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Traumatised and afraid - 300,000 children who want to go home

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"I don't want to die. I want to go to school," says Jamal, a four-year-old Lebanese boy scarred by the Israeli bombing of his country. Home for Jamal is now a "displacement centre" in the southern town of Jezzine, where his family fled in fear for their lives.

"We've had our picnic, and we want to go home now," says another child, staying in a makeshift refugee camp in the Sanayeh public gardens in Beirut. "We are bored and afraid and we want to go home," says another.

These are the voices of the dispossessed of Lebanon, the hundreds of thousands of children whose world was changed forever in the seconds that followed the explosion of a bomb. "Mummy, what is a massacre?" another child asks.

About 300,000 Lebanese children have been displaced by Israel's three-week war against Hizbollah - a third of the number of people who have abandoned their homes. In many cases they were ordered out by Israeli army leaflets. They are living in open-air camps, like the one in the Beirut park, or in schools, where many sought refuge. Many children have been housed with host families - in the port of Sidon, 48km (30 miles) south of the capital, 40 per cent of the 22,700 children in temporary accommodation are doing so. The rest are in displacement centres.

Ribka Amsale, an aid worker with Save the Children, visited a school in Sidon yesterday. Children were playing football as their mothers cheered them on. The children seemed cheerful enough, but the stress and trauma are already etched in their psyches.

"Many are undergoing enormous stress in this situation," said Save the Children's Deborah Haines in Sidon. "Although some are out playing, there are issues of safety and security. Many are at a loose end, as their toys and games have been left behind. Their parents haven't got the time or the patience to set things up for the children."

Many of the displaced children are behaving aggressively, getting into fights, in a sign of the underlying pressure that also manifests itself through crying, bed-wetting and bad dreams.

Children placed with host families are not necessarily better off than those in the centres, says Ms Haines. "There are tensions, they have to get used to living with strangers."

Save the Children, which has launched a humanitarian appeal jointly with The Independent, is working with the Lebanese education and social affairs ministries, local non-government partners, and donor countries to assess urgent needs. Save the Children had received 300 telephone calls by yesterday afternoon, pledging an average of £100 a time, thanks to The Independent's Lebanon appeal, which was launched on Wednesday.

Rania al-Ameri, a Lebanese child psychologist working with young internally displaced people, said: "They desperately need help because they are the ones who are suffering the most. Many children have lost members of their families as well as their homes. They are severely traumatised."

There have been discussions on creating safe places for children to play in. It sounds straightforward, and is relatively easy to organise in the camps, where children can be supervised. But for the displaced living with families, the natural caution of mothers must be overcome by house visits.

Schools have become the displacement centres of choice because of the holidays, which run until 15 September in Lebanon. But the water is of poor quality, the showers - if there are any - are overcrowded, and the lavatories reek of sewage.

In addition to basic necessities such as mattresses, the children need fresh fruit and vegetables for a balanced diet. But "in some of the camps in Tyre, the displaced people need food full stop," said the aid worker Jeremie Bodin of Save the Children. "The stress means that women are no longer breast-feeding, so we need [an] infant-feeding formula, and we need nappies because the children haven't been changed for days." Emerging from his basement, where he has spent the past three weeks, Ali, nine, said: "My father and mother went with my other brothers and sisters to another town. They said they will come and get me when the bombs stop." After another nearby explosion, he said: "Why are the Israelis hitting us? Do they hate us? My cousin told me nuclear bombs are really big. Are they as big as these rockets?"

