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NO RECOVERY WITHOUT CHILDREN

Understanding Children's Needs in Northern Syria

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

November 2026

Cover Photo: As part of the “Building a Brighter Future” initiative, funded by the European Commission (ECHO) in partnership with Takaful Al Sham - War Child worked to provide thousands of displaced children and their families in Northwest Syria with vital education support.

As well as literacy and numeracy, environmental education around climate issues also made it into the schools and communities we targeted—a fantastic initiative by the children themselves.

Children and caregivers planted trees to create green spaces, recycled their waste, and learned new ways to care for their surroundings.

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Key Facts

What caregivers and key informants in assessed communities of five northern governorates reported.

19 in 20
enrolled children in Deir Ezzor do not attend school regularly

54%
of school-aged children in Ar-Raqqa are out of school

54%
of households in Idlib are displaced or returnee families

9 in 10
caregivers in Ar-Raqqa whose children show distress have not sought help

38%
of caregivers in Aleppo report bullying as the risk they cite most often

2 in 3
caregivers in Deir Ezzor send children to work to cope with economic pressure

All
key informants in Idlib report no or inadequate non-formal education for children who have left school

95%
of households in Ar-Raqqa with a child with a disability report no specialised services

56%
of enrolled children in Al Hasakeh have no access to the books and stationery they need

Introduction

After more than 14 years of conflict, children in Syria continue to experience the cumulative effects of war – including displacement, disrupted education, economic deterioration, damaged infrastructure and weakened public services. While the political transition that followed the fall of the Assad government in December 2024 created opportunities for recovery and the return of displaced populations, many families continue to face significant barriers to essential services, livelihoods and protection. Across northern Syria, children's needs reflect years of conflict, repeated displacement, uneven recovery and persistent economic hardship. To tackle this, recovery must extend beyond rebuilding physical infrastructure to address the conditions children need to be safe, healthy, educated and able to participate in their communities.

War Child, in partnership with Bahar and the Humanitarian Relief Association (IYD), conducted a child-focused needs assessment to generate evidence on children's experiences, vulnerabilities and priorities across Aleppo, Idlib, Ar-Raqqa, Al Hasakeh and Deir Ezzor governorates. The findings highlight the importance of placing children's wellbeing, protection and development at the centre of humanitarian action and recovery planning. This paper presents these findings, and makes a number of recommendations for how relevant international and national actors can address them.

Methodology

The assessment employed a mixed-methods approach, comprising 540 caregiver household surveys, 32 key informant interviews, and 20 focus group discussions involving 75 caregivers as well as 69 adolescents aged 10–17 years. Data was collected between 2–10 July 2026 across selected communities in the five governorates, selected based on operational presence and access.

Participants included internally displaced people (IDPs), returnees, host communities, and households with children with disabilities. Quantitative and qualitative findings were analysed and triangulated to identify common patterns, geographic differences and the experiences of vulnerable groups. Data collection followed informed consent, gender-sensitive, safeguarding and quality-assurance procedures. As geographic coverage was limited to accessible

communities within War Child and partner operational areas, the findings are indicative of the experiences and priorities of assessed participants, rather than statistically representative of the wider populations of the five governorates.

Key Findings

Children in northern Syria experience overlapping and mutually reinforcing vulnerabilities. Across the five assessed governorates, children's wellbeing is affected by the interaction of economic hardship, barriers to education and specialised services, protection risks, psychosocial distress and limited access to safe spaces. The severity and specific manifestation of these vulnerabilities vary by location, age, sex, displacement status, disability and other vulnerability factors.

1 Economic hardship is a major driver of children's vulnerability

Poverty is not simply a matter of being unable to meet basic needs: it affects children's ability to attend school, access healthcare, participate in social activities and live in safe environments, while increasing family stress and reliance on negative coping strategies. Borrowing money to meet household needs was reported by 78–83% of caregivers in Aleppo, Idlib, Ar-Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, compared with 59% in Al Hasakeh. The impact on children was particularly concerning in Ar-Raqqa and Deir Ezzor: 86% of caregivers in Ar-Raqqa and 75% in Deir Ezzor reported that children aged 0–10 had experienced reductions in the number or quality of meals due to economic pressure.

These pressures also undermine children's protection and development. Child labour was reported as an economic coping strategy by 66% of households in Deir Ezzor and 32% in Ar-Raqqa, while reductions in education spending were reported by 44% of households in Ar-Raqqa and 34% in Deir Ezzor. Qualitative findings further linked economic hardship to school withdrawal, family tension and psychosocial distress. The findings demonstrate the importance of child-focused programming addressing the household economic pressures that lead to school withdrawal, child labour and reduced access to essential services. Responses that aim to meet children's needs without considering these financial pressures may do little to reduce the underlying drivers of vulnerability. Household economic support and child protection should therefore be considered complementary components of an integrated programme.

2 Education remains a critical priority, particularly for children who are out of school, displaced or have returned to their communities

Children face persistent barriers to education, including school-related costs, inadequate infrastructure and learning materials, teacher shortages, interrupted learning and limited school capacity. While challenges exist across all five governorates, the severity and nature of barriers differ considerably. Caregivers in Ar-Raqqa reported that 54% of school-aged children were out of school, compared with 43% in both Idlib and Al Hasakeh. Deir Ezzor also emerged as a particularly concerning context, with key informants reporting substantial dropout rates and limited educational opportunities.

For displaced and returnee children, barriers extend beyond school availability. Key informants most frequently identified curriculum differences and educational learning gaps, followed by limited school capacity and psychosocial or social integration challenges. Missing documentation and interrupted education were additional concerns, particularly in Aleppo and Deir Ezzor. These findings highlight the need to combine school rehabilitation and access support with catch-up learning, recognition of prior learning, inclusive education and measures that facilitate children's reintegration into school.

3 Protection risks are significant, but vary greatly by location and are closely linked to economic hardship and service gaps

Children experience multiple, overlapping protection risks across the assessed governorates. Child labour, neglect, bullying, violence, early marriage and family separation were among the key protection concerns identified by respondents. These risks affect children in different ways depending on governorate, their age, circumstances, household resources and access to protective services. In Deir Ezzor, caregivers reported neglect (68%), bullying (51%), child labour (49%), violence (33%) and family separation (16%). In Ar-Raqqa, child labour was reported by 49% of caregivers and early marriage by 18%, the highest reported proportion across the five locations. In Aleppo, bullying was prominent at 38%, despite reports of comparatively more positive emotional wellbeing.

Families and informal networks remain important first points of support, with children often relying on parents, teachers and other trusted adults to address their protection concerns. However, awareness and use of formal reporting and referral pathways are

inconsistent. Some respondents reported that children did not know how to report concerns; in Ar-Raqqa, fear at school and reluctance to express concerns were identified as barriers. Informal support is valuable, but it cannot replace accessible and trusted formal protection services. Strengthening safe reporting mechanisms, referral pathways and access to appropriate child protection services is essential to complement family and community support.

4 Psychosocial distress is widespread, while opportunities for play, recreation and social connection remain limited

Caregivers reported substantial psychosocial concerns across all five governorates, with anxiety or fear among the most consistently observed symptoms. Deir Ezzor had the most concerning overall emotional wellbeing profile: no children were described as happy or doing well, while 37% were described as often sad or stressed and 12% as very distressed or struggling. In Aleppo, 54% were described as doing well or happy or doing well, although significant needs remained. Access to support was also limited: among caregivers reporting psychosocial difficulties, the proportion who had not sought support ranged from 57% in Al Hasakeh to 89% in Ar-Raqqa, often because services were unavailable, unaffordable or not known about. Focus group participants in Aleppo also described reduced or closed humanitarian mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services, illustrating how funding reductions can interrupt the support available to children and families. Such interruptions risk leaving children without consistent support at a time when distress is widespread.

The assessment also highlights an important but sometimes overlooked dimension of children's wellbeing: opportunities to play, participate in organised activities and spend time with peers. Among children aged 0–10, only 1% in Deir Ezzor participated regularly in play activities, while 53% in Ar-Raqqa and 50% in Al Hasakeh did not participate at all. Among adolescents, regular participation was also just 1% in Deir Ezzor, while 52% in Ar-Raqqa and 49% in Al Hasakeh did not participate in social or recreational activities. These opportunities are fundamental to children's development, emotional wellbeing and social connection, rather than optional additions to services. They also demonstrate the importance of distinguishing between households' immediate material priorities and children's developmental needs. Families facing acute economic pressure may prioritise food and financial assistance, while children and adolescents emphasise the need for opportunities to socialise, play and participate in organised activities as a part of their development. Effective responses must recognise both. Accessible, safe and age-appropriate recreational opportunities should form part of integrated education, protection and MHPSS programming, alongside appropriate specialised support for children experiencing more severe distress.



Children during a recreational activity in response to the 2023 earthquake that hit Syria.
© War Child

5 Displacement and return create distinct challenges for wellbeing and reintegration

Displacement status influences children's experiences, although needs vary across locations and from child to child. Idlib had the highest number of caregiver respondents who were displaced or had returned to their communities, with 33% identifying as IDPs and 21% as returnees. Survey findings linked children's emotional wellbeing in Idlib to displacement, poverty, poor living conditions and insecurity. Adolescents spoke positively about returning to familiar places, but also highlighted difficulties associated with damaged or destroyed homes, lost friendships, language and dialect differences, and the need to readjust after spending time elsewhere.

Key informants identified returnee children as facing particular challenges related to education, reintegration and socioeconomic stability. Beyond the curriculum differences and learning gaps identified earlier, documentation and interrupted education were recurring concerns, especially in Aleppo and Deir Ezzor. Displaced and returnee children were reported to also require support with MHPSS, basic assistance, protection and rebuilding social connections. Recovery and programming should assess individual circumstances and respond to the specific barriers faced by IDPs, returnees and vulnerable children in host communities, without assuming that displacement status alone determines need or that return automatically equates to restored stability. Of note, the assessment identifies needs and barriers affecting vulnerable children; it is not intended to determine whether conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return are in place.

6 Children with disabilities and other marginalised groups face additional barriers to services and participation

Children with disabilities, children from economically vulnerable households, out-of-school children, displaced and returnee children, working children and girls were repeatedly identified as facing additional risks and barriers. These vulnerabilities often overlap, meaning that a child may experience several forms of exclusion simultaneously. Among the 92 surveyed households with a child with a disability, between 76% in Al Hasakeh and 95% in Ar-Raqqa reported that specialised services were unavailable. Gaps were identified in disability-inclusive education, healthcare, rehabilitation, accessible facilities and adapted activities.

Barriers extend beyond service availability to include affordability, geographic coverage, staffing and referral pathways. Key informants also identified unequal opportunities for children with disabilities to access services across several locations, alongside barriers affecting girls, working children and socially isolated children. In Al Hasakeh, respondents consistently described unequal participation opportunities, including gender-related differences, while in Deir Ezzor, limited specialised staffing and capacity to include children with disabilities or psychosocial difficulties were highlighted as significant constraints. Disability inclusion must therefore be integrated across education, protection, MHPSS, health and recreational programming, with accessible facilities, adapted activities, appropriate referrals, and meaningful engagement with children with disabilities and their caregivers.

7 Children and caregivers should have greater influence over decisions affecting them

Children often have opportunities to express their views within families, schools and communities, but participation remains largely consultative rather than consistently influencing decisions. Between 84% and 93% of caregivers in Idlib, Al Hasakeh and Ar-Raqqa reported that they had not been consulted on decisions or activities affecting their children. Qualitative findings also identified inconsistent awareness of formal feedback and complaints mechanisms, raising concerns that children may not know how to report issues or may be reluctant to do so because of fear or uncertainty about how their concerns will be handled.

Meaningful participation requires safe, accessible and age-appropriate channels through which children and caregivers can raise concerns, influence programme design and receive appropriate responses. Particular attention is needed to include younger children, children with disabilities and working children, who may face additional barriers. Organisations and authorities should demonstrate how feedback informs decisions and programme adaptation, strengthening accountability alongside service delivery.

8 Geographic differences demand a differentiated approach to recovery

Although children across all five governorates face significant needs, the assessment identifies distinct geographic patterns that should guide programme design, advocacy and resource allocation.

- Deir Ezzor presents the most pronounced combination of vulnerabilities, spanning protection, education, psychosocial wellbeing, basic needs, disability inclusion and limited specialised services. Particular attention to integrated support for children and vulnerable households is needed.

- Ar-Raqqa is characterised by acute economic and education-related pressures, including child labour, school exclusion, reduced access to essential services, and limited opportunities for recreation and psychosocial support.
- Al Hasakeh faces significant gaps in MHPSS, education, health and specialised services, alongside concerns about social isolation, disability inclusion and limited recreational opportunities.
- Idlib presents substantial displacement-related pressures, poverty, and education and protection concerns, and gaps in specialised services. Returnee children may require targeted support for educational continuity, social reintegration and access to services.
- Aleppo has comparatively more positive emotional wellbeing and greater service availability, but persistent concerns remain around economic hardship, bullying, safe spaces, disability inclusion, documentation and specialised services.

These differences reinforce the need for a common set of child-focused priorities combined with locally adapted responses. Geographic prioritisation should guide resource allocation – but without overlooking the needs of children in comparatively lower-priority locations. Economic vulnerability and disability-related exclusion remain important cross-cutting drivers of exclusion throughout the assessment, while displacement and return create additional challenges in particular locations.



Families in Deir ez-Zoor, northeast Syria, receiving cash assistance through War Child's partner, Dan for Relief and Development (DRD). This assistance came as part of our emergency response to the Euphrates River flooding in late May, which affected 17,000 people, including around 2,000 children (source: UNICEF).
© DRD, War Child's partner



Deserted and damaged school building in Idlib, Syria.
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Conclusion

Children's needs across northern Syria are interconnected: economic hardship, disrupted education, protection risks, psychosocial distress, and limited access to specialised services and recreational opportunities all reinforce one another. The differences between governorates and population groups demonstrate the importance of locally adapted responses that address both immediate needs and the underlying barriers to children's wellbeing. As Syria advances recovery, children's needs must be central to decisions about service restoration, funding and institutional development. A sustainable recovery requires more than rebuilding infrastructure; it must ensure that children can learn, access protection and psychosocial support, play, participate and grow in safe and inclusive environments.



Children receiving kits for psychosocial and non-formal education activities in Aleppo, 2025.
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