to which they moved, a fact often discovered only after relocation. She also reported difficulties in monitoring school attendance in the early part

of the war and after evacuation due to frequent moves, and emphasized the value of life skills and resilience programs. She also echoed the insight that keeping communities intact, even during evacuation, could prevent dropout.

Monitoring dropout from educational frameworks is characterized by a lack of clarity, as it is difficult to understand the scope of the phenomenon—both at the beginning of the war and at present—based on the existing information. In a discussion of the Knesset Education, Culture and Sports Committee in February (2024a), which addressed the dropout of evacuated students from temporary educational settings, the Ministry of Education reported that a review covering the majority of students in secondary education found that only 5% were identified as not attending school regularly, and an additional 8% had been located and returned to school. However, in that same discussion, a high school principal from Kiryat Shmona stated that, from his experience, many students registered in the education system in the hosting municipalities were in fact not attending school and were not being reported (Knesset Education, Culture and Sports Committee, 2024b; Rabinovitz, 2024). In this context, it should be emphasized that there is great importance in developing a mechanism to measure hidden dropout, both in times of routine and, especially, in times of war and crisis. This is necessary in order to provide the required responses to all children who need them, and to do so quickly.[3]

The education system also faced challenges in responding to the needs of evacuated children and youth during their return home. For example, the government framework formulated in February 2024 allowed residents of the Gaza Envelope and Sderot to return to their homes from March 1, 2024, onward but also permitted these residents to remain in evacuation centers until July 7, 2024, if they so preferred. Since the return was not planned to take place in one fell swoop, it was difficult to assess how many evacuees had returned to their communities. Many evacuees were concerned about the departure of education staff from the evacuation centers to reopen schools in the evacuated towns (Rabinovitz, 2024). Uncertainty surrounded planning for the academic year: In late July 2024, the Minister of Education announced that the upcoming school year would not open as usual and would be managed according to a designated framework, details of which were not specified (Odem & Varon, 2024). This situation further impaired the right of evacuated children and youth to education.

3. Various stakeholders, including the NCC and the State Comptroller, have repeatedly addressed the issue of hidden dropout from the education system and the need to develop an appropriate mechanism for measuring it. In 2021, Government Resolution No. 550 called on the Ministry of Education to develop a mechanism to measure the number of students who are formally registered in the education system but are not actively attending, and to define the appropriate measurement criteria. However, currently such a mechanism has yet to be developed or implemented.

Interviews conducted by the NCC with education professionals later in the war (December 2024–January 2025) offered a broad perspective on the state of education for evacuees, with a view toward the future. Gil Hadash, Head of the Education Department in the Municipality of Sderot (personal communication, December 22, 2024), emphasized the need for national education authorities' physical presence in the field—to take interest in concrete issues, witness the practical difficulties, and address them. According to Hadash, such involvement was not common practice for ministry officials, at least in the early days of the war. He also called for organizing education for each evacuated community in a single location, that is, insisting on evacuating members of the same community together rather than dispersing them at different locations, and also offering financial incentives to families to remain with their community. Furthermore, he suggested emphasizing early prevention and intervention in cases of risk. Specifically, he noted the need to address the serious phenomenon of non-attendance in educational settings. Based on his experience, due to the regular attendance officers' overwhelming workload and staffing shortages, a technological and data-based solution is needed to facilitate the monitoring of children's school participation and attendance. The Municipality of Sderot established the Villa Sultana project: a unique space operating under the Education Department's Regular Attendance Division, aimed at providing a safe meeting place for at-risk youth. The space hosts various activities led by youth counselors and professionals, in coordination and cooperation with the local authority. In collaboration with the business sector, a computerized system was also developed to support the project's operations (Cacalist staff & Amdocs, 2024; Odem, 2024).

Hadash also recommended to significantly expand the teaching workforce (noting that the addition of 500 assistant teachers in his area had a dramatic impact, calling the move a "game changer"); expand emotion-focused therapy services, and make them available in schools and during school hours; create partnerships with external therapeutic actors to fill gaps; involve students in outdoor activities such as sports, camping, bonfires, and nature-based games as part of the school curriculum, to create enjoyable and experiential learning experiences; strengthen students' connection to nature and the environment through informal education; encourage students to face challenges; and design tasks that require effort to reinforce self-efficacy. Finally, he recommended investing in four main target groups: early-age (pre-school) children, at-risk children and youth, parents, and educational staff. He also stressed the importance of sharing the model adopted by Sderot and other successful approaches with other local governments, and encouraged professional cooperation and knowledge sharing among educators at various levels and from various regions in order to learn from the experiences of others and use those insights to benefit future activities.

Anat Levi, former Director of the Education Department in the Upper Galilee Regional Council and currently the project coordinator for the return of evacuated communities (personal communication, December 23, 2024), explained that during the first six months of the war, 40% of the Council's residents were evacuated, and had to face an entirely new education system being established for them. According to Levi, the Ministries of Education and the Interior invested significant efforts during the war and were responsive to developments in the field. Nonetheless, the shortage of personnel and the extreme emotional consequences of the war and evacuation had a dramatic impact both on educational staff who were operating under conditions of uncertainty and on the students and their families—an effect that was naturally felt in the educational settings. Her recommendations focused on increasing the number of personnel working in education, especially in the field and in training settings (as opposed to administrative staff), while recruiting deeply committed professionals to work in the field, given the magnitude of current challenges.

3.d. Youth Empowerment and Social Engagement

3.d.1. Disruption of Informal Educational Activities

Alongside the disruption of formal learning routines, informal educational activities—such as extracurricular activities and youth movements—were also disrupted, particularly during the first months of the war. Informal education provides a framework for quality educational time beyond school hours and outside the classroom. It holds great social importance and offers numerous benefits, including the acquisition of various skills and social competencies (e.g., the ability to form interpersonal relationships, communication, teamwork); promotion of personal empowerment, independence, initiative, and leadership; strengthening of self-confidence and self-image; learning through direct and experiential engagement; exposure to diverse areas of interest; and fostering of community and social involvement, and active citizenship. As a result, informal education contributes to the development of a balanced personal and social identity and prepares children and youth for the challenges of adult life (Na'amat & Zlotnik Raz, 2023b). Despite its significant importance, there is a lack of comprehensive documentation and up-to-date data on the participation of children and youth in informal education—both before and during the Iron Swords War. This situation naturally creates difficulty in identifying challenges and in developing the necessary services and interventions, which is particularly critical during wartime.

Nonetheless, the topic of informal education during the war received attention from educational authorities in the context of evacuated children and youth. About one month after the outbreak of the war, in November 2023, the Ministry of Education initiated the establishment of Yachad Centers—ministry-run centers in evacuation facilities, set up to support evacuated children and youth, provide an educational setting tailored to their emotional, academic, and social needs, and ensure informal education continuity. According to the Ministry of Education, during peak days, 400 Yachad Centers operated nationwide (Ministry of Justice, 2024: National Digital Service, n.d.; Rabinovitz, 2024; Zaltzman, 2024). However, as of March 2024, these centers were not operating in all evacuation sites, and furthermore, needs assessments for social and community support—which could have improved the Ministry's services—were not conducted in sufficient numbers (Rabinovitz, 2024). Various actors stepped into the resulting vacuum, often operating independently. For example, 10 regional youth hubs set up in evacuation facilities for youth were operated by the Community Centers Association (Matnasim) in conjunction with the Ministry of Education through donations raised by the Community Centers Association and, initially, without financial support from the Ministry (Rabinovitz, 2024). Naturally, this dependence on donations and financial uncertainty affected the availability and continuity of informal education for evacuated children and youth.

Interviews conducted by the NCC with professionals in the field also revealed significant problems relating to informal education. Elad Sanderovitz, Secretary General of the Israeli Scouts Movement (personal communication, September 17, 2024), described the movement's vibrant involvement—150 pre-army service-year volunteers were deployed across 45 activity centers, most of them in hotels that served as evacuation centers. However, he noted the enormous burden on the volunteers, the over-reliance on volunteer activity, and the lack of adequate training for the situation. Yael Brody, Head of the Department for Children and Youth in the Municipality of Kiryat Shmona, who also works through the Matnas network (personal communication, October 10, 2024), also praised the work of youth coordinators and service-year volunteers in the evacuation centers, stating that their work was very meaningful for the children and youth—but also pointed to the shortage of human resources and the fact that the (young) volunteers lacked sufficient training for the serious distress they encountered. To illustrate the heavy work load, Brody described how she had to coordinate a staff of 20—rather than 4 as in routine times—across 8 locations nationwide, while facing a shortage of training opportunities and difficulties in communication with government authorities. Similar issues were mentioned in other professional interviews. Shula Smith, a training coordinator with HaNoar HaOved VeHaLomed (the Working and Studying Youth movement) in Eilat (personal communication, October 13, 2024), described the movement's intense activity in informal educational activities for evacuated children and youth and emphasized the urgent need to quickly train counselors to meet the high demand. A youth coordinator from the same movement, Rotem Rogovsky,

stressed the need to learn how to cope with challenges as they emerge, and with intensive field activity, and spoke of the difficulty of retaining counselors for children and youth in constantly changing circumstances. In an interview with David Tzur, Director of the Child, Youth and Young Person Division at the Matnas Network (personal interview, August 28, 2024), ahead of the second school year during the war, he stressed the pressing need for Ministry of Education funding for informal education workers and for a coordinating body to help manage children and youth's schedules in the evacuation centers. His perspective echoed other testimonies from the field that highlighted the lack of skilled educational staff and staff to organize and coordinate informal activities.

Additional challenges reported in the field concerning informal education for evacuated children and youth included a mismatch between available recreational activities and evacuees' age (most activities were aimed at younger children), a shortage of sports programming, and the absence of transportation between hotels and nearby towns where activities took place. Over time, as the war continued, the resources allocated to these activities in the evacuation centers were depleted. For example, although the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports Authority had initially coordinated physical activities and provided equipment for evacuated children and youth at the evacuation centers, by March 2024 it was reported that no additional budget had been allocated to continue funding these programs (Rabinovitz, 2024).

Thus, despite some state involvement (through Yachad Centers) and despite the immense importance of informal education activities for evacuated children and youth, it appears the state did not assume full responsibility for this informal education and thereby failed to fulfill its fundamental role as the coordinating authority in emergency situations. In this respect, children's right to education was severely compromised, since not all needs were mapped, some evacuation centers did not receive comprehensive governmental support, essential informal education frameworks were funded through private donations, and civil society organizations and youth movements assumed responsibility for large numbers of children without state coordination or support. Moreover, even where the state did assume responsibility for certain activities, state involvement and funding was limited and failed to meet the ongoing needs over the entire course of the war.

Leisure activities of children and youth who were not evacuated from their homes were also disrupted during the war. For example, in NCC youth participatory processes, participants shared that "our afternoons were empty" in the initial period after the outbreak of the war. While some extracurricular activities and youth movements resumed activity in late October 2023, these were limited to online platforms and in-home activities. Additionally, participants expressed frustration about the numerous restrictions on their lives, as well as their fears and anxiety. As one participant stated, "The silence is scarier than the

sirens." They also discussed their parents' fear and the resulting restrictions on their ability to go out or participate in various activities outside the home. Participants suggested creating campaigns to raise parents' awareness of the importance of outdoor leisure activities for children and youth (Na'amat & Zlotnik Raz, 2023; NCC, forthcoming). Participants also proposed organizing shelters and protected spaces to accommodate extracurricular and informal activities; promoting both physical and online programming; and investing in their publicity and broad dissemination, such that children and youth could receive this information directly and not be dependent on actively searching for it.

3.d.2. Barriers to Volunteering and Civic Engagement

During the Iron Swords War, volunteering became a meaningful coping mechanism for many children and youth. Many viewed their volunteering as beneficial and important, both to themselves and to the community, noting that it supported personal development, reduced anxiety and stress, and strengthened social cohesion (Special Knesset Committee on the Rights of the Child,2023; 2024a; NCC, forthcoming). Indeed, during the war, many youth chose to volunteer and devote their time to various causes, such as agriculture and support services for evacuees. Some of these volunteering programs were developed independently, while others were organized by schools, educational institutions, or local communities. The Division for Society and Youth at the Ministry of Education reported that around 200,000 youth across the country, including youth from evacuation centers, participated in agricultural volunteer activities coordinated by the Ministry (Rabinovitz, 2024).

Interestingly, another area of youth volunteerism was public diplomacy via social media. Youth posted online about the war, published advocacy content, and shared their perspectives and wartime experiences as "digital ambassadors." They described this activity as meaningful work and considered it a form of participation in public discourse and civic engagement, both in Israel and internationally (see chapter on children and youth in the digital environment in this report). The Division for Society and Youth at the Ministry of Education, together with the Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and the Fight Against Antisemitism, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Gesher, launched the NOVA Initiative (Youth on the Frontlines of Public Diplomacy), offering professional training and support to young people wishing to engage in social media advocacy. Approximately 2,500 youth, including evacuated youth, joined the initiative (Ministry of Education, 2023b; Rabinovitz, 2024).

However, children and youth volunteering during the war did not always receive institutional support from educational institutions. The National Students and

Youth Council, 2023) issued a position paper calling schools to show leniency toward students participating in volunteering. The document urged schools to ease academic requirements and suggested creating a digital platform to help youth find suitable volunteer opportunities more easily.

3.e. Unique Challenges in Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Early childhood is widely recognized as a critical period in a child's life and as a significant "window of opportunity" for optimal development. Early childhood education settings play a vital role in both young children's care and education, and significantly impact children's physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral development. These settings also affect a child's ability to reach their full potential during both childhood and adulthood (Zlotnik Raz et al., 2023).

Despite growing recognition of the importance of early childhood and major legislative and policy advancements in recent years—notably the Law on Supervision of Daycare Centers for Infants, 5779-2018 and the transfer of ministerial responsibility for daycare centers for children from birth to age 3 to the Ministry of Education (Government Resolution, 2022; Rabinovitz, 2023)—the early childhood education system in Israel still suffers from structural problems that undermine the realization of young children's right to education. These issues include a severe shortage of trained early education staff, inadequate supervision over care-education settings for children from birth to age 3, and a lack of oversight regarding compliance with professional standards. This lack of supervision is also due to the absence of a comprehensive mapping of all care-education settings in each municipality or local government (Zlotnik Raz et al., 2023).

Naturally, staff shortages and supervisory challenges worsened during the war. As with formal education for school-aged children, the war also disrupted early childhood education routines, **particularly due to shelter and staff shortages.** In general, the Ministry of Education does not require local governments to build shelters or protective spaces in kindergartens, and in some municipalities early kindergartens have partial or substandard shelter arrangements (Ben Moshe, 2024). However, during the war, educational activities could not be held in spaces without access to a standard-compliant shelter, forcing many kindergartens to adopt creative but incomplete solutions—for example, working in shifts to allow several kindergarten classes to use a single protected space (Ben Moshe, 2024; Knesset Education, Culture, and Sports Committee, 2023). Many daycare centers serving infants and toddlers similarly lacked sufficient shelter and were forced to operate in shifts or for limited hours.[4] Many daycare centers remained

entirely or partially closed, or operated in unsuitable educational environments for many months after the outbreak of the war, even after the security situation improved somewhat and Home Front Command guidelines were revised, (Knesset Education, Culture, and Sports Committee, 2024c).

Against this backdrop, many municipalities mobilized to devise appropriate solutions for early childhood education—such as installing mobile protective shelters in kindergartens or identifying alternative protected spaces. However, their ability to respond effectively was hampered by pre-existing challenges, including the aforementioned staff shortages, insufficient mapping of local early childhood educational settings, lack of emergency protocols and guidelines, and disparities in economic resources (Ben Moshe, 2024; T. Nir, personal communication, November 24, 2023).

In settings serving evacuee communities early childhood education staff shortages were especially acute, both in quality and quantity. In November 2023, the Ministry of Education issued a call for proposals to establish temporary daycare centers for infants and toddlers up to age 3 during the emergency (Ministry of Education, n.d., Budgetary Regulation 20670109). This call allowed local authorities hosting evacuated populations from the northern border area and Gaza Envelope to set up and operate daycare centers in or near evacuation centers, and established minimum requirements for doing so. However, these criteria set lower standards than those required in routine times, particularly regarding child-to-staff ratios and the required staff training or experience in early childhood education. In addition, the required operating hours of these settings were limited—due both to staff shortages and to the lack of suitable facilities for full-day programming (Multisectoral Round Table, 2024; Rabinovitz, 2023; Weissblai, 2023).

The shortage of educational staff was also noted as a challenge in interviews with professionals, as was the need for specialized training in emergency and crisis response. Ran Cohen Aharonov (personal communication, August 28, 2024), founder, partner, and CEO of Early Starters International, an organization that established safe early childhood spaces in evacuation centers staffed by professional educators during the war, noted that in the initial emergency phase immediately after October 7, his organization sought to provide basic support services for children and skilled personnel in order to establish “emergency routines" and promote adjustment by creating a daily schedule of structured

4. To enable the operation of daycare centers that did not include a standard protected space, the Ministry of Education (2023) issued an emergency order for the period of the Iron Swords War and a multi-ministerial letter to local governments concerning support for daycare centers and family daycare homes (Ministry of Finance et al., n.d.). In early January 2024, additional guidelines were published to facilitate the operation of daycare centers lacking a standard protected space, as part of the “Safest possible” program (2024). Subsequently, the Ministry of Education also held training sessions on preparing daycare centers for emergency operations (n.d.) Training on operating daycare centers during Iron Swords.

parent-child activities – all while ensuring safeguarding through measures such as limiting entry of unfamiliar individuals to these spaces. He emphasized the importance of training education-care teams in immediate emergency response skills, adapting routines to emergency conditions, and post-crisis recovery, to build resilience among young children.

Additional structural challenges that further hindered the ability of young evacuee children to cope with the hardships of the war included a lack of developmental-emotion-focused services, lack of staff guidance, absence of effective field supervision, and lack of coordination between local and national actors. A senior education administrator (who wishes to remain anonymous, personal communication, August 27, 2024) noted that significant developmental delays were observed among evacuated children during the war, resulting from inadequate educational and developmental support; stress and uncertainty caused by environments unsuited for development and learning; inexperienced staff in evacuation centers; and emotional distress affecting parents (coping with the evacuation, uncertainty about return, chronic stress, and survival mode) and staff, many of whom were themselves evacuees. The lack of regular, frequent staff training, absence of coordination mechanisms between local and national actors, and limited authority of local governments—all of which also hampered operations in routine times—made it almost impossible to effectively address these issues during an emergency.

The challenge of **insufficient coordination** among stakeholders involved in early childhood education—and the increased need for such coordination during emergencies—was echoed by Tova Sinai, Director of Early Childhood Education at the Na'amat network (personal communication, January 22, 2024). She noted that the system overall suffered from major operational dysfunctions, including communication and coordination difficulties between government and municipal entities, lack of a clear policy on operating daycare centers during emergencies, and budgetary issues. She identified lack of coordination as the primary problem during the war and recommended establishing a national emergency coordination authority to facilitate communication between ministries and professional agencies during emergencies, particularly regarding early childhood education-care.

Another structural issue predating the outbreak of the war, which also affected children during the war, was the **lack of sufficient supervision** over daycare centers for infants and toddlers. A senior manager in the field of education stated that the absence of frequent in-person inspections of such settings naturally impacts children in routine times, but even more so during wartime. According to this manager, the current supervision model does not ensure meaningful field presence by inspectors (personal communication, December 30, 2024). In March 2024, the Ministry of Education announced a 200 million shekel budget cut to early childhood education, a sum that had been earmarked specifically

for supervision and monitoring activities (Special Knesset Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2024b; Gil-Ad, & Treblisi Hadad, 2024; Ilan, 2024; Kashti, 2023). This cut significantly impaired the ability to improve and expand daycare supervision—both during the war and in the recovery and rebuilding period.

4. Recommendations

4.a. Ensuring Protection in Educational Institutions

This chapter highlights the critical need to operate physical educational spaces, especially during times of emergency and war. Therefore, protection of educational spaces is a fundamental condition for realizing the right to education, as well as other related rights of children and youth. To this end:

- A consolidated, updated national shelter and protected spaces protocol must be developed. This protocol should be adaptable to the number of students in a school, to their needs, and to the nature of the emergency situation. The protocol should include timelines and allocate the necessary financial and planning resources to add protected spaces to existing schools and ensure compliance with its provisions. Resources must be allocated differentially in order to reduce gaps and promote equal protection for children and youth in all population groups and geographic regions. In addition, resources must be allocated to support regular supervision and monitoring of compliance with the protocol.
- Alongside protection of educational spaces, safety procedures should be established regarding student transportation routes, access to schools, and waiting areas. These procedures must take into account the profile and age of students (for example, special education or younger students) and risk levels.
- Educational institutions' preparedness for emergency scenarios and their compliance with the protocol must be evaluated. This should be based on a comprehensive, up-to-date mapping of all educational institutions in Israel, including daycare centers for infants and toddlers, institutions, along with the number of enrolled students. Preparedness procedures should include drills for educational staff regarding emergency readiness and checking the feasibility of timely, safe access to protected spaces and conducting activities in them.
- Clear, friendly, age-appropriate informative materials must be developed for children and youth nationwide, containing explanations of safety instructions and protected areas. In cases where levels of protection or safety arrangements vary by location or in different areas of a single school, this must be explained to students in a way that not only addresses compliance with the protocol but also clarifies the purpose and rationale behind the differences in a clear, age-appropriate manner. Furthermore, schools must

conduct regular drills for students, which should also include opportunities for processing any emotional reactions the drill may trigger.

4.b. Ensuring Protection in Informal Education Settings

Given the importance of informal education to children's development, it is necessary to ensure that spaces and settings serving children and youth for these activities are protected so that routine operations can continue during emergencies and wartime, as far as possible. To this end:

- Priority should be given to installation and construction of large shelters and protected areas in community spaces (e.g., community centers, sports halls) to support the continuation of routine activities. Additionally, permanent or temporary shelters should be placed in outdoor spaces used by children, such as playgrounds and parks.
- Local governments should consider modifying the infrastructure and design of existing shelters and protected spaces so they are suitable for informal activities during emergencies (e.g., youth movement meetings or extracurricular programs).

4.c. Preparedness for Accessible and Equitable Online Learning

In emergency situations in which in-person learning in school is not possible, steps should be taken to ensure that remote learning is accessible and equitable. To this end:

- According to the recommendations regarding digital learning in the COVID-19 pandemic period, steps should be taken, and the necessary financial and technological resources should be allocated, to ensure that all students have access to digital devices, including through school-based lending programs or government subsidies. In addition, the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with local governments, should develop site-specific technological solutions for areas with limited or no Internet access (e.g., by distributing mobile devices that provide Internet access through cellular networks, or mobile routers).
- To ensure optimal preparedness for online learning and effective use of digital educational platforms and tools in emergencies, schools should learn from the experience of schools that have successfully integrated digital learning as part of their routine activities. In this way, education staff and students become exposed to digital tools and accustomed to using them as a routine practice.

4.d. Ensuring Regular School Attendance and Preventing Dropout

A systemic, nationwide approach is needed to comprehensively address the issue of student dropout. This approach must apply to all schools (both official and unofficial) and across all age groups, both during routine times and in emergencies. To that end:

- A technological system must be developed to monitor student dropout data in real time. This system should include information on students' formal enrollment status in the educational institution, as well as cumulative absences by class and/or day. Schools must be required to use this system and to synchronize it with their digital attendance systems, where such systems exist.
- Based on data collected through this technological system, national dropout statistics should be refined—by comparing student enrollment records with actual dropout figures—and indicators should be developed to detect "hidden dropout" at the national, municipal, and school levels.
- This system should include a dedicated protocol to ensure continuity in tracking student attendance and absences, even when students transfer to a new educational setting. This will allow early identification and intervention in cases of hidden or actual dropout, even when the student is no longer in their original school.
- A protocol must be established for the regular updating and sharing of information with all relevant actors at the local level, in order to improve coordination and collaboration among professionals in education, welfare, and community services who are involved in supporting youth across the at-risk spectrum.
- Targeted services and responses must be developed and strengthened for youth at risk of dropping out, particularly at the local level. During emergencies, when dropout rates tend to increase, these services must be reinforced with additional personnel and financial resources, and their accessibility and availability to students must be ensured.
- In emergencies requiring evacuation, it is recommended to prioritize the relocation of entire communities to a single hosting location, avoid the dispersal of students across multiple municipalities, and enable a coordinated and holistic educational and community-wide response. In cases where community evacuation to a single hosting location is not feasible (e.g., due to the size of the evacuated community), it is recommended to at least group together residents from the same neighborhoods who attend the same schools, to facilitate continuity of a "school-based" educational routine in the new hosting community.

4.e. Adapting the Operations of Educational Settings to Emergencies

- During emergencies and throughout the recovery and rebuilding phase, schools should be granted management-level flexibility, including flexibility to adjust national curricula to the unique characteristics and current needs of their students. In particular, during complex times, emphasis should be placed on activities that support students' need for ventilation, respite, social-emotional learning, and on limiting the introduction of new academic content.

- Appropriate measures must be taken to facilitate and initiative open, sensitive dialogues within educational settings about topics related to war and emergencies and the challenges these pose for the lives of children and youth. This type of dialogue must be ensured across all educational institutions in Israel—both in Jewish and Arab society—and relevant example materials and guidance for conducting such conversations should be developed and made available in Hebrew and Arabic. Moreover, such conversations should go beyond sharing challenges and difficulties, and include opportunities for students to propose responses and activities that could support them. These might include initiating activities through the school or municipal student council, submitting proposals to school leadership or other relevant municipal or governmental bodies.

- Emotional support services in educational settings—for example, through school counselors and educational psychologists—must be strengthened during emergencies and recovery and rebuilding periods, both in terms of human resource allocation and availability, to ensure they are accessible to all students. To support this goal, a unified registry of therapeutic professionals (including professionals from both the public and private sectors) should be developed to facilitate quick and efficient placements based on geographic location, availability, and expertise. Such a registry would allow schools and/or local education departments to reach out to these professionals and coordinate placements in schools on a flexible and temporary basis during emergencies and recovery. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, fund such placements—at least temporarily—during emergencies and recovery and rebuilding, whether on a national or regional basis.

- Training programs on the needs and experiences of children and youth during times of war and emergency should be developed for educational staff, and should include practical tools to promote children's resilience, sense of social belonging, and meaningful learning even amidst adversity. When developing these training programs, consideration should be given to the perspectives and preferences of children and youth themselves, as reflected in academic research or relevant participatory processes. Additionally, such programs should be made available online to ensure broad accessibility.

- Coordination and collaboration between formal and informal educational settings and local volunteer and civic engagement networks should be

encouraged in order to support meaningful volunteer activities by children and youth. Measures should be taken to ensure that participation in approved and coordinated volunteer activities is not counted as school absence and takes place in a protected and safe environment.

- Data on various aspects of leisure activities and recreational frameworks for children and youth at the municipal and regional levels should be collected. Such data should include the types of available activities, the age groups they target, and the number of children they are able to serve. The availability of such a database during routine times could be particularly valuable during emergencies and evacuations, as it would allow for the development of comparable services in evacuation centers and host communities tailored to the needs of the evacuated community. Furthermore, such a database could provide information on relevant and available leisure activities in neighboring or host communities, thereby facilitating participation of children and youth.

4.f. Ensuring Tailored Responses for Early Childhood Education

- As noted in Section 4.a above, full protective infrastructure must be ensured for early childhood education and care settings, including kindergartens and daycare centers. Protection measures for such settings should be tailored to children's developmental profiles (e.g., age, extent of assistance needed to reach a shelter) and be included in the unified national protocol. Resources for these measures should be allocated differentially, to reduce disparities and promote equality among population groups and geographic areas, and in a manner that considers varying security needs.

- Until full protection coverage is achieved, and based on municipal mapping of early childhood educational settings, structured and safe emergency preparedness plans should be developed at the local or regional level to support some degree of educational continuity during emergencies—for example, by temporary merging kindergarten classes, and increase of support staff.

- In evacuation scenarios, emphasis must be placed on providing protected, high-quality educational-care settings for young children. Specifically, such settings must employ a sufficient number of experienced and trained educational-care staff, operate in facilities suitable for educational activities, and be equipped with the necessary infrastructure and materials. These settings should also provide emotional and therapeutic support to children and parents beyond school hours.

- Professional training for educational-care staff should include expanded content on emergency procedures and educational activities during times of crisis.

- Due to the inter-ministerial and cross-sectoral nature of the challenges related to early childhood education, the Ministry of Education should appoint a dedicated early childhood education coordinator (project manager) for emergencies and recovery and rebuilding. This coordinator should be granted the necessary authority and resources to develop coordination mechanisms and establish joint work processes with relevant government, local, civil society, and professional stakeholders.

- It is essential to address the ongoing structural challenges facing the early childhood education system, which are exacerbated during war and emergency. In this context:

- (a) Action should be taken to improve and expand the supervision system for educational-care frameworks. Particularly in emergencies, it is crucial for representatives of supervisory bodies to visit the field in person to assess needs and challenges and offer support. Sufficient government funding must be allocated to supervision and oversight activities, especially during wartime and recovery periods.

- (b) Address the shortage of trained educational-care staff. This requires a substantial improvement in employment conditions—including salaries, adequate working conditions, career advancement opportunities, and professional development—as well as significant investment in training and mentoring. These steps will help establish early childhood education and care as a professional field and support the recruitment and retention of qualified staff. Ensuring a strong, skilled workforce will foster professional resilience in both routine and emergency contexts.

4.g. Promoting Child and Youth Participation

Children and youth have the right to express their views, to participate, and to influence decision-making processes on matters affecting their lives—including, and especially, during times of emergency and war. Listening to children and youth also carries significant benefits: (a) For the participating child—by playing a role in participatory learning, developing skills (such as communication and message delivery), and being given the opportunity to influence matters that concern them. Particularly in times of emergency and recovery, when children and youth experience uncertainty and a lack of control, the very act of participation can restore a sense of agency and influence; (b) For decision-makers—listening to the views and suggestions of children and youth contributes to a deeper understanding of their needs and wishes, and leads to the development of more relevant and appropriate policies and responses; (c) For society as a whole—by reinforcing democratic values, especially in times of emergency and war. To this end:

- Mechanisms for child and youth participation should be institutionalized in the needs assessment process and the development of appropriate

responses, with an emphasis on formal and informal educational activities during emergencies and recovery periods.

- The influence and involvement of student councils, both national and local, in decision-making processes related to school operations and educational programming during emergencies should be ensured.

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CHAPTER 2

The Right of Children and Youth to Mental Health during the Iron Swords War

1. The Right of Children and Youth to Health — Focusing on Mental Health — in Light of the CRC

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) enshrines the right of children and youth "to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health" (Article 24). Although this article emphasizes physical aspects of health—such as reducing infant and child mortality, combating disease and malnutrition, and ensuring maternal and child health care—it also includes reference to broader and systemic obligations of States Parties. These include ensuring access to essential medical assistance and health care for every child, as well as the development of preventive health services (Articles 24(2)(b) and 24(2)(f)).

Over the years, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee) adopted a holistic and positive interpretation of the right to health for children and youth. This approach draws on the World Health Organization's definition of health as not merely the absence of disease, but a state of physical, mental, and social well-being. Accordingly, the right to health is understood as a social right, grounded in a public health approach that emphasizes health promotion, prevention, accessibility of services, and reduction of disparities. It also requires the development of tailored responses through various means, including through listening to children and youth and involving them in the design of policies, services, and programs (CRC Committee, 2013).

In its interpretation, the CRC Committee stressed that—like all other rights enshrined in the Convention— the right to health is not a standalone right, but is interconnected with other rights and is of equal importance. Therefore, the realization of the right to health is not only a goal in itself but also a fundamental condition for the realization of other rights. The CRC Committee has pointed, among other things, to the connection between the right to health and the right to equal, non-discriminatory access to health services, highlighting the heightened vulnerability of children and youth from minority or marginalized groups who tend to face greater barriers in accessing medical and psychosocial services. The CRC Committee also emphasized the right of children and youth to development—physical, mental, emotional, and social—and their right to express their views and participate in shaping the health and mental health services designed for them. Such participation is essential for understanding their health-related and mental-health-related challenges and needs, and their expectations of the health system (CRC Committee, 2013).

In recent years, the CRC Committee has devoted special attention to the mental health of children and youth, noting that this is an evolving field that

requires tailored, multisystem responses. The CRC Committee emphasized the importance of mental health as a vital component of the overall health and well-being of children and youth, and expressed concern over the global rise in mental and emotional health problems, particularly among adolescents. It noted a range of emotional and psychological challenges faced by children and youth, including depression; anxiety; eating disorders; addictions; psychological trauma resulting from violence, abuse, and neglect; and self-harm and suicide. The CRC Committee called on States Parties to acknowledge the extent of these phenomena and to develop appropriate and targeted responses (CRC Committee, 2003, 2013).

The CRC Committee supported a holistic, integrated, and multisector approach—based on the promotion of health and mental health, prevention, provision of emotional support, early identification of difficulties, and therapeutic responses tailored to the needs of children and youth. The CRC Committee particularly encouraged accessible, community-based therapeutic responses embedded in the everyday environments of children and youth, such as the education system, community health services, and the family (CRC Committee, 2003, 2013).

Emergencies, war, and displacement exacerbate pre-existing mental health challenges experienced by children and youth and require specific, immediate, and targeted attention. The Committee has recognized that such periods disrupt children and youths' sense of safety, and the family, educational, and community settings that serve as support networks, and increase their risk of exposure to traumatic and violent events, loss, physical harm, anxiety, stress, uncertainty, risky behaviors, and harm to their sense of protection—both due to the emergency itself and the breakdown of existing support and protection systems.

In light of this, the CRC Committee has stressed the grave effects of emergencies and war on the physical and mental health of children and youth, and has called on States Parties to ensure continued access to health services, including mental health care, even during emergencies and evacuation. The CRC Committee further stated that emergency preparedness, recovery, and rebuilding planning must consider the broad effects of war and emergencies on children's and youths' health and urged States Parties to promote resilience by developing appropriate, multisystem programs and services. Importantly, the CRC Committee emphasized the need to ensure the participation of children and youth themselves in the design of emergency response and preparedness plans—including in aspects related to readiness, planning, and the adaptation of health and mental health services to their needs (CRC Committee, 2016; CRC Committee, 2013).

2. The Mental Health of Children and Youth during the Iron Swords War

2.A. Introduction

The mental health of children and youth is fundamental to their overall well-being, healthy development, and ability to cope with life's challenges. Numerous studies indicate that emotional distress among children and youth—particularly during emergencies and armed conflict—is rarely a temporary or isolated phenomenon. When appropriate professional support is not provided, their psychological difficulties may deepen and worsen, potentially impairing their cognitive, behavioral, and social development, with long-term consequences into adulthood. Early intervention can reduce or even prevent such harm (Machel, 1996).

Nonetheless, the response provided by Israel's health, education, and welfare systems to the mental health needs of children and youth during the Iron Swords War was inadequate. Even prior to the outbreak of the war, the mental health system for children and youth was in the midst of a deep and ongoing crisis: a severe shortage of professional staff (including psychologists, child and adolescent psychiatrists, social workers, and school counselors), insufficient staffing standards, lack of investment in public infrastructure, and increasing reliance on civil society organizations and external service providers. The system was further characterized by significant disparities across local governments and geographic regions, a shortage of therapeutic services, and the absence of a coordinated, comprehensive national policy.

During the war, children and youth were confronted with an almost unimaginable reality: Some survived the atrocities of October 7th, were injured, witnessed unbearable scenes, lost family members and friends, endured captivity, or had loved ones who were—or still are—held hostage. Many were forced to leave their homes suddenly, separated for long periods from siblings or parents called up for reserve duty, worried for injured loved ones, and were subject to repeated alarms and missile attacks. Additionally, many were exposed to graphic documentation of violence and terror circulating on social media. Their daily lives changed overnight, and their basic sense of safety was profoundly shaken (Monikendam-Givon, 2024; NCC, 2024a; NCC, forthcoming; Sabag et al., 2024). It is therefore not surprising the mental health crisis affecting children and youth in Israel significantly worsened during the Iron Swords War.

2.B. Children and Youth's Increased Need for Mental Health Services

One of the clearest indicators of the worsening mental health crisis among children and youth during the war is the sharp rise in requests for emotional support and psychological treatment. Data received from healthcare organizations (HMOs), helplines, and public services point to a widespread trend in all sectors and regions. Indeed, more than 23,000 children have been recognized as victims of hostilities by the National Insurance Institute as a result of the war, with a significant portion suffering from psychological harm (Ministry of Justice, 2024; NCC, , 2025).

In addition, data processed from Israel's four HMOs (Clalit, Maccabi, Meuhedet, and Leumit) in response to a freedom of information request by the NCC, show a 33% increase in the number of adolescents (ages 12–17) diagnosed with anxiety during the first three months of the war (October–December 2023), compared to the corresponding period in 2022. Clalit HMO also reported that the number of children and adolescents who received psychotherapeutic treatment between October and June 2023 increased by approximately 2,500 compared to the corresponding period in 2022–2023.

A follow-up review conducted by the NCC one year after the outbreak of the war revealed similar trends: In the first 12 months of the war, the number of children diagnosed with anxiety and with stress and emotional disorders increased by 29% and 27%, respectively, compared to the previous 12-month period. Additionally, the number of children diagnosed with eating disorders increased by 13%, and the number of calls to the Ministry of Education's helpline increased by 1.6 times compared to the previous 12-month period, with 73% of the calls related to emotional support.

These data clearly indicate a significant rise in the demand for mental health services for children and youth. However, it is important to note that the figures reflect only cases documented within public systems, and do not include children and youth who experienced distress but did not reach out to these systems—either because they received support through private services or because they did not seek help at all. Therefore, it is likely that the true number of children and youth experiencing mental distress as a result of the war is considerably higher.

2.C Key Manifestations of Distress Emerging from Surveys on the Mental State of Children and Youth

During the war, a wide range of mental distress symptoms were reported among children and youth. Studies and surveys were conducted with parents of children and youth, as well as with professionals working with children and youth, with the aim of assessing the emotional toll of this period and identifying the most common psychological symptoms children and youth experienced.

Findings revealed a broad spectrum of distress symptoms observed among children and youth at the onset of the war, including anxiety, sleep difficulties, hypervigilance, sensitivity to noise, irritability, social withdrawal, crying, temper outbursts, loss of appetite or emotional eating, unexplained physical pain, feelings of detachment from reality, confusion, loss of routine, insecurity, and a heightened sense of lack of control driven by ongoing stress and uncertainty. Among adolescents, additional symptoms included emotional exhaustion and a sense of meaninglessness.

For example, a survey conducted by the NCC in October 2024, among parents of children from across the country, yielded alarming results: 24% of parents reported that their child's emotional state had significantly worsened during the war. The emotional state of children whose parents were serving in reserve duty and/or who personally knew someone injured in the war was particularly affected. Approximately 90% of parents reported that their children experienced stress and fear to some extent during the war, with episodes occurring at least once every two weeks (42%) or on a daily basis (16%). In addition, 25% of parents noted changes in their children's eating habits, in the form of overeating, emotional eating, and food avoidance. The survey also showed that younger children were particularly vulnerable: 36% of children aged 6–9 experienced temper tantrums, compared to 30% of those aged 10–13 and only 12% among those aged 14–17.

Another survey conducted among pediatricians by the Goshen Association in December 2024, in the early stages of the war, found that approximately 84% of parents of children aged 2–12 who had seen a pediatrician reported symptoms of mental distress in their children. Specifically, 64% of parents reported that their children were experiencing fear, and 62% noted symptoms of anxiety (NCC, 2024b).

2.D Voices of Children and Youth on Their Mental State

The dramatic rise in mental distress among children and youth following the war is not only reflected in statistical data, but is also echoed in the voices of children and youth who participated in participatory processes of the NCC's Youth Parliament program. In these participatory processes, children and youth spoke of the significant emotional and mental health difficulties they and their peers were facing as a result of the war. Participants spoke of feelings of anxiety, stress, and physical and emotional exhaustion. Some reported knowing victims of the war or having close family members who had been called up for reserve duty, and expressed fears of another terrorist attack. It was evident that the impact of the war remained deeply felt in their lives many months after the outbreak of hostilities.

They described how even seemingly indirect, day-to-day events—such as exposure to the news, hearing the phrase "cleared for publication," (which typically precedes official announcements of soldiers killed in action) or background noises like planes, ambulances, or explosions—trigger unease and restlessness. Some participants reported general hypervigilance; others described persistent sleep disturbances, even months after the war began, decreased physical activity and movement, poor nutrition (emotional eating or loss of appetite), sedentary behavior, and excessive screen time (Na'amat & Zlotnik Raz, 2023; NCC, forthcoming). A participatory process conducted in 2024 with students from the south—many of whom came from communities that experienced many casualties on October 7 and had been evacuated to other towns—revealed difficult accounts of prolonged shock, malaise, a desire to "escape reality," and severe disruption to their daily routines, including reversed sleep patterns (NCC, forthcoming).

A similar picture emerged in a discussion held by the Special Knesset Committee on the Rights of the Child, where it was reported that both evacuated and non-evacuated children and youth continued to experience deep emotional distress even months after the war began. It also became clear from this discussion, as well as from additional sources detailed later in this report, that the systemic response to these significant emotional needs was inadequate (Knesset, 2024a).

3. The Mental Health Systems' Response to the Challenges of War

This chapter focuses on the challenging state of the child and youth mental health system in Israel during the war and examines how the three main systems—health, education, and welfare—responded to the growing mental health needs of children and youth in the wake of the war.

The dramatic rise in mental distress among children and youth following the war faced a mental health system already suffering from prolonged systemic undercapacity. The COVID-19 crisis had already revealed and deepened the gap between the emotional and therapeutic needs of children and youth and the adequacy of available community-based services. The war, as noted, further exacerbated these gaps (Dali & Sofer, 2021). Chronic and significant shortages in professional personnel, inadequate infrastructure, limited services, long waiting times, and poor coordination between professional actors—all made the task of providing rapid and accessible emotional support to children and youth during the war nearly impossible.

The health, education, and welfare systems are the public institutions responsible for safeguarding and promoting the mental health of children and youth in Israel. Upon the outbreak of the war, these systems—often without clear guidelines, adequate infrastructure or services, and an established emergency response framework—were forced to care for an unprecedented number of children and youth in need of emotional and psychological support, many of whom were dealing with particularly complex and sensitive issues. These systems were required to deliver therapeutic responses to children experiencing trauma, loss, and anxiety, even as many of the professionals themselves were directly affected by the war (Noam-Rosenthal, 2024).

Despite strong commitment on the part of many professionals and several commendable local initiatives—including immediate deployment to evacuation centers and the provision of ad-hoc psychological support to children and youth—a concerning picture emerged from the field. There was a lack of coordinated, uniform policy for emotional support in times of emergency, an absence of mechanisms for rapid expansion of therapeutic personnel, and overreliance on private or volunteer-based initiatives, which cannot replace structured, systemic, and sustainable responses. As a result, many children and youth in significant emotional distress remained without adequate support (Almog-Bar et al., 2024).

The scope of the gap between needs and available responses also emerges from the 2024 NCC survey, which found that approximately one-half of the children who needed psychological or emotional care during the war did not

receive it at all. Consequently, many had to turn to private services or forgo treatment altogether due to accessibility barriers (NCC, 2024a).

The gaps described above are reflected—differently, but consistently—across the three main systems responsible for the mental health of children and youth: health, education, and welfare. Each system was called upon to respond to the emotional needs of children and youth during and after the outbreak of the war, yet all three were caught in a state of budgetary, professional, and operational depletion.

3.A. The Health System's Mental Health Services for Children and Youth

3.A.1 Status of the Child and Youth Mental Health Services within the Health System Prior to the War

In 2015, responsibility for providing mental health services was transferred to the HMOs as part of a health insurance reform. Under this reform, psychotherapeutic treatments—including for children and youth—were to be provided through the HMOs by psychologists and social workers operating in public mental health clinics or in the HMOs' primary care mental health clinics. The reform had two main objectives: First, to expand the accessibility and availability of mental health services in light of the chronic shortage of professionals and decades of underfunding; and second, to promote integration between the physical and mental health systems, in an effort to reduce stigma around mental health care and improve treatment continuity (State Comptroller, 2020).

In 2019, the Ministry of Health published a comprehensive report exposing serious deficiencies in the mental health services provided through the HMOs, including services for children and youth. In particular, the report warned of a severe shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists, which directly impacts the ability to deliver appropriate and timely care to this population (National Council for Mental Health, 2019). The report further found that the reform's framework relied on a diagnostic model that is not appropriate for all age groups, and in particular, does not meet the unique developmental needs of younger children. In addition, it revealed persistent neglect regarding services for the Arab population—both in terms of available services, professional staff, and access to services in Arabic. These findings illustrated that even four years after the reform was launched, the shortage of accessible and available therapeutic services for children and youth remained unresolved.

This already dire situation was further strained in 2020 by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The restrictions introduced in an effort to contain the spread of the virus—most notably the closure of educational settings, the shift to digital learning, cancellation or reduction of social and recreational activities, and the resulting damage to social connections—led to a significant worsening of emotional distress among children and youth. In response, the Ministries of Education, Health, and Welfare jointly developed a national emergency mental health plan for children and youth. The plan included components intended to fill gaps in prevention, early identification, and community-based treatment, and included the establishment of outpatient clinics and development of intensive interventions for emergencies and crises (Ben Moshe, 2024; Knesset, 2024a).

The plan received broad support from professionals across government ministries, professional associations, therapeutic providers, and civil society organizations, including the NCC. However, following the dissolution of the 24th Knesset in 2022, the plan was never implemented. Later, the Director-Generals Committee on the Rights of Children and Youth[1] decided to appoint a team to develop a similar inter-ministerial plan to promote the mental health of children and youth (Ministry of Justice, 2023). Despite recognition of the growing need to strengthen the child and youth mental health system, no structured government plan to promote their mental well-being was developed. The systemic failures identified in the Ministry of Health's 2019 report have not been addressed. As a result, the events of October 7 and the Iron Swords War found the health system under-resourced, structurally deficient, and unable to provide adequate mental health support to children and youth at the very time they were most vulnerable.

3.A.2. Responses vs. Mental Health Needs of Children and Youth during the Iron Swords War

The Iron Swords War posed challenges for the health system in unprecedented scale and intensity. The system was required to provide treatment and support to tens of thousands of children and youth directly affected by the events of October 7, including survivors of massacres, terror attacks, and violence, as well as children and youth who lost family members, friends, or their homes. In addition, the system was tasked with providing sensitive and tailored care for children and youth who had been kidnapped to Gaza and released after a lengthy period in captivity.

1. The Director-Generals Committee on the Rights of Children and Youth is a permanent committee established under Government Resolution No. 1652 (June 2022). The committee is chaired by the Director-General of the Ministry of Justice and includes the Director-General of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of National Security, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration. For additional information, see: Ministry of Justice (n.d.).

Moreover, the system needed to support children and youth who were evacuated from their homes in southern and northern Israel and who were abruptly separated from their social, educational, and community settings. Many others across the country lived under the constant threat of missile and rocket attacks and experienced daily sirens, coped with the prolonged absence of a parent or family member called up for reserve duty, or were exposed to violent and traumatic content through social media. The Ministry of Health was required to simultaneously manage an unprecedented number of mental health cases, proactively identify children and youth in need of urgent emotional care—especially those whose parents were unable or not yet ready to seek help—and address complex professional challenges for which it had neither pre-existing tools nor sufficient clinical guidelines.

In the early days of the war, the health system operated without a structured action plan or established framework to respond to widespread psychological crises among children and youth. Most responses in the field were reactive and not guided by a coordinated policy or by uniform professional guidelines. The existing shortage of personnel was immediately felt: In addition to the chronic labor shortage that already existed prior to the war, many care professionals were called up for reserve duty or were forced to stay home due to the closure of educational institutions—further limiting the availability of community-based mental health services. HMOs struggled to provide immediate and meaningful care, especially in areas to which families and children had been evacuated, where there was often no physical presence of therapeutic services and, in some cases, inadequate technological infrastructure for remote care.

At the same time, many therapeutic and support services were established through private or volunteer efforts, without clear distinctions between certified professionals and external providers, and often without professional oversight or institutional accountability. It took time for the Ministry of Health to formulate and implement a structured and broad-reaching response, and even then, the services encountered operational and structural barriers that limited their scope and effectiveness.

Several weeks into the war, the NCC, together with several professional associations and civil society organizations, formulated recommendations for a comprehensive national mental health plan for children and youth. These recommendations included the expansion of the educational psychology service, the addition of thousands of social workers, the establishment of dedicated mental health clinics in the north, expansion of resilience centers,[2]

2. Resilience Centers, operated jointly by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Welfare, and local governments, provide first-line care for children, youth, and adults affected by stress and trauma resulting from security-related incidents and emergency situations. Services include emotional and psychological support, individual or family guidance, and referrals to professional therapists when needed. For additional information see Israel Trauma Coalition (n.d.).

and reinforcement of mechanisms for the early identification of emotional distress and community-based care across the entire continuum of care (NCC et al., 2023).

About a month and a half after the outbreak of the war, the Ministry of Health declared mental health a "national priority" and launched the outline of the national plan Makom LaNefesh ("A Place for the Mind"), which aligned with the above recommendations for a national mental health plan for children and youth. The program included proactive outreach to affected individuals, support for the families of hostages, expansion of community-based rehabilitation support, establishment of clinics in evacuation centers (e.g., hotels where the evacuees lived), recruitment of paid volunteers, strengthening of telephone and online crisis hotlines, and improvement of mental health professionals' employment terms. The program, which addressed both adults and children/youth, also outlined systemic goals, including increased compensation for independent therapists, financial grants for physicians specializing in psychiatry, funding for hundreds of new positions for psychologists and social workers, wage increases for public-sector psychologists, and the establishment of new resilience centers.

However, in the initial months of the war, the measures outlined in the national plan were only partially implemented. A Knesset discussion held more than six months after the outbreak of the war revealed that children and youth were still facing long waiting times of several months for psychological treatment. It was also reported that one-half of the children released from Hamas captivity and children who had lost one or both parents in the war had abandoned the treatments offered to them as the treatments did not match their needs (Efrati, 2024b Gal et al., 2024; Knesset, 2024b; Moshe Pardo & Reuveni, 2024). The exceptional demand highlighted once again the acute shortage of professionals—a problem that persisted even after temporary wage incentives and bonuses were introduced.

As part of the Makom LaNefesh program and in response to the ongoing crisis, the Ministry of Health increased the mental health support budget for the HMOs in February 2024, from 350 to 596 million shekels. In September 2024, funding criteria were modified to expand alternatives to inpatient psychiatric hospitalization. However, the application of these criteria to children and youth drew criticism, as they did not stipulate a dedicated investment in this age group, did not set maximum wait times, and did not include sanctions for delays (HCJ 6733/24).

The shortage of immediately available mental health services also led to the expansion of services through non-conventional means—whose suitability and effectiveness for children and youth remain unclear. These included the training of "resilience coaches" in some HMOs (Efrati, 2024a) and expansion of first-line emotional support services by pediatricians and others—especially in

the identification of distress and referral to relevant professionals. Obviously, appropriate training was required for pediatricians in order to assume these expanded responsibilities. A December 2023 survey of pediatricians conducted by the Goshen Association found that more than one third (36%) felt they had limited knowledge about the effects of traumatic events and war on children, and more than one half felt they had limited knowledge about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in children or trauma-informed care. Only about 12% of pediatricians reported having participated in any training related to the war's emotional impact on children, while around 80% said they believed further training in this area was necessary (NCC, 2024b).

The signing of the collective agreement with public-sector psychologists in March 2025 marked a significant turning point in the Ministry of Health's efforts to expand public-sector mental health services, and specifically services responding to the psychological needs of children and youth following the war. The agreement, signed after a prolonged public campaign, includes substantial improvements in employment conditions, staffing levels, and a compensation model, with the aim of enabling long-term recruitment and retention of professionals within the public system. Negotiations for a similar collective agreement with public-sector psychiatrists also began in August 2024, reflecting growing recognition of the urgent need to bolster the field of child and adolescent psychiatry—a sector that has long suffered from a severe shortage of trained professionals.

In recent months, early signs of positive change have begun to emerge. In ongoing conversations held by the NCC with professionals—including clinical and educational psychologists working with children and youth—many have expressed a renewed willingness to remain in the public system and even to expand the scope of their public-sector positions, citing the improvements brought about by the new agreement. It is to be hoped, therefore, that these developments signal the beginning of a much-needed structural transformation that will strengthen the public system, reduce waiting times for community-based mental health care services, and ensure that all children and youth have access to timely, high-quality, and affordable psychological support.

3.B. The Education System's Mental Health Services for Children and Youth

3.B.1. Status of the Education System's Mental Health Services Prior to the War

The education system plays a critical role in the mental health infrastructure for children and youth in Israel. Unlike other population groups, nearly all children

and youth are part of a single, supervised, and universal public system that, if properly utilized, facilitate the early and systematic identification of students experiencing mental distress and allows for timely support.

The Educational Psychologic Service (EPS or SHAPAH) and the Counseling Psychologic Service (CPS or SHEFI)—constitute core components of prevention, early identification, and intervention for mental health challenges. As such, they play a central role in fulfilling students' rights to health—including mental health—and to education. However, even before the outbreak of the war, these services suffered from severe structural shortcomings. CPS, which operates within schools and relies mainly on school counselors, functions without a regulated staffing standard. This service, provided by educational counselors, is intended to deliver emotional and therapeutic support to students in educational institutions, as well as to their parents and school staff (Noy, 2023).

School counselors are defined as the representatives of the mental health field within the education system. They are responsible, among other things, "for developing resiliency skills among individuals and systems to cope with developmental processes, unexpected crises, and stressful life events" (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Their role is critical, as they serve as the first line of mental health support for students. Students dealing with emotional or psychological difficulties can approach the school counselor for initial assistance. The counselor also has the authority to refer cases to EPS and to provide appropriate guidance to educational staff and parents.

In practice, elementary and middle schools are not required to allocate a budget for counseling hours, and in many cases, school counselors are employed part-time under the terms of a teaching position (Ashkenazi et al., 2014). In high schools there is a formal staffing standard, but it is very limited—only 1.7 weekly counseling hours per class. Not only is this a very small number of hours, but during these hours, school counselors are also expected to perform a range of administrative and educational responsibilities in addition to their counseling work (Toronto Friendship Fund, 2021). Moreover, low socio-economic areas and Arab localities suffer from acute staffing gaps (Ashkenazi et al., 2014). The combination of a heavy workload and poor employment conditions meant that the school counseling system was already unable to provide adequate support to students in regular times—and struggled even more during the war.

EPS, which is responsible for providing individual psychological care, parental guidance, and professional consultation for staff, also suffered from understaffing and unfilled positions before the war. Of the 3,422 allocated positions for educational psychologists, only about 2,400 were filled—leaving approximately 30% of the positions vacant, in part due to low wages and poor working conditions (NCC, 2024b). These staffing shortages were particularly pronounced in lower socio-economic areas and Arab municipalities (Shahaf, 2023). Moreover, the current staffing standards defined in the Ministry of

Education's Circular of the Director-General is not aligned with actual needs: one psychologist per 1,000 students in elementary and secondary schools, one per 500 children in kindergartens (ages 3–6) and in first grade, and one per 300 students in special education. These standards do not enable an effective or tailored responses to the growing mental health challenges—challenges that had already intensified prior to the war—and have contributed to heavy workloads and professional burnout (Monikendam-Givon, 2023).

In addition, the service does not provide equal coverage for all age groups. In practice, and contrary to its intended purpose, EPS focuses primarily on children aged 5 to 15. That is, the Director-General's Circular does not mandate the provision of this service to pre-school children aged 3–4 or to high school students aged 16–18. As a result, children in these age groups sometimes receive no psychological services at all—especially in municipalities where no dedicated budget has been allocated (Ministry of Education, 2022; NCC, 2023; Rimon-Greenspan & Barlev, 2023).

Unequal access to psychological services for children and youth in different localities is further exacerbated by the funding mechanism of the EPS. According to this mechanism, EPS funds approximately 70% of the cost of each psychologist position and the local government is expected to cover the remaining 30%. This matching-fund model disproportionately affects under-resourced municipalities, which often struggle to finance their portion of the positions. As a result, these authorities typically settle for a minimal level of service, while wealthier municipalities are able to allocate additional resources to create more extensive services, leading to disparities in the scope and availability of psychological services across municipalities.

Moreover, due to the availability of additional personnel in wealthier municipalities, some are able to extend the service to age groups for which the Ministry of Education's guidelines do not mandate coverage. This allows for broader access to services for children and youth in those areas. Consequently, children and youth living in different municipalities receive varying levels and quality of services—both in terms of the number of positions available and the age groups eligible for service—ultimately affecting the availability, frequency, and nature of the psychological support they receive (Rimon-Greenspan & Barlev, 2023).

Another challenge related to EPS concerns its limited capacity to address the needs of early childhood (birth to age 3). Although responsibility for daycares was transferred from the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs to the Ministry of Education in 2022, ministerial-level changes that were necessary to enable EPS to provide for the needs of children in this age group were never made. As a result, EPS struggled before the war—and continues to struggle—to provide services in these early childhood education and care settings due to a lack of budget, staffing, and allocated positions.

A report by the Berl Katznelson Center and the Forum of Organizations for Public Psychology published in February 2023, several months before the outbreak of the war, warned that the educational psychological services in Israel's education system were in a deep crisis. According to the report, approximately 2,600 additional positions for educational psychologists are needed—beyond fully staffing for existing positions—to ensure adequate emotional and therapeutic services for all students. In the report, psychologists cited low salaries, excessive workloads, lack of promotion opportunities, and insufficient support for professional development as the main reasons for refusing to enter or remain in the public system.

Given this situation—including structural gaps in staffing standards, workforce shortages, and unfilled positions—the war hit the educational mental health system for children and youth when it was already under-resourced and lacked the infrastructure and responsiveness required to handle an emergency of such unprecedented scale. This situation directly affected the education system's ability to serve as the first line of defense for students' mental health.

3.B.2 Responses vs. Mental Health Needs of Children and Youth during the Iron Swords War

Although the education system's mental health services were unprepared for the psychological consequences of the war on children and youth, the Ministry of Education took a series of steps following the outbreak of the war in an effort to respond to the scale and intensity of the mental distress experienced by students. These steps included the establishment of an emotional support hotline within the CPS, as part of the Support and Assistance Directorate of the Ministry of Education, aimed at supporting educators, students, and parents on emergency-related issues. In addition, the Ministry reported that educational psychologists were redeployed to the areas with the greatest need, and that professional support was provided for children and youth in the evacuation centers (Monikendam-Givon, 2023). Later, informative videos were produced for parents and children, and educational staff received training in mental health.

Another systemic measure introduced to address the emotional-psychological consequences of the war was approval of temporary reinforcement budgets ("psychological support baskets") for EPS units. These funds are typically transferred from the Ministry of Education to local governments to bolster psychological staffing, particularly in times of emergency. The aim of these baskets is to enable the short-term hiring of additional psychologists based on urgent local needs. In response to a freedom of information request by the NCC, Michal Engelhart Chief Psychologist and Head of the Psychology Division at the Ministry of Education (personal communication, September

25, 2024), stated that the Ministry of Education reported its approval of 1,200 psychological reinforcement baskets to expand emotional support services for children, parents, and educational staff—particularly in EPS units located in municipalities that received large numbers of evacuees. As of September 2024, 57% of the reinforcement baskets had been utilized, most of them to fund psychologists already working in EPS, and in some cases retired psychologists or those on unpaid leave.

Nevertheless, these steps fell far short of meeting the needs. Psychologists in the education system reported working "around the clock" to respond to students and their families. According to an October 2023 survey by the Forum of Organizations for Public Psychology, approximately 80% of public-sector psychologists worked beyond their official hours due to overwhelming demand and pressure for support (Monikendam-Givon, 2023). However, in view of the lack of preparation and resources, about one-half of the volunteer psychologists understood they would not be compensated for their work. In a letter sent by the Forum of Organizations for Public Psychology to MK Mickey Levy on October 18, 2023, the Forum noted that under these circumstances, the system was functioning on goodwill and volunteerism—a temporary solution that is unsustainable, especially in a prolonged emergency (Forum of Organizations for Public Psychology, 2023).

At the same time, a concerning trend emerged among children and youth at risk. According to data released by the Ministry of Education, suicide risk assessments performed by educational psychologists in 2024 increased by 15% compared to 2023. The number of treatment sessions for children and youth at risk of suicide increased by 42%, and training sessions for educational staff on the subject rose by 40% (NCC, 2025). These findings indicate a significant rise in emotional distress among children and youth—one that was not matched by a corresponding scale-up of services.

This worsening trend was further supported by a large-scale survey of 462 educational psychologists published by the Forum of Organizations for Public Psychology in April 2024. The survey revealed that 92% of respondents reported an increase in the level of distress among children and adolescents, 86% reported a significant rise in the number of referrals, and 77% identified an increase in the severity of the cases. Thirty-seven percent reported waiting times of six months to one year for treatment, while 21% reported waiting times exceeding one year. Thirty-two percent stated they were required to terminate therapy with children and youth against their professional judgment, and 30% indicated that patients were forced to discontinue treatment, due to systemic constraints. The survey also revealed rising burnout and diminishing motivation among professionals, driven by low wages, heavy workloads, lack of systemic support, and the absence of professional advancement opportunities (Treblesi-Hadad, 2024).

In addition, although the Ministry of Education did take steps to establish new EPS centers and fill positions that had been vacant prior to the war, only nine new centers were opened between August 2023 and December 2024—an increase of merely 4% in the number of centers. Staffing levels rose only marginally, from 71% to 73%. In the Jerusalem and Southern districts—the latter being among the regions most affected by the war— staffing levels declined.

As noted, these data provides clear evidence that the education system's mental health infrastructure—which was already operating under capacity—struggled to cope with the extraordinary challenges posed by the war. The shortage of personnel, reliance on temporary reinforcement measures, and overwhelming workload all severely impaired the system's ability to provide an adequate and timely response to children and youth at their most vulnerable moments. As a result, the mental health services and support available to children and youth in the education system remained limited relative to the depth and breadth of needs on the ground.

3.C. The Welfare System's Mental Health Services for Children and Youth

3.C.1. Status of the Welfare System's Mental Health Services for Child and Youth Prior to the War

Israel's welfare system plays a central role in the mental health infrastructure for children and youth, as it provides a range of services and responses—including emotional and psychological support—to children and youth facing personal or family crises or who are at risk. The welfare system offers treatment centers for child victims of abuse, emergency support in short- and long-term crises (including therapeutic or post-hospitalization residential settings), therapeutic services in parent–child visitation centers, and supplemental mental health care in educational-therapeutic settings under the responsibility of the Ministry of Welfare.

In times of emergency and war, the welfare system becomes especially crucial in responding to the distress of children and youth. Findings from recent years indicate that during such situations, welfare services play a key role in delivering tailored, focused responses for children and youth—including therapeutic-emotional support. This is particularly true in cases involving loss, harm, displacement, or family separation (Gal et al., 2024; Sabag et al., 2024). These findings underscore the welfare system's important role as an integral part of the broader mental health framework for children and youth.

However, like the health and education systems, the welfare system was already grappling with severe and ongoing structural challenges on the eve of the war—primarily, a shortage of qualified professionals, increasing workloads, and services that were not fully adapted to the evolving and complex needs of children and youth. In addition, welfare services rely heavily on civil society organizations that provide a wide array of therapeutic and emotional support to children and youth. These organizations often operate with insufficient resources and funding. Prior to the war, there was a clear trend of increasing state reliance on such organizations, alongside a lack of long-term systemic investment in public government infrastructure. This situation made it significantly more difficult for the welfare system, through its regulatory mechanisms, to ensure the quality and availability of services provided by these non-governmental entities (Gal et al., 2024, p. 14).

As part of the broader staffing crisis in the welfare system, there was also a marked shortage of mental health professionals specializing in children and youth—particularly clinical social workers, psychologists, and therapeutic staff in out-of-home settings for youth at risk. Residential care settings, including post-hospitalization facilities, therapeutic boarding schools, and emergency shelters, faced high staff turnover, low wages, and inadequate staffing levels. According to a report by the Taub Center, in the period leading up to the war, the Ministry of Welfare's youth units experienced a steady decline in the number of social workers on staff, and encountered difficulties in recruiting and training staff to provide in-depth emotional support (Gal et al., 2024). Mental health services provided through the welfare system were limited in scope and primarily reached children and youth formally classified as at risk—for example, those in rehabilitative or therapeutic settings. In contrast, children and youth in the welfare system who experience but are not formally designated as “at risk” often receive no support (Almog-Bar et al., 2024).

3.C.2. Responses vs. Mental Health Needs of Children and Youth during the Iron Swords War

In the absence of a strong, stable public infrastructure, the war further widened the gap between growing needs and available responses. There was a significant increase in the number of children and youth in welfare settings who required emotional support—through emergency hotlines or via civil society organizations and external service providers operating under the Ministry of Welfare. However, due to the heavy caseload, pre-existing shortages of professional staff, and the further diminished staff caused by widespread reserve duty or staff being unable to reach work in severely affected areas, the responses provided were insufficient (Almog-Bar, 2024; Gal et al., 2024; Sabag et al., 2024).

Despite these many challenges, social workers—driven by a sense of mission and urgency to support children and families during their most difficult moments—were among the first to reach evacuation centers and emergency facilities, often at their own initiative, without institutional directives (Open Knesset, 2024). Nevertheless, alongside this impressive mobilization, a comprehensive systemic response by the Ministry of Welfare remained lacking.

In a discussion of the Knesset Labor and Welfare Committee, the chair of the Social Workers' Union, Inbal Hermoni, stressed that the system's existing infrastructure did not allow social workers to provide quality care, due to excessive caseloads, poor employment conditions, and lack of adequate staffing (Open Knesset, 2024). According to Iris Florentin, a representative of the Ministry of Welfare, 510 new positions were added to the welfare system in 2024, including 310 designated for war-related needs. However, of total 6,648 approved positions, only 5,742 were filled—leaving around 900 positions vacant. Understaffing was particularly severe in localities directly affected by the war in the north and south. For example, only 37% of positions were filled in Metula and in the Eshkol Regional Council, and over 25% of positions remained unfilled in Kiryat Shmona and Sha'ar HaNegev (Gal et al., 2024). These limitations significantly impaired the system's ability to provide needed care.

Among the children and youth in need of immediate emotional support were not only those who experienced personal tragedies—such as the loss of family members, abduction, or physical and emotional harm—but also children already known to the welfare system due to unrelated risk factors, such as youth residing in emergency shelters, out-of-home care, or post-hospitalization therapeutic frameworks. According to Sabag et al. (2024), staff in these welfare settings reported a rise in emotional distress, anxiety, and post-traumatic symptoms among children in their care. These high-risk settings—many of which operated in emergency mode for extended periods—faced high staff turnover: Staff were under intense emotional strain, and in some cases, lacked appropriate training for handling extreme trauma.

Another key obstacle to the availability of services at the necessary scale during the war was the absence of a structured mechanism for rapid recruitment of additional professional staff. This led to heavy reliance on volunteers and local initiatives, which precluded the creation of a stable and sustained support network. At the local level, municipal welfare departments were tasked with identifying and supporting thousands of families in distress, all while facing uncertainty and frequent staff turnover (Almog-Bar et al., 2024).

Social services that are not specifically mental health–focused but do provide emotional support, such as protection centers for children and youth (Beit Lynn Centers), emergency hotlines, and mentorship programs—also reported exceptional workloads. For example, Beit Lynn Centers operated under a dual burden: new cases of abuse alongside worsening of existing cases due to

the general rise in emotional distress (Almog-Bar et al., 2024). In its annual review, ELEM (2024) reported a sharp increase in the number of youth seeking emergency and street-based support services, many of whom presented with anxiety, depression, or emotional dissociation triggered by the war.

It appears, therefore, that while the welfare system made efforts to deliver immediate emotional and psychological responses, no national policy was formulated for rehabilitating mental health services for children and youth within the welfare system. As of now, there is still no long-term plan aimed at rebuilding the eroded infrastructure and especially its human resources.

4. Focus on Key Population Groups

4.A. Spotlight: Young Children (Early Childhood)

Exposure to trauma in early childhood has distinct effects, particularly with respect to development. In childhood, cognitive and emotional capacities for processing traumatic events are not yet fully formed, which makes children particularly vulnerable to developing severe emotional and developmental symptoms—either in early childhood or later developmental stages (Sabag et al., 2024; Zlotnik Raz et al., 2023).

Research indicates that war has a direct and significant effect on the emotional distress of young children. For example, children aged 2–7 who were exposed to explosions and sirens, were forced to rush to shelters, or witnessed people wounded and property damaged during the Second Lebanon War, later exhibited symptoms such as separation anxiety, fear, excessive crying, and sleep disturbances. Another study found that 80% of children aged 1–5 in the city of Sderot, who were chronically exposed to sirens and rocket fire, later experienced symptoms of PTSD and a significantly higher rate of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) compared to children from communities not exposed to warfare (Taub Center, 2023).

The mental distress experienced by children and youth during the Iron Swords War also affected young children. A survey conducted in January 2024 described the difficulties observed by staff in daycare centers, including trouble falling asleep, restlessness, frequent crying, hypervigilance, and tantrums (Blank, 2024a). Another survey found that about one-third of parents of young children reported an increase in signs of emotional distress or behavioral regression since the beginning of the war. For example, 43% reported that their child was increasingly startled by sudden noises, 36% noted increased separation anxiety, and 34% reported sleep difficulties (Blank, 2024b). In addition, the closure of early

childhood education and care settings at the start of the war (for at least two weeks in most cases), and their only partial reopening later on, also negatively affected the mental well-being of young children (Blank, 2024b; Blank et al., 2024).

It appears that the emotional distress described above did not receive a sufficient systemic response from the education system—even after early childhood education settings resumed partial operation. Educational supervisors responsible for training daycare staff were, like other educational teams, faced with unprecedented challenges during the war. They struggled to provide adequate support to daycare directors, being allocated only 10 hours of guidance per month (Blank, 2024a).

Additionally, although the Ministries of Education and Finance had introduced a five-year plan in May 2023 to improve the quality of care in daycare centers, this plan was significantly compromised by a 2024 budget cut of approximately NIS 200 million—about half of the originally promised amount (Blank, 2024a; Taub Center, 2024). This cut effectively undermined the ability to provide pedagogical training for caregivers in identifying emotional distress among infants and toddlers and in providing appropriate first-line responses through pedagogical training. The implications of this setback are serious in routine times—and even more so in times of emergency and war.

In conclusion, the combination of the war's severe emotional and psychological effects on young children, and the failure to invest the necessary resources to properly identify and treat emotional distress, may result in a missed critical window for early intervention—one that could otherwise prevent the escalation of mental health challenges later in life.

4.B. Spotlight: Evacuated Children and Youth

4.B.1 Severe Disruption of Life Continuity

By December 2023, over 40,000 children and youth had been evacuated from their homes by government order due to the war, with thousands more evacuated later. These children and youth were uprooted from their familiar and natural environments under harsh and traumatic circumstances, while also coping with intense stress, fear, and anxiety. Some sustained physical injuries, lost family members, friends, neighbors, or teachers, lost their homes, and experienced a profound rupture in their community life. Additionally, they faced difficulties related to living in evacuation centers that were not designed for long-term residence. Life in the evacuation centers was characterized by overcrowding, a lack of a stable daily routine, extended periods of unstructured

free time, and at times complete inactivity, along with blurred boundaries between private and public spaces (Rabinovitz, 2024).

Many children did not return to school regularly. Some moved with their families multiple times, disrupting both their educational and social continuity. These experiences led to heightened feelings of fear and anxiety and/or to social withdrawal and isolation (Rabinovitz, 2024). Among children and youth who remained in evacuation centers for prolonged periods, a decline of emotional well-being was observed, partly due to the uncertainty and lack of routine. According to Prof. Doron Gothelf, Chair of the Israeli Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (personal communication, August 27, 2024), in the absence of a structured routine and regular attendance at educational settings, there was an increase in risk behaviors, including drug and alcohol use, incidents of sexual abuse, as well as symptoms of depression and anxiety.

4.B.2. Challenges in Providing Mental Health Support for Children and Youth in Evacuation Centers

The Ministries of Health, Education, and Welfare implemented a range of services and therapeutic programs for children and youth in the evacuation centers during the war, including therapeutic after-school programs, individual therapy sessions, parent support groups, and mentorship programs (Ministry of Justice, 2024; Rabinovitz, 2024). However, these were generally ad-hoc and uncoordinated services, with limited availability. In many cases, there was no central coordinating body responsible for mapping needs, facilitating inter-ministerial and inter-organizational coordination—across government, local, and civil society actors—and directing resources accordingly. As a result, there were overlaps in responsibilities or, conversely, gaps in services where essential support for children and youth was unavailable.

For example, the Ministries of Health, Education, and Welfare, and the National Authority for Community Safety each operated similar programs—such as psychological centers, emergency response hubs, emotional hotlines, and community outreach programs—without coordination. No consolidated system was established to guide or integrate the work of these actors (Rabinovitz, 2024). Similarly, psychological centers established by the Ministry of Education in some areas resembled those operated by the Ministry of Health (Ben Moshe, 2024).

The difficulties in delivering consistent, targeted emotional support to evacuated children and youth also stemmed from a significant shortage of therapeutic personnel—an issue that, as described earlier, affected all systems responsible for children and youth's mental health, even before the war. This widespread

shortage made it difficult to provide appropriate and tailored support in evacuation centers. According to Prof. Doron Gothelf, Chair of the Israeli Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (personal communication, August 27, 2024), the severe staffing crisis—exacerbated by the departure of psychiatrists from the public system to work in private settings or abroad—meant that the emotional needs of many evacuated children and youth were often left unmet.

Efrat Rotem, attorney and social worker, and Head of the National Division of the Social Workers' Union (personal communication, September 5, 2024), also described the grave situation on the ground. She noted that the war's challenges encountered an already-depleted system and welfare professionals—many of whom do not specialize in trauma—were called upon during the war to support children and youth dealing with severe traumatic experiences.

4.B.3. Safeguarding Concerns about Children and Youth in Evacuation Centers

A troubling picture emerged regarding the safety and protection of children and youth in evacuation centers. By January 2024, reports were received of 64 children at risk, and 13 criminal cases were opened against adults suspected of offenses—including sexual abuse and violence—against minors in these centers (Rabinovitz, 2024). During a March 2024 discussion of the Knesset Committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality, it was reported that 93% of 75 reported cases of sexual assault in evacuation centers involved minors (Knesset, 2024c; Or, 2024).

The harms to children and youth' safety in the evacuation centers apparently stemmed, in part, from inadequate operational and safety preparedness. At least during the early months of the war, many facilities lacked designated safeguarding officers, did not allocate dedicated spaces for children and youth, and failed to mark hazardous areas within the facilities. In addition, entry procedures for the numerous volunteers working in these centers were not properly regulated, entry restrictions were not enforced for those lacking authorization. For example, according to David Tzur, Director of the Department for Children, Youth and Young Adults at the Community Centers Association (personal communication, August 28, 2024), he repeatedly entered evacuation centers without anyone asking who he was. Oversight of volunteer and professional access was also lacking, and the statutory requirements for preventing the employment of sex offenders were applied only at a later stage (Ministry of Justice, 2024).

Furthermore, no structured safeguarding trainings were organized for evacuation centers based in hotels, information on safeguarding children and youth was not widely distributed, and no individuals were assigned responsibility for handling safeguarding-related complaints and inquiries in each evacuation center (Rabinovitz, 2024).

As noted in the chapter on children and youth's right to education during wartime, the Multisectoral Round Table on Children and Youth in Wartime developed recommendations to ensure child protection in evacuation centers. These included: allocating designated child- and youth-friendly spaces within the centers, appointing dedicated safeguarding officers, regulating and monitoring the entry of volunteers and professionals to the centers through various means (including issuing ID badges and requiring police clearance in accordance with the Prevention of Employment of Sex Offenders in Certain Institutions Law, 2001), and encouraging supportive therapeutic and social welfare activities that strengthen the family and community unit (Multisectoral Round Table, 2023). These recommendations led to a government resolution that tasked the National Authority for Community Safety with several steps including development of a child safeguarding protocol for evacuation centers (Government of Israel, 2024a, 2024b). However, these steps were taken belatedly, and the implementation of several key recommendations remains incomplete.

4.C. Spotlight: Children and Youth in the Arab Community

A December 2023 survey conducted by the Goshen Association among parents of children aged 2–12 found a particularly high rate of emotional distress among children in the Arab community—approximately 88%, compared to 82.5% among Jewish children (CC, 2024b). In NCC youth participatory processes, Arab youth spoke of their wartime experiences and emotional challenges, such as feelings of anxiety, stress, and physical and emotional exhaustion, frustration, and helplessness. They also expressed a sense of insecurity due to exposure to threats and racist incitement—both online and in public spaces—and reported fear of leaving their homes or venturing outside their communities.

As described in the chapter on the right of children and youth to education during wartime, while some youth stated that returning physically to school provided a degree of emotional stability, they also reported the lack of emotional support in schools, a sense of being misunderstood by educational staff, and an absence of professionals to turn to. Participants emphasized the importance of creating opportunities for emotional expression, adapting the learning process to the emotional toll of the war, and consideration of students' individual circumstances (NCC, forthcoming). Data from the aChord Center further supports this picture: 57% of Jewish students but only 25% of Arab students reported that their schools

offered assistance to students with emotional difficulties and fears during the war (Hebrew University of Jerusalem & Accords Center, 2024).

The absence of emotional and therapeutic support for Arab children and youth within the education system during the war is closely tied to the severe shortage of mental health professionals in Arab society. According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, Arabs account for only 12% of graduates of a specialization in educational psychology—a figure significantly lower than their share of the population (Monikendam-Givon, 2024).

This shortage of child and youth mental health professionals in Arab society extends beyond the Ministry of Education and is also evident within the Ministries of Health and Welfare. In 2019, members of the Arab community accounted for only 4% of child and adolescent psychiatrists, 5.5% of psychologists (with a master's degree), a mere 0.17% of art and expressive therapists were Muslim (Ministry for Social Equality & Ministry of Health, 2019), and 11% of social workers (Ben-Porat [Madhela & Gal], 2024).

Since the outbreak of the war, the Ministry of Education has taken several meaningful steps to expand psychological and therapeutic support in the Arab sector by funding supplemental support ("reinforcement baskets") in Al-Kasom, Kuseife, Neve Midbar, Ar'ara in the Negev, Rahat, and Segev Shalom, and group therapy programs, as well as guidance for staff and parents were launched by EPS in Rahat, Al-Kasom, and Neve Midbar. Programs were also developed and led by school counselors to promote youth resilience, along with protocols for facilitating emotional conversations with students about distressing content, emotional pain, and loss. Nevertheless, a significant shortage of mental health support in the Arab education system remains—especially within the Bedouin communities in southern Israel (Monikendam-Givon, 2024).

5. Recommendations

5.A. General Recommendations for Promoting the Mental Health of Children and Youth

- A permanent inter-ministerial and cross-sectoral forum should be established to address issues related to the mental health of children and youth. This forum should raise awareness of evolving challenges and propose initiatives and action plans in the field of mental health.
- A coordinated inter-ministerial government program should be developed to expand therapeutic services for children and youth and revise the staffing formulas for mental health professionals within the Ministries of Health,

Education, and Welfare.

- A new, up-to-date database should be created to monitor mental health services for children and youth and to flag shortages by geographic area, specialization, language, and cultural characteristics.
- A regularly updated national registry of certified child and youth mental health professionals (from both the public and private sectors) should be established and made available to the public. This registry should include details on professional specializations, languages in which services are provided, and the service areas of each therapist across the country. The aim is to improve access to mental health services, particularly during times of war and emergency.
- Mandatory training programs on trauma and anxiety treatment for children and youth should be implemented for mental health professionals, including child and adolescent psychiatrists, pediatricians, and psychologists. Additional training should also be provided to professionals who regularly work with children and youth, such as public health (Tipat Halav) nurses, school counselors, kindergarten teachers, caregivers, and educators. Appropriate resources should also be allocated for specific parental guidance on these topics, as an integral component of strengthening community and family resilience during emergencies and wartime.
- A dedicated role of "care coordinator" for children and youth should be developed, responsible for assisting children in exercising their right to mental health care—including service navigation and coordination of care between relevant government ministries and agencies.
- Regulatory mechanisms should be established to ensure the full implementation of the government recommendations on child and youth safeguarding in evacuation centers and evacuation hotels.

5.B. Strengthening the Mental Health Infrastructure within the Ministry of Health

- The number of professionals across all therapeutic disciplines in the health system, including child and adolescent psychiatrists, psychologists in the public sector, and social workers who work with children and youth, must be significantly expanded. This expansion should prioritize increasing the number of professionals in the Arab community. The expansion should include the following elements:
  - » Increasing the number of funded positions;
  - » Addressing the shortage of professional staff and unfilled positions through salary increases, financial incentives, and proactive retention measures;

  - » Incentivizing private-sector professionals to join the public mental health services for children and youth;
  - » Promoting academic studies in therapeutic professions where there is a severe shortage, through a dedicated incentive framework;
  - » Offering financial incentives to mental health professionals, including doctors and psychologists, to work in peripheral areas suffering from critical staff shortages.

- Community-based mental health services for children and youth should be developed and expanded across the entire continuum of care, and additional public mental health clinics should be established to significantly improve availability and accessibility.
- A Director-General's Circular should be issued to establish maximum waiting times for mental health treatment for children and youth, with the aim of reducing delays in access to community-based therapy.
- Therapeutic services in Arabic should be expanded, and include the development of linguistically and culturally adapted emotional support services, training for educational staff in Arabic, and efforts to make existing services more culturally and linguistically accessible and increase public awareness of these services by publishing and distributing relevant information.
- An inter-ministerial coordination function should be established to ensure the integration of all psychosocial responses for children and youth during evacuations. This body should be granted the authority and resources necessary to coordinate efforts among the health, welfare, and education systems at both the national and local levels.

5.C. Strengthening the Mental Health Infrastructure within the Ministry of Education

- The staffing ratio for educational psychologists in the education system must be revised. As a first step, the ratio should be set at no less than one psychologist per 500 students in grades 2–12, one psychologist per 300 children in kindergartens (birth to age 6) and in grade 1, and one psychologist per 200 students in special education. This revision requires a significant increase in educational psychologist positions—at least 2,700 new positions should be added, even if their recruitment is gradual.
- The responsibilities of the educational psychology service (EPS) should be fully and formally expanded to cover both early childhood (birth to age 5) and high school ages (15–18).
- The number of school counseling hours in elementary schools, middle schools,

and high schools should be set at a minimum of 3.5 hours per class.

- The budget for training early childhood caregivers in daycare centers should be significantly increased, with an emphasis on training to identify signs of distress, anxiety, and trauma in young children and providing first-line responses by the daycare educational staff.
- ESP services in schools in Arab communities should be strengthened, with a focus on expanding supplemental support ("reinforcement baskets"), providing guidance to educational teams, and offering parent counseling.

5.D. Strengthening the Mental Health Infrastructure within the Ministry of Welfare

- The number of welfare professionals should be increased, and dedicated emergency staffing plans established, as well as the immediate addition of social work positions, with a focus on peripheral regions and communities directly affected in wartime and emergency. The current workforce should be reinforced through incentives (including salary increases and retention bonuses) and by encouraging the return of professionals who have left the system. Additionally, standardized staffing ratio should be established for all social workers working with children and youth, specifically social workers who operate under the framework of the Youth Law [Care and Supervision] 5720-1960.
- A national plan for psychosocial emergency response should be developed, including clear protocols for identifying children in distress and providing immediate access to psychological assistance.
- Residential care staff (such as those in therapeutic boarding schools, post-hospitalization frameworks, and emergency shelters) should be trained to respond to trauma, anxiety, and psychological distress during emergencies.

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CHAPTER 3

Children and Youth in the Digital Environment During the Iron Swords War

1. Children's Rights in the Digital Environment in Light of the CRC

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted in 1989, prior to the technological revolutions of the twenty-first century. In this sense, the Convention predated the digital age and did not account for the significant developments that occurred in the digital environment and in information and communication technologies, and their profound impact on children and youth. Nonetheless, in recent years there has been substantial progress—both in theory and in practice—in the field of children's digital rights, as well as a growing recognition of the need to adapt the rights enshrined in the CRC to the digital environment and to the significant presence of children and youth online.

As part of this development, in 2021 the CRC Committee issued a comprehensive General Comment on children's rights in the digital environment. The General Comment is intended to guide States Parties in implementing the Convention in digital settings and to clarify the obligations of State Parties with respect to both the opportunities and the challenges that the digital sphere poses for children's rights. In this context, the CRC Committee instructed States Parties to develop and implement legislation, policy, and education and training programs to ensure the realization of children's rights in the digital environment, and to promote cooperation and stakeholder involvement in this field, including the active participation of children and youth themselves (CRC Committee, 2021; NCC, 2023).

In particular, the CRC Committee recognized the vital role that the digital environment plays in children's lives during emergencies and crises. The CRC Committee stressed the need to ensure online safety even in times of war and emergency and called on State Parties to take all necessary measures to protect children from exposure to violent and harmful content, bullying and harassment, exploitation, and incitement to behaviors that potentially endanger their lives, including content originating from terrorist groups and violent extremists. The CRC Committee stated that States must guarantee children's safe access to the internet, and develop mechanisms for identifying and eradicating online risks, including through listening to and engaging with children themselves (CRC Committee, 2021, paras. 14, 54, 121).

In addition, the CRC Committee acknowledged that the digital environment contains racist content as well as misleading and false information, sometimes originating from terrorist or extremist groups. Accordingly, it urged State Parties to take the necessary measures to prevent the spread of such content; to provide reliable, child-friendly information; and to develop appropriate and sensitive responses for children and youth exposed to harmful content (CRC

Committee, 2021, para. 54). The CRC Committee also noted the need to promote digital literacy among children and youth of all ages—including through formal education—and to equip them with tools and skills to identify unreliable, biased, or false sources of information; to locate and access support services; and to understand online risks, including those related to exposure to violent or terrorist content (CRC Committee, 2021, para. 104).

Alongside the need to guarantee children's right to protection online and access to reliable information during times of emergency and war, the CRC Committee also stressed children's right to express their views and to participate in the digital environment. It acknowledged that children and youth view the digital space as a meaningful arena for sounding their voices and engaging in matters that affect their lives. The CRC Committee also recognized that digital technologies can support the realization of their right to participate at the local, national, and international levels. The CRC Committee therefore called on States to ensure children's right to express their views and participate in digital settings—including, and especially, during times of emergency and crisis (CRC Committee, 2021, para. 16; CRC Committee, 2009, paras. 125–126).

In this regard, the CRC Committee emphasized that children's right to freedom of expression includes their right to seek, receive, create, and share information and ideas—including through digital means—and that the digital environment offers children opportunities to express ideas, opinions, and political views (CRC Committee, 2021, para. 58). The CRC Committee further established that States Parties are responsible for ensuring that children have access to clear, comprehensible information and training on the topic of freedom of expression—particularly regarding how to create and share content safely, respectfully, and legally, while preventing incitement to violence, racism, or hatred (CRC Committee, 2021, para. 59), as part of their right to freedom of speech, opinion, and participation.

2. Introduction: Children and Youth in the Digital Environment During the Iron Swords War

The digital environment is now an integral part of the lives of children and youth, who were born into an era characterized by wide connectivity and extensive use of social networks and digital tools. Globally—and in Israel—children and youth represent a major user group on the internet (Livingstone et al., 2016), making extensive use of digital platforms.[1] They engage in the digital space for

learning, social interaction, leisure, content creation, discussion, and gaming, and for accessing government and other essential services. Many children and youth therefore perceive internet access and use as a human right, and view the digital environment as a vital space for participation and for exercising their rights in practice (NCC, 2023; Zlotnik Raz & Almog, forthcoming).

In emergency situations, including during wartime, the internet and digital media offer clear benefits for children and youth. For example, the digital environment offers children in risky, vulnerable situations access to vital—sometimes life-saving—information; enables them to stay connected to family and friends; and can support access to essential services including education, healthcare, welfare, and other essential services (CRC Committee, 2021, para. 121; Livingstone & Bulger, 2014). Alongside its advantages, the digital environment also poses challenges and risks that affect the rights, development, and well-being of children and youth, especially in times of war and emergency.

Exposure to age-inappropriate content can lead to anxiety, depression, and fear. Excessive and prolonged screen time has also been associated with a range of health risks, including disrupted sleep, headaches, eating disorders, and a sedentary lifestyle. Another consequence of increased screen time in isolation is withdrawal from or reduced interest in social relationships—relationships that are particularly crucial for children and youth. Moreover, extended time spent online—especially on social media—can shift users' "center of life" to the screen and increase the risk of online harm committed by adults and peers[2] (Israel Internet Association, 2023c, 2024b). These dangers are further compounded by the fact that many children and youth in Israel feel that the significant adults in their lives—parents, educators, and professionals—do not sufficiently understand the digital environment. As a result, these adults are not considered to be appropriate sources of support for children and youth who are experiencing stress or problems in the digital sphere (Na'amat & Zlotnik Raz, 2021).

Given these risks and the centrality of the internet and digital culture in the lives of children and youth in general, and particularly in times of emergency, it is worth noting that the State of Israel has yet to adopt a comprehensive national policy

1. Approximately one year prior to the Iron Swords War, in July 2022, the Israel Internet Association published a survey on social media use among several hundred children and youth. In the survey, 60% of respondents reported spending more than four hours a day on social networks, and 11% reported using them for more than eight hours daily (Israel Internet Association, 2022; for additional information on online usage: Israel Internet Association, 2024b).

2. According to data from the Child Online Protection Bureau (Hotline 105), thousands of children are harmed online each year. These harms include, among others: sexual and physical abuse; exposure to offensive images, videos, and content; bullying and shaming; social exclusion; and emotional abuse. The risk of online harm increased during the COVID-19 crisis, as a result of prolonged lockdowns and the intensified digital activity of children and youth (Ben-Arieh et al., 2020; Morag et al., 2021).

regarding children and youth's use of the digital sphere, despite the existence of several state-level responses (such as the Child Online Protection Bureau [Hotline 105]) and a growing awareness (specifically following the Iron Swords War) of the need for an integrative approach to address the implications of children and youths' internet use.

3. Key Challenges

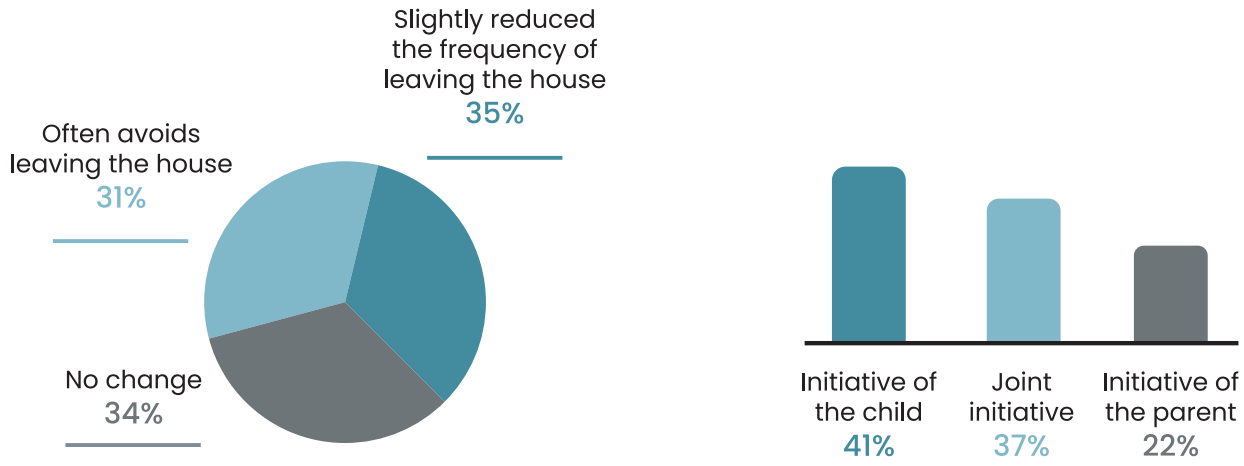
The events of October 7 and the Iron Swords War starkly illustrated the importance of examining the impact of the digital environment on the lives of children and youth in Israel. During the war, the reduction in physical interactions—particularly in educational settings—led to increased reliance on the online sphere by children and youth for both educational and social purposes. This heightened use was accompanied by a set of unique challenges. Exposure to disturbing content related to terrorism and extreme violence—including footage of killings, combat scenes, and graphic images and videos—combined with violent and harmful discourse online, as well as the spread of false, misleading, or unreliable information ("fake news"), resulted in significant emotional consequences for children and youth, including fear, anxiety, stress, depression, diminished sense of security, confusion, and uncertainty.

In a survey conducted by the NCC at the start of the war's second year, parents of children between the ages of 6 and 17 reported a significant decline in their children's frequency of leaving the house since the outbreak of the war. Many pointed to a clear pattern of children avoiding leaving the home altogether (NCC, 2024), a phenomenon that likely elevated consumption of digital content and consequently, risks of online harm, including exposure to the types of harm mentioned above.

Leaving the House since the Outbreak of the Iron Swords War

Decline in frequency of leaving the house	Compared to the situation before the war, about two-thirds (66%) of children refrain from leaving the house or reduced the frequency of leaving the house due to the security situation
Some children hardly ever leave the house due to the war	7% of the children almost never leave the house compared to the period before the war. The situation is more severe in the Arab society,* where 18% of children almost never leave the house.
Decline in the frequency of leaving the house is mostly the children's choice	41% of children who refrain from leaving the house or leave the house less frequently do so independently, and not because of their parents (22%), and for 37% this was a mutual decision.

*The vast majority of Arab respondents live in the Haifa and the Northern region



Source: NCC, 2024.

3.a. Exposure of Children and Youth to Violent and Terror-Related Content

3.a.1. Scope of Exposure

During the Iron Swords War, many children and youth in Israel were exposed to graphic content involving extremely violent and terror-related contents on social media platforms. In effect, already in the morning hours of October 7, many children and youth encountered videos circulated online that documented extreme physical, verbal, and sexual acts of violence, including contents broadcast in real time. These videos included images of people being killed; various acts of extreme violence such as abductions and abuse, including of children and youth; and scenes of destruction, arson, and looting.

Content-filtering tools (which are not commonly installed in the digital devices used by children and youth) are not fool-proof (Benita, 2023; Ministry of National Security, 2023), and many children and youth accessed unfiltered apps and media channels where disturbing footage was shared and remained outside the public eye. In the early days of the war, especially on October 7, it was particularly difficult to monitor these materials, provide real-time mediation for viewers, report them, and remove them from the internet. Notably, there was a significant rise in the use of the Telegram platform during the war, including among children and youth. Graphic and disturbing content was widely disseminated on Telegram in particular, according to Ohad Ezran, founder of the Digital Forum – Protecting Children Online (personal communication, May 6, 2024). The Israel Internet Association (2023a) issued a special warning regarding Telegram, recommending that it only be used by individuals aged 17

and older, partly due to the absence of content filtering and users' heightened risk of exposure to violent, graphic, or inciting material. Notably, while in the Israel Internet Association's 2022 survey, Telegram ranked low among platforms that youth were unwilling to forego (indicating that most could do without it), by 2024, nearly 30% of youth reported using Telegram daily or several times a week (Israel Internet Association, 2022, 2024d).

According to findings of s study conducted by Hotline 105 and the Chief Scientist's Office at the Ministry of National Security (Nagar et al., 2024), 63% of youth reported exposure to disturbing or harmful war-related content (e.g., images, videos, chats, messages, and posts) and 61% reported experiencing severe anxiety or emotional reactions as a result. Additionally, 61% reported exposure to fake news; 57% reported encountering nationalist or antisemitic discourse related to the war on social media or in online games, and also reported experiencing harm based on nationalist tensions. A detailed breakdown of the findings by age reveals the following:

- 71% of teens aged 15–17 were exposed to disturbing or violent content related to the war on social media or online gaming platforms. Among self-identified secular and traditional youth, 69% reported such exposure, as did 65% of Arab youth.
- 15% of youth aged 12–14 reported having shared disturbing or harmful content themselves.
- 57% of respondents said they encountered nationalist or antisemitic discourse online: 64% among youth aged 15–17 and 50% among youth aged 12–14.
- 17% reported exposure to graphic content during online lessons: 20% among youth aged 15–17, and 14% among youth aged 12–14.

Data from a survey by the NCC (2024) also point to a disturbing situation: 40% of parents reported that their children were exposed to graphic violence or terror-related content on social media. The survey also found that the exposure to disturbing content increases with age.

The widespread use of smartphones among children in Israel suggests that exposure to disturbing online content is not limited to youth. A significant proportion of younger children are also at risk. As of 2024, the average age for receiving a first smartphone in Israel is 6.6 years, and as of 2023, 59% of children aged 6–9 own a smartphone (Bezeq, 2023, 2024). This means that many young children were also exposed to violent content during the war. According to Mr. Ohad Ezran, even very young children—first graders and even younger—were exposed to extremely graphic materials, including videos depicting murder, corpses, rape, and severe abuse.

3.a.2. Emotional Impact of Exposure to Graphic Terror and Violence Content

In a participatory process with youth held by the NCC during the war, participants discussed their exposure to disturbing content—not only in the news, but especially through apps and social media. While some youth reported that they had actively sought out such content in order "to truly understand what happened," the majority noted that they were exposed to these materials unintentionally—through videos or images that appeared while scrolling through apps, or via direct messages from friends (e.g., on WhatsApp; NCC, forthcoming). Youth who viewed such graphic content described sometimes experiencing it with a sense of detachment (as if it were not real, like "a movie"), but at other times, the exposure to violent images remained deeply embedded in their memory, causing distress and even regret about having watched them (NCC, forthcoming). Many participants also noted that they actively sought out stories of those who were killed, abducted, or survived the attacks—experiences that also had a deep emotional effect on them (NCC, forthcoming).

Viewing disturbing content, especially related to the events of October 7, can cause significant psychological harm, particularly to children and youth (Child Online Protection Bureau–Hotline 105, 2023b; Sabag et al., 2024). Many reports in popular media (e.g., Dai, 2023; Hadar, 2024; Kakon, 2023; N12, 2023) described the emotional impact of viewing such graphic content on social media, including bedwetting, nightmares, and avoidance of routine activities among young children, and anxiety attacks, nightmares, lack of concentration, and social withdrawal among youth. Such exposure to unfiltered, harmful content—often unsolicited—was in addition to what was already a highly distressing exposure to similar materials via traditional media (such as television).

The emotional effects of exposure to violent and terror-related content have also been confirmed by professionals in the field. According to Dr. Michal Dolev-Cohen, Director of the Center for Learning and Research on Online Harm and senior lecturer in Internet psychology at Oranim College (personal communication, May 6, 2024), findings from a qualitative phenomenological study focusing on youth exposed to videos depicting murder and death related to the October 7 events show that such exposure had a deep emotional impact. Interviews conducted as part of the study (mostly with girls) revealed that watching these videos caused them deep anxiety. In some cases, the young viewers personally knew the individuals shown in the footage, which understandably amplified their emotional distress. Dr. Dolev-Cohen also highlighted the difficulty youth had in "avoiding" such videos, which were sometimes sent directly or shared in class WhatsApp groups. Apparently, social pressure made it difficult to stop viewing the videos, and caused the youth to experience what is commonly referred to as FOMO (Fear of Missing Out; Ring, 2024a; 2024b). Dr. Dolev-Cohen added that children and youth typically coped with these distressing experiences without

meaningful support from significant adults in their lives such as parents or educators. As a result, the "viewing experience" was often private and isolating, and many children and youth did not share their feelings or distress with adults—whether parents, teachers, or mental health professionals. Dr. Dolev-Cohen also addressed the possible long-term effects of exposure to such content including emotional distress, diminished empathy, and impaired emotional regulation, as viewers gradually became desensitized to such content.

3.b. Exposure of Children and Youth to Violent and Harmful Online Discourse

During the war, discourse on digital platforms became increasingly violent and offensive. According to a study by Hotline 105 and the Chief Scientist's Office at the Ministry of National Security (Nagar et al., 2024), about one quarter (23%) of youth respondents reported experiencing verbal abuse on social media during the war, and 44% said they had witnessed another person being harmed online. Of these, 34% of the cases involved verbal violence, and 16% involved incidents of public shaming, humiliation, or social exclusion.

Dr. Dolev-Cohen (personal communication, May 6, 2024) noted that even youth who took part in public diplomacy efforts online during the war (including on the Omegle platform) were exposed to online violence. Youth participants in the participatory process led by the NCC similarly reported that shortly after the outbreak of the war, they encountered anti-Israeli content and reactions—some of it false or misleading ("fake news")—which left them feeling that "the world is against them," and negatively affected their emotional state. Notably, some youth shared that these anti-Israel messages were posted in online groups they belonged to or appeared on the social media accounts of influencers they followed who had never posted political or news-related content prior to the war.

The war also directly affected the exposure of Arab children and youth to violent and harmful online discourse and the protection of their rights in the digital environment. A research report published during the war on the educational experiences of children indicated that Arab youth primarily received information about the war and the security situation through social media, partly due to a lack of adequate discussion of these topics in Arab schools. As a result of their reliance on digital platforms for information, Arab children and youth were exposed to high volumes of violent, misleading, or complex content that requires guidance and contextualization (The Hebrew University and the aChord Center, 2024). Beyond the educational implications, the impact of exposure to such content was compounded by the emotional complexity of their Arab-Israeli identity. Arab children and youth were also exposed to hate speech

and incitement during the war, which may have affected their emotional well-being, sense of security, and sense of belonging. For example, in the February 2024 survey by Hotline 105 and the Chief Scientist's Office at the Ministry of National Security—in which 25% of the sample consisted of Arab youth—39% of respondents from the Arab sector reported feeling not at all or only slightly safe while using the internet during the war. In comparison, only 26% of the total sample gave a similar rating on this item, significantly lower than among Arab youth (Nagar et al., 2024).

An additional point that emerged in a youth participatory process with Arab youth conducted by the NCC concerns various aspects of freedom of expression online. Some of the participating youth felt that their freedom of expression on war-related issues was "limited," and that messages expressing solidarity with suffering or discomfort with the fighting could be unjustly interpreted as support for or encouragement of terrorism. At the same time, they felt that the atmosphere on social media—combined with the anonymity that characterizes it—enabled harsh hate speech and incitement against the Arab population in Israel (NCC, forthcoming).

The participating youth shared feelings of discrimination and spoke of attempts to silence them in the digital environment. They recounted that they had heard of youth who were arrested for posting statuses calling for an end to the war or expressing empathy with uninvolved civilians who were harmed, and they expressed outrage at what they perceived as a violation of their freedom of expression and a violation and the principle of equality. As one participant stated, "We understand that we are in an emergency situation and we need to be careful about what we post on social media, but as teens, we feel there's a policy of silencing to some extent [...] Why should I be afraid to post something just because I'm against the war?" (NCC, forthcoming).

The feelings expressed by Arab youth in the participatory process and similar concerns expressed by professionals based on the situation on the ground [3] add to broader research findings that point to the structural challenges experienced by Arab society, even in times of routine stemming from under-addressed social issues, specifically violence and a sense of discrimination. These findings call for efforts to strengthen the sense of personal security in Arab society, by combating online violence and refraining from imposing excessive restrictions on freedom of expression (Lavie et al., 2023; Benvenisti et al., 2023)—phenomena

3. Aspects of silencing and violations of freedom of expression, as well as overenforcement within Arab society, were also noted by Dr. Sharaf Hassan, Head of the Follow-Up Committee on Arab Education at Oranim College, as well as by Dr. Hiba Zaydan and Attorney Nasrin Aliyan, both from the Hebrew University, during the Minerva Center for Human Rights Conference 'Rights and Needs of Children during War and Crisis', held on May 29, 2024. https://en.minervacenter.huji.ac.il/2024-events-0#CRIWAC. For further discussion of violations of freedom of expression in Arab society in Israel during the war, see Asaad (2023), Benvenisti et al. (2023), Hebrew University and the aChord Center (2024), and Yoaz (2023).

that are relevant to children and youth, and especially so in times of war and crisis.

3.c. Absence of Comprehensive National Regulation and Government Response

In general, formal regulation offers no adequate treatment of the challenges related to the digital environment described above, challenges that children and youth were also forced to cope with. The right to protection is considered a fundamental right in Israel— for example, Section 2 of the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty, 5752-1992 states that "there shall be no violation of the life, body, or dignity of any person"—and this protection also extends to the digital environment. Moreover, legal and regulatory protections for children against violence (physical, emotional, and sexual, as well as neglect) do exist—primarily within the Penal Law, 5737-1977. However, although these legal frameworks should also apply (with necessary adjustments) to children in the digital environment, most of the relevant legislation on the protection of children from violence is insufficiently clear on its meaning, scope, interpretation, and practical application in digital settings—particularly in times of emergency or war, when the right to protection should be considered of greater importance and warrants special attention.

Furthermore, there is no comprehensive, structured national policy for the protection of children and youth in the digital environment—one that integrates education, prevention, intervention, and enforcement; addresses the threats and dangers children face online, including those intensified in times of war and emergency; defines the powers and responsibilities of government bodies and local authorities; and sets measurable goals for action (Benita, 2023). In effect, the key actors responsible for child safety online during the war were: (a) the justice system, including the cyber division of the State Attorney's Office; (b) the Ministry of National Security, particularly through Hotline 105; and (c) the Ministry of Education, including its collaborations with other relevant governmental bodies. However, as shown below, despite these efforts and the state's actions, which addressed legal, reporting, and educational-emotional aspects of protection, these responses were, like others discussed in this report, insufficiently coordinated and fell short of a full, adequate response to the growing phenomenon of harm to children in the digital space, or to the short- and long-term implications of such harm.

3.c.1. Challenges in Reporting and Removing Harmful Content

One of the primary means of protecting children from exposure to violent and disturbing content is the removal of such content from the digital environment. Removal can be performed through various methods, including dedicated digital filtering and monitoring tools, requests to social media platforms, and legal recourse. The lack of effective and comprehensive content removal mechanisms in routine times directly affected efforts to address the exposure of children and youth to graphic violent and terror-related content that was immediately circulated on social media platforms in wartime.

The use of legal tools to remove harmful content is a complex matter, involving legal, technological, and ethical issues. It depends heavily on regulation and cooperation with major non-state actors—including social media platforms, which are the key designers of the online environment and determine its nature and permitted content. However, the legal status of social media platforms in Israel has yet to be formalized, and they are generally not subject to local regulation.

In recent years, there have been attempts to legislate the regulation of social media platforms in Israel on various issue, including the removal of content that constitutes a criminal offense, the imposition of financial sanctions for publishing such content, and mandatory removal orders issued by the courts (Draft Bill for Preventing Offenses through Advertising on the Internet (Content Removal), 5782-2021; Draft Bill for Preventing Offenses through Advertising on the Internet (Content Removal), 5784-2024; Draft Bill Social Networks Law, 5781-2020). However, these legislative proposals have not been advanced. While most social media platforms have internal codes (community guidelines, terms of use, etc.) that they could use to filter harmful content that may reach children and youth, in practice there is often a gap between their stated policies and implementation, for example with respect to enforcement of age restrictions or actions against creators and distributors of harmful content, as has been the case with TikTok (Israel Internet Association, 2024c). Notably, in its report, the Arbel Committee on Measures to Protect the Public from Harmful Content (2020) recommended that legislation should establish uniform rapid-response channels for submitting removal requests to government agencies, courts, and Internet content providers (e.g., websites, social networks). This recommendation is particularly relevant in wartime and in view of the rapid, continuous posting of harmful content.

Several voluntary mechanisms for requesting the removal or limiting access to harmful online content currently exist. These include submitting requests directly to digital platforms, either privately, via government channels such as the State Attorney's Office, or through civil society organizations such as the Israel Internet

Association (Child Online Protection Bureau-Hotline 105, 2023a; Israel Internet Association, 2023b) In addition, the Prevention of Offenses Through an Internet Website Law, 5777-2017 allows district courts to issue removal orders (Etsioni, 2014; Goldschmidt, 2021; Unger, 2021b).

In practice, during the war, the Cyber Division of the State Attorney's Office played a key role in removing content. The majority of the division's requests to social media platforms for content removal were accepted, especially those related to terror content, incitement to violence, and the publication of images of hostages and events from October 7 (Alexandra Kara, personal communication, September 29, 2024).[4] From the beginning of the war until March 2, 2025, the Cyber Division reviewed 227,242 cases of terror-related or illegal content. Of these, 163,565 were reported to platforms, and approximately 80% of the reported content was removed at the Division's request. In October 2023 alone, the Division reviewed 18,171 items—about nine times the average based on the three months preceding the war. In subsequent months, the number decreased slightly but remained high compared to the pre-war period, with another spike in October 2024, when 21,607 items were reviewed (Ministry of Justice, 2025).

Despite these efforts, some social media and messaging platforms remained "under the radar," Telegram being a notable example. According to Attorney Shiri Rom of the Cyber Division (personal communication, February 16, 2025), Telegram often ignores the Division's requests to remove harmful content. Moreover, there is still no uniform, rapid government protocol for submitting content removal requests that is accessible and user-friendly for children who were harmed and their families (Unger, 2021a, 2021b).[5] Since this is a voluntary mechanism, and response speed is not monitored, it remains unclear how quickly content is removed—and whether, by that time, children may have already been exposed to it, resulting in a response that is "too little, too late." Orna Heilinger, safe browsing expert (personal communication, February 17, 2025), pointed to another problem: harmful content may be removed from one platform but remain accessible on others, or comments to the content may not be removed, reducing the effectiveness of the removal effort.

In the absence of dedicated legislation or government procedures—and in view of the reliance on voluntary reporting to platform operators, even during war and emergencies—significant problems remain in the reporting process and its

4. For additional information on the activities of the Cyber Division of the State Attorney's Office during the early months of the war, see HCJ 7846/19 Adala Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel and others v. State Attorney's Office – Cyber Division and others (Isr.) (12.04.2021); Israel Internet Association, 2023d; Shafir & Treblesi (2023).

5. The Child Online Protection Bureau–Hotline 105 published a guide on November 6, 2023, on independently reporting inappropriate content to social media platforms. While the guide is not specifically designed for youth, it is written in clear and accessible language, is easy to follow, and includes external links to relevant resources.

availability to the general public, including children and youth; in the ability to uniformly, quickly, and comprehensively remove harmful and violent content; and in efforts to promote appropriate legal tools to prevent children and youth from being exposed to such disturbing material.

3.c.2. Challenges in Education and Treatment

3.c.2.a. Hotline 105: Service Disruptions and the Need to Raise Awareness and Improve Accessibility

Hotline 105, a national center that receives reports from the public and provides professional responses to harm, violence, and crimes against children in the digital environment, is a primary point of contact for children and youth regarding online harm that is designed to be available in times of emergency. However, between October 7 and October 25, 2023, Hotline 105 temporarily shifted to serving as a center for identifying missing persons, and did not offer services to children during this critical period. As stated in a recommendation paper published by the Multisectoral Round Table on Children and Youth in Wartime (2024), such shifts—redirecting regular services for children and youth to general emergency efforts—should be employed only as a last resort and with a clear intention to minimize the suspension period as much as possible.

In addition, although Hotline 105 does publish information, guidelines, recommendations, and cautionary statements regarding online harm, its materials are not proactively distributed to relevant professional audiences (e.g., in the fields of education and mental health), parents, or interested children and youth (e.g., via a direct mailing list). To access its professional resources, users must actively visit the government website or follow the Hotline's posts on social media. As a result, dissemination of information to those most involved in children's lives, including parents, is not optimal (Benita, 2023).

Furthermore, despite the important role Hotline 105 plays, until recently the reporting mechanisms it offered (a phone line and an online form) were not sufficiently adapted or accessible to children. This issue has already been flagged by the State Comptroller (2019). Only in March 2025 the Hotline launched a new WhatsApp line, making the service more accessible to children and youth.

Another challenge regarding Hotline 105 is the lack of sufficient public awareness among children, youth, and parents about its role and available services. National surveys by the Ministry of Public Security and the State Comptroller show that 41% of youth (aged 12–17) and 51% of parents are not familiar with Hotline 105 (State Comptroller, 2022a). These figures align with insights shared by youth themselves regarding their lack of awareness of Hotline 105 and its

services. For example, in a 2021 youth participatory process organized as part of the NCC Youth Parliament program on the right to privacy in the digital environment, most participants were unaware of available support channels (including Hotline 105) and recommended that the state invest in raising awareness among children and youth about the existence of such services and how to access them (Na'amat & Zlotnik Raz, 2021).

The February 2024 report published by Hotline 105 and the Chief Scientist's Office at the Ministry of National Security—relevant to the wartime period—also found that although 60% of youth respondents (aged 12–17) had heard of the hotline (an increase in awareness since 2018), 40% were still completely unaware of its existence. Moreover, 68% of participants stated that they either were unsure or were not likely to reach out to Hotline 105 if harmed—an indicator that significant work remains in raising awareness about the hotline's work, identifying barriers to reporting, and improving the accessibility of its services to children and youth (Nagar et al., 2024).

3.c.2.b. The Education System: Challenges in Delivering and Mediating Knowledge About Safe Online Behavior, and Challenges in Monitoring Impact

The topic of safe and responsible online behavior has received increased attention from the Ministry of Education in recent years. The Ministry has developed a variety of educational materials and lesson plans for students at all grade levels, along with training materials for educational staff and workshops and resources for parents. For example, the Hayim Bareshet program is implemented in schools to help children and youth develop responsible online behavior, avoid harm, bullying, risky situations, and exposure to harmful or inappropriate content, and to provide tools for coping with such risks.

Additionally, before the outbreak of the war, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Public Security jointly published a "Safe Internet Use Pledge" in both Hebrew and Arabic, encouraging children and parents to sign and commit to its guidelines (Ministry of National Security, n.d.). The Ministry of Education also developed lesson plans on safe digital use and encouraged classes to draft their own pledges for positive online conduct (Ministry of Education, Surfing for Change, n.d.; Ministry of Education, Optimal Behavior, preventing Offences, n.d.). Furthermore, national and local initiatives and educational programs on online safety were implemented in schools by civil society organizations or professional facilitators (Arbel Committee, 2020). However, these programs and initiatives are not systematically or consistently implemented throughout the education system, and their effectiveness remains unclear. For example, in 2022, the State Comptroller reported that approximately 58% of schools in Israel

had no program for responding to students harmed online, and approximately 70% had no programs for addressing students who perpetrated harm online (State Comptroller, 2022b). According to Orna Heilinger, a safe browsing expert (personal communication, February 17, 2025), one of the education system's responsibilities is to integrate digital literacy into the curriculum. She argues that it is important to equip children and youth with tools to help them act responsibly and safely in the digital environment.

Yosef Bar David, CEO of the Taking Responsibility nonprofit (personal communication, February 13, 2025), said that despite the Ministry of Education's efforts in the digital field, it has not addressed the root issue, namely, the digital divide between educational staff and students. In his view, this gap can only be bridged when children and youth view their teachers and parents as trusted sources of support and guidance on digital issues. He suggested doing so by providing educators with holistic training programs that focus not only on the technological but also on the emotional aspects of online behavior. In the youth participatory process conducted by the NCC during the war, some participants said they spoke to their parents after viewing violent content, and felt they could discuss it with them, while others said their parents reacted with anger, which discouraged further dialogue, leaving many youth to cope alone, without the familial or emotional support they needed (NCC, forthcoming).

Despite the Ministry of Education's significant investments before the war, it appears that assimilating safe and responsible online conduct required stronger and more widespread integration among students. These gaps only widened during the war. Children and youth's exposure to terror and violent content, as well as to harmful and aggressive online discourse, required attention from the education system—both to prevent harm (e.g., by promoting safer digital habits or explaining the emotional impact of violent content) and to respond to harm and support affected students. Moreover, given the lack of a comprehensive legal framework for removing harmful content (see above), education and awareness play a critical role in protecting children and youth, and fostering safe digital behavior and healthy online habits is essential.

Some of the challenges in promoting safe and responsible internet use were addressed to a certain extent. For example, during the 2024 National Month for the Protection of Children Online, led by Hotline 105, focused on digital resilience and using the internet for positive change (Child Online Protection Bureau–Hotline 105, 2024; Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs, 2024). In addition, efforts that had been advanced before the war by the Ministry's Psychological Counseling Services and by Hotline 105's education staff continued during the war. Both the Ministry of Education and Hotline 105 developed parent-targeted materials (e.g., online talks, occasional lectures, and tip sheets for parents, children, and youth; Child Online Protection Bureau-Hotline 105, 2024). Although monitoring implementation is especially crucial during times of war and crisis, there are

no available data on the actual use of these lesson plans and recordings in schools, or on the scope of staff training on these topics or the training materials used (Benita, 2023; Knesset, 2023).

In addition, after the outbreak of the war, the Ministry of Education launched a dedicated online portal containing all the circulars and updates addressed to parents and students. The Ministry also published a circular for educators containing guidelines on limiting exposure to graphic videos, urging staff to facilitate discussions about the viewing experience while acknowledging their limited ability to supervise students' content consumption (Ministry of Education, Circular on coping with disturbing content, n.d.). The Ministry also established a Support and Assistance Directorate, staffed by school psychologists who provide emotional support on emergency-related issues to educators, students, and parents, including distress stemming from exposure to harmful online content (Benita, 2023). Though the Directorate reportedly received 3,000 calls, no systematic reporting on the type of support provided or its outcomes was published (Benita, 2023). In a discussion held by the Knesset's Special Committee for the Rights of the Child on December 25, 2023, concerns were raised regarding the extent to which the Ministry's headquarters-level efforts reached educators and parents "on the ground." In a survey conducted by the NCC close to one year after the outbreak of the war, about two-thirds of parents (66%) reported that they had received no support from the education system concerning their children's exposure to violent or terror-related content online (NCC, 2024).

It therefore appears that despite meaningful investment and action by the Ministry of Education, the support mechanisms in place are not being implemented systematically, nor is their actual usage or effectiveness adequately monitored. Given the scale and severity of the digital challenges facing children and youth—and the fact that the long-term impacts of the war in these areas are still emerging—there is a pressing need to more deeply embed these supports within educational settings, both in terms of prevention and response, and to rigorously evaluate their impact to ensure alignment with the needs of students, educational staff, and parents.

4. Recommendations

4.a. Regulating the Reporting and Removal of Harmful and Violent Content

This section highlights the urgent need for the state to take the necessary legal and technological measures to prevent the spread of graphic violent and terror-related content during times of emergency and war—particularly

to protect children and youth. This must be done by establishing effective and accessible channels for reporting such content and mechanisms for its rapid and comprehensive removal from the Internet. To that end:

- Legislation or a dedicated government directive should be enacted to establish clear channels for reporting harmful and violent content for removal from the internet. Such legislation or directive should also define the procedure for submitting removal requests to relevant authorities (government bodies and/or courts), the types of content that warrant removal, the procedures and timelines for handling such requests, and responding to and updating individuals who file reports.
- Expansion and optimization of existing government mechanisms for reporting and removing harmful and violent content—such as those operated by the Cyber Division of the State Attorney's Office and the Child Online Protection Bureau (Hotline 105), including appropriate legal and technological actions to ensure swift and comprehensive content removal (from multiple platforms and addressing related challenges). In particular, staffing, funding, and technological resources for these mechanisms must be increased during emergencies and times of war.
- Action to raise awareness and improve the accessibility and child-friendliness of reporting mechanisms must be improved. To this end:
  - A youth-adapted version of the relevant legislation or directive should be published (e.g., using simple, comprehensible language and user-friendly design).
  - Campaigns and outreach efforts should be conducted to raise awareness among children and youth about existing mechanisms for reporting and removing harmful content, the types of content that may be reported, and how to file such reports—whether through government agencies, civil society organizations, or directly via the internal reporting tools of social media platforms and apps. These awareness efforts should be tailored to children and youth and conducted on the diverse channels used by them.
  - The reporting mechanisms themselves should be made more accessible and youth-friendly (e.g., enabling reports via WhatsApp, creating child-appropriate reporting forms).
  - Clear instructional materials should be developed for children and youth—and their parents—regarding how to report and remove harmful online content (e.g., targeted videos, online workshops with professionals, etc.). These materials should be widely distributed, especially through digital platforms commonly used by parents, children, and youth (e.g., parenting groups, youth-targeted websites, etc.).
- The mechanisms for reporting and removing harmful content must also meet the specific needs and challenges faced by children and youth in Arab society. In this regard: (a) Government reporting and removal systems should develop tools and responses in Arabic; (b) They should establish clear criteria

for classifying inciting, racist, or otherwise harmful content, publish them, and address related reports; (c) Special attention should be given to translating and adapting instructional materials and awareness efforts into Arabic, including resources specifically developed for Arab children and youth.

- International cooperation should be promoted to establish social media platforms' corporate responsibility regarding harmful and violent content published on their networks.

4.b. Strengthening Educational Measures to Prevent Exposure to Harmful Content and Discourse

- The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with other relevant government agencies and organizations (e.g., Hotline 105, the Israel Internet Association), should publish clear, sensitive, and age-appropriate informative materials for children and youth that explain what constitutes terror-related and violent content, why such content is disseminated (e.g., to instill fear, glorify terrorism), the emotional consequences of exposure—especially during childhood and adolescence—and how to cope with peer pressure to engage with such content.
- The important work of promoting digital literacy and safe online behavior among children and youth should be expanded, and its integration as a mandatory subject in the national curriculum, tailored to different age groups, should be considered.
- Until this subject is formally included in the curriculum, the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with other government bodies and relevant civil society organizations, should enhance existing training materials and educational modules on preventing children and youth's exposure to harmful content and discourse online. These modules and lesson plans should also include techniques for coping with social expectations and peer pressure to consume such content, particularly graphic violent and terror-related content. It is recommended that this content be made available online, and that efforts be made to distribute and implement it across both formal and informal educational settings.
- In addition to training and developing educational content, it is recommended to design visual informative materials on the topic (e.g., posters, flyers, stickers)—in both Hebrew and Arabic—and display them in educational and social spaces frequented by children and youth (e.g., schools, community centers, youth clubs).
- Greater investment is needed to increase the availability of training and awareness materials for parents on safe and age-appropriate internet use, with special emphasis on times of war and emergency. These materials should address, among other things, the effects of exposure to harmful content and

discourse during childhood and adolescence; content filtering options and their limitations; how to facilitate family conversations about such exposure; and how to seek help in cases of online harm.

- The Ministry of Education—or a coordinating entity acting on its behalf—should collect systematic and periodic data related to the development and dissemination of training and awareness materials. The data should include the number of training sessions and workshops held; the number, age, and geographic distribution of participants; and the types of settings in which they were conducted. It is also recommended to include participant feedback in some of the trainings to assess their impact and inform future improvements and adjustments to the content.

4.c. Developing Emotional Support Services for Children and Youth Exposed to Harmful Online Content and Discourse

Efforts must be made to develop emotional support services for children and youth who have been exposed to harmful content online—particularly graphic violent and terror-related content—as well as harmful discourse. To that end:

- In times of war and emergency, existing emotional support services for children and youth should be expanded to include a focus on those who have been harmed online or exposed to graphic content.
- Steps should be taken to raise awareness among children and youth about the availability of emotional support resources for those affected by online harm or exposure to harmful content. This can be done through online campaigns and social media posts, as well as in educational and social environments frequented by children and youth.
- Emotional support services for children and youth must also be available in Arabic. Therefore, efforts should include Arabic-language online campaigns and publishing materials in Arabic, Arabic-language contact channels, and the availability of trained Arabic-speaking professionals to receive inquiries and provide assistance.
- Relevant government ministries—including the Ministries of Health, Welfare and Social Affairs, and Education—should develop dedicated training programs for professionals working with children and youth on the topic of exposure to graphic violent and terror-related content and its emotional consequences. In addition, these ministries and other relevant government bodies should consider promoting and supporting research on the emotional effects of exposure to harmful discourse and online content on children and youth. This would serve to better understand and improve the support that is necessary.
- Training materials and educational content on preventing exposure to harmful

online content and discourse (see above) should also include guidance on coping with past exposure and help seeking. These materials should be disseminated across both formal and informal educational settings, and they should be developed in collaboration with mental health professionals.

4.d. Providing Clear, Reliable, and Age-Appropriate Information for Children and Youth About Situations of War and Emergency

- A dedicated digital platform for children and youth should be developed in collaboration with government ministries and civil society organizations, offering clear, reliable, and age-appropriate information about war and emergency situations, in Hebrew and Arabic.
- The Ministry of Justice, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and other relevant government agencies and civil society organizations, should develop clear, youth-adapted guidelines on children and youth's right to freedom of expression online and its limits (e.g., which types of statements or content are prohibited by law), available channels for reporting violations of their freedom of expression and/or exposure to harmful or inciting content online, and ways to promote respectful and constructive discourse on sensitive topics in the digital space.
- While access to online information is important, exclusive reliance on the internet by children and youth as their primary source of information during times of war and emergency may expose them to harmful, inciting, or misleading content. Therefore, the Ministry of Education should take the necessary steps to publish reliable, age-appropriate information for children and youth, and to promote complex, sensitive, and open conversations on war and emergency situations within both formal and informal educational settings, across both Jewish and Arab communities.

4.e. Advancing Policy and Legislative Amendments

- A dedicated team should be established within the Ministry of Justice, in cooperation with other relevant government ministries, to conduct a comprehensive review of the existing legal framework for the protection of children and youth. This review should clarify how current laws apply to the digital environment and identify necessary legislative amendments or administrative guidelines. Particular emphasis should be placed on adapting the legal framework to situations of war and emergency.
- It is recommended to establish an inter-ministerial steering committee to address the risks and challenges faced by children and youth in the

digital environment, both in routine times and during emergencies. Such a committee would support cross-sectoral and inter-ministerial collaboration at both national and local levels, with a focus on education, prevention, and care.

4.f. Continued In-Person Educational and Social Activities During Emergencies and War

As discussed in detail in the chapter on children and youth's right to education during the Iron Swords War, maintaining in-person educational and social settings for children and youth (e.g., schools, youth movements, extracurricular programs) during times of emergency and war is of critical importance. In addition to their positive benefits, the continued operation of these frameworks helps reduce children and youth's "screen time," thereby lowering their risk of exposure to harmful or violent content and discourse online, and the risk of being harmed in the digital environment.

4.g. Promoting Child and Youth Participation

Children and youth have the right to express their views, and participate in and influence decision-making on matters that affect their lives, including all matters related to their engagement in the digital environment, especially during times of emergency and war. To that end:

In order to ensure the effective and tailored implementation of the recommendations outlined above, relevant government ministries, in collaboration with civil society organizations working in the field of children's rights and digital technology, should conduct participatory processes with children and youth from diverse population groups. These participation processes should address the educational, legal, technological, and emotional responses that children and youth need in the digital environment—both in routine times and in emergencies. Government decision-makers should give due weight to the insights and recommendations shared by children and youth, in order to, among other things: (a) improve the accessibility and suitability of reporting mechanisms for harmful online content; (b) develop and strengthen educational responses—such as trainings, curricula, and awareness materials—to prevent children and youth's exposure to harmful and violent online content and discourse; (c) provide emotional support and adapt it to cases of exposure to harmful online content; deliver clear, reliable, and age-appropriate information online about war and emergency situations, particularly in the context of designing a dedicated digital platform for children

and youth; and (d) inform legislation and policies that reflect needs, challenges, and aspirations of children and youth.

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REALIZING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN TIMES OF EMERGENCY AND WAR: SUMMARY AND PATHWAYS FORWARD

1. Summary: Key Principles, Lessons, and Insights for the Future

The Iron Swords War has had deep, severe, and long-lasting impacts on children and youth in Israel. These consequences are reflected both in the emergence of new challenges and in the exacerbation of existing systemic gaps and difficulties. They require practical and tailored responses during the emergency period as well as throughout the subsequent phases of recovery and rebuilding. This report was written based on the understanding that children and youth are not merely an extension of their families or communities—as they are sometimes perceived in policy planning and the setting of national priorities—but rather a distinct group with their own rights, needs, and voices. Accordingly, the report presents a framework that places children and youth—their rights, well-being, and welfare—at the center of policy discussion and action, promoting a child rights-based approach, especially in times of war and emergency.

The report focuses on three key areas in which the war's impact on children and youth was particularly evident: education, mental health, and the digital environment. It includes an analysis of current policies and legal frameworks, highlights challenges and failures that emerged or intensified during the war, and proposes concrete, actionable steps to promote the rights of children and youth in times of emergency and beyond. A central and distinctive feature of this report lies in the integration of a child rights-based discourse, grounded in the spirit of the CRC, with up-to-date research findings, publications, and data. Alongside these, the report incorporates the voices of children and youth who participated in participatory processes led by the NCC, as well as insights and recommendations from professionals and civil society actors who brought their expertise and experience working with and for children during the war. In this

way, the report presents a comprehensive picture that highlights not only gaps and hardships but also opportunities for immediate improvement and action.

The thematic recommendations embedded in the report—included again in this chapter—are not intended merely as documentation of past failures, but rather as a forward-looking basis for action. They are meant to guide decision-makers during times of war and emergency, as well as in recovery and rebuilding phases. Among other things, the recommendations emphasize the need for legal reform, the development of emotional, educational, and social support systems for children and youth, cross-sectoral and inter-ministerial coordination in emergencies, and reinforcement of essential personnel and resources. Crucially, they call upon decision-makers to actively involve children and youth in shaping these responses.

In addition, the report's recommendations lay the groundwork for preparedness and policy development to address future emergencies. In this sense, while the report focuses on the Iron Swords War and its devastating impact on children and youth in Israel, its insights and lessons can serve as a foundation for learning and action in the context of other emergencies—whether security-related, civil, environmental, or otherwise—both in Israel and in other countries. The report's findings and recommendations offer a practical contribution to the evolving international discourse on realizing the rights of children and youth during times of emergency and can inform the development of appropriate policies, programs, knowledge, and tools.

The NCC is committed to ensuring that the recommendations presented in this report do not remain merely "on paper." The development of the report was accompanied by an in-depth process involving dialogue with professionals, civil society organizations, and youth themselves—reflecting the ethos it seeks to advance: renewed, systematic thinking focused on children's rights. It was not only the content of the report, but the nature of the process by which it was written that generated a new professional discourse, advancing the development of a child rights-based approach and extending its application to times of war and emergency.

The urgency of this report—and the need to implement its practical recommendations—was further reinforced by the Iran-Israel war (operation Am KeLavi) in June 2025. Over the course of twelve days, school classes were suspended or shifted to digital platforms, and social and recreational activities were cancelled—making the digital environment once again a central arena for social interactions, education, and access to information for children and youth.

During this time, many children and youth were subject to threats from missile attacks; They experienced a genuine fear for their lives and the lives of their family members. Homes were destroyed and some children and youth were

suddenly evacuated far from familiar surroundings, losing not only their home, belongings, and memories, but also their community structures, daily routines, and sense of personal safety. Four children lost their lives, and many others lost family members or were physically and emotionally injured. In addition, many children and youth were exposed to distressing and threatening war content, including footage of people fleeing to shelters, physical injuries, and widespread destruction. It is therefore not surprising that the difficult events of the war triggered severe anxiety, stress, and uncertainty among children and youth. These events illustrated how the challenges and systemic failures identified during the Iron Swords War—central to this report—resurfaced, sometimes with increased intensity, even before lessons had been sufficiently learned. The report's recommendations, formulated in response to those failures, were tragically reaffirmed by the next emergency—the Israel-Iran War— demonstrating their relevance and the need to implement them across a wide range of crisis scenarios affecting children and youth.

Naturally, this report has its limitations. It does not cover the full range of rights or all aspects of children and youth's lives in situations of war and emergency. Due to its scope and objectives, it does not include a comprehensive budgetary mapping, a systemic analysis of labor allocations, or long-term strategic implementation planning. In addition, since it was composed "in real time," during the war itself, some data are not yet available or are still being collected, and many of the consequences remain unclear—while others may still emerge and are not yet fully known or understood. That said, this timing also gives the report a distinct advantage: It is based on a current, "live," and evolving picture of the challenges at hand and was written while the information, experiences, and needs remain fresh and palpable. It therefore has genuine potential to inform rapid, targeted, and evidence-based development of policy that transforms the idea of children's rights from a conceptual vision into an actionable agenda.

The implementation of children and youth's rights during the Iron Swords War, as well as throughout the subsequent periods of recovery and rebuilding, is a national mission requiring cross-sectoral and inter-ministerial cooperation at all levels—national, regional, and local. The NCC works to embed this approach among government ministries, professionals, civil society organizations, and children and youth themselves—both through the promotion of concrete policy recommendations and by developing and ensuring access to updated, innovative knowledge and field-based data. We view this report as a key step in an ongoing process to embed a child rights-based approach, and we are committed to advancing the implementation of its recommendations—during emergencies, throughout recovery and rebuilding phases, and as part of long-term preparedness for future crises. This includes translating the recommendations into practical action plans, making them accessible through digital and other tools, and integrating them into policymaking and service development processes at national, regional, and local levels—with the aim of

generating real, wide-reaching, and lasting impact on the lives of children and youth in Israel.

2. Overarching Recommendations

A close analysis of the report's thematic findings, as presented in each substantive chapter, reveals that many of the challenges affecting children and youth during emergencies are deeply interconnected, spanning systems, services, and policy domains. These complex interactions highlight the need for coordinated and systemic responses grounded in a child rights-based normative framework. The overarching recommendations below reflect this broader perspective and point to key areas where structural, inclusive, and rights-based reform, alongside long-term planning and inter-ministerial and cross-sectoral partnerships, is essential for realizing children and youth's rights in times of crisis, recovery, rebuilding, and preparedness for future emergencies.

- **Adopting a Child Rights-Based Approach:** A child rights-based approach, grounded in the principles of the CRC, must be adopted—recognizing children and youth as rights-holders with distinct needs and unique voices. This approach is particularly essential in times of emergency and crisis, when children and youth are especially vulnerable and are often relegated to the margins of policy priorities. Precisely during such times—when decisions are made under pressure—it is imperative to ensure that children and youth are recognized as a distinct group entitled to be heard, participate, and influence decisions that affect their lives.

- **Investment in Institutional and Infrastructural Preparedness for Emergencies, including in Human Resources, across Child-Relevant Fields:** Emergency preparedness infrastructure and planning must be developed with dedicated attention to all areas relevant to children and youth, including education, welfare, health, mental health, and the digital environment. Such preparedness should be ensured in advance, during routine times. These infrastructures should include tailored action plans, care and support systems, information and data management mechanisms, targeted services, and professional training programs. Significant and long-term investment is required to recruit, train, and retain skilled professionals; revise minimum staffing standards for emergency situations; and create incentives and mechanisms for rapid response scaling. Such preparedness necessitates inter-ministerial and cross-sectoral coordination, grounded in real-time needs assessment and strengthened capacity to operate in prolonged extreme scenarios.

- **Real-Time Data Collection and Analysis as a Foundation for Evidence-Based Policy Making:** Systems for the systematic collection and processing of both quantitative and qualitative data on issues affecting children and youth must be established and maintained—during both routine times and emergencies.

In times of crisis, the importance of timely and accurate information increases, requiring immediate and continuous data collection and analysis in order to detect trends and evolving needs in real time. Furthermore, the data and insights must be made publicly accessible and serve as a foundation for informed decision-making and the development of responsive policies.

- **Strengthening Cross-Sectoral Partnerships and Elevating the Voices of Children and Youth:** Sustained, ongoing collaboration must be established between the government, local authorities, civil society, and children and youth themselves—in times of routine and especially during emergencies. In wartime and crisis situations, such partnerships become particularly critical to efforts to shape effective responses, identify urgent needs, and draw lessons quickly and appropriately. It is recommended to institutionalize permanent mechanisms for cross-sectoral collaboration, such as the Multi-sectoral Round Table on Children and Youth, which operated during the war and served as a successful example of coordinated work among diverse actors. The Round Table's work contributed to the identification of urgent needs, the formulation of new response initiatives, and the improvement of existing services for children and youth—in real time. Given its impact, it is recommended to adopt a permanent institutional practice of establishing similar mechanisms on various issues to address structural and cross-sector challenges affecting children and youth, particularly in times of emergency and war, and to allocate the necessary resources and authority for their operation. Participation of children and youth—from diverse population groups— in decision-making processes should also be expanded and deepened to ensure that children and youth are actively involved in the design of services, programs, and policies that affect their lives—both during emergency and in recovery and rebuilding phases.

- **Adapting Responses for Children and Youth from Diverse Population Groups:** Policies, programs, services, and interventions—both in routine times and during emergencies must be informed by a deep understanding of the diverse and unique needs of children and youth in Israel, taking into account considerations of age, language, culture, geographic location, disability, and individual circumstances related to the emergency (such as children and youth who have been evacuated). Such considerations should include linguistic and cultural accessibility, necessary spatial adaptation to needs and constraints in different parts of the country, and the development of clear, accessible, and youth-friendly information, materials, and guidance—for children and youth, as well as their parents. In addition, targeted tools and training must be developed for parents and relevant professionals, as an essential foundation for realizing the rights of children and youth in practice.

המועצה הלאומית לשלום הילד
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