

Advocacy Note

Addressing Peer Bullying in Türkiye's Education Sector

This advocacy note outlines the key challenges and proposes targeted interventions to combat peer bullying in schools in Türkiye.

Education Sector Türkiye

As of September 2023, Türkiye is home to over 1.3 million children under temporary and international protection, with more than 1 million enrolled in schools, leaving 300,000 out of the education system. The profile of out-of-school children reveals significant differences in educational levels and gender. While significant progress has been made by the Turkish government and education sector organizations in reducing the number of out-of-school children since the start of the Syria crisis.

Additionally, the February 2023 earthquakes impacted 4 million children, damaging schools and disrupting attendance, particularly for refugee children. The impact has been compounded by the

inflation and economic crisis. Continued support from education sector partners, especially for refugees and earthquake-affected populations, is crucial to ensure access to quality education.

1.3 Million

Children under Temporary and International Protection



300,000



Out of the Education System

1 Million

Children Enrolled in Schools



Peer Bullying: A Growing Challenge

Peer bullying in the education sector is a growing concern in Türkiye, affecting both refugee and Turkish host communities. This issue poses significant barriers to education, leading to absenteeism, poor academic performance, and long-term emotional and psychological harm, including deliberate deprivation of child rights, violence, abuse, self-imposed isolation as the country continues to host large populations of refugees, it is critical to address peer bullying to foster inclusivity and ensure equitable education for all children.

The Education Sector Needs Overview Report highlights an increasing prevalence of peer bullying, particularly among refugee children, as a significant factor contributing to school absenteeism and dropouts. Peer bullying often manifests in physical, verbal, or social forms and disproportionately affects vulnerable groups such as refugee children, who may already face cultural and linguistic barriers. Bullying is not confined to one group; children from the Turkish host community are also victims of peer aggression, especially in schools



located in earthquake-affected areas. Refugee children, particularly Syrians and Afghans, are more likely to be targeted due to increasing anti-refugee sentiments, prevalence of social tension, their perceived differences in language, culture, and legal status. A 2024 Ipsos study¹ revealed that Türkiye has the highest rate of anti-refugee sentiment among 52

surveyed countries. As anti-refugee sentiment grows, host communities often link economic challenges to the presence of refugees, leading to increased hate speech, xenophobia, and social tensions at all levels, including within households. This negatively affects the perception of refugee children and other vulnerable groups, such as children with disabilities or semi-nomadic backgrounds, by host community children.

Children who experience peer bullying suffer from a range of negative outcomes, including emotional distress, low self-esteem, and poor academic performance, such as increased dropout rates, leading to a higher risk of child labor for boys and child, early, and forced marriage for girls. Refugee children, particularly Syrians and Afghans, are more likely to be targeted due to their perceived differences in language, culture, and legal status. In addition, bullying can exacerbate existing mental health challenges, further undermining these children's ability to thrive in educational environments.

Impact on Refugee and Host Community Children

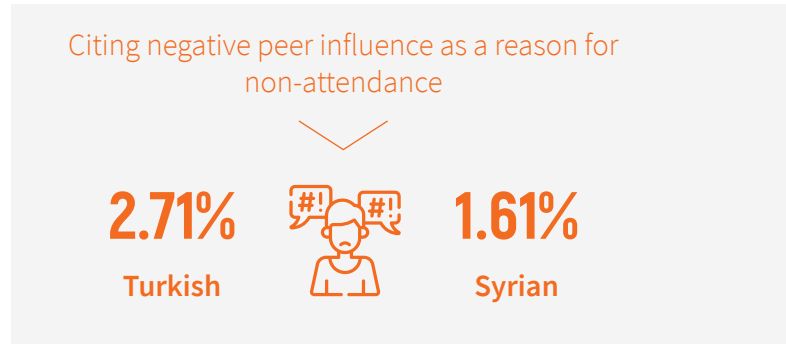
Data from the report indicates that peer bullying affects both refugee and host community children, although refugee children are more vulnerable due to language barriers, discrimination, and social exclusion. Refugee children, particularly Syrians, Afghans, and those from other nationalities, are more likely to drop out of school as a result of bullying,

contributing to an already alarming rate of out-of-school children. In earthquake-affected regions, incidents of bullying have escalated as children from different backgrounds are placed in overcrowded classrooms, leading to increased tensions between host community and refugee children.

Key Statistics²

Impact of Peer Bullying on School Absenteeism

Peer bullying has been identified as a contributing factor to children's absenteeism, with 2.71% of Turkish respondents and 1.61% of Syrian respondents citing negative peer influence as a reason for non-attendance. Bullying, combined with insufficient mental health and psycho-social support, accounted for 2.33% of absenteeism cases. According to the Protection Sector Needs Assessment Round 8 (August 2024), 54% of



¹ <https://www.ipsos.com/en/unhcr-ipsos-survey-shows-enduring-public-support-refugees-alongside-stark-variations-attitudes>

² Education Sector Needs Overview | UNICEF

respondents observed an increase in peer bullying between Turkish and refugee children, and 27% indicated that peer bullying affects their children's continued attendance at school, making it a key reason for children being out of school.

Psychosocial Impact



Children subjected to bullying experience higher rates of emotional and psychological distress, often compounded by existing traumas such as displacement and family separation.

ESWG Member Organizations Efforts to Address Peer Bullying

UNICEF, in partnership with key ESGW and child protection sector actors such as support to life (STL) and Türkiye Kalkınma Vakfı (TKV), and municipalities in Hatay, Şanlıurfa, and Gaziantep has developed mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) structured programmes to prevent and respond to peer bullying, build psychological resilience, and increase wellbeing on the basis of addressing peer bullying. These programmes, which include eight sessions for children across different age groups (6–8, 9–13, 14–17) and a complementary positive parenting programme focused on peer bullying, are part of UNICEF's child protection framework. In addition to UNICEF's programme development efforts, UNICEF's is further implementing with its partners Türk Kızılay (TRC) and Association for Social Development and Aid Mobilization (ASAM) complementary structured programmes on positive

peer relations which contribute to prevention of peer bullying. They promote social cohesion and positive peer relationships, involving both refugee and host community children and adolescents. The programmes address peer bullying by enhancing children's coping skills and well-being. Both include sessions for parents, along with awareness seminars for children and parents.

Save the Children is carrying similar interventions, supporting addressal of peer bullying.

UNICEF's education team is working to integrate these MHPSS efforts into the broader education system by developing curriculum content focused on guidance and counseling.



This integration aims to create a sustainable impact on the education sector, with discussions ongoing about leveraging these programmes to benefit more children and promote long-term solutions.

UNICEF's efforts to enhance social cohesion in Türkiye focus on creating positive engagement opportunities for both Syrian refugees and Turkish youth. Through programmes like peer-to-peer training, educational initiatives, and safe spaces, UNICEF fosters mutual understanding and overcomes cultural barriers. Key outcomes include increased youth participation and strengthen community ties, benefiting over 64,000 adolescents and young people across 20 provinces.

Proposed Interventions

1. Advocating for Anti-Bullying Policies



The implementation of current anti-bullying policies³ (annexed), along with any necessary enhancements or the development of new related policies, must be carried out in partnership with the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Provincial Directorates of National Education (PDoNEs). This collaborative approach will ensure that policies are effectively enforced and tailored to meet the needs of students, creating a safer and more supportive educational environment. These policies should outline clear definitions of bullying, establish reporting mechanisms, and specify consequences for those who engage in such behavior. Schools must implement awareness campaigns and engage both students and staff in creating an inclusive, supportive environment.

³ The Secondary Education Institutions Regulation, amended and published on November 15, 2022, officially recognizes peer bullying as a disciplinary issue. Additionally, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) has issued comprehensive guidance defining various forms of peer bullying and outlining associated disciplinary, protective, and preventive measures.

2. Promoting Cultural Understanding



To reduce bullying driven by cultural and linguistic differences, schools should promote cultural exchange programmes and activities that foster understanding between refugee and host community children. These programmes can help break down stereotypes and encourage positive interactions among children from diverse background.

3. Language Support for Refugee Children



A significant factor contributing to the bullying of refugee children is their limited ability to communicate in Turkish. According to IPNA Round 8 by the protection sector, 10% cite language barriers as a reason for difficulties in school attendance, with higher reports among Syrians (13%) and in the Southeast (15%). Offering targeted Turkish language support through in-school classes and after-school tutoring can help bridge these communication gaps and promote inclusivity.

4. Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services



Children at risk of, affected by, or engaging in bullying or other violent behaviors should have access to psychological support and counseling services. Schools should establish safe spaces for students to receive mental health and psychosocial support and express their emotions in a secure environment. Additionally, they should implement early identification and referral systems to connect children and families needing specialized support with social welfare services. This aligns with the collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Family and Social Services⁴ to ensure schools remain safe environments for learning and growth. Engaging parents in positive parenting, violence prevention programmes, and providing guidance on addressing bullying further strengthens the home and community support systems.

5. Empowering Students Through Peer Mediation



Implementing peer mediation programmes in schools empowers students to resolve conflicts and reducing bullying. Trained student mediators promote empathy and understanding, fostering a supportive and inclusive culture. ESWG partners can work with schools to offer training in conflict resolution and emotional regulation, which would benefit both Turkish and refugee children.

6. Buddy Programmes



Pairing refugee children with local “buddies” can foster peer support, reduce isolation, and help build connections, minimizing misunderstandings and bullying between refugee and Turkish students.

7. Involving Refugee Families



Connecting refugee families with the school community is vital. Regular meetings on education and inclusion can help parents feel more engaged and better support their children.

⁴ https://www.tbb.gov.tr/Tr/icerik_cocuklarin-egitim-guvenligine-liskin-s-birligi-protokolu_651

8. Anti-Bullying Champions



Training students as anti-bullying champions fosters a proactive school culture. Involving both refugee and host children promotes collective responsibility in identifying, reporting, and preventing bullying.

9. Community Engagement and Awareness



Local NGOs, trusted by refugee and host communities, can collaborate with PDoNEs to lead outreach programmes that educate parents, teachers, and students about bullying. Their initiatives could include hosting anti-bullying seminars in schools and community centers, as well as workshops on cultural sensitivity to foster understanding between groups.

10. Collaboration with the Child Protection Sector



Collaboration with the Child Protection sector is crucial, as school bullying often overlaps with wider protection issues. By partnering with child protection organizations, schools can implement comprehensive violence prevention models to address bullying both in and around school.

Peer bullying is a significant barrier to educational access, retention, and success for both refugee and Turkish children in Türkiye. By addressing this issue through comprehensive policies, language support, and psychosocial interventions, the education sector can foster an inclusive and safe learning environment for all children. Collaboration, between government bodies, international organizations, and national civil society organization, sectoral and cross sectoral is crucial to ensure that peer bullying is effectively addressed, and all children can benefit from the transformative power of education.

For further
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Annex 1 | Peer Bullying Legislation and Related Documents

The main Regulation related with the Peer Bullying is the Secondary Education Institutions Regulation.⁵ Peer bullying becomes an act that necessitates disciplinary measure with the amendment made in the Secondary Education Institutions Regulation, published in the Official Gazette on November 15, 2022 numbered 32014.⁶ In addition to that, Ministry of National Education (MoNE) published a comprehensive guidance on peer bullying. In this regulation and guidance, different acts of peer bullying have been defined and all of them were associated different kind of disciplinary/ protective/ preventive measures. Finally, Circular no 2024/56 on the Prevention Violence in the Schools outlines comprehensive strategies to address various forms of violence. The document highlights bullying as a key issue, emphasizing the importance of proactive measure to combat with it.⁷ In accordance with these provisions:

Act (Definition of Bullying)	Source	Measure	Where to apply
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Behaving rudely and disrespectfully towards school administrators, teachers, staff, and classmates (not severe) 	Secondary Education Institutions Regulation Article 164/1/ğ MoNE's Guidance on Peer Bullying Circular no 2024/56	Disciplinary Measure: Verbal reprimand Protective/ preventive measures: Conflict Resolution exercises between victims and bullies, families, teachers; psychological interventions; Information and awareness-raising activities, non-formal education activities	Meeting with the psychological counselor/guidance teacher and school administration (in accordance with the Regulation on Guidance and Psychological Counseling Services of the Ministry of National Education), If this approach is unsuccessful, the next steps involve a verbal notification followed by a written notification to the DDoNE or PDoNE,
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging in peer bullying in a way that negatively affects another student's social or emotional development through repeated various behaviors, Insulting school administrators, teachers, staff, students, and other individuals present in educational environments through words, actions, or social media, sharing insults, inciting others to engage in such behavior, threatening these individuals, or causing harm to educational and teaching activities, individuals, and institutions through information technology or social media (more severe) 	Secondary Education Institutions Regulation Article 164/2/a, 164/2/ö MoNE's Guidance on Peer Bullying Circular no 2024/56	Disciplinary Measure: Suspend someone from the school between 1-5 days (short period). Protective/ preventive measures: Conflict Resolution exercises between victims and bullies, families, teachers; psychological interventions; Information and awareness-raising activities, non-formal education activities	If this approach is unsuccessful, the next steps involve a verbal notification followed by a written notification to the DDoNE or PDoNE,
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disrupting education and teaching through information technology or social media, and causing severe material and moral harm to individuals, Harassing individuals, classmates, and school staff through words and actions, making false accusations, inciting or forcing others to engage in these behaviors, and sharing or spreading these acts via social media (severe) 	Secondary Education Institutions Regulation Article 164/3/m, 164/3/r MoNE's Guidance on Peer Bullying Circular no 2024/56	Disciplinary Measure: School change Protective/ preventive measures: Conflict Resolution exercises between victims and bullies, families, teachers; psychological interventions; Information and awareness-raising activities, non-formal education activities	If this approach is unsuccessful as well, application to OMBUDSMAN, Legal Aid MoNE Call Center: 444 06 32, NGOs/ INGOs,
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attempting to injure, injuring, or killing someone using any harmful, lethal tools, weapons, explosives, Subjecting a person or persons to torture for any reason; committing or causing torture, engaging in sexual abuse, and perpetrating acts that are considered crimes under the law regarding this matter. (Very severe/ crimes) 	Secondary Education Institutions Regulation Article 164/4/i, 164/4/i MoNE's Guidance on Peer Bullying Circular no 2024/56	Disciplinary Measure: Removal from the education Protective measure: Legal processes Protective/ preventive measures: psychological interventions, Information and awareness-raising activities, non-formal education activities	For legal cases/ crimes: Law Enforcement Officers, Legal Aid.

⁵ <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/File/GeneratePdf?mevzuatNo=18812&mevzuatTur=KurumVeKurulusYonetmeligi&mevzuatTertip=5>, (Accessed date: 10.01.2024).

⁶ <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2022/11/20221115-1.htm>, (Accessed date: 10.01.2024).

⁷ <https://orgm.meb.gov.tr/www/akran-zorbaligi/icerik/2085>, (Accessed date: 10.01.2024).