

interview with  
War Child



**“Our role is to help them  
be the kind of parents  
they wish to be”**

**War Child is an organisation working to improve the lives of children in war and conflict zones around the world. It has recently launched a programme dedicated to the psychosocial wellbeing of caregivers grappling with extreme stress and anxiety. In a conversation with Tanmoy Goswami, War Child’s team members explain how the programme works and share heartening early results.**

**Could you give us an overview of War Child’s “care system” approach for children in conflict zones?**

Hundreds of millions of young people around the world are living with the devastating effects of war and conflict. From our 25-plus years of experience working in conflict zones, we have learned that it’s not enough to design programmes that only target children. We must also support the social structures meant to protect them – such as families, communities and schools – that are often acutely stressed and at risk of breaking down. The goal of our care system approach is to develop evidence-based services that can help mitigate the multi-layered impact of war and conflict on children, as well as the entire ecosystem around them. We offer targeted interventions in three main areas: psychosocial support, child protection, and education.<sup>1</sup>

**Tell us about “Be There”, your intervention for caregivers.**

Be There is a programme created in January 2022 to address the psychosocial wellbeing of caregivers looking after children from birth to age 12. Most of the participants are parents, but we’ve also had a few grandparents and step-parents. In conflict zones, these caregivers undergo extreme stress on a daily basis. They may be separated from family members, struggle with poverty and unemployment, and be forced to live in crowded quarters. They may experience a lot of trauma and anxiety caused by the violence and displacement. Through this programme, we give them a safe space to learn simple, evidence-based stress management tools and techniques

under the supervision of trained facilitators. Over nine sessions, we take them through practical exercises that, for instance, help them better manage their anger or frustration and prevent it from negatively impacting their own wellbeing as well as their relationship with their children. We believe that when caregivers feel supported, valued and respected, it also enables them to create a calmer home environment that’s conducive to their children’s learning and development needs.

## Structure of the sessions

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1. Energiser
  2. Review Home Practice
  3. Main-topic Exercise
  4. Additional Exercise
  5. Relaxation Exercise
  6. Assignment for next time/Review

<sup>1</sup> An overview of the War Child care system, describing these interventions, can be found at <https://www.warchildholland.org/care-system-overview/>



Photo: War Child Jordan

↑ Women participating in a group Be There session

**How do you find the caregivers who are most in need of the programme, and how did you design the programme so that it gives them what they need?**

We work with local partners who have deep ties within the community and a close understanding of what the families need. They help us create awareness about the programme and enrol caregivers. Over the course of the programme, we strongly emphasise building trust and creating a non-judgemental environment. We communicate clearly at every stage that parents are the real experts, and they don't need us to teach them how to do their job. Our only role is to ask how we can ease their stress so that they can regain some agency, focus on their own wellbeing, and be the kind of parents they wish to be.

We treat caregivers not as passive participants but as co-creators of the programme. For instance, we ran a

small pilot of our learning material in Lebanon to seek feedback from caregivers. In the first draft, we had a muscle relaxation exercise, but most participants told us it didn't work for them. So in the final version we replaced it with a different technique. Similarly, in the first draft, we had no videos. However, caregivers said they learn better via videos, so now we have videos embedded in our material. These are little things, but they go a long way in driving the programme's long-term effectiveness.

**Do you find that you need to adapt the programme significantly when you start working with caregivers in a new cultural context?**

Yes, this is a key challenge. We organise workshops to ground our staff in locally relevant interpretations of ideas such as "stress" or "anxiety". Then, we go session by session to identify elements of the programme that can be changed while keeping the

core intact. For example, we may need to modify some of our relaxation exercises so that they're culturally appropriate. The process of adapting our manuals and methodology to a new cultural context is led by a team consisting of stakeholders with technical skills and people with deep familiarity with the local culture. This process takes between six weeks and two months.

### What kind of results are you seeing from the programme so far?

We are currently in the process of measuring and collecting data on caregivers' attendance and their adherence to the lessons delivered in the sessions. But the stories we hear are already hugely encouraging. Parents tell us that they have made a lot of progress in their relationships with their children, and even with their partners and extended families. A lot of them say they were shocked to learn the amount of brain development that happens in the first 1,000 days of a child's life. Many mothers used to give smart devices to their one-year-old children because they didn't know the dangers. They say they are able to make better-informed decisions after attending the sessions.

**“They sit together and practise relaxation techniques as a family, which is such a beautiful way to reduce interpersonal tension and create bonding.”**

Many men who participate in our sessions say that they used to be angry at home all the time. Now they tell us that whenever they feel they're about to be angry, they can use a counting technique or a breathing technique to calm themselves. We know of caregivers who have turned the exercises from the programme into evening or weekend family activities. They sit together and practise relaxation techniques as a family, which is such a beautiful way to reduce interpersonal tension and create bonding.

### Do you encourage caregivers to form a community?

Yes, one of our core objectives is to help caregivers feel empowered as a group. At the start of the programme, we create a WhatsApp group so they can stay in touch. We encourage them to keep meeting and tell them that we are always around if they need any support. We have witnessed a lot of success stories of this collective focus. For instance, in Jordan we've had women who took the initiative to transfer all the knowledge and skills they gained from the programme to other women in the community. We hope to create a sustainable community of people who can support each other after the programme ends.

## War Child team interviewed

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