Building Bright Futures:

How to integrate Ukraine's
refugee children through
early childhood education and care

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Why is early childhood education and care (ECEC) considered a means for integrating refugees in host-communities?

ECEC is one of the first points of contact between young children, their families and host communities.

ECEC settings can act as bridging spaces where refugee and non-refugee families find common goals, aspirations and expectations for their children.

ECEC settings enable young children and their families to receive integrated services, ameliorate the risks they face, expand their social capital and increase embeddedness within host societies.

How can refugee children be included in ECEC services to support their integration in the host community?

Ensure refugees are included in national and subnational plans, legislation and data systems across key ministries responsible for ECEC services.

Adapt existing policies and standards to ensure considerations are made for the integration of refugee children in ECEC in host communities.

Deliver flexible, holistic and complementary formal and non-formal programmes that are linked to national and municipal reforms and plans, and are responsive to the needs of refugee children and their families.

Develop and strengthen the capacity of the ECEC workforce to better support the inclusion of refugee children and their families in ECEC settings and in communities.

This brief is part of a two-brief series on early childhood education and care in the context of the Ukraine response. While the evidence base informing these briefs is mostly from upper-middle-income and high-income country contexts, the findings also have relevance to other contexts hosting refugee children and their families. Both briefs can be accessed here.

THE STATE OF YOUNG REFUGEE CHILDREN IN THE UKRAINE CRISIS

The war in Ukraine has displaced over 7.8 million individuals who have sought refuge in several countries across Europe, including Poland (1,497,849), Czechia (460,415), Italy (173,231), Slovakia (100,783) and Türkiye (145,000).[1] As many as 9 in every 10 refugees arriving in host countries from Ukraine are women and children.[2]

9 in 10 refugees are women and children

Nearly 4 million of the refugees from Ukraine are children in need of humanitarian assistance,[3] one third of whom are estimated to be below the age of 6.[i]

The circumstances in which Ukrainian families have been forced to leave their homes have been stressful, traumatic and unsafe, affecting them in a multitude of ways, including financially and mentally.[4][5] In many host countries, it has not been possible to provide refugees with sufficient psychosocial support due to a shortage of qualified psychologists, teachers and specialists in refugee integration.[6] Refugee children are also exposed to several compounded risks as they lose not only their homes but also their education, which tends to be deprioritized in humanitarian response plans compared to survival initiatives.[7][8] Indeed, recent data show that on average, only one in three refugee children are enrolled in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in host countries.[9]

The effects of war on young children can be detrimental, as the early years are a period of rapid brain growth and development and thus are highly sensitive to adverse life experiences.[10] ECEC services that are inclusive and responsive to refugee children's and families' needs can be a vehicle for offsetting the effects of trauma and displacement.

Why is early childhood education and care considered a means for integrating refugees in host communities?

The integration of refugees is a complex, dynamic and multifaceted process that requires building connections between refugee families, host-country families and institutions in order to help refugee families develop a sense of belonging following their displacement, while maintaining important cultural and familial ties to their homeland.[11] Effective integration measures include providing refugee and host-community families with equal access to education, care and health services, and ensuring opportunities for social and economic inclusion, which contributes to inclusive societies.[12] Integration measures can also facilitate social cohesion by promoting interactions between refugees and non-refugees to create a collective sense of togetherness, reciprocity and community.[13]

Although there is no single or best model for integration, it should be understood as a process of mutual adaptation in which refugee children and families adapt to new lifestyles and experiences, while host communities adjust to address the complexity of newcomers' needs.[14][15]

[i] *Based on estimates from the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO).*

Inclusive ECEC services are uniquely positioned to facilitate integration as they are frequently one of the first points of contact between refugee children, their families and host communities.[16] ECEC can enable integration and social cohesion by supporting children's adaptation to a new education system with a new language of instruction and curriculum; enhancing their communication and bonding with peers, including non-refugee children; and developing a sense of belonging, connectedness and safety to cope with loss and separation.[17]

The positive effects of inclusive ECEC go beyond the individual level: ECEC services can contribute to family well-being by providing psychological and parenting support to caregivers.[18][19] ECEC settings also provide spaces for refugee caregivers to interact and engage with the wider community, becoming hubs for integration and social cohesion, as both refugee and non-refugee families can meet in situations where their paths might not have otherwise overlapped.[20] ECEC can also enable families from diverse backgrounds to find common goals, aspirations and expectations for their children.

Engaging in activities that are rooted in a shared vision of supporting young children's early learning and development can help challenge prejudice and misconceptions, overcome cultural barriers and increase social cohesion and embeddedness of refugees within host communities.[21] Investments in ECEC also provide societal benefits in the form of high return on investment: every US$1 spent on ECEC yields a return of US$9 to society.[22]

Families' self-sufficiency and mothers' chances of attaining relevant economic and social support are also tied to children's opportunities to access ECEC. Children's enrollment in ECEC offers parents time to work, access social protection services or find other ways to support their families while their children are being cared for.[23]

As such, it is essential not to overlook ECEC in the humanitarian response to the conflict in Ukraine, which should include access to high quality, inclusive early childhood education and care services for children age 6 or below, covering a range of services such as day cares, nurseries, kindergartens and preschools, in formal and non-formal settings.[24]

ECEC responses in humanitarian contexts should be inclusive and comprise the sum of interlinked components including policy, programming, workforce development, and monitoring and evaluation.[25] This brief highlights considerations across these components for increasing the capacity of ECEC systems to support the integration of refugees in host countries.

1. Ensure refugees are included in national and subnational plans, legislation and data systems across key ministries responsible for ECEC services.

Collect disaggregated, timely data on the number and characteristics of young refugee children enrolled in ECEC settings and their families.

Ministries of education and other relevant ministries must move towards more comprehensive, systematic inclusion of refugee children in their education and childcare databases. Refugees are often at risk of being excluded from education data systems. For instance, the education management information system in Bulgaria records children as refugees or migrants only if they are categorized as asylum-seekers or beneficiaries of international protection.[26] This risks the exclusion of refugee children who are not formally or legally recognized within the host country. Collecting real-time, comprehensive data is essential to inform policy developments, planning and budgeting and to ensure equitable, inclusive and high-quality service delivery.[27][28][29] For instance, Türkiye recorded an increase in the enrollment rates of Syrian refugee children in national education statistics.[30] Consequently, the country's latest education sector plan explicitly articulated a goal for strengthening the ECEC curriculum to be more inclusive.[31]

Additionally, data on access to ECEC can be used to map young refugee children's location in ECEC centres within host countries, to ensure the deployment and professional development of an adequate number of ECEC professionals experienced in concepts of inclusion and ways to support refugee children's needs.[32] Such data can also support the allocation of a sufficient quantity of teaching and learning materials in regions with higher enrollment rates of refugee children in order to maintain acceptable standards of quality.[33] This is also essential as limited resources may create tensions among host and refugee families if they perceive resources within ECEC settings are becoming constrained and exhausted.

Collecting data on ethnicity, origin, mother tongue and/or disability status is also key to understanding the intersecting forms of marginalization for refugee children and thus inform efforts to create an enabling environment for their integration.[34] Disaggregated data can support identifying refugee children's specific developmental needs and consequently tailoring programme design and implementation.[35][36] Disparities and gaps in the availability, level of disaggregation, quality and timeliness of data on refugee children's access to ECEC persist in European countries despite the influx of refugees arriving in the last decade.[37][38][39] Greece is one of the few countries capturing information from all refugee and migrant children regardless of their legal status, across all education levels including ECEC.[40] As data can be disaggregated by children's age, gender, region and nationality, the Ministry of Education in Greece identified lower enrollment rates among four- and five-year-old refugee and migrant children.[41] A high level of data disaggregation is crucial to highlighting disparities in access more tangibly, and achieving more targeted, equitable financing to ensure all young children participate in ECEC.

2. Adapt existing policies and standards to ensure considerations are made for the inclusion of refugee children in host community ECEC services.

Allow for flexible implementation of existing policies in contexts where refugee children are not already included in ECEC sector plans and policies.

Flexible implementation of existing policies can facilitate refugee children's access to host community ECEC services, allowing them to learn alongside and interact with host-country children. Waiving the requirement for residence permits or information documents typically necessary for ECEC enrollment can ease access barriers for refugee children, as such documents may have been lost during displacement.[47] In Finland, the government has taken measures to allow the enrollment of refugee children from Ukraine who have not yet received temporary protection or asylum status.[48] Providing families with a grace period to meet any medical enrollment mandates, such as vaccines or medical examinations, can also enable refugee children's enrollment in ECEC. In France, children are allowed to enroll in ECEC before formally meeting medical mandates, but they are required to meet them within a specified time frame.[49] Additionally, several host countries have begun relaxing child-to-educator ratios to allow for larger groups within ECEC classrooms, creating additional spaces for refugee children to learn and play with host-community children.[ii] [50] However, such measures should be considered temporary to address the urgent demand for ECEC while expansion efforts are under way, [iii] as large class sizes compromise the quality of pedagogy and teacher-child interactions.

[ii] *These countries include Moldova, Romania, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary.*
[iii] *For recommendations on ways to rapidly expand ECEC services, please refer to this brief.*

Include refugees in the early childhood care and education sector policies and plans.

Including refugee children systematically in national development and education and childcare sector plans, which often is a shared responsibility across ministries, is the most sustainable path to ensuring relevant systems are inclusive.[42] In Chad, the government is committed to educating refugee and local children together and has therefore included refugees in their national education sector plan.[43] The plan establishes the goal of building more learning spaces to increase the number of refugee children who can access national education services.[44]

Inclusion in education sector and childcare planning can also contribute to reducing financial constraints which often hinder refugee children's access to ECEC in host countries. Most parents in Europe must pay fees for ECEC services, which is a barrier to enrollment for more than one third of preschool-aged children.[45] National governments and municipalities must ensure their respective budgets prioritize vulnerable groups, including refugee children and marginalized children from the host community, to increase their inclusion in national ECEC services. This can be done through the establishment of coordinating bodies that oversee ECEC funding and spending at the country level and work in collaboration with health and child protection sectors for cross-sectoral planning and budgeting.[46]

Easing strict hiring policies can also encourage qualified candidates from the refugee community to enter the workforce, supporting its diversification. Taking steps towards making the workforce more inclusive is beneficial as educators from the refugee community can provide diversification in the culture and languages used in ECEC centres, reflecting the diversity of the young learners.[51] [52] Refugee children's sense of familiarity with educators from the same background can also give them a sense of safety which contributes to social cohesion.[53] [54] Governments should therefore ease pathways for teacher accreditation and hiring, and recognize foreign degrees to allow refugee educators to enter the ECEC workforce in host countries. Governments can also loosen requirements that may hinder the hiring of educators from the refugee community. For example, Lithuania has loosened the need for ECEC educators to have knowledge of the local language.[55]

In instances where such flexibility in policies is difficult to implement, host governments and municipalities can leverage strategic partnerships to facilitate refugee children's inclusion in ECEC settings. For example, partnering with the ministry of health to facilitate the vaccination of refugee children can support overcoming formal vaccination mandates for ECEC enrollment, which is common among several host countries and has hindered refugee children's enrollment in ECEC services.[56] Host governments and municipalities can also partner with development or private actors, such as non-governmental organizations or universities, to provide ECEC educators from the refugee community with the necessary professional development, supporting their entry into the workforce in the host community.[57] Additionally, in humanitarian contexts and in cases where the ECEC workforce needs to be rapidly trained, digital learning approaches can be capitalized on due to their flexibility, wider outreach and capacity to provide more frequent interaction than in-person approaches.[58] For instance, UNICEF's Learning Passport, which is available in Ukrainian, provides digestible, digital professional development courses aligned with national curriculums and teacher training standards.[59]

3. Deliver flexible, holistic and complementary formal and non-formal ECEC programmes that are linked to national and municipal reforms and plans, and are responsive to the needs of refugee children and their families

Inclusive, flexible non-formal programmes can also support the integration of refugee children in host communities. Given that access to formal ECEC is not yet universal in many host countries,[60] non-formal programmes can enroll refugee and host-community children, giving them a space to learn, play and interact with one another. Participation of both groups in non-formal programmes can contribute to social cohesion by providing children and their families with opportunities to build social networks and engage with one another.[61] Even in cases where children from refugee and host communities are not learning together in non-formal programmes, their flexibility can facilitate the later integration of refugee children into the formal ECEC system. For example, facilitators within non-formal ECEC programmes tend to have more flexibility to adjust their pedagogical practices and tailor them to the needs and routines of refugee children.[62] This can facilitate refugee children's eventual transition into the formal pre-primary or primary education system within the host community.[63]

Formal and non-formal ECEC programmes should be holistic, integrating multiple services to address the diverse needs of refugee children.[64] Ensuring relevant social and child protection services are systematically included in ECEC services is crucial, as addressing the holistic needs of refugee children is integral to their feelings of safety and security,[65] which contributes to their belonging and social cohesion in the host community.[66] Countries should link and situate ECEC programmes within, or near, existing services that refugee families are likely to attend such as health clinics or community-based information centres to ensure they have access to services that are supportive of children's developmental needs.[67] This can include delivering complementary, wrap-around services such as parenting support, provision of timely information, health and development monitoring, access to nutritious meals, and referrals to specialized psychosocial support services for families and children in need to overcome signs of distress and trauma.[68 iv]

iv *Such services have been provided in the United States, Canada, Norway and other countries.*

4. Develop and strengthen the capacity of the ECEC workforce to better support the inclusion of refugee children and their families in ECEC settings and communities.

The ECEC workforce plays a fundamental role in responding to children's learning, social and emotional needs in situations of war and displacement.[69] It is therefore crucial to ensure educators have the skills to support the integration of refugee children and their families in host communities, and make them feel that the context to which they have arrived is one where they are valued alongside their peers and can safely settle in.[70] As such, host countries must provide an array of professional development activities to support the ECEC workforce – from both the refugee and host communities – to support integration and social cohesion.

Professional development programmes on teaching the host country language(s) are imperative to support refugee children's acquisition of the host country language(s).

Governments should prioritize short-term and medium-term strategies to ensure ECEC settings are prepared to enable host country language acquisition while building on children's mother tongue. In the short-term, host governments can provide Ukrainian ECEC professionals with language courses and resources to gain knowledge of the local language and act as linguistic bridges between refugee children and their families, and children from host communities and their families.[71][72] This is essential as most European host countries lack ECEC staff with knowledge of the Ukrainian language, and consequently are unable to communicate with and successfully support refugee children and their families.[v][73] In the medium-term, governments and municipalities should provide the host country ECEC workforce with professional development on pedagogical approaches to teach a new language and manage a classroom with learners who don't speak the host country language.[74] In many contexts, the host country's language must be taught as a second language to children for the first time, and the ECEC workforce will need support to achieve this. Supporting children to develop new language skills is particularly relevant in the early years due to children's ability to rapidly acquire a new language, which is positively associated with exposure to rich vocabulary environments that are present in high-quality peer-to-peer and teacher-child interactions in ECEC settings.[75][76] Creating a rich, multilingual classroom environment can facilitate refugee children's communication with non-refugee children, supporting their integration and sense of belonging.[77]

[v] *Evidence is derived from a recent situation analysis of ECEC services in support of Ukrainian refugees across European Union member states.*

Multilingual classrooms also positively impact the integration of refugee caregivers. For instance, in Germany, a study using longitudinal data from a survey on refugees who arrived between 2013 and 2016 found refugee children's ECEC attendance indirectly improved parents' proficiency in German, especially for mothers. The authors indicated this could be related to a higher exposure to the language when dropping off and picking up their children from daycare centres and kindergartens.[78] The effect was also significant for caregivers' perceived probability of future employment in Germany, contributing towards a stronger feeling of social inclusion in the host community.[79]

Professional development programmes on strategies to engage refugee and host families to promote integration and social cohesion in host communities are also beneficial.

Guidance on how to promote social cohesion should be provided to ensure ECEC settings are welcoming and inclusive spaces where the cultures and languages of all children and families are seen as assets and respected.[80] Professional development programmes should include practical examples of classroom activities to encourage tolerance, conflict resolution, and openness to multiple perspectives and life experiences in an inclusive and non-discriminatory manner.[81] The WillkommensKITAs professional development programme in Germany has been successful in supporting the workforce to ensure ECEC centres value diversity and are welcoming and inclusive spaces for all children.[82] ECEC professionals from 74 daycare centres, kindergartens and after-school care centres in Saxony state receive three years of professional development support in the form of on-site coaching to acquire pedagogical strategies, plan learning activities and develop classroom materials that can facilitate integration. The programme also supports the workforce to analyse their own practices to be more aware of individual biases and stereotypes towards children and families from diverse cultural and social backgrounds.[83]

The ECEC workforce, and other professionals in contact with refugees at reception centres or health services, should also be prepared to provide refugee families with timely and reliable information about the host country's education and care system. This is essential to facilitate integration as refugee families may be reluctant to enroll their children in ECEC due to a lack of knowledge about the system, or due to concerns regarding how enrollment may affect their possibilities of returning to their countries of origin.[84] The ECEC workforce also needs support on how to plan and organize community engagement activities that bring refugee and host-country caregivers together. These can include helping to plan curricular and extracurricular activities, supporting fundraising for ECEC centres, donating time to improve facilities, or sharing skills, language and cultural traditions in the classroom.[85][86] Finding common goals, aspirations and expectations for their children can foster social cohesion between families from diverse backgrounds.

Professional development programmes on psychosocial support are also essential to support the workforce in effectively responding to children's and caregivers' socio-emotional needs.

Host countries should prioritize professional development programmes that equip the ECEC workforce with competencies to support refugee children and their families in coping with traumatic experiences and prolonged stress.[87] This is essential as only 20 per cent of pre-service and in-service teacher professional development programmes were found to prepare educators on how to provide psychosocial support to children with migration and/or displacement backgrounds.[vi][88] The sudden influx of refugees from Ukraine into host countries has highlighted that this lack of expertise is not only among educators, but also among other professionals working closely with young children, namely psychologists and daycare staff.[89] These programmes should help ECEC professionals adapt their pedagogies to be trauma-informed and responsive to the multiple needs of young children.

[vi] *Evidence comes from a review of 105 pre-service and in-service teacher professional development programmes in 49 countries.*

For example, following the Ukraine crisis, the International Step by Step Association developed a resource package for ECEC practitioners on psychological first aid and trauma-informed practices. The aim of the package is to build the workforce's capacity to identify and address signs of distress among young children and better communicate with refugee families without doing them any harm.[90] This also calls for the need for close collaboration with other sectors beyond education and care – such as health and social protection – to prepare the ECEC workforce to know how and when to refer children and their caregivers to other services according to their specific psychosocial needs.[91] Such professional development courses enable ECEC settings to become safe environments that refugee families feel comfortable to send their children to, which consequently supports their inclusion in host community ECEC services.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The integration of young refugee children and their families into host communities should be a comprehensive, system-wide approach within the ECEC response to the Ukraine crisis and to other refugee and migrant responses in the future. ECEC is uniquely positioned to contribute towards this integration as it is often the first point of contact for refugee families and children with the host community. This integration can be achieved using four main strategies, including:

1) the systematic integration of refugee children in education sector plans, legislation and data systems, to allow for sufficient budget allocations, implementation of relevant policies, and the monitoring and tracking of refugee children's needs;

2) allowing flexibility in the implementation of existing policies in contexts where refugees are not included in education sector plans and legislation, to support their enrollment in host country ECEC services where they are able to learn alongside and integrate with host-community children;

3) delivering flexible, holistic formal and non-formal programmes that are responsive to the holistic needs of refugee children and their families; and

4) investing in and providing professional development opportunities to the ECEC workforce so that they can provide the necessary support for young refugee children who have faced trauma, and bridge language and cultural gaps between the host and refugee communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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UNICEF Europe and Central Asia works with and for children and adolescents across 22 countries and territories in which we have country programmes. We also respond to the needs of refugee and migrant women and children in Austria, Germany, Greece and Italy, and engage with institutions across many more countries to uphold the rights of children. Since the outbreak of war, UNICEF has scaled up and expanded its humanitarian response for children in Ukraine and 19 refugee-receiving countries including Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

For any queries about this brief, please reach out to:
1. Ivelina Borisova, Regional Adviser Early Child Development - UNICEF ECARO at iborisova@unicef.org
2. Ghalia Ghawi, Research Specialist - UNICEF Innocenti at gghawi@unicef.org