Millions of kids are trying to escape violence and poverty. What can be done to keep them safe?

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Running for Safety

Right now, a huge number of children around the world are on the run. Estimates show that 30 million young people have been forced to flee their homes. (That’s more people than live in the entire state of Texas!)

These kids are trying to escape war, violence, and hunger. Most are on the move with their families. Some older children are traveling alone. Many have missed years of school. All have the right to be protected from harm.

This huge migration is the worst refugee crisis in more than 70 years. Citizens of many countries are on the run. But the greatest number of refugees are coming from Syria, a country in the Middle East. Syria is being torn apart by civil war.

Since the war began in 2011, more than 4.7 million Syrians have fled to neighboring countries. Many are trying to get to Europe. Whether at home or on the move, 13.5 million Syrian people are in need of immediate help, as of the end of 2015. Almost half are children.

Their journey is dangerous, but it is the only hope for the refugees. Many have been traveling across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe in inflatable boats. Others have walked hundreds of miles to reach safety. When the refugees arrive, they do not always receive a warm welcome. Some people worry that refugees will not fit in well or will need too much help.

More than 120 groups, including UNICEF, are leading the call for an end to Syria’s civil war. And those groups continue working hard to help the millions on the run.

WORD MATCH

Draw a line between each vocabulary word and its meaning.

1. Civil war
2. Crisis
3. Flee
4. Inflatable
5. Migration
6. Refugees

A. Able to be filled with air
B. To run away from, to escape
C. A battle between people in the same country
D. A difficult or dangerous situation
E. People who escape their home country to find safety
F. Movement of people from one place to another
Migration Map

Where are refugees coming from and going to, and how are they migrating? Study the map, then demonstrate your understanding by answering the questions below.

1. Which body of water do Syrian refugees have to cross to reach Greece?

2. In which direction do refugees from Syria have to travel to get to Germany?

3. For refugees traveling by land from Syria, name at least three countries they might pass through on their way to Germany.
Malak’s Journey

This young girl, like millions of other children, is fleeing danger and hoping for a safe new home.

Seven-year-old Malak knows how difficult it is to be a refugee. She is one of millions of people who have had to flee dangerous conditions. (People have the right to escape to other countries when their human rights are under attack at home.) Malak and her mother had to leave their home country of Syria to get away from its violent civil war. Malak’s older brother had already fled to Germany. Their mother wanted to meet him there so the family could be together.

Their journey was long and dangerous. Malak and her mother traveled in an inflatable boat across the Mediterranean Sea to the Greek island of Lesbos. “Once [the boat] moved, water started getting into [it],” says Malak. “And we got sprayed by the water. It felt as if my mother and I might drown.”

Malak was cold and scared. The boat had 50 children and adults in it, but was meant to hold only 20 people. During the trip, the boat ran out of fuel and a fisherman had to pull it to shore.

Once on shore in Lesbos, the refugees

Children on the move have rights. Many countries are working to protect the rights of those children. Read the graphs below to learn more about the countries that children are fleeing from and where they are going.

By the Numbers

Diplomat Edition

Study the Graph

1 How many more children from Syria than from Afghanistan were seeking safety in Europe in 2015?

2 How many children were seeking safety in Germany, Sweden, and Hungary combined in 2015?
Toys That Travel

Families who are forced to leave their homes take only what they can carry. They bring the things they need, such as money and medicine. If a child is lucky, he or she can take a favorite toy. These photos show some of the toys brought by children on the move.

Refugees often have to walk long distances to reach safety. This girl carries a stuffed animal toy with her.

Sadly, some children lose or forget their toys during the rush to reach the next country border.

Toys can keep children company at the busy borders. This girl and her teddy bear have to wait for hours at a reception center.

Children can often replace a lost toy when they reach a safe place. Here, Mahmood, age 7, and Zahra, 5, hold new stuffed animals they were given at a UNICEF child-friendly space.

Imagine It’s You: Malak and other child refugees have to leave many things behind. Imagine you are one of those children. Write a journal entry about your thoughts and feelings on the day you find out you have to leave.

Watch Malak talk about her journey at bit.ly/MalaksJourney.

walked miles on dusty mountain roads to reach a reception center. Malak and her mother were safe, but were missing their other family members. After seven tries to escape, Malak’s father and two other sisters made it to Greece as well. The family is now ready to travel to Germany to reunite with Malak’s brother.

What does Malak miss most about her home? “I miss my school in Syria and I miss my teacher,” she says. “I had a lot of friends. Now there is no one left.”

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Families on the run face many problems: Their trips are often dangerous. Weather conditions may be extreme. As they travel, they stop in places where they don’t know anyone. UNICEF and other groups are working hard to help these families along the way. We spoke with UNICEF’s Chris Tidey to learn more. He recently returned from Europe, where he looked into how the rights of child refugees were being protected.

Providing the Basics: Workers make sure children have food and water when they arrive at reception centers, explains Chris Tidey. In the winter, kids receive warm clothing to fight the cold temperatures. Young people who get sick during the trip are treated with medicine. “We do the best we can, as quickly as possible, before they move on,” says Tidey.

Every Child Has Rights

A United Nations agreement states that all children are entitled to important rights. Those rights include a place to sleep, healthy food, medical care, and protection from violence. Children are also entitled to the right to learn and play. The U.N. agreement is called the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Nearly 200 countries have agreed to this convention, which protects children all over the world. That includes refugees and other people who are moving to new countries.

THINK, WRITE, DISCUSS

1. Why is it important for countries to protect the rights of children?
2. Why is learning considered a right? Why is playing considered a right?
3. Why would children who are refugees or migrants still have these rights, even when they leave their countries?
Creating Child-Friendly Spaces: Kids have the right to play, yet “it is hard for children on the move to play and have fun like most other children,” Tidey points out. That is why UNICEF sets up special tents or other spaces just for kids. Child-friendly spaces are safe, warm, colorful areas decorated with children’s art. Inside, kids can play with stuffed animals, balls, building blocks, games, and coloring books.

Helping Lost Children: Chris Tidey notes that refugees who want to cross into another country have to wait at the border. It can get very crowded with thousands of people. Sometimes, kids get separated from their parents in the large crowd. Officials take quick action to help children who are lost. The kids are kept safe in a child-friendly space while officials find their parents. “This process usually happens very quickly,” Tidey reports. Parents and children are often reunited within a few hours.

A New Home for Syrian Kids

About 2,000 Syrian refugees now live in the United States. Thousands more are expected to settle in the United States in the next few years.

The process to allow refugees into the country is thorough. Before they can come to the United States, refugees have to pass a strict security screening, interviews, and health checks.

Once refugees are approved, they can move to the United States. For the first three months, agencies help families settle into their new communities. The agencies help them find housing and learn English. Families receive furniture, food, and medical care. Agencies also help parents enroll their kids in school.

Nabiha and Hajar are two Syrian girls who came to the United States in 2015. They live in New Jersey with their parents and younger brother, Shaker. The children are learning English and all about their new country. “I want to thank the Americans for welcoming us,” Nabiha told journalist Willa Frej. Nabiha also wanted Americans to know that “Syrians are good people.”

The girls and their family—like other refugees admitted to this country—can apply for a green card after a year. The card proves the holder is a legal resident. After five years, refugees are eligible to become U.S. citizens.
My school’s concert raised nearly $1,500 to help refugees.

By David Ju

When I was first told that our school was going to help Syrian refugees, my heart filled with joy. The terrible ordeal that children were experiencing as they fled their country was not their fault. The idea started with our assistant principal, Dr. Issa. She had family members who fled Syria. They traveled by sea to arrive in Lesbos, Greece.

Our music teacher, Mr. Danielson, felt that this crisis would help us learn about compassion and giving. He decided to take action. The plan was to put on a concert for students while they donated money. Our school’s orchestra, band, and choir would perform. Students were asked to match the amount they spent on lunch.

Syrian Refugee Day was an emotional and satisfying day for all of us. After lunch, students and staff members gathered on our front lawn. Everyone sang, “We Are the World,” accompanied by our fabulous musicians.

We were all overjoyed to take part in this fundraiser. What was most amazing is that we raised almost $1,500 in 30 minutes! Our school community was not physically affected by this tragedy, yet we feel pride that we were able to have a small effect on this crisis.

What is my advice to others? Never be afraid to try to change the world! Anyone can help make a difference.

David Ju is an eighth grader at First Avenue Middle School in Arcadia, California.

Speak out for child refugees by writing the U.S. President a letter. In the letter, express your feelings about the importance of accepting child refugees.

Start your own fundraiser to help children on the move. Then donate the money. You can find ideas for school-based fundraisers at bit.ly/UNICEFFundraising.

Help refugees directly by volunteering for a local organization that provides aid, such as food and clothing, for refugees.

Be a “buddy” to new students at school who are refugees or who come from other countries.