

# Life Skills Training Among 7-13 Years Old Afghan Refugee Children in Rafsanjan Camp, Kerman, Iran

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## ABSTRACT

**Background and Purpose:** Children as the most vulnerable refugees need a special care to improve their psychological-social capabilities and physical health. It seems that life skills education based on essential psychological and social skills is needed for a healthy life and is one of the most important teaching requirements for these children. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of three developed life skills education packages (for the grade one, four and five students) that carried out among Afghan children refugees in Rafsanjan camp in Iran.

**Methods:** All 7-13 years old children attended in a three-month life skill training course. During the course the occurrence frequency of 'positive' and 'negative' behaviors in four categories of hygiene, aggression, respectfulness and psychological difficulties were recorded by the coaches as well as the parents through a structured observation checklist. Semi-structured interviews with the parents and coaches also applied.

**Results:** Comparisons of teachers and coaches' reports between first and third month in all categories using Chi-Square test were statistically significant in all grades (P-value <0.05) except aggression for grade 4 and 5. The training program have had a positive impact on the students' personal hygiene and neat appearance, reduction of physical and verbal aggression, respect for the rights of others and class rules, reduction of psychological difficulties and improvement in cognitive-emotional abilities.

**Conclusion:** It seems that for making long lasting improvements, a long term continuous education is required to let the learned skills get established in the students through everyday real life situations.

**Keywords:** Empowerment; Life skills; Health Education; Mental Health

## INTRODUCTION

The number of refugees in the world has raised rapidly in the last decade, as ethnic conflict, famine, war, and other political struggles have forced millions of people to leave their country<sup>1</sup>. Nowadays, living in a complex world has created widespread problems such as economic inflation, social and political difficulties for the general public. Refugees are among social problems that are caused by unpleasant socio-political changes.

Refugees and asylum seekers usually live in camps with limited resources. They have to stay in these camps for several years that make various complex psychological difficulties for them. Children comprise over half of the global refugee population. Refugee children have complex experiences with exposure to multiple disturbing events<sup>2</sup>. Children suffer and get affected by the situation more than other groups, and this necessitates a special care towards the children in refugee camps.

Our observations of the Rafsanjan camp, Kerman, Iran showed that the children living in that camp have very little social and sanitary provisions. They did not care for regular cleaning of their body and cloths, and some would not take bath for weeks. They often are ridicule, curse and beat one another. Some of these children were extremely shy and unable to communicate their most basic needs and some would express their needs in the most violent fashion. Definitely all these deficiencies will adversely affect the ability to adapt to the society and confidence of these children and makes them vulnerable to events and accidents in their environment.

These evidences suggest that implementing programs that are designed to improve cognitive-behavioral-emotional skills can play a positive role in the process of socialization of these kids and their self-esteem<sup>3</sup>. The life skills education program for elementary students is among programs that teaches individuals how to improve their cognitive-social-emotional abilities<sup>4</sup>. This training plan is based on active learning and its model is designed to relate to children's personal and social life, to improve cognitive-social and emotional skills of the kids in the operational and practical level.

The effectiveness of such training course was the main question of the study. Thus, we tried to assess the changes in behaviors among the children during the life skill course training.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A total number of 260 students were studying in two unisex schools in the camp. As there were life skills packages available just for grade 1, 4 and 5 of school, we had to recruit the students in these grades. Because of better collaboration of the girls' school principal, in addition to budget shortage, we considered 7-13 years old Afghan refugee children living in Rafsanjan camp, Kerman, Iran among grade one class (including 26 students) and grade four class (25 students) from girls' school. No girl studied in fifth grade, so we recruited grade five class from the boys' school including 32 students.

For coach and assistant researcher selection, we called the interested people to join. The eligible applicants (mostly college students) passed an intensive training course and the qualified applicant joined us as life skills coaches. We didn't have any men applicant.

The basis of the life skill courses package included a student work book and coaches' guide book.

## Data collection and analysis

The qualitative data such as data obtained from

interviews and structured observation were collected in two ways including 1) the structured observation through checklist forms by the teachers and coaches and 2) semi-structured interviews with the mothers and coaches about the children's behavioral changes.

The 4 categories for assessment were determined as Hygiene, Aggression, Respectfulness and Psychological Difficulties. With the structured observations of the teachers and coaches the occurrence frequency of the behaviors were recorded that resulted in quantitative tables of occurrence. The data were recorded in three separate months of the course for each grade.

In the next stage the coaches' and mothers' opinions were compared. To do this the differences and similarities between the data obtained from mothers and coaches on each category were analyzed. On the other hand, the checklists completed by the teachers and the coaches got qualitatively analyzed. Data obtained from this checklist was again compared with the data derived from the behavioral observation.

## RESULTS

After a 3-month training course, there were obvious overall increasing trend in positive behaviors occurrence and a decreasing trend in negative behaviors. Among the four categories, changes in hygienic behaviors were dramatic and great improvements in these behaviors have happened during the course. Comparisons between first and third month of Hygiene, Respectfulness and Psychological Difficulties using Chi-Square were statistically significant in all grades ( $P$ -value  $<0.05$ ). (Table 1).

Among grade one student hygiene and psychological indicators show more improvements in comparison to two other indicators. A general deteriorating trend in third month is evident in grade 4 students. In fact, shortage of suitable room for the classes forced the coaches to finish the grade five courses in the early days of the third month. Large number of overage students and repeated class absence in this grade also worsens the situation regarding the class management.

According to the data obtained from mothers in the first month the most outstanding negative characteristic in the students of three grades of first, fourth and fifth was physical and verbal aggression. The mothers of the fourth graders underlined psychological difficulties in their children. Mothers reported the physical and verbal aggression level of their kids have greatly reduced and those behaviors have replaced with more moderate characteristics. However, comparison between first and

**Table 1.** Occurrence of “Negative” and “Positive” behaviors according to the observation of the coaches and the teachers.

	Grade 1				Grade 4				Grade 5			
	1	2	3	<i>P</i> -value*	1	2	3	<i>P</i> -value*	1	2	3	<i>P</i> -value*
Hygiene												
Positive	10	22	28	<0.001	12	20	24	0.025	10	17	22	0.020
Negative	20	11	6		10	7	4		12	6	6	
Aggression												
Positive	10	20	18	0.043	15	21	20	0.156	7	16	11	0.220
Negative	23	13	13		20	14	13		16	10	10	
Respect												
Positive	14	20	20	0.022	14	20	20	<0.001	16	23	20	0.040
Negative	28	18	13		16	9	1		18	7	7	
Psychological Difficulties												
Positive	7	12	30	<0.001	9	18	24	0.002	8	19	15	0.05
Negative	24	20	5		20	11	9		18	10	10	

\*Comparison between first and third month value using Chi-Square test.

third month of aggression was statistically significant among grade 1 level (p-value: 0.043) and Grade 4 and 5 did not showed significant changes (p-value: 0.156 for grade 4, 0.220 for grade 5; Table 1). On the other hand, the progress of hygienic changes (personal hygiene and neat appearance) and reduction in the psychological difficulties has been evaluated to be very positive by mothers, coaches and the teachers. Also the mothers have reported that the positive psychological attributes (sharing, cooperating, boldness) have been visibly improved in their children. In regards to respecting others, the children have paid some attention which is noticeable. Parents have declared that their children had obvious positive transformations in their behaviors during this course.

## DISCUSSION

According to the results, the life skill course had positive effect on the students’ behavior. Mothers, coaches and teachers all observed a decrease in the occurrence frequency of physical and verbal aggression among the children. Furthermore, they reported a decrease in psychological difficulties of the children with more respectful behavior towards peers and adults. An increasing improvement of personal hygiene and neat appearance were other observable change among the children during the course.

The noticeable point is that after finishing of the course, the children’s behavior and their personal hygiene cease to improve and even signs of deterioration of the achieved improvements in their behavior and hygiene were observed. In the other word, for many students finishing the course resulted in gradually losing the improvements and the recurrence of aggressive behaviors

signs and lack of concern about hygiene and neatness. In fact, the return of some past customary behavior was predictable. Obviously, the students’ ‘negative’ behavioral repertoire was well established, so that the short term education would have a limited effect on them. It seems that if we want to make long lasting improvements and continuous positive behaviors in these children, a long term continuous education that provides the student with the opportunity to repeat and practice the learned skills in real life situations is essential.

The coaches of all three grades have reported growing progress in regards to respecting the classroom rules, participation in group activities and boldness, which they valued highly. A very interesting issue was a report from the grade five coaches and it was the life skills book was completed at the beginning of the third month. There was no subject to discuss further therefore the students got scattered and did not show up to the life skills classes as often. For some students this resulted in gradually losing the improvements and some signs of the aggressive behaviors and lack of attention to the hygiene issues started to be observed again. In the analysis of the data also some trends of this claim can be found for the grade five.

Based upon the information obtained from the teacher’s checklists for the grade one students the most outstanding behavioral improvements were in the areas of personal hygiene, neat appearance, reduction in the physical and verbal aggression, increase in respect to others and reduction of the psychological difficulties. For the fourth grade the personal hygiene and reduction of aggressive behaviors and psychological difficulties were the most outstanding ones. Teacher of the grade five also has reported the changes in the students in this

grade to be excellent. Teacher reported that the majority of the students have improved considerably in the areas of sincere communication, accepting responsibilities, helping others to resolve their problems, problem solving methods, decisiveness, and dealing with anger.

UNICEF's adoption of the document "A World Fit for Children" (2002) states that children must be empowered to exercise their right to expression in accordance with their evolving capacity; build self-esteem; and acquire knowledge and skills needed for conflict resolution, decision-making, communication, and endurance of life's challenges. Various researches that were conducted after implementation of life skills education programs in schools, showed meaningful improvements in various aspects of mental health including picture of self <sup>5</sup>, self-esteem <sup>6</sup>, self-sufficiency <sup>7</sup>, social and emotional conflicts <sup>8</sup> and meaningful reduction of social anxiety <sup>9</sup>. The development of a child's self-esteem is heavily influenced by the environment in which he or she is raised. Harter described that positive self-esteem formation is based on four factors: 1) the parent-child relationship; 2) the means used to cope with the child's undesirable emotions; 3) self-acceptance; and 4) social behavior <sup>10</sup>. The development of children's self-esteem is severely affected by their situation, that is, their homes, neighborhoods, and schools. Children with damaged self-esteem are at risk of developing psychological and social problems, which hinders recovery from low self-esteem. Thus, to recover low self-esteem, it is important for children to accumulate a series of successful experiences to create a positive concept of self <sup>11</sup>. The results of Tellado study showed that after teaching problem solving skills, this skill has improved in the test team compared to the control team <sup>12</sup>. The results of a research that revealed the effects of this education on self-awareness showed that with this training, students show more honesty, more altruism and less aggression <sup>13</sup>. Shure in his research concluded that interpersonal problem solving skills, is directly related with positive social relations with peers, hopefulness and sentimental companionship <sup>14</sup>.

We faced some limitations in our study. First, considering the students age, the grade five students were not homogenous and there were many overage students among them. This made some problems regarding the class control for the female coaches particularly in boy classes. Second, there were not suitable place for holding the courses available. Thus the courses were held in different places like the mosque, and any available room in the camp. This in turn could affect the efficiency of the course.

## CONCLUSION

Such training courses are recommended to improve daily living component in refugee children. In fact the life skills education had changed the behaviors of the students in all three grades in all three mentioned areas. It is obvious that the students' past behavioral repertoire includes well established unpleasant behaviors that are very hard to be replaced with new pleasant behaviors. Therefore, this course has a short term effect on the children and old established behaviors cannot immediately be replaced by new behaviors, as after the finishing of the course the occurrence frequency of the new behaviors decline and old behaviors start to appear again. It seems that we need to have a longer term education in order to make a more effective impact on the children's behavior.

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