CASE STUDY

SAWA FOUNDATION AND DEFENSE FOR CHILDREN PALESTINE

PALESTINE

How to work with boys at risk or survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse across occupation, war and detention

GLOBAL BOYS INITIATIVE

DEFENCE FOR CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL PALESTINE

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This research was made possible by funding from the Carlson Family Foundation.

The views expressed herein are solely those of ECPAT International. Support does not constitute endorsement of the opinions expressed.

This publication is based on a documentation of practice undertaken by ECPAT International with the kind collaboration of SAWA Foundation and Defense for Children Palestine, Palestine, as part of the Global Boys Initiative (GBI).

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Suggested citation:
ECPAT International (2025). Case study: SAWA Foundation and Defense for Children Palestine, Palestine. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

Cover illustration:
The photos on the cover of this report depict environments and situations relevant to the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys in Palestine. They are courtesy of SAWA Foundation and Defense for Children Palestine.

Published by:

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BACKGROUND

Given that programmatic responses to identify and meet the particular needs of boys are scarce, ECPAT International launched the ECPAT Global Boys Initiative (GBI) to explore the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys and the services available for their protection. The ECPAT Global Boys Initiative embarked on a series of research projects in countries around the world to shed light on understanding the scale of sexual exploitation taking place with children, vulnerability contexts and risk factors, barriers to disclosure and access to services, and what we need to improve prevention and response strategies.

We know that the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys is a global problem and have gathered information on key drivers, risk situations, gender norms, and barriers to access, among other things. We are now focusing on how to address these challenges and how to support boys and service providers in the fight against sexual exploitation. In July 2022, we began a process of mobilising ECPAT members, partners and practitioners working with boys in different regions of the world to inform them about the GBI, explore possibilities for implementing the Initiative at country and regional levels, and capitalise on members' and partners' experiences in working with boys.

In line with this global effort, discussions with SAWA Foundation and Defense for Children Palestine highlighted several key learning points for improving the protection of boys at both national and global levels. This case study, therefore, seeks to document the practices of SAWA and Defense for Children Palestine in providing services to boys particularly at risk or boy survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse in a context of war and occupation. It also explores their work with boys in conflict with the law, as well as interventions in schools, with families, and within communities. It aims to document and share the lessons learnt by the organisations, while helping to answer the question: *"How can we work with children and young boys at risk or survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse through a gender-sensitive approach?"*

INTRODUCTION

SAWA Foundation, founded in 1998, is a leading Palestinian organisation dedicated to combating all forms of violence and abuse against children and women. SAWA is committed to promoting health, dignity, and safety within Palestinian society, providing essential services such as support, protection, and social counselling for survivors of violence. SAWA also focuses on community awareness and advocacy, aiming to create a safer society with a strong emphasis on gender equality and human rights.

One of SAWA's key initiatives is its Palestinian Child Protection Helpline, launched in 2005, offering free counselling and support services to children in need via both phone calls and chat, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The helpline is staffed by extensively trained volunteers and professionals, providing general guidance as well as psychosocial, medical and legal assistance when necessary. People seeking help can contact SAWA through the helpline or via chat.

To extend its reach, SAWA operates a mobile clinic that conducts outreach programmes in various communities in the West Bank. It also provides training and technical assistance to law enforcement, school personnel, and others working in the areas of domestic violence and abuse. Additionally, SAWA publishes educational materials to raise awareness about physical, psychological, and sexual violence.

Defense for Children Palestine (DCIP) is an independent Palestinian child rights organisation dedicated to defending and promoting the rights of children living in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. Founded in 1991, DCIP is a national section of Defence for Children International, which operates autonomously, securing its own funding and developing programmes specifically tailored to address the rights of children.

DCIP provides legal aid to children who are arrested, detained, and prosecuted within the Israeli military and legal systems, and provides socio-legal support to children detained or otherwise in conflict with the Palestinian Law within the Palestinian juvenile justice system. The organisation systematically monitors and documents child arrests, injuries, and fatalities throughout the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Moreover, DCIP engages in advocacy work to expose grave violations against Palestinian children by using collected data and evidence.

The organisation also conducts education and awareness initiatives with children and schools to raise awareness about children's rights. Through these activities, DCIP works to protect the rights and welfare of Palestinian children living under occupation.

METHODOLOGY FOR DOCUMENTING PRACTICES

This case study was carried out using a semi-structured assessment and learning tool developed by the ECPAT Global Boys Initiative and ECPAT International research teams. The evaluation and learning questionnaire guided the interview with the teams working with boys. The questions included in the questionnaire were designed to gather information on the practices considered effective by the organisations in supporting boy survivors of sexual exploitation in a humanitarian context.

The methodology was applied during an in-person, one-day meeting, followed by several follow-up discussions led by the ECPAT Global Boys Initiative team to address outstanding questions. The ECPAT Global Boys Initiative research shows that boys tend to fall between the cracks of child protection systems due to prejudices about their victimisation, as they are often not seen as victims of sexual exploitation and abuse due to gender norms that do not see them as potentially vulnerable.

This is even more concerning in a protracted humanitarian crisis, where boys face a dual burden: the structural violence of a long-term military occupation, with recurrent escalations and where restrictive policies at national, regional and local levels often create additional barriers for boys. These policies can limit boys' access to essential services like education, healthcare, and legal protection. In humanitarian contexts, boys may be overlooked in issues related to sexual exploitation and abuse. The focus often shifts to immediate needs like economic survival or physical safety, neglecting other challenges boys face, such as sexual violence. This lack of specialised care can worsen their situation and hinder recovery, leading to long-term consequences like mental health issues, difficulty reintegrating, and increased risk of further exploitation.

This case study documents the practices and expertise of SAWA Foundation and DCIP on how to support boys who live in a context of occupation and war. Based on the findings from the ECPAT Global Boys Initiative research, the case study offers insights and recommendations for working specifically with boys in such environments, and those who are in conflict with the law, highlighting how these organisations have tailored their support to address the specific challenges boys face, ensuring their experiences are recognised and their needs are met.

KEY CHALLENGES IN WORKING WITH BOYS IN PALESTINE

Ideas of masculinity, globally, are often defined by notions of strength, protection, and dominance. In the Palestinian context, however, these norms are further shaped by the experiences of prolonged political and military occupation, where concepts such as resilience, resistance, martyrdom, and honour play a central role in defining gender expectations, especially for boys. Social norms strongly encourage boys to suppress emotions and to avoid any form of perceived weakness, as vulnerability can be seen as incompatible with the role of a protector or a fighter. **This perception significantly complicates the process of discussing sexual violence, as boys may feel that acknowledging any form of victimhood contradicts the identity they are expected to uphold.** These interiorised expectations about their gender roles make it more difficult for them to express emotions or speak about different experiences of sexual violence, because they fear judgment, shame, or negative social consequences. This issue is even more pronounced in occupation and humanitarian settings like the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza, where children also face conflict-related trauma, displacement, and systemic violence and discrimination.

The impact of the ongoing occupation in Palestine adds an additional layer of complexity. Living under occupation shapes how boys perceive themselves and what is expected of them. For many boys who have been arrested or detained by the Israeli occupation forces, survival and resistance become central to their identity, and any conversation that diverges from these may be seen as irrelevant or secondary. **In this context, sexual violence against boys is often downplayed or not recognised as an issue worth addressing, as it may not align with the more immediate and visible forms of violence that are linked to the occupation, such as military raids, checkpoints, and forced displacement.**

SAWA noted that in Palestine, both service providers and members of the community often react with discomfort or even offence when the issue of sexual violence in general is raised, highlighting the sensitivity of the topic, regardless of gender or age. **It is perceived as a less urgent concern, easily overshadowed by the pressing demands of daily survival and the broader political struggle.** In some cases, organisations have expressed concern that acknowledging sexual violence could be politically risky, potentially undermining the image of steadfastness and unity associated with the resistance. Within internally displaced camps that suffer from a range of issues, both in Gaza and the West Bank, residents tend to stress that these acts do not happen as a way to highlight the safety of their communities.

Moreover, the stigma surrounding sexual violence in general, and specifically affecting boys, exacerbates the challenges in addressing it. The cultural taboo against discussing sexual matters, combined with the shame and social stigma associated with sexual victimisation, prevents boys from acknowledging, disclosing or reporting these experiences.

1 Challenges for Boys in the West Bank

The West Bank is divided into three administrative areas according to the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (also called Oslo II)[1] signed in 1995. These are Area A, Area B, and Area C, each with different levels of Palestinian and Israeli control.

- Area A is under full Palestinian Authority civil and security control. It mainly includes urban centres where the Palestinian Authority manages internal governance and law enforcement.
- Area B is under Palestinian civil control but Israeli security control. This area typically covers smaller towns and villages where Palestinians handle administrative matters, while Israel oversees security.
- Area C remains under full Israeli control, both civil and security. It encompasses rural areas, Israeli settlements, and strategic zones, and is subject to Israeli planning and military authority.

This division has significant implications for the daily lives of Palestinians, affecting freedom of movement, access to resources, and governance.

In the West Bank, the Palestinian national child protection system is considered generally functional, with established pathways for reporting and responding to violence and sexual abuse. Children can usually reach institutions or the police, especially through schools or child protection services. However, the situation becomes more complex in areas affected by military operations, particularly in the northern West Bank, such as in the cities of Jenin and Tulkarem. In this area, repeated Israeli military incursions and ongoing violence have a profound impact on children.

Boys are also often perceived as security threats, which puts them at greater risk of being directly targeted with violence. **Living under constant pressure and fear takes a serious toll on their mental and emotional health**. Additionally, they have experienced severe disruptions to education, with schools resuming in-person classes only recently after prolonged closures. Since schools are one of the main avenues through which children can report abuse, often via school counsellors, these closures have significantly affected the ability of children to seek out help and receive support.

1 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (September 1995).

The Palestinian police remain operational, even if they work in civilian clothing due to the security context, and cases that are reported are generally followed up on. Child Protection Officers operating under the Ministry of Social Development also respond to reported cases, yet with limited human resource capacity and a lack of proper outreach due to movement restrictions. In some areas, child protection counsellors from civil society organisations continue to play a key role, visiting families and coordinating directly with the police or prosecutors, often by phone. Despite these efforts, **reaching and supporting children in general in unsafe environments can be delayed, especially due to military checkpoints and restrictions on movement.**

Moreover, **boys are often expected to be the "breadwinners",** this may include working in markets, selling items such as food, gum, or tissues in public areas, including busy streets or near checkpoints. In some cases, even younger boys as young as six or seven, are seen working in similar ways in urban areas. Checkpoints, in particular, are places where clashes can occur, putting boys at serious risk of physical harm, in addition to exposing them to exploitation and hazardous working conditions.

2 Challenges Faced by Boys in Palestinian Detention in the West Bank

In the West Bank, within the Palestinian juvenile justice system, boys in conflict with the law face a range of challenges linked to the type of facility in which they are held and the limited services available to support them. There are two main types of facilities: police-run temporary holding cells and one specialised social care home, the Dar Al-Amal Centre for Observation and Social Care in Ramallah, operated by the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Social Development. Dar Al-Amal is a closed facility designated for children who have committed serious offences and are considered to pose a risk to others. According to the Palestinian Juvenile Law, these children must be placed in a secure centre run by the Ministry, where they receive rehabilitation and access to psychosocial, educational, and health services. However, Dar Al-Amal is the only facility in the central West Bank. In the northern and southern regions, no equivalent centres exist. Instead, children are typically held in police-run facilities that are not designed for them and lack specialised services. These temporary detention centres typically do not offer structured programmes, leaving children with minimal support beyond basic visitation rights and occasional legal or psychosocial specialist visits.

Boys detained in temporary police-run facilities face severe challenges, including a lack of rehabilitative services, extended pre-trial detention, overcrowding, and poor living conditions. These detention centres are often ill-equipped for children, with inadequate healthcare and no access to educational or awareness programs. Many centres lack basic amenities such as hot water, proper ventilation, and clean bedding, making them unsuitable environments for boys in detention. Boys are sometimes detained with adults, which further exposes them to risks of physical and psychological harm, including sexual abuse and exploitation. The psychological impact of detention is profound. **Boys experience a range of issues such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and ostracism.** Their educational and health outcomes are also severely affected. For instance, a boy with a neurological condition, such as seizures, may

experience worsened symptoms in detention due to the lack of appropriate care and support. Additionally, detainees often struggle with feelings of guilt, confusion, and frustration, further hindering their ability to recover.

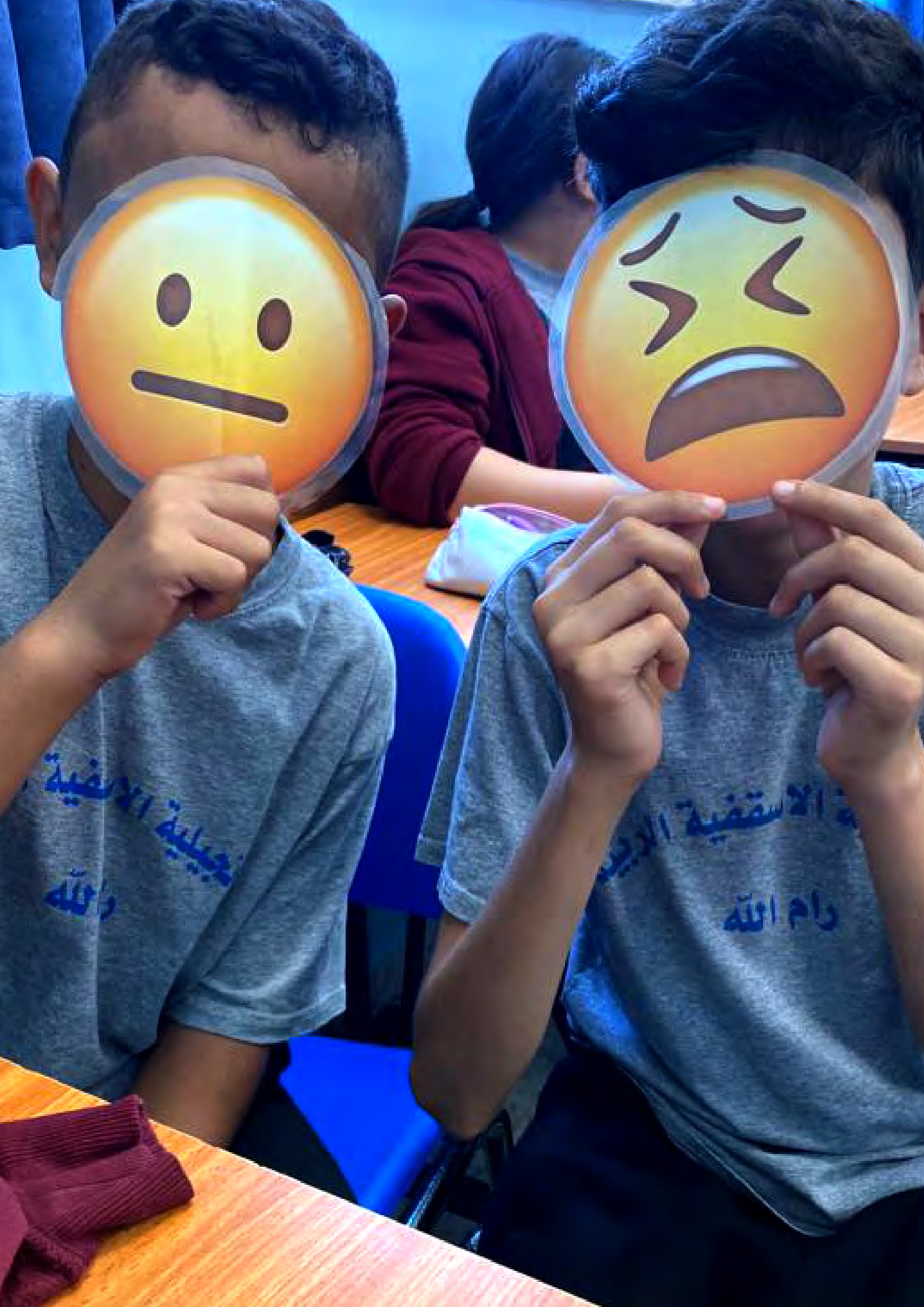
3 Challenges in the Gaza Strip

In the Gaza Strip, the ongoing war is severely undermining every attempt to protect all children, particularly in the context of military attacks and further displacement of civilians. Thousands of children have experienced the loss of family members and peers, displacement, and severe disruption of daily life. Access to education, health, water, hygiene and protection has been completely disrupted. As a result, boys aged between 11 and 17 often take on roles of household responsibility, not only due to social norms and expectations, but also because other family members may be absent, unable to help, or have been killed. These boys find themselves caring for relatives and trying to secure food and income for their families.

Due to the intensity and scale of the attacks, thousands of children in Gaza are currently classified as unaccompanied, meaning they are no longer living with their parents. During 2024, at least 17,000 children were unaccompanied or separated from their parents and were staying with extended family members or in other informal care arrangements.[2] While these arrangements may offer a form of shelter, they do not always provide the space or stability needed for boys to build trust with adults or to seek help in case of abuse. In some cases, **boys do not know the families they are staying with, which makes it further complex for them to speak up about sensitive issues such as sexual violence.** Frequent displacement also affects the boys' overall sense of safety. Many families have been forced to relocate multiple times, which limits continuity of care and reduces opportunities for boys to engage with services or professionals they may have previously known and that they could trust.

Police services are not fully operational, and humanitarian actors are often focused on essential emergency relief. This means that the usual pathways for seeking out help, such as accessing specialised child protection support or case management, are not always available. Organisations working in Gaza have also highlighted the lack of basic resources related to children's sexual and reproductive health. Even fundamental rights, such as access to hygiene materials or safe, private spaces, are often unmet. In this context, **boys who experience abuse may feel unsure about where to go or whether it is appropriate to speak up.**

2 UNICEF (2024). Stories of loss and grief: At least 17,000 children are estimated to be unaccompanied or separated from their parents in the Gaza Strip. Accessed 20 May 2025.



APPROACHES TO LISTENING, BUILDING TRUST AND SUPPORT

a SAWA's Helpline Approach to Emotional Support

SAWA operates a child helpline that is available every day, at any time, both in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. Through this service, SAWA creates a space where boys can talk freely without fear. Helpline counsellors are trained to be empathetic, non-judgmental, and sensitive to the unique challenges boys face. However, **the way boys engage with the helpline varies depending on their exact location and individual lived experiences.**

• Prioritising Anonymity and Building Trust with Boys Living in the West Bank

For boys in the West Bank, confidentiality is their primary concern. When calling SAWA to seek out advice or help, one of the first things they ask is whether their identity will remain anonymous. Many hesitate to share personal experiences out of fear that speaking up could lead to social or legal repercussions, but also for fear of being recognised or judged. To reassure them, the helpline counsellors emphasise that all calls are confidential and that they do not need to reveal their real name, which allows boys to feel that they are maintaining control over their identity.

> **"We ask the boys: How would you like to be called?"**

By respecting the boys' need for privacy and trust, SAWA creates an environment where they gradually feel comfortable to open up. Many boys initially struggle to put their emotions into words, often saying: *"I don't even know where to start",* to which the helpline counsellor usually responds, *"Start wherever you want."*

This reassuring and non-directive approach helps **boys feel in control of the conversation, reducing the pressure to disclose painful experiences immediately, because they feel free to talk about anything they want.**

Another approach used by SAWA, especially when boys are scared that someone else might hear what they say, is to explain how the helpline's physical space is organised, to help them feel more at ease. Counsellors tell boys that the centre is physically divided into separate spaces, and while they might hear people moving around in the building, no one can hear what the boy is saying, because each counsellor sits in a private area. This helps reassure the boys that their words remain confidential and that they can speak openly.

- ### Breaking the Ice and Addressing Emotional Distress with Boys Living in the Gaza Strip

Boys aged 11 to 17 in Gaza often take on household responsibilities, work, and become the main breadwinners for their families due to the ongoing attacks and displacement. As a result, many of them stopped attending school, due to the schools' destruction, and instead focus on surviving and collecting food to support their families. This shift in roles exposes them to harassment and other dangers. The weight of these responsibilities, combined with the trauma of the war, affects their emotional and physical well-being. Sometimes, these boys call SAWA's helpline not to seek solutions or discuss specific issues, but simply to have a space where they can ask about other needs, like materials or services, **or just to have someone to talk to.**

Boys calling from the Gaza Strip are usually less concerned about the confidentiality of the call, not because this is not important to them, but due to the inhuman and life-threatening conditions in which they find themselves. **Many live in overcrowded camps or temporary shelters, where it is nearly impossible to find a private, quiet, or safe place to talk.** Because of this situation, the SAWA helpline counsellors further adapt their approach. Rather than focusing on anonymity or confidentiality at the start of the call, they simply ask: *"Are you safe and comfortable speaking from where you are?"*

This gentle question acknowledges the context in which the boys survive and gives them the space to decide whether or not they feel ready to talk, even in life-threatening surroundings. While engaging with them, the helpline staff might ask questions about possible situations of violence, even though the boys do not typically call to speak about abuse.

Some boys call while reciting the *Qur'an*[3] or singing, and the helpline counsellors give them the space to do so. At times, the boys call the helpline as a prank, laughing or joking to test the reaction of the staff. SAWA understands that these calls might not just be jokes, but rather a **way for the boys to check if the helpline is a safe place.** The staff responds patiently, explaining the purpose of the helpline, and many of these boys later return for more serious conversations.

> **"Some boys call us, especially from Gaza, and joke about everything, even the most tragic events. Sometimes, they joke about us too. But we always remind them: 'We are here for you if you need to talk.' During the war, they have no one else to share with."**

Another common reason why boys in the Gaza Strip contact SAWA is to request basic material necessities. Many boys seek food, shelter, or other urgent forms of aid. In such cases, SAWA refers them to organisations that provide material support. However, these conversations often reveal more profound emotional distress. **Some boys express frustration and anger about their circumstances, but struggle to put their emotions into words.** Rather than immediately discussing personal experiences, they use the helpline as an outlet to vent about the broader attacks on Gaza.

In these cases, SAWA takes a patient, long-term approach. Boys may not open up immediately, but over time, if they keep contacting the helpline and with continued engagement, they begin to share personal struggles. The helpline counsellors use **gentle questioning and active listening** to guide boys in discussing their emotions and experiences. **The tone of the conversation is just as important as the words.** Boys often say to the helpline counsellors, *"Your voice is calming"*, which shows how much they value feeling truly heard. SAWA personnel know that it is not only about the content of the questions, but also about **how they are asked.**

Boys can sense whether someone is genuinely present for them. **They respond to empathy, patience, and attentiveness.** When they feel that the person on the other end of the line is really listening and cares, they are more likely to open up.

3 The Qur'an is the central religious text of Islam, believed by Muslims to be the word of God.

Supporting Boys Who Witness or Experience Violence and Helping Them Process Their Emotions

Many boys living in the West Bank often search for work opportunities or resources. They work near checkpoints or street markets, where they encounter Israeli forces, and these areas are frequently sites of conflict, including armed confrontations, further exposing them to different forms of violence and traumatising experiences. **Boys are particularly exposed to violence in this context, as they can be perceived as threats, especially older adolescent boys.** This constant pressure and the mental toll of their daily experiences contribute significantly to their emotional and psychological distress. SAWA's helpline provides them with a space that is always available, where they can gradually begin to process their experiences of different forms of violence.

In cases of disclosure of sexual violence, many boys tend to internalise the blame. They may feel ashamed, guilty, and fear that they have let their families down. It may take several sessions before a boy feels ready to talk, and even longer before he begins to process what has happened to him. This is why SAWA's approach is grounded in patience and reassurance. **Helpline counsellors avoid asking direct or confrontational questions** such as *"Why were you alone?"* or *"How did this happen?"* Instead, they focus on helping the child feel safe and supported, using calm, grounding questions like *"Where are you now?"*. They might suggest a short break, *"Would you like to take a sip of water and return in a moment?"*, to ease the pressure. Their words are gentle and intentional: *"It is okay to feel this way." "This was not your fault."* These simple affirmations are essential to begin the process.

One of the biggest obstacles these boys face is talking about their traumatic experiences. This reluctance to disclose reflects the psychological burden of growing up under occupation and systemic attacks. Instead of speaking directly about what they have experienced, they often **express their pain through emotions such as anger, frustration, or helplessness,** avoiding direct references to their experiences of violence. Therefore, SAWA's gradual approach allows boys to regain a sense of control and safety. With each interaction, trust is slowly built, and over time, some begin to feel ready to share more of what they have experienced. At the end of the call, the helpline counsellor reassures the child that everything they shared took courage. Yet the sense of guilt often remains, because emotional recovery takes time and progress is rarely straightforward. **The helpline becomes not just a space to talk, but a space to feel, in whatever way the boy needs in that moment, whether that means laughing, crying, or simply sitting in silence.**

SAWA's counselling service is centred on the belief that the helpline does not provide direct solutions or tell callers what to do. Instead, **counsellors guide individuals to understand their experiences, explore their emotions, and make their own decisions.** The goal is to empower children to find their own solutions, with helpline counsellors acting as facilitators in the process.

One example is a boy who called from Gaza, who initially called the helpline several times, speaking very little during each call. At first, he did not want to share much, he would say a few words, sometimes just respond with yes or no, and then end the call. The counsellor did not pressure him, rather taking time to build a connection through small, simple questions like *"How was your day?" or "What did you do today?"*

After more than three calls, he shared that he used to hate school, but that now he misses going to school. It was the first time he expressed something personal, and that opened the door to deeper conversations.

From that point on, the counsellor gently supported him in exploring those feelings, what school had meant to him, and how losing it had affected his daily life and sense of self. Through continued dialogue, the boy began to recognise and name emotions he had not spoken about before, like sadness and frustration.

> **"On the helpline, we don't offer solutions or tell boys what to do. Instead, we help them understand what has happened to them and support them in deciding their next steps."**

b SAWA's Approach to Overcoming Barriers in Sexuality Education in Schools in the West Bank

Sexual education is a crucial component of children's overall development and well-being. Because it provides children and young people with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to understand their bodies, recognise boundaries, and protect themselves from abuse and exploitation. In Palestine, where cultural taboos and social stigma generally surround discussions about sexuality, education becomes even more critical, as it helps break down barriers that prevent children from speaking openly about their experiences and seeking help. By providing accurate and age-appropriate information, sexuality education fosters emotional awareness, supports healthy relationships, and empowers children to make more informed decisions about their safety and rights.[4] This foundation is particularly important in humanitarian and conflict-affected settings, where children face heightened risks of sexual violence and where access to protective services may be further limited.[5]

SAWA works to provide children with education on body safety, self-protection, and emotional awareness. However, reaching children in Palestinian schools remains a complex challenge due to legal, institutional, and cultural barriers. In the public school system, boys' and girls' secondary schools are usually separated, and non-governmental organisations are generally not permitted to operate. The only exception is when formal approval is granted by the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Education, a process that is often lengthy and rarely successful. Private schools, on the other hand, offer more flexibility. Many are mixed-gender, and access depends largely on the school's internal policies.

SAWA has built partnerships with some private schools, which allow them to carry out awareness-raising activities. Before any sessions take place, the school's management, teachers, and parents are invited to participate in orientation meetings, where SAWA presents its approach and listens to possible concerns. These discussions offer families and educators the opportunity to share their views on which topics are considered appropriate, creating a shared agreement on how to address sensitive issues in a way that is acceptable for everyone. Despite these efforts, discussing sexuality-related topics remains prohibited in both public and private schools. Legal restrictions strictly forbid any reference to such content. Within these limits, SAWA carefully adapts its messaging to ensure that boys still receive accurate, age-appropriate guidance on staying safe and recognising potential harmful behaviour.

> **"Many believe that boys from religious, wealthy, or well-educated families are not at risk of abuse."**

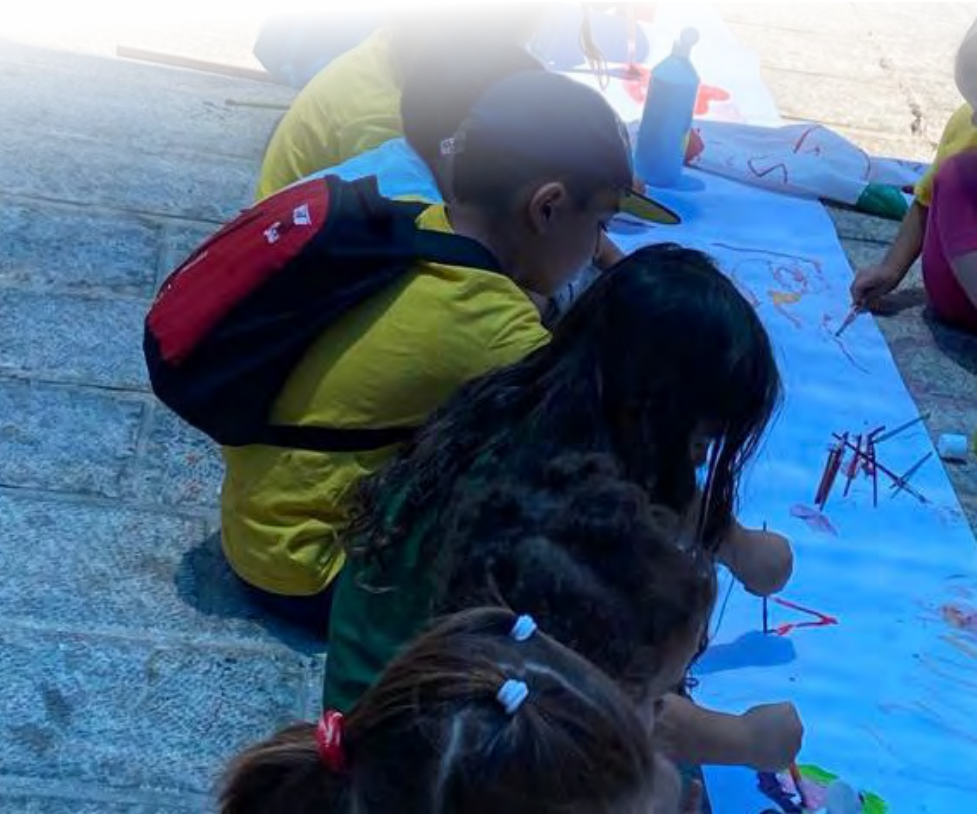
4 ECPAT International (2021). Global Boys Initiative: A global review of existing literature on the sexual exploitation of boys. ECPAT International.

5 ECPAT International (2024) A Call for Nuanced, Contextualised and Coordinated Responses to Complex Manifestations of Sexual Exploitation of Children in Humanitarian Contexts. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

One of the reasons for the resistance to include topics like sexuality education in school programmes is rooted in the belief that issues like sexual violence do not affect *"good children from good families"* and, therefore, do not need to be addressed in school settings. Many schools refuse to acknowledge the existence of such problems, fearing that discussing them would introduce inappropriate ideas or reflect poorly on the institution. The word "sex" itself is widely considered taboo in Arabic, making direct conversations about protection and abuse particularly difficult. To navigate these constraints, SAWA looks for entry points for discussion, and instead of framing sessions as "sexuality education", which would be immediately rejected, they are introduced under umbrella terms like **"family relations"** or **"family communication".** This strategic use of language allows educators to discuss critical topics, such as body changes, recognising emotions, and understanding good and bad touch, without triggering institutional pushback.

During these sessions, SAWA uses engaging and age-appropriate activities to help children process and communicate their feelings. For example, children aged 8-14 years old might be invited to choose emojis that represent how they feel in different situations. For younger children aged 4-6, puppet theatre can be used to act out scenarios. These creative tools provide a space for boys to explore and express emotions, especially when they may not have the words to describe what they are going through. Through these activities, they begin to develop emotional literacy and the confidence to talk about boundaries and personal safety in ways that feel accessible and non-threatening.

Despite these adaptations, direct discussions about sexual violence remain highly sensitive. Schools are often unwilling to address the topic, insisting that such issues do not occur within their institutions. This denial creates an additional layer of difficulty, as it prevents open conversations about risks children may face both inside and outside school. However, SAWA's experience shows that when given the right environment, children, including boys, do disclose concerns and experiences, proving that these issues exist regardless of whether adults acknowledge them. To challenge this culture of denial, SAWA engages in ongoing dialogue with communities, encouraging open reflection on how to recognise, talk about, and respond to sexual violence.



C DCIP's Socio-Legal Defence (SLD) Approach for Boys in Palestinian Detention Centres

DCIP adopts a socio-legal defence approach to provide comprehensive support to children in conflict with the Palestinian law, children at risk and child victims of violence. Its services include legal consultations and representation, monitoring and documenting violations inside Palestinian detention centres, evidence-based advocacy, and providing primary psychological support through a case management system.

• Addressing Emotional, Psychological, and Social Challenges through Individual Sessions

In Palestinian detention centres such as at the Nablus Correction and Rehabilitation Centre – a facility run by the Palestinian police and not designated for children, and according to DCIP, in violation of Palestinian juvenile justice law – DCIP provides psychosocial support for detained boys[6] through a long-term, trust-based approach that responds to the complex emotional, psychological, and social challenges they face in detention.

These boys are often stigmatised by society as troublemakers. This perception isolates them from their families, schools, and communities, and makes reintegration efforts extremely difficult. To respond to this, DCIP psychosocial specialists visit the centre every week to conduct a structured set of support activities. A key component of this programme is the weekly individual session between a psychosocial specialist and each boy.

These one-on-one meetings provide a regular, private space where the boys can talk about their feelings, experiences, and needs at their own pace. All sessions are conducted in private, with police officers remaining outside the room to ensure a clear separation from authority figures. By keeping authority figures out of the sessions, the programme creates a space where boys can speak freely, without fear of surveillance or disciplinary action, and begins to foster a sense of safety and trust.

In the first meeting, the DCIP psychosocial specialist typically begins with informal conversations about the boy's daily routines, interests, and emotional well-being. The tone is intentionally kept light to reduce anxiety and help ease into deeper discussions. Once a sense of comfort is established, the psychosocial specialist gradually introduces the boy to DCIP's work and the support available through the programme. **Psychosocial specialists do not take notes** during these sessions, as this could make the boys feel scrutinised or interrogated. Instead, they memorise key details and document them after the session, helping preserve confidentiality and a sense of emotional safety.

6 Boys can be detained for a variety of reasons.

Over time, as trust develops, boys begin to open up about more personal and difficult experiences. One particularly meaningful tool is the 'lifeline activity', in which boys are invited to reflect on key moments in their lives from early childhood to the present. Even early childhood (ages 0–5) is explored, as this helps them **think about their role in the family and whether they felt wanted or valued.** As they move along this timeline, many begin to speak about traumatic events, including experiences of sexual violence or abuse.

In several cases, signs of sexual violence begin to emerge only after weeks of consistent engagement. One boy, for example, required 21 sessions before an intervention plan could be developed. When needed, DCIP refers boys to specialised organisations to ensure they receive the appropriate mental health and psychosocial support.

DCIP's lawyers also provide legal representation for those children and visit the centre every three months to provide legal consultations to these boys. They also monitor and document any violations of children's rights for advocacy purposes. The consistent presence of the same psychosocial specialists and legal team over time has helped boys feel that the DCIP team is reliable and trustworthy. **The consistency of DCIP's relationship with the boys helps build trust beyond individual interactions.** Those who have engaged with DCIP share their experiences with others in detention, reassuring them that the organisation is a safe and supportive presence. This word-of-mouth encourages more boys to seek out help, knowing they will be met with understanding and consistency.

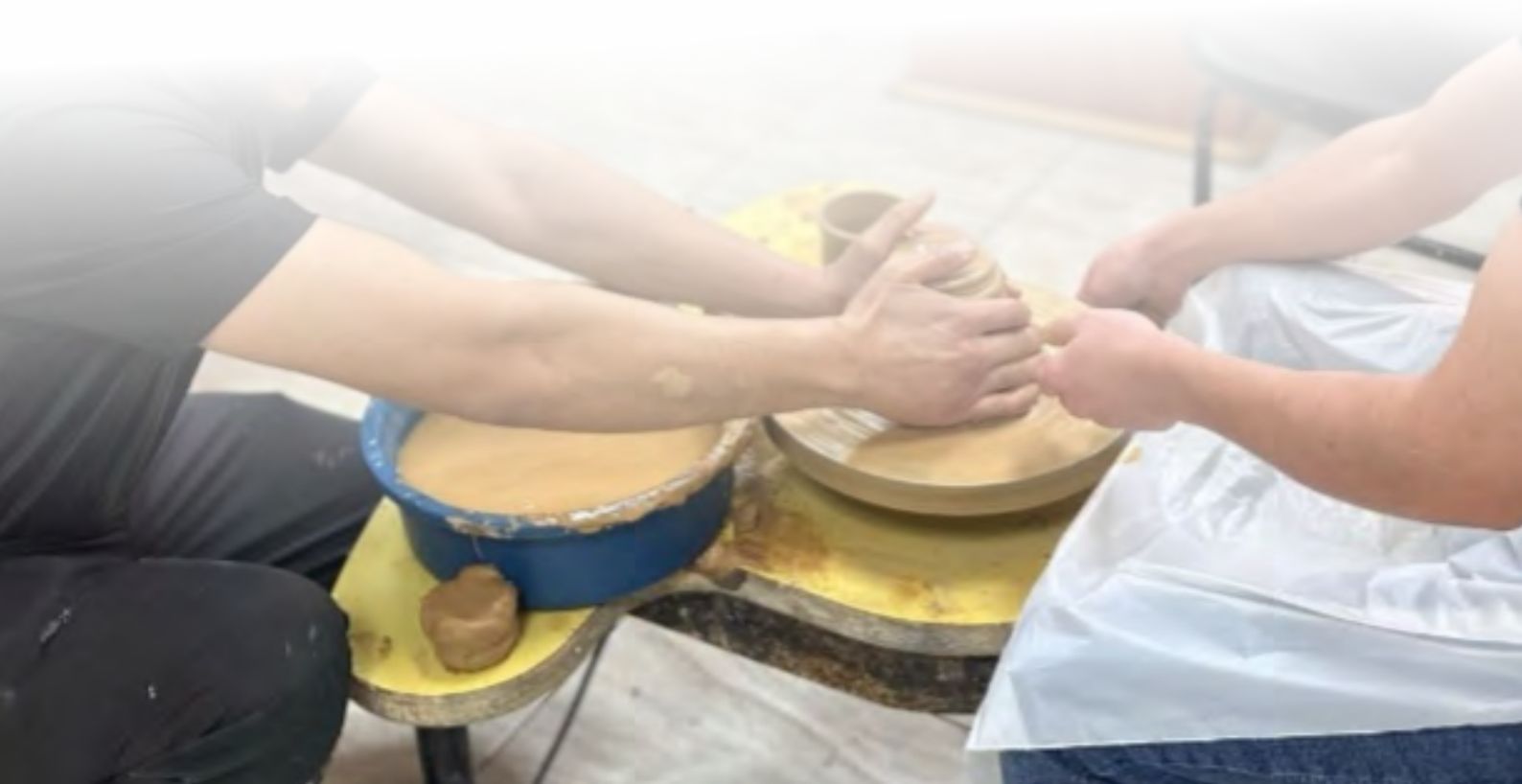
> **"Before I (psychosocial specialist) arrive at the detention centre, a boy is already waiting for me and putting hope in me before I even know anything about them."**

Creating a Supportive Environment through Group Counselling

Group counselling is another key element of DCIP's support model. **These sessions help boys to start sharing their thoughts and feelings with peers, developing empathy, and reducing the sense of isolation that detention can bring.** The group setting helps some children **feel less alone** in their experience and introduces collective strategies for coping and emotional expression. Psychosocial specialists also facilitate creative and informal group activities that serve as a form of psychological debriefing. These include structured games, drawing, storytelling, and even sports activities. These activities are tools for emotional release, stress reduction, and strengthening social bonds among the boys. For those who struggle to express themselves through words, these moments offer alternative ways to communicate and process what they are going through.

A particularly effective method is the use of drawing, painting and working with clay. These creative group activities allow boys to reflect on their emotions and experiences in a non-verbal way. A boy might sketch a scene from home, a symbolic figure, or something abstract that reflects their current emotional state. The aim is not to interpret the artwork but to give the boy space to externalise feelings without pressure or judgment. **These techniques help psychosocial specialists focus on emotional well-being, slowly building trust without pushing for disclosures.** This approach aligns with one of the core principles of DCIP's psychosocial work: supporting children at their own pace, on their own terms. Rather than confronting painful memories head-on, psychosocial specialists use creativity and play to open space for healing. Over time, these moments lead to more meaningful conversations.

Another initiative is the "Gratitude Day", which the children organise themselves to express appreciation for the psychosocial specialists and detention centre staff. Though symbolic, the gesture reflects a significant psychological shift: **the boys begin to see themselves not only as recipients of help but also as agents of change within their environment.**



Supporting Boys in Processing Anger in Palestinian Detention Centres

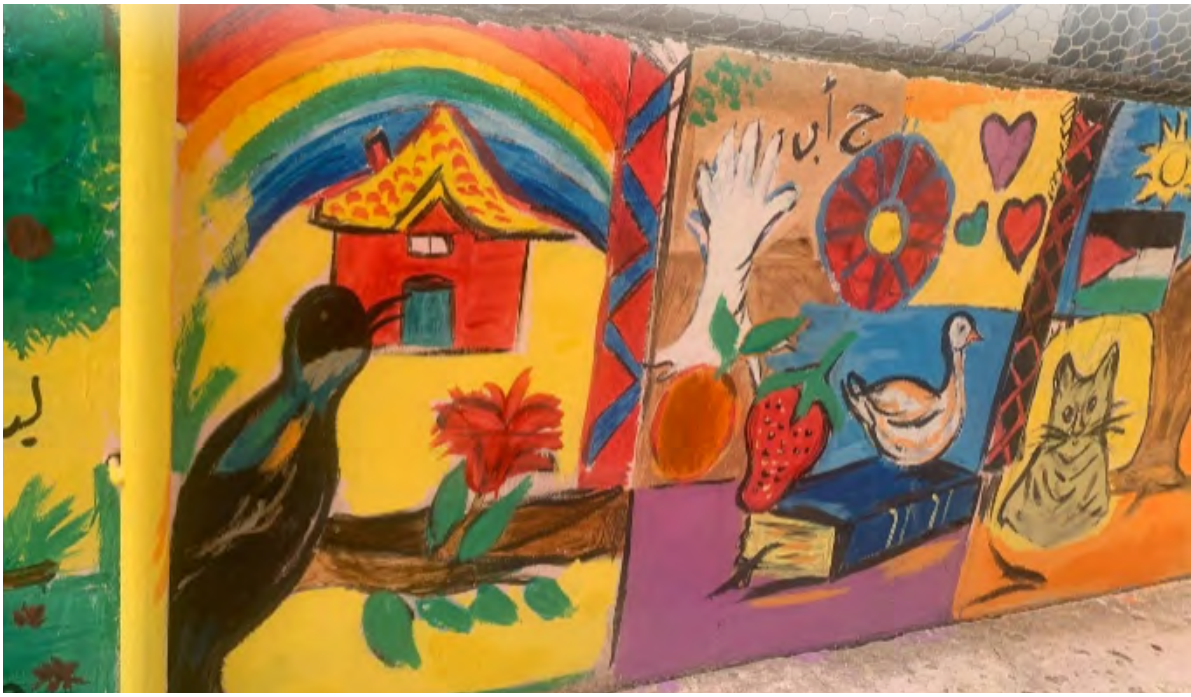
Anger is a common and expected emotion among boys in detention, but how it appears and how it is managed can vary greatly from one child to another. Some boys are able to explain what they are feeling in clear terms. They might talk about the reasons why they are upset, what triggered their anger, or how they reacted in those moment. While others struggle to find the words. This difference affects how they respond to support and how easily they can engage in therapeutic conversations.

Some boys have never been asked about their emotions before, not at home, not at school, not by any adult in their lives. So, when they first join a group session or meet with a psychosocial specialist, it may be the first time anyone has shown interest in how they are really feeling. In these cases, anger may not manifest as words, **it may show up as disruptive behaviour, aggression, or a refusal to participate** in the activities. A boy might try to draw attention away from the group or create tension during an activity. Rather than punishing or silencing the child in those moments, DCIP's psychosocial specialists allow the expression of anger. **They see it as communication, even if it is not yet verbalised.**

When this happens, one of the psychosocial specialists will continue the group session while another takes the boy aside for an individual conversation. This calm and personal space allows the child to feel seen and heard. Step by step, the psychosocial specialist helps the child reconstruct the situation – what happened, how they felt, how they responded, and what the consequences were.

Then, they begin to reflect together: Was the child's reaction helpful? Did it solve the problem or make it worse? Could something else have been done instead? If violence was used, they discuss with the boy whether that felt like the right choice. If the boy tried to communicate but was ignored, they explore how that felt.

This process helps the boy begin to understand the link between emotions, actions, and outcomes. It also helps them **start building new ways of responding to tension, conflict and stress.**



d DCIP's Approach to Raising Awareness in Targeted Schools

DCIP also operates outside of detention centres in the West Bank and has branches in multiple locations, enabling them to directly engage with boys, particularly in areas where cases of sexual violence have been reported. They use data from sources like the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Social Development, which tracks cases of child sexual violence, to help guide their intervention efforts. This allows them to focus on schools in communities where sexual exploitation and abuse have been identified as an issue. Based on this data, they prioritise schools in some areas, conducting awareness-raising activities not only to educate children but also to assess whether deeper issues are present. Thanks to this targeted approach, DCIP has the opportunity to identify patterns of violence or neglect that may otherwise would go unnoticed, and to adapt their interventions accordingly.

A significant part of this work focuses on raising awareness about children's rights, particularly in situations of apprehension. **One key reason why boys are specifically at risk of being arrested is that they are often perceived as older than they are.** The link between gender biases about boys intersects with racial prejudices and discriminatory practices in a context marked by occupation and violence, This perception can lead to them being treated less like children and more like adults, increasing the likelihood of arrest. **As boys grow older, the perception of them being threatening or being violent increases.**

To address this, DCIP runs campaigns that use accessible tools, such as videos, to inform all children about their legal rights and the protection mechanisms available to them. These **videos are designed to explain complex legal concepts in a simple and engaging way, making it easier for boys to understand their rights.** The content covers important topics like what happens during an arrest, the legal protections children should receive, and how they can seek help if their rights are violated.

Moreover, after the awareness-raising session in front of the class, they inform the students that the DCIP team will stay in a designated room in the school all day for anyone who wishes to talk with them. This method lowers barriers to disclosure, allowing children to seek help on their own terms.

> **"Boys don't have to reach us; we have to reach them."**

THE ROLE OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY NORMS IN BOYS' OVERALL EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Both SAWA and DCIP emphasise the importance of working in parallel within communities to shift perceptions around child protection and emotional well-being. Their work highlights the need to balance respect for cultural values with the fundamental rights of children to protection, education, and mental well-being.

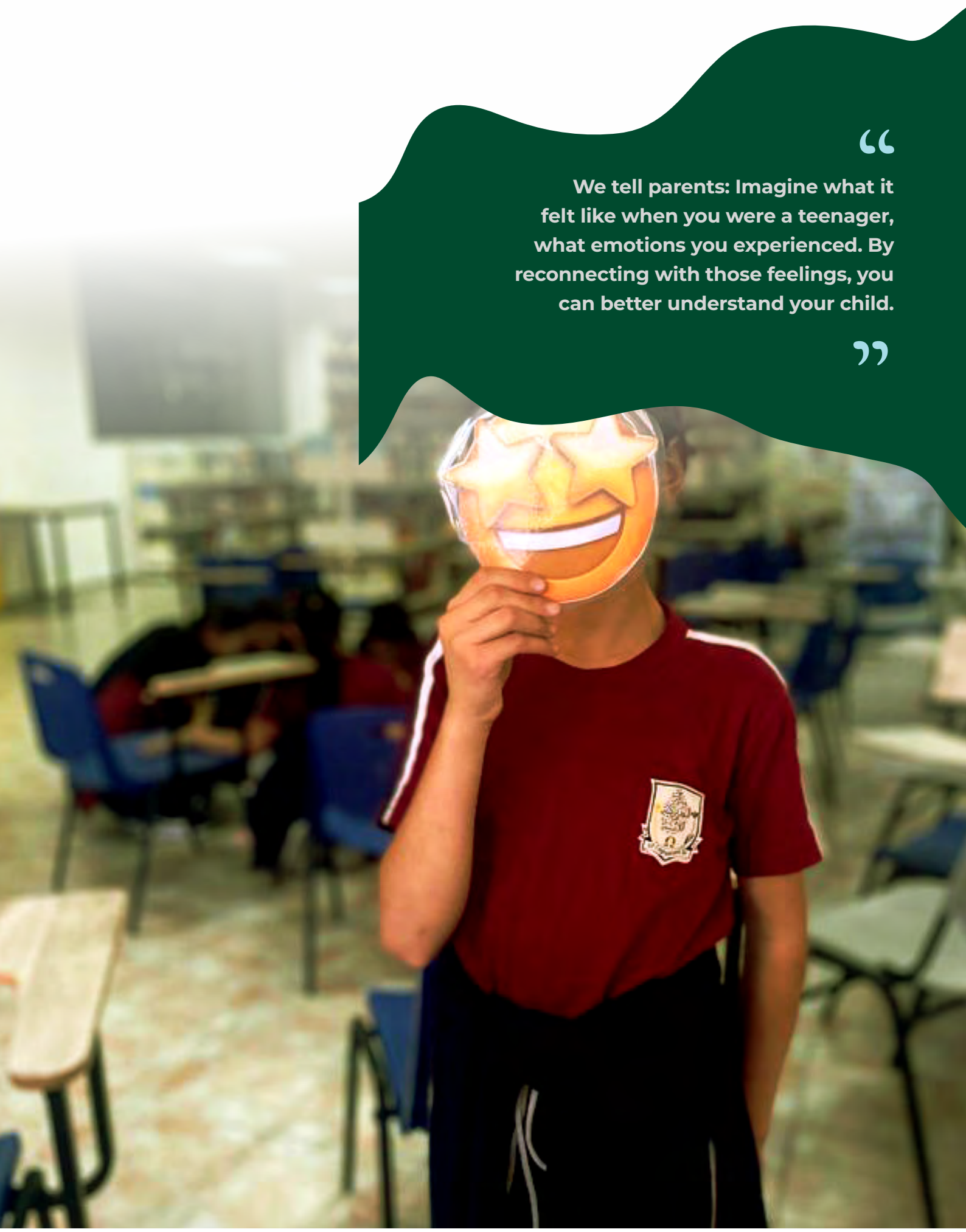
Supporting Parents and Enhancing Emotional Awareness: SAWA's Approach

SAWA engages parents and caregivers through schools, community centres, and online sessions, often organising joint activities with both parents and children to build trust and encourage open communication within families. However, participation is not always possible, many mothers are unable to attend the sessions regularly, and involvement from fathers is even more limited. Gender roles in Palestine place the responsibility for a child's education on the mother, expecting her to handle tasks such as checking grades, meeting with teachers, and managing school-related matters. Fathers' attendance remains the exception rather than the norm.

One of the key challenges identified by SAWA is that **many parents struggle to recognise the signs of sexual violence in boys.** Often, when children exhibit behavioural changes, such as nightmares and reluctance to go to school, parents may dismiss these as normal developmental stages rather than potential signs of abuse. **Many parents are in denial,** unable to interpret their boy's distress, which makes early intervention difficult.

Because children in general often lack the language to articulate their experiences, SAWA helps parents recognise behavioural changes as possible signs of distress. Many caregivers reach out with concerns about shifts in their child's behaviour, which can become key moments to uncover underlying issues and provide support. To help them respond, SAWA encourages parents to pay attention to these signals and to create space for open conversations about emotions.

Recognising that many adults also find it difficult to talk about feelings, SAWA actively engages them in self-reflective activities, for example recalling their own teenage experiences, to build empathy and strengthen their connection with their children. The main objective is to help parents recognise their own emotional barriers, enabling them to **break the cycle of emotional suppression and create a more open and supportive environment at home.**



> **We tell parents: Imagine what it felt like when you were a teenager, what emotions you experienced. By reconnecting with those feelings, you can better understand your child.**

Engaging Families to Support Reintegration: DCIP's Approach

Engaging families is also a key part of DCIP's reintegration efforts for boys in conflict with the law, whether or not they have experienced situations of detention. In some cases, particularly when the offence is considered minor or sensitive, legal proceedings are avoided to preserve family or community harmony. Instead, resolution takes place through mediation, often facilitated by community leaders or elders. This process involves bringing together the families of those involved to reach an informal agreement, aiming to resolve the issue without escalation. When a case is resolved in this way, the reintegration process tends to be more straightforward: there is little to no formal record, minimal stigma, and the boy can more easily return to daily life. However, when detention has taken place, reintegration becomes more complex. Psychosocial specialists must then support not only the boy, but also his family and school. Concerns about stigma, such as being labelled a "thief" or seen as dangerous, can lead to further rejection or isolation. DCIP addresses this by continuing to work with the child and their environment even after release. This may include family counselling, individual support for parents, and advocacy with school staff to ensure that the boy can return to a safe and welcoming setting.

In some of the most difficult cases, **boys have experienced sexual violence, and instead of receiving protection, they face further rejection from their families. Harmful gender biases about boys lead parents to blame the boy, asking, *"How could you not protect yourself?"*.**[7]

For example, when a boy is rejected by his father, psychosocial specialists reach out directly to the whole family. They visit the home, open conversations, and try to understand the reasons behind the rejection. An initial resistance is common, but through repeated meetings, they explore **the parents' own emotional struggles and biases, and their role in supporting the boy,** and attitudes often begin to shift.

When beginning this process, DCIP psychosocial specialists start by identifying and engaging the parent or family member who is closest to the child, which in most cases is the mother. By gradually working through them to involve the other family members. Home visits play a key role in this approach. These visits are not one-off meetings, **they are repeated and purposeful,** aimed at slowly building trust with the family over time.

Throughout the process, **the focus remains on the boy's best interests.** Psychosocial specialists frame every conversation around the needs and well-being of the boy, using messages like, *"This is for the benefit of your child,"* or *"We are doing this to support your child's future"*. With time and consistent contact, families often begin to engage more openly, and parents who were initially absent may start participating more actively. In some cases, they even went beyond scheduled visits, demonstrating care and involvement that was not there before. **These changes are gradual, but they are central to the boy's sense of belonging and recovery.**

7 ECPAT International (2025). Shifting the narrative on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: guiding principles on preventing victim-blaming language, communication and behaviours.

To support boys' reintegration more effectively and ensure a holistic approach, DCIP also works with their communities. The aim is to create a more supportive environment around the child. One important part of this work is helping boys, especially those in conflict with the law or at risk, to take the lead in organising community activities. These initiatives, designed and carried out by the boys themselves, give them a chance to be seen in a positive light and to rebuild their place in the community. Examples include theatre shows, volunteer work, and public events featuring decision-makers. DCIP psychosocial specialists guide and support the boys throughout the process, helping to build their confidence and make sure the activities are meaningful and well-received.

HUMAN RESOURCES AND KEY ATTITUDES

As part of their training, SAWA helpline counsellors are required to reflect on their own experiences, confront past trauma, and develop the emotional strength needed to support others. The organisation emphasises that to provide effective assistance, **counsellors must first work on themselves.** Weekly group meetings provide a space for staff to discuss their own experiences with sexual violence, fostering an environment of trust and mutual learning. Breaking personal taboos is a key component of the process, ensuring that counsellors can engage in open and non-judgmental conversations with callers.

Following the 2023 war in Gaza, SAWA adapted its training to strengthen the capacity of counsellors in responding to an increased number of disclosures of sexual violence against children. With the helpline receiving around 100 contacts per day, including calls and online chat, specialised and sustained training has become even more critical. The programme is rigorous and comprehensive, aiming to equip counsellors with both the emotional readiness and technical skills needed to support children in distress.

SAWA's training programme includes:

1. The 330-hour training for counsellors on the *164 Helpline* includes 110 hours of interactive learning and 220 hours of practical experience. The interactive component comprises 80 hours of theoretical instruction and 30 hours of live observation, during which trainees observe other helpline counsellors at work and learn proper methods for initiating calls, providing feedback, and handling challenging conversations. The training covers topics such as abuse, domestic and family violence, gender, sexual identity, adolescence, sexual assault, power dynamics, and cyber violence. It uses participatory methods, including group work, role-playing, video analysis, and critical discussions, all led by an experienced facilitator. Beyond building technical skills, the training challenges participants' views on gender-based violence and encourages reflection on their own experiences to foster empathy. A strong focus is placed on communication, active listening, emotional regulation, and validation, ensuring that counsellors are well-equipped to offer sensitive and respectful support.
2. The 210-hour training for Emergency Response consists of 70 hours of interactive training and 140 hours of practical experience, preparing counsellors to provide specialised support in crises. The program focuses on remote service delivery, teaching counsellors to identify mental health issues and signs of violence over the phone, conduct assessments, and create suicide safety plans. Introduced after the most recent war in Palestine, the training addresses the urgent need for qualified counsellors to meet the rising demand. The theoretical component covers topics like psychosocial first aid, active listening, validation, gender-based violence, and assessments for depression, anxiety, and suicide risk prevention.

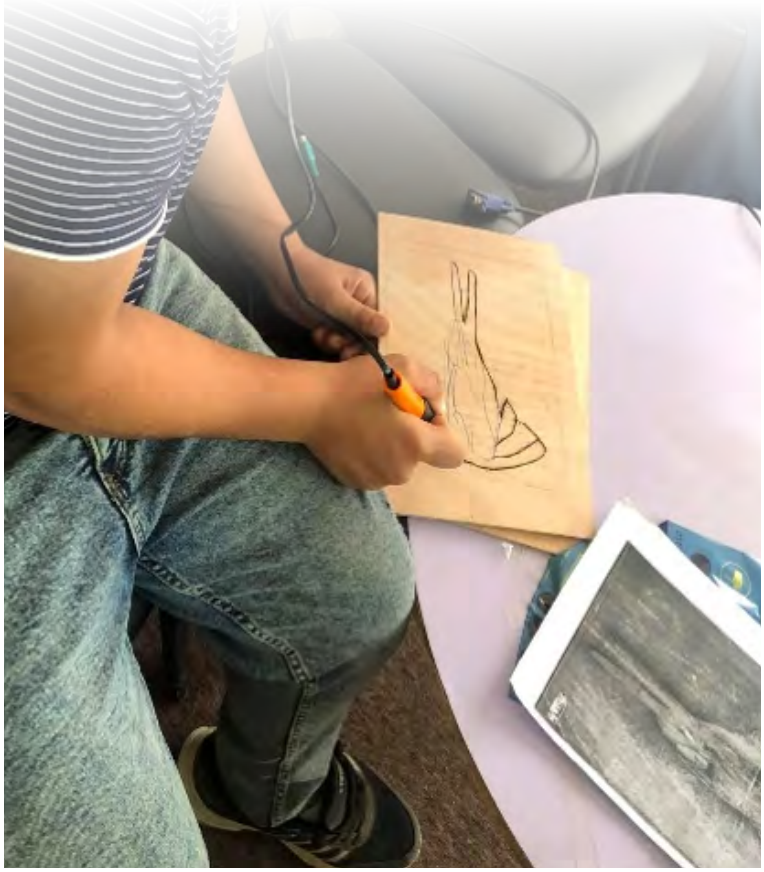
Training and Support for Staff at DCIP

At DCIP, all staff members, whether psychosocial specialists, lawyers, or other professionals, receive continuous training and supervision to strengthen their skills in working with boys in conflict with the law. For psychosocial specialists, the focus is on direct support to boys and families. Staff regularly participate in professional supervision, which includes both individual and group sessions. These sessions provide an opportunity for reflection, debriefing, and technical guidance, including strategies for managing challenging cases, conducting effective interviews, and preparing social reports. This continuous support enables staff to navigate complex situations, and it is essential for their own well-being.

Psychosocial specialists are also trained in the socio-legal defence methodology, which includes specific techniques for interviewing children, using creative tools like art therapy, and supporting reintegration processes in collaboration with schools and families.

For lawyers, DCIP invests in strengthening capacity in the area of juvenile justice. All legal staff have received training on how to become certified trainers themselves, equipping them to guide service providers, judges, lawyers and law enforcement personnel. They contribute to the development of manuals and tools for the justice sector and play a leadership role in regional exchanges through the DCI network.

All DCIP staff, including administrative and support personnel, receive training on the organisation's child protection policy, code of conduct and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) policy. This is part of onboarding for all new staff and is regularly refreshed every two years. The policy outlines clear guidance on acceptable behaviour, safeguarding children's privacy, obtaining consent, and handling disclosures or concerns. Each office has a protection focal point who ensures compliance with these standards and supports staff in upholding a safe environment**. There is also a checklist to ensure that spaces are child-friendly and that confidentiality is respected.** In addition, DCIP developed its own safeguarding manual, and the organisation's psychosocial specialists deliver training on safeguarding mechanisms to all staff and partners. Suppliers and external collaborators are also bound by policies on child protection and the prevention of sexual harassment.



CONCLUSIONS

The accumulated experience of SAWA and Defense for Children Palestine in supporting boys at risk or survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse in the context of occupation, discrimination and attacks in Palestine provides critical lessons and insights. Their work demonstrates the importance of adapting support approaches to the complex realities faced by boys living under occupation, where restrictive policies, social norms and biases around masculinity and intersection with racist beliefs and practices, as well as the ongoing attacks on Gaza, create significant barriers to disclosure and access to services.

SAWA's helpline model highlights the necessity of creating safe, anonymous, and trusting spaces where boys can express themselves in their own way and time, recognising that emotional recovery is gradual, individual and non-linear. **The approach respects boys' need for confidentiality and control, especially in the West Bank, while adapting sensitively to the difficult living conditions in Gaza, where privacy is limited, and boys often carry heavy family responsibilities.** SAWA's patient, empathetic listening and non-directive counselling show how emotional support can be provided effectively even when direct disclosures of abuse cannot happen organically.

DCIP's work in detention centres underscores the value of long-term, trust-based individual and group psychosocial support that allows boys to process trauma in a safe environment, at their own pace. Creative tools and activities serve as important alternatives for expression, especially when verbal communication is challenging. **The organisation's integration of legal support and community outreach helps address stigma and facilitates reintegration by engaging families and schools,** which is crucial for sustainable recovery.

Both organisations emphasise the critical role of working within families and communities to shift rigid gender norms and biases and **increase adults' emotional literacy.** SAWA's efforts to engage parents in recognising signs of distress among boys and building empathy, alongside DCIP's family-focused reintegration strategies, highlight the need for holistic interventions that extend beyond the individual boy and his lived experiences

Training and ongoing support for staff at both SAWA and DCIP are foundational to their success, ensuring that all staff are emotionally prepared and technically skilled to respond to the unique challenges boys face in this context.

Overall, the ECPAT Global Boys Initiative case study in Palestine illustrates that supporting boys affected by sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian and occupation settings requires long-term plans and resources, as well as culturally sensitive, gender-responsive approaches that **build trust gradually,** respect confidentiality, and address the broader social environment.

TO DELVE DEEPER INTO THIS

To find out more about SAWA's work in Palestine and the West Bank and about their approach and services, please visit: https://SAWA.ps/en/

To find out more about DCI's work in Palestine and about their approach and services, please visit: https://www.dci-palestine.org/

To better understand the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse of boys and ECPAT International's work on this issue worldwide, please visit: https://ecpat.org/global-boys-initiative/

To learn from other practitioners around the world about their work with boys: https://ecpat.org/story/global-boys-initiative-case-studies/

To learn more about the global work on sexual violence against boys, please visit the website of the Global Alliance for the Protection of Boys from Sexual Violence (GAPB): https://gapb-ecpat.nationbuilder.com/

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