



BEYOND CONFLICT

The mental health charity for victims of war

PALESTINIAN GAZA REPORT

March 2026

FOREWORD

Beyond Conflict is the mental health charity for victims of war, terrorism and displacement. Following the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, the Israeli military response against Palestinian territories and civilians has resulted in an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in the Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank.

Palestinian civilians have suffered destruction of their homes, community, infrastructure and medical facilities.

Together with an escalation of Israeli military strikes on Gaza, an Israeli blockade of food and medical supplies into the Palestinian territory led to acute malnutrition and food insecurity, risking mass starvation, according to the United Nations. Food security saw some improvement after the ceasefire was declared in October 2025, but more than three quarters of Gazans continue to suffer “acute hunger and malnutrition”.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres said whilst there has been some progress, gains remain “fragile – perilously so.”

After supporting a project for Palestinian families and frontline workers in the West Bank in 2024, Beyond Conflict has supported a project for children in Gaza in 2025.

UNICEF reports that conflict in Gaza has taken an unconscionable toll on children. More than 64,000 children have reportedly been killed or injured, and homes, hospitals and schools have been destroyed, depriving families of safety and essential services. More than 56,000 children have lost one or both parents, while widespread displacement, malnutrition and trauma continue to shape every aspect of childhood in Gaza. The need for treatment remains high. Children and families, exhausted by the constant moving, have returned to neighbourhoods reduced to rubble,

This has had a devastating impact on the mental health of civilians, with children suffering the most. UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Tom Fletcher, said a whole generation in Gaza has been traumatised by the war, with at least one million children requiring mental health support for depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

Both UNRWA and UNICEF have reported a surge in symptoms of depression, stress, anxiety, and trauma among the people they serve, especially noticeable among children. Beyond Conflict's local partner, Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP), a leader in this field, has said children are the most vulnerable during and after emergencies, with symptoms, including suicidal and self harm thoughts, nightmares, bedwetting, crying, fear, concentration issues, sleeping problems, and aggressive behaviour.

On average, GCMHP estimates that 8-10% of children need advanced mental health care in the Gaza Strip.

Since the war began, Beyond Conflict has supported projects delivering mental health support for Palestinian families in both Gaza and the West Bank. In 2024, we supported a project for hundreds of Palestinian families and frontline workers in the West Bank. In 2025, BC supported a new project for the children of Gaza, run by our partner the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme (GCMHP), an award winning grassroots mental health NGO that has delivered help to the Gaza community for more than three decades.

GCMHP has helped mitigate the immediate devastating psychological impact of the war on the children of Gaza by implementing targeted recreational activities to support their mental well-being. During the 2025 project, GCMHP organized 10 recreational play camps for displaced and war-affected children at IDP camps and shelters across Gaza. These activities reached 3,846 children aged 5-16 years, comprising 2,236 girls and 1,610 boys.

Out of this total, up to 10 percent of children identified as suffering the most serious cases of trauma were referred for further one-on-one specialist psychological support, carried out by GCMHP's staff. This treatment aims to address some of the longer-term issues prevalent in these children, involving in-depth follow up care where needed.

Overall, the camps helped an additional 1,000 more children than originally anticipated, against a backdrop of bombardment, food and medical aid blockades and attacks on frontline workers.

Our partner GCMHP has seen three of its hospital facilities bombed and destroyed since this phase of the war began. We pay tribute to our partners GCMHP who not only delivered but increased their impact on the ground, even whilst facing great danger to themselves.

These activities are helping children to cope with the immediate situation. However, trauma is long-term in its impact. Many of these children have lost parents, families and friends as well as homes and normal life. They feel abandoned and lonely with no-one to turn to for comfort, re-assurance and hope. Both GCMHP and Beyond Conflict recognise the need to address the long term scars and we hope to continue working together to respond to the deeper trauma. Unless this is addressed, a whole generation of children will grow up unable to cope with the world around them.

GCMHP's respected Director General, Dr Yasser Abu Jamal, said these recreational play camps provide art, play and music, under the supervision of a team of dedicated mental health professionals. Dr Yasser thanked Beyond Conflict for its support and emphasised the urgent need to support this work.

Beyond Conflict trustee Murhaf Assaf, a Syrian surgeon now working in the UK who worked in hospitals during the bombardment of Aleppo, said this Gaza project evoked memories of his time living through the Syrian war:

"On a personal note, the images reminded me of my own experience during the siege of Aleppo. I remember attending similar recreational activities organised for children. Although these programmes were designed primarily for the children, they also had a profound impact on adults like myself who were living through the conflict. They provided moments of relief and hope, and they made a real difference to our mental health during those very dark times...While the report clearly shows the immediate relief these activities provide, it is also important to recognise that supporting children's mental health during conflict is an investment in their future and in the long-term recovery of their communities."

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THE BEYOND CONFLICT BOARD



Impact Report



**Implemented by: Gaza Community Mental Health Programme
(GCMHP)**

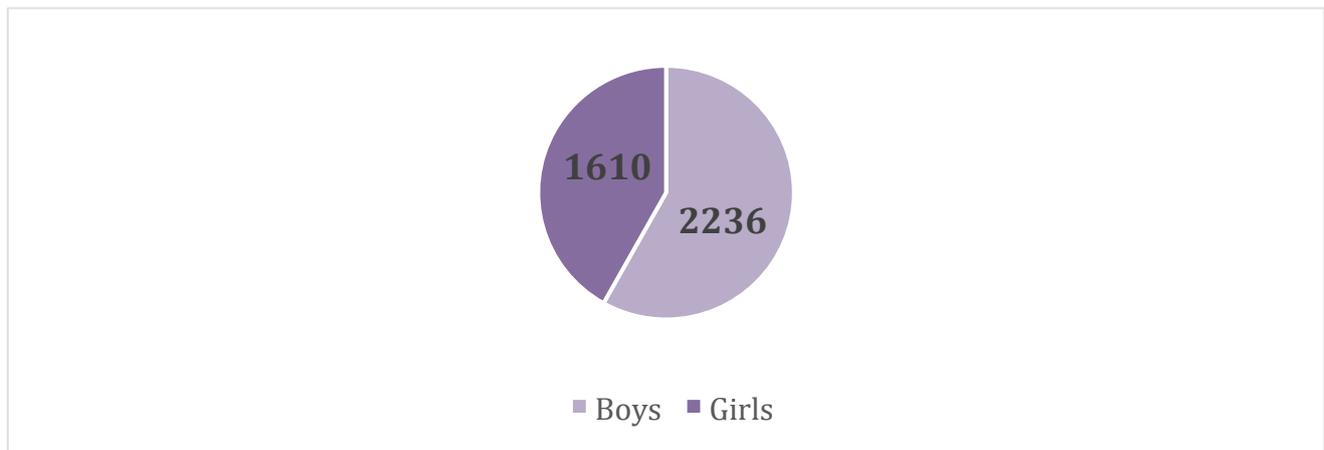
In cooperation with: Beyond Conflict

Executive Summary:

Children in the Gaza Strip are living under extreme conditions of conflict, displacement, and deprivation, which have a profound impact on their mental, emotional, and social well-being. Recreational days provide a critical opportunity for these children to experience safety, joy, and normalcy, even if temporarily. Through playing games, arts, and group activities, children can express emotions, reduce stress, improve social interaction, and regain a sense of childhood that is often lost amid the hardships of war.

GCMHP contributed to mitigating the psychological impact of the war on children, who continue to face traumatic experiences, by implementing targeted recreational activities to support their mental well-being. During the project, GCMHP organized 10 recreational days for displaced and war-affected children at camps and shelters across the Gaza city. These activities reached 3,846 children aged 5–16 years, including 2,236 girls and 1,610 boys.

Target locations were identified based on field assessments conducted by mental health professionals to prioritize areas of greatest need. The recreational activities had a notable positive effect on the children's mental health.



The recreational activities included:

- o Art (drawing, painting)
- o Music and movement activities
- o Team games and sports
- o Puppet shows and educational performances
- o Light snacks distributed to participants

GCMHP recommends continuing such activities as essential for building resilience. Regular recreational programs help children cope with trauma, foster adaptive skills, and create positive memories that counterbalance the daily stresses of displacement and conflict. Sustained implementation ensures that children have repeated opportunities to heal, socialize, and develop in a supportive and structured environment, contributing significantly to their overall well-being and future potential.

This report highlights the impact of these recreational days on children's overall mental health.

Bringing Joy Amidst Conflict: Children's Voices on the Impact of Recreational Activities in Gaza

Recreational days act as a protective and restorative tool for children's mental health. They help reduce trauma symptoms, promote positive emotions, and strengthen resilience, which directly improves the overall psychological well-being of affected children.

The activities helped create an atmosphere of joy and happiness among the children. The MEAL process recorded some voices and quotes from children that show the positive impact of recreational activities:

A 10-year-old boy who participated in the recreational day at Al Malia Camp- Gaza city, shared his feelings: "I haven't felt this kind of joy in a long time. I lost my friends during the war, and I hadn't had anyone to play with for a long time. The games today were so much fun and really exciting. At first, I felt a little shy and hesitant, but once I joined in, I felt safe, comfortable, and truly happy. For the first time in a long while, I could just be a child, play freely, and forget, even if just for a little while, all the fear and worries around me."

A 14-year-old girl who took part in the recreational day at Watan Shelter-Gaza City, shared her experience: "I really enjoyed story time, it made me feel like someone truly understood me and my feelings. For a little while, I could forget the fear and uncertainty around us and just focus on the story and the fun activities. When I returned to my tent, I was so happy that I immediately told my mom about everything we did. It felt like a special day just for us, where we could laugh, share, and feel safe despite everything happening outside."

An 11-year-old girl who participated in the recreational day at Iqraa Shelter- Gaza city, said: "It was such a wonderful day. My favorite parts were the teddy bears and the clown, they made me laugh and feel happy. For a little while, I felt like I was at school on a special open day. It was amazing to play freely and not think about the bombardment outside. For a few hours, all the fear and noise from the war seemed far away, and I could just be a child again."

An 13-year-old boy who participated in the recreational day at Al Yarmouk Camp-Gaza city, said: "As soon as I heard the songs and saw the games, I ran over without hesitation. During the war, I often had to help my mother by fetching water and gathering firewood, so I hardly ever had time to play. Today, I finally had the chance to just be a child and enjoy myself. We haven't had this much fun in a long time. Thank you for organizing these activities. I hope they continue so we can always have moments like this."

A 12-year-old girl who participated in the recreational day at Palestine Camp-Gaza city, shared her experience: "I had so much fun today, and the atmosphere was wonderful. For a little while, it felt like we were far away from the war, and I could forget about the fatigue and living in tents. My favorite part was the competitions; they were so exciting and made me feel happy and free. Please continue to come and organize activities like this for us."

Mothers' Voices on the Impact of Recreational Activities in Gaza

Mother of a 7-year-old boy: "I saw a big change in my son after the recreational day. He returned smiling and full of energy, talking excitedly about the games and activities. For a moment, I saw him just as a child again, without fear or worry. These activities gave him a sense of normalcy that he hasn't felt in a long time."

Mother of an 9-year-old boy: "After participating in the recreational day, I saw my son laughing and playing freely for hours. It was the first time in months that he felt safe and carefree. I am grateful for the chance for him to experience this joy."

Mother of a 12-year-old girl: "We are living in a crowded camp of tents, and there are no safe places for children to play. My daughter came back from the recreational day full of stories and happiness. She couldn't stop talking about the competitions and games, and I could see how excited and joyful she felt. She seemed relaxed and completely stress-free. Seeing her like this reminded me how important these activities are for children growing up in the midst of war."

Mother of a 11-year-old: " I noticed a big difference in my daughter. She was more cheerful and talked about her feelings openly. Story time and the games seemed to help her express what she had been keeping inside"

Mental Health Professionals' Voices on the Impact of Recreational Activities in Gaza

"Repeated recreational programs contribute to long-term resilience in children. They create positive memories and routines that help counteract the negative psychological effects of war and displacement, supporting the development of adaptive coping skills that extend beyond the activities themselves. During the project, some mothers shared concerns and observed symptoms regarding their children. Our professionals provided them with counselling and ongoing support and were also given access to our free hotline (1800222333) for further follow-up and assistance." **Dr. Amal Abu Obada- Psychiatrist and Director of Community Centers.**

"Most of the challenges reported by children, either directly or through their parents, were related to the heavy responsibilities and hardships they face in their daily lives. Many children indicated that they are compelled to carry out numerous household tasks, such as fetching water, collecting firewood, and carrying dough to bakeries, among other duties. These burdens deprive them of essential childhood experiences, including attending school, forming friendships, and engaging in play .In addition, several children exhibited behavioral and emotional difficulties, including aggression, social withdrawal, use of inappropriate language, bullying, and stubbornness. Children also showed signs of developmental delays resulting from the severe lack of basic necessities, such as adequate food, clothing, and

clean drinking water, exacerbated by the ongoing deprivation and humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. This was further compounded by the absence of the care, attention, and stability they were accustomed to before the crisis. The recreational activities offered these children a brief yet meaningful escape from these harsh realities, enabling them to experience joy, relaxation, and a sense of normalcy. For many, these activities restored moments of happiness and emotional relief, allowing them to reconnect with their childhood, even if only for a short time." **Mr. Osama Fienah- Head of Khan Younis Community Center-GCMHP.**

"Recreational activities provided a safe space for emotional release and created an atmosphere of joy and happiness for children. They also contributed to strengthening feelings of safety and belonging through participation in shared group activities with peers, which reduced stress and enhanced social skills and the ability to express emotions in a healthy manner." **Ms. Samah Mahmoud- Head of Deir Al Balah Community Center-GCMHP**

"Children living through war or displacement often experience high levels of anxiety, fear, and trauma. Recreational days provide them with a safe environment where they can temporarily escape these stressors. Through engaging in play and games, children are able to release tension, reduce stress hormones, and feel a sense of security." **Mr. Mohamed Abu Hasanin- Mental Health Professional at GCMHP**

"Activities such as games, storytelling, and arts give children the opportunity to express emotions they might not be able to put into words. These positive experiences foster happiness and joy, offering emotional relief and significantly improving their overall mental health." **Mr. Mohamed Abu Sief- Occupational Therapy Specialist at GCMHP**

"Group recreational activities are very important for children's social development. By interacting with their peers, working as a team, and sharing experiences, children develop a sense of belonging and social support, which is critical for building resilience in trauma-affected environments." **Mr. Yousef Shaladan- Psychologist at GCMHP**

Challenges encountered and Mitigation measures (MM):

During the implementation of the project activities, several challenges were encountered due to the ongoing crisis and difficult humanitarian conditions in Gaza. The following summarizes the main challenges and the measures taken to mitigate their impact:

- **Challenge 1: Unstable security situation, violence, and continuous displacement:** The volatile security environment and ongoing displacements in Gaza during the project period led to delays and changes in the planned schedules of the recreational activities.

- **Mitigation Measure:** GCMHP addressed this challenge through flexibility, rescheduling postponed or suspended days and implementing activities once the surrounding conditions stabilized. This approach ensured the continuity of the program without affecting children's and families' commitment to participation.
- **Challenge 2: Overcrowding and limited spaces within camps:** The camps' overcrowded conditions and scarcity of safety, appropriate areas for activities posed a significant challenge for organizing group recreational activities. **Mitigation Measure:** GCMHP's team worked closely with the management of the targeted camps and shelters to identify suitable spaces with adequate area for implementing the activities, while prioritizing the safety of all participating children.
- **Challenge 3: Hesitation and reluctance among children:** Some children were initially hesitant to participate in recreational activities due to continuous exposure to trauma and repeated displacement. **Mitigation Measure:** Mental health professionals from GCMHP actively encouraged children to attend and engage with their peers in the activities. This support not only helped overcome initial hesitation but also promoted children's psychological well-being, strengthened social integration, and created an atmosphere of joy and positivity during the recreational days.
- **Challenge 4: Limited access to advanced mental health care due to ongoing displacement:** Continuous displacement prevented some children from accessing advanced mental health services, as some families were forced to move to other areas or governorates. **Mitigation Measure:** GCMHP provided mothers with complete contact information and addresses of all GCMHP community centers, ensuring that displaced children could reach services and support regardless of their location.

Photos:

The following some photos for the different recreational activities implemented during the reporting period.



















