Learning and care for the youngest refugees – a critical priority across countries

*Insights from the ISSA Network*

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A professional association of close to 95 member organizations working in the field of early childhood in more than 40 countries, primarily in Europe and Central Asia, with more than 20 years in the field.

- We advocate for and support competent early childhood systems for all children, especially the most vulnerable.

- We strive to increase awareness of the importance of early childhood development and of a qualified workforce.

- We promote quality, equitable and integrated services for all children and families.
‘Networks are well placed to address complicated problems in the following cases:

THE PROBLEM YOU ARE TRYING TO ADDRESS...

...has no clear recipe or formula for success
...cuts across sectors or fields of practice
...is evolving and require solutions to evolve with it
...cannot be addressed effectively by any single individual or organization.’

Since the first day of the war in Ukraine, ISSA closely supported its member organizations in:

- **Ukraine**
- **Moldova**
- **Romania**
- **Poland**
- **Hungary**
- **Slovakia**

expanding it to other countries and used its network mechanisms for peer learning and support across its membership.
Quick scan of the current context:

Each child and family might be in a different situation when arriving at the border (stand by, transitioning to another country, settling down).

Young children are accompanied by mothers (and/or other female adults) and siblings and have been separated from their fathers.

There are different needs among refugee children and adults, but all of them went through traumatic experiences.
Quick scan of the current context:

A lot of emphasis is put into providing emergency support (safety, protection, food, good health, etc.) but equally important is the support that addresses mental health, recovering routines, stability, and transitioning to a different life and environment.

Policy measures to provide free access to services are being issued in many countries, but there is insufficient readiness at national and local level to provide responsive and flexible solutions.

The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system’s readiness needs to meet the readiness of refugee children and families to participate in activities/services.
The ECEC system is part of the microsystem, but also subject to the interactions in the mesosystem and to the influence of the exo- and macro-system.
Early years’ experiences matter tremendously in a person’s life.

Child’s development encompasses several areas of development, strongly intertwined: physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. All are equally important and require equal attention.

Child’s wellbeing depends on family’s wellbeing.

Traumatic events can strongly affect child’s development.
Key points in responding to the refugee crisis – young children and their families!

- Child’s wellbeing depends on family’s wellbeing.
- Child and family’s wellbeing depend on the communities they live/settle in and on the services that they can benefit from.
How ready are ECEC systems to welcome and meet the needs of young refugee children and of their families?

and

How ready are young refugee children and their families to attend the ECEC services in communities?
How ready are ECEC systems to welcome and meet the needs of young refugee children and of their families?

Which of the factors below are of high priority to be addressed for building the ECEC system readiness?

1. Enabling policies for supporting refugee families
2. Availability of ECEC places to include refugee children
3. Preparation of staff to work with refugee children and their families
4. Addressing the language barrier
5. Availability of other types of services (playgroups, family hubs, etc.) to ensure the smooth integration
6. Coordination between different types of services
How ready are young refugee children and their families to access and participation in the ECEC services in communities?

Which of the situations below you recognize as influencing greatly the children and their families’ level of readiness to access and participate in the ECEC services?

1. Language is the major barrier
2. Overall insecurity is preventing families from accessing services
3. Children do not feel comfortable to get separated for too much time
4. Mothers cope with too many challenges
5. Mothers fear that children will not feel welcome and comfortable in services
6. Provision of transitioning and support activities in services
7. Mothers are in great need of ECEC services’ support
ECEC system readiness - What have we learned in the past months?

• ‘Do no harm’ principle → the need for knowledge and skills on psychosocial first aid, trauma-informed activities among ECEC staff

• Ensuring that services are tailored to the needs → flexible design, locally driven

• Faster is not necessarily better → one step at a time within a strategic plan

• Avoiding segregation through service provision → access to different vulnerable groups

• Provide support to prevent overstress and burnout among ECEC professionals

• One service will not solve the complex problems that refugee families are facing → networks of services led at the local level
Building/strengthening the ECEC (local) system readiness

- ‘Do no harm’ principle
  - Capacity of ECEC staff (and staff working in other services) to work with children and families who experienced traumatic events

- Ensuring that services are tailored to the needs
  - Needs analysis driven solutions/programs; one size never fits all → place-based, responsive, transitioning services

- Faster is not necessarily better
  - Strategic thinking and approach to ECEC service provision – immediate, short-, mid-, long-term coordinated solutions.

- Avoiding segregation
  - Leveraging/strengthening inclusive policies and practices for increasing access of different vulnerable groups

- One type of service will not solve the problem
  - Coordination structures and mechanisms across early childhood sectors – a new way of working at the local level.
Contributing to systems’ readiness: ISSA’s Five Streams of Action (short-, medium-, and long-term plan)

1. Strengthen the capacity of early childhood practitioners to provide psychological first aid and deal with stress and burnout

2. Empower members to build capacity at municipality level and support a strategic response on short and medium term

3. Ensure that inclusion, respect for diversity, and equity are key ingredients of quality early childhood policies and practices

4. Facilitate learning communities in and across countries

5. Support efforts of reconstruction in Ukraine
1. Strengthen the capacity of early childhood practitioners to provide psychological first aid and deal with stress and burnout

- **Training of Trainers on Foundational Training on psychological first aid and trauma-informed practices with young children and their caregivers**
  
  *Countries: Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine (10 trainers/country)*
  
  *In partnership with: Amna (former Refugee Trauma Initiative), War Child Holland, UNICEF ECARO*

- **Rolling out the training of practitioners at the country level**
- **Coaching the country teams of trainers**
- **Learning exchange sessions and shared online space across country teams**
- **Setting-up learning communities and resource hubs at country level**
- **Translation of selected resources**

  *Countries: Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine*

  *In partnership with: War Child Holland, UNICEF ECARO and UNICEF Country Offices*
Psychological first aid (PFA) is globally acknowledged as a simple, efficient method of providing initial support in crisis situations, and is now included in the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.

Psychological first aid is a set of skills and competencies that enable people working in contact with children to reduce the initial distress of children caused by accidents, natural disasters, war, conflict, interpersonal violence or other traumatic events.

ECEC staff can play a crucial and healing role, if adequately supported!
1. Strengthen the capacity of early childhood practitioners to provide psychological first aid and deal with stress and burnout (continued)

What impact can the war have on children and adults?

- Physical deprivation (food, water, healthcare, sanitation, etc.)
- Feeling fearful, unsafe, powerless, rootless, stressed
- Loss and dislocation from own people, home, land, familiar places
- Feeling of constant danger and insecurity.
1. Strengthen the capacity of early childhood practitioners to provide psychological first aid and deal with stress and burnout (continued)

How to recognize the signs of distress in children and adults?

**IN CHILDREN UNDER TWO YEARS OF AGE:**
- May cling to caregivers
- Regression to younger behaviour
- Changes in sleep and eating patterns
- Crying and irritability
- Afraid of things that did not frighten them before
- Hyperactivity
- Changes in play activity/play patterns
- More opposing and demanding behaviour than before or overly cooperative
- Very sensitive to other people’s reactions.

**IN CHILDREN OF 3 TO 6 YEARS OLD:**
- Start clinging to parents or other adults
- Regress to younger behaviour such as thumb-sucking
- Stop talking
- Become inactive or hyperactive
- Stop playing, or start playing repetitive games
- Feel anxious and worry that bad things are going to happen
- Experience sleep disturbances, including nightmares
- Changes in eating patterns
- Become easily confused
- Unable to concentrate well
- At times, take on adult role
- Show irritability.

Source: War Child Holland
1. Strengthen the capacity of early childhood practitioners to provide psychological first aid and deal with stress and burnout (continued)

Key principles in providing psychological first aid to children who have experienced traumatic situations, events:

- **LOOK**
- **LISTEN**
- **LINK**

https://iris.paho.org/bitstream/handle/10665.2/52495/PAHONMHMN200019low_eng.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y
1. Strengthen the capacity of early childhood practitioners to provide psycho-logical first aid and deal with stress and burnout (continued)

Children need to regain their childhood!
They need safe, secure, caring and supportive relationships, and .... PLAY!

PLAYING IS HEALING!
4. Strengthen the capacity of early childhood practitioners to provide psycho-logical first aid and deal with stress and burnout *(continued)*

Working with distressed children and adults can be overwhelming and stressful.

ECEC staff need to have self-care and self-protection skills and networks of support around them.

**Care for professionals!**
2. Empower members to build capacity at municipality level and support a strategic response on short and medium term

• Build the capacity and provide technical assistance to local authorities (using the Primokiz approach)
  o Setting-up local teams under the leadership of municipalities (cross-sectoral)
  o Conduct the needs analysis and mapping the local capacity
  o Setting priorities (immediate, short, medium term)
  o Develop a strategic plan

• Support the setting up of non-formal services for internally displaced and refugee children and their families, alongside children from the hosting country
  o Strengthen staff capacity
  o Equip centers
  o Provide assistance to staff
4. Facilitate a learning community in and across countries

- Facilitate learning exchanges among Member organizations involved in country solutions
  - *Countries: Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine*

- Constantly feed the ISSA’s Support for Ukraine web page with new resources
- Share news about Members’ work at country level

  - Czech Republic: [https://www.issa.nl/content/step-step-%C4%8Dr-helping-ukrainian-children-settle-czech-schools](https://www.issa.nl/content/step-step-%C4%8Dr-helping-ukrainian-children-settle-czech-schools)
  - Latvia: [https://www.issa.nl/content/war-time-tension-affecting-school-children-latvia](https://www.issa.nl/content/war-time-tension-affecting-school-children-latvia)
  - Hungary: [https://www.issa.nl/content/partners-hungary-supporting-ukrainian-refugee-children-and-families](https://www.issa.nl/content/partners-hungary-supporting-ukrainian-refugee-children-and-families)
  - Romania: [https://www.issa.nl/content/advocacy-efforts-romania-continue-while-war-deepens-inequities](https://www.issa.nl/content/advocacy-efforts-romania-continue-while-war-deepens-inequities) / [https://www.issa.nl/content/amurtel-romania-provides-psycho](https://www.issa.nl/content/amurtel-romania-provides-psycho)
  - Bulgaria: [https://www.issa.nl/content/bulgarian-advocates-raise-awareness-about-importance-ecd-amid-refugee-wave](https://www.issa.nl/content/bulgarian-advocates-raise-awareness-about-importance-ecd-amid-refugee-wave)

- **ISSA Connects for Ukraine** – online events supporting cross-country learning:
  - **Webinars:** Responsive solutions in early childhood - Learning across borders
  - **Country actions - Video:** *A Network in Action for the Families and Young Children of Ukraine*
Take aways?

- **NATIONAL SYSTEM LEVEL**: The current crisis created by the war surfaced vulnerabilities of the ECEC system (funding, infrastructure, responsiveness, inclusiveness, capacity, resilience, etc.) – similar with the COVID pandemic period – requiring a higher level of coordination. Increasing the access of vulnerable groups remains a big challenge for ECEC systems.

- **LOCAL SYSTEM LEVEL**: While national policies may enable the system readiness overall, the responsive (needs based), inclusive and flexible solutions are provided at the local level.

- **WORKFORCE**: ECEC staff need to operate in a supportive environment and feel supported (capacity building, coaching, learning communities on inclusive and trauma-informed practices).

- **PRACTICE LEVEL**: Attuned services/practices/activities that recognize the (potentially) harmful impact of traumatic experience on children are high on demand: flexible program, safe and healing environments, caring interactions, play opportunities (indoor and outdoor), art and stress releasing focused activities, language facilitation, community building activities, etc.
Thank You!

For more information:  
https://www.issa.nl/Support_for_Ukraine

Sign-up to ISSA newsletter:  
www.issa.nl

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