



CASE STUDY: Creating safe places for children to learn and play during crisis in Ethiopia

In 2016, ChildFund set up a one-year emergency project to strengthen community-based child protection in the districts of Siraro and Fentale in the Oromia region of **Ethiopia**. Severely affected by one of the worst droughts in decades, these remote pastoralist communities were experiencing a rise in school absenteeism and child labor, with heightened rates of anxiety and psychological distress among children as their families struggled with food and water insecurity.

One of the principal aims of the *Strengthening Community-Based Protection in Severely Drought-Affected Districts in Oromia Region* project⁵ was to strengthen psychosocial support for children by setting up 30 **Child-Friendly Spaces** where girls and boys of mixed ages could play, learn to read and write, engage in fun activities, and develop important life skills. Significant effort was also made to include **children with disabilities**, who were often stigmatized or kept at home by families with project staff visiting households to identify children with physical and developmental impairments who could benefit from activities.

In a final evaluation, children and adults identified the Child-Friendly Spaces as the most beneficial and successful component of the project.^{xxiv} By providing children with a hub for learning, entertainment and socializing during a time of emergency, the spaces were found to:

- Reduce children's drought-related stress.
- Contribute to children's informal learning.
- Increase community awareness about the importance of formal education for children and young adolescents ages 6 to 14 years old.
- Provide a safe place for children to take a break from daily hardship.

Enthusiastic volunteers from the community managed the Child-Friendly Spaces and played an important role in their success. Running activities appropriate to the local culture, they engaged children (many of whom had never attended school) in sessions that included reading, counting, drawing, games, drama, singing and story-telling. Simple measures such as situating the Child-Friendly Spaces close to households, providing children with shade in the very hot climate, and giving them snacks and drinks also contributed to their success.

Finally, community participation in building and managing the Child-Friendly Spaces helped to develop local ownership of the initiative. This enabled the communities in Siraro and Fentale to keep the Child-Friendly Spaces running even after the end of the program so that children continued to benefit from a safe learning and play environment.

While the project clearly gave much-needed relief to families and children during a time of hardship, sustainable change for these communities will need to include addressing the chronic nature of drought-related stress. A longer-term perspective would include the development of water sources – including water tanks at schools – and building permanent, rather than temporary, facilities for children.

