

Photo © Nikola Stachova  
Play and Learning Hub in Presov, Slovakia

# Young refugee and migrant children and their families

When you pay attention to the beginning of the story, you can change the whole story<sup>1</sup>

The early years of life are a time of great opportunity, but also of considerable risk due to rapid brain development. The quality of children's early experiences makes a critical difference as their brains develop.<sup>2</sup> Science tells us that the absence of responsive caregiving due to exposure to extreme stressors such as persistent fear and violence, combined with poverty – circumstances often experienced by migrant, including refugee, children – can have tragic consequences for children's development.<sup>3</sup> Access to quality pre- and post-natal health care for pregnant women and newborns is crucial for guaranteeing their immediate physical and psychological well-being and for later outcomes in adult life. That access is not guaranteed, however.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, international and internal displacement of families with young children across Europe has increased. In 2021, 24,147 children arrived in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, and Spain, following the Western Mediterranean and Northwest African maritime route or the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans routes. The number

1 Raffi Cavoukian, Canadian singer-songwriter and author of Armenian descent born in Egypt, best known for his children's music.

2 National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). "Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships: Working Paper No. 1." Retrieved from [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)

3 National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2012). "The Science of Neglect: The Persistent Absence of Responsive Care Disrupts the Developing Brain: Working Paper 12". <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

4 PICUM, 2016, [The Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights of Undocumented Migrants](#)

44% higher compared to 2020 (16,700 children).<sup>5</sup> In 2021, 71% of the children were unaccompanied or separated from their families. Since February 2022, as a consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, more than 8.1 million people have fled Ukraine to neighbouring countries,<sup>6</sup> 90% of whom are women and children.<sup>7</sup> Millions more people (around 6.3 million) have been internally displaced or are trapped within Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> Severe and lasting psychological after-effects have been extensively documented among forcibly displaced people, including children. According to estimates, 22% of conflict-affected people suffer from a mental health disorder.<sup>9</sup> For young children and their primary caregivers, the provision of psychosocial support and child protection services is vital. To recover their well-being, they need to feel safe again, have their basic needs met, and be able to access social and community support. Governments have an essential role in fostering a welcoming environment for young refugees and migrants by offering inclusive early childhood development (ECD) services.

Some children are undocumented, i.e., do not have a regular residence status, either because they (or their parents) lost a status, because they never had one or because they were born to undocumented parents. Undocumented children in Europe are vulnerable to harm due to the negative effects of current migration policies. Their irregular migration status impacts their psycho-social development, increases the possibility that they experience poverty, social isolation, immigration detention (which is always a child rights violation), and exposes them to pushbacks at and within EU borders, deportation, homelessness, and child-unfriendly justice systems.<sup>10</sup> It is not known how many children living in Europe are undocumented, but some national estimates exist. For example, between 190,000 and 241,000 undocumented children were estimated to live in the UK in 2017,<sup>11</sup> and 55,327 children aged 0–4 were undocumented in Spain in 2019.<sup>12</sup>

The available data shows that refugee children and children with a migrant background, in Europe, are at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion. In 2022, 32.8% of children whose parents were born outside their country of residence lived at risk of poverty,<sup>13</sup> as did 37.2% of children whose parents have a foreign nationality. This is two to three times higher than their peers. They are also more likely to leave school or training early and are more likely to be guided towards vocational training despite their individual capabilities or interests. This has an impact on their pathways to job success later in life.

Even though children with a migrant background are still twice as likely to live in poverty

5 Data on arrivals is partial due to the large scale of irregular movements. The data reflects both sea and land arrivals in Greece, and sea arrivals in Cyprus, Italy, Malta and Spain. Data for Spain is based on the Ministry of Interior's statistics and UNHCR's estimates. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/94351>

6 Operational Data Portal / Ukraine Refugee Situation, available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

7 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Regional Bureau for Europe (July 2022), "Lives on Hold: Profiles and intentions of refugees from Ukraine", UNHCR RBE, Geneva

8 UNHCR's 2022 Mid-Year Trends report, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/mid-year-trends-2022>

9 Charlson, F., van Ommeren, M., Flaxman, A., Cornett, J., Whiteford, H., & Saxena, S. (2019). "New WHO prevalence estimates of mental disorders in conflict settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis." *The Lancet*, 394(10194), 240–248. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(19\)30934-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(19)30934-1)

10 PICUM, 2021, "Navigating Irregularity: the impact of growing up undocumented in Europe"

11 [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/final\\_londons\\_children\\_and\\_young\\_people\\_who\\_are\\_not\\_british\\_citizens.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/final_londons_children_and_young_people_who_are_not_british_citizens.pdf)

12 [https://www.savethechildren.es/sites/default/files/2021-02/Crecer\\_sin\\_papeles\\_en\\_Espana\\_SC\\_PC.pdf](https://www.savethechildren.es/sites/default/files/2021-02/Crecer_sin_papeles_en_Espana_SC_PC.pdf)

13 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC\\_LI33/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_LI33/default/table?lang=en)

as their peers, they receive less government support when support measures depend on the child's or parental residence status. For example, many countries promote access to early childhood education and care through tax cuts and income-based admission fees, which families with irregular status cannot benefit from.<sup>14</sup> Many migrant and refugee women (who are undocumented) are unable to access maternal healthcare due to: high out-of-pocket payments and lack of free-of-charge or subsidised services; lack of adequate information and language barriers; and fear of being reported to immigration authorities.

Children and families in migration have difficulties in accessing secure residence permits, simply because there are too few ways for them to regularise. For example, only 10 EU Member States<sup>15</sup> propose ways for undocumented, formerly unaccompanied children to regularise their stay. If pathways exist, they are rarely designed with children and young people in mind.

## Recommendations

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE EU AND COUNTRY LEVEL

#### ► LEVERAGING THE EUROPEAN CHILD GUARANTEE POLICY OPPORTUNITY

Member States should pay specific attention to young refugee and migrant children and their families as part of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. This includes developing targeted interventions to ensure young refugee and migrant children's access to quality early childhood development services, early learning opportunities, housing, and nutrition, irrespective of their migration status. Member States should guarantee universal access to maternal, newborn and child healthcare, and

parent-friendly care provisions through their Child Guarantee National Action Plans.

#### ► PRIORITISING THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN IN ACHIEVING THE BARCELONA TARGETS

The EU should continuously call on Member States to introduce and implement ambitious national plans aiming at improving access to and quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, prioritising the most vulnerable children, including refugees and migrants, irrespective of their residence status.

<sup>14</sup> PICUM, 2023, [Access to early childhood education and care for undocumented children and families: obstacles and promising practices](#)

<sup>15</sup> [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-11/EMN\\_INFORM\\_Transition-minors-adulthood\\_final.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-11/EMN_INFORM_Transition-minors-adulthood_final.pdf)

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AT THE EU AND COUNTRY LEVEL (continued)

### ► PROTECT ALL CHILDREN FROM VIOLENCE, IRRESPECTIVE OF THEIR RESIDENCE STATUS

The EU should champion policies and practices that prevent violence by, amongst others, committing to adopt and support policies that end the practice of child detention in line with the [Global Compact on Migration](#). The European Parliament must play a key role in negotiating migration laws that safeguard children from harm, including by incorporating *best interests of the child* procedures in all EU migration-related legislation and policies.

### ► PRIORITISE EARLY LEARNING ALONGSIDE SAFETY AND SECURITY, PROVIDING EASY ACCESS TO A VARIETY OF RESPONSIVE AND QUALITY SERVICES<sup>16</sup>

In the context of a humanitarian crisis that affects Europe, the EU should ensure that alongside the provision of immediate and humanitarian support, all young refugee children (including undocumented) are provided with easy access to different types of early childhood services across sectors – formal, non-formal or informal – aligned with their needs, to ensure their psychological well-being and long-term inclusion in host societies. They should ensure that by creating easy access to services, the quality of the services is not compromised, and that coordination across services is in place for effective outcomes in terms of social inclusion.

### ► FAMILY SUPPORT WITH RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY

Member States should ensure that cross-sectorial early childhood systems provide family and parenting support services that promote multiculturalism, respect for diversity, and social justice, with special attention to the specific needs of migrants, including refugees. Involving families in decision-making processes regarding the type of services and programmes that are relevant to them and support effective social inclusion. These systems should strengthen migrant and refugee parents' and caregivers' capacities to sustain children's learning and development in their new environment.

### ► DATA-INFORMED SYSTEMS

The EU should increase funding and build a comprehensive data system to collect and monitor data on refugee and migrant young children and their caregivers, including attendance/access to ECD-related services, living conditions, needs, access barriers, etc. There is currently no comprehensive data at the European level that could inform policymaking. When carried out, data collection should not transcend the right to safety, security and protection of refugee and migrant young children and their caregivers.

<sup>16</sup> Additional recommendations can be found at "How the youngest children are left behind in humanitarian response", available at: [https://movingmindsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/mma\\_factsheet-01\\_how-the-youngest-children-are-left-behind.pdf](https://movingmindsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/mma_factsheet-01_how-the-youngest-children-are-left-behind.pdf)

## SNAPSHOT OF EU POLICIES ADDRESSING YOUNG MIGRANT CHILDREN, INCLUDING REFUGEES

There is no formal legal definition of “international migrant”, but the IOM states that it is “someone who changes his or her country of usual residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status.” Children fleeing conflict, persecution and violence can seek refugee protection under the 1951 UN Geneva Refugee Convention,<sup>17</sup> its subsequent Protocol,<sup>18</sup> and other international instruments. The 1951 Convention provides the internationally recognised definition of a refugee and outlines the (minimal) legal protection, rights and assistance a refugee is entitled to receive. The EU has developed a separate legal and policy framework outlining the rights, duties, policies and processes that migrants (including refugees) experience.<sup>19</sup>

Article 3 (1) of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Article 24 (2) of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights provides that, in all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, **the child’s best interests must be a primary consideration**. Both documents refer to all children, irrespective of their immigration status (non-discrimination principle) and set the basis for the promotion and protection of their rights, including the right to safety, protection, health, education and play.

Nevertheless, protecting the rights of migrant children, including refugees, remains an ongoing challenge and a long-term commitment. Action in this area is guided by the Council of Europe’s Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027), the implementation of which is overseen by the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF).

### ► European Commission’s Communication on the Protection of Children in Migration

In 2017, the European Commission (EC) issued the **Communication on the Protection of Children in Migration** as the first comprehensive policy approach to protect all children in migration.

The Communication calls on the EU and its Member States to: step up efforts to address unsafe migration and protect children along migratory routes; ensure swift and comprehensive identification and protection; provide adequate reception in the EU (including through family-based and community-based care for unaccompanied and separated children); ensure swift and effective access to status determination procedures; and ensure durable solutions, such as integration in a Member State, returning to the country of origin, resettlement or reunification with family members in a third country. Best-interests determination should be carried out in all cases. The Council Conclusions on the protection of children in migration (June 2017) encourage Member States to take or implement actions, as appropriate, to protect children at all stages of migration, building on the Commission Communication on the protection of children in migration, and report on the implementation of these actions.

### ► The EU Child Guarantee

In the Council Recommendation of June 14, 2021, establishing the EU Child Guarantee, refugee and migrant children irrespective of their status are mentioned as one of the groups of children in need that should be taken into consideration by Member States when designing national integrated measures, and when referring to access to early childhood education. Under principle 11 on Childcare and support to children, the Recommendation clearly states that “*Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) of good quality*” and “*Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds (including refugees and migrants) have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.*”

<sup>17</sup> The 1951 Refugee Convention, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention>

<sup>18</sup> Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/28185>

<sup>19</sup> This includes both the so-called regular and irregular migration policy frameworks.

### ► European Parliament Resolution on the protection of children in migration

In May 2018, the European Parliament adopted a **Resolution on the protection of children in migration**, setting out a number of recommendations. These are related to non-discrimination, funding, and the use of infringement proceedings against Member States which violate children's rights through immigration detention.

### ► The Council Recommendation on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030

Most recently, the Barcelona targets for 2030 encourage Member States to increase participation in ECEC services, and to adopt targeted measures to increase access to quality ECEC for the most disadvantaged children, including refugee and migrant children. The focus on quality, inclusive and non-segregated ECEC in the revised Barcelona targets is particularly welcome. So far, exclusion and low-quality services have significantly hindered participation in ECEC, with lower enrolment rates for refugee and migrant children.

## EU Humanitarian Response to the war in Ukraine

Activated for the first time in history and unanimously by EU Member states, the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)<sup>20</sup> allows the EU to provide immediate protection to people fleeing Russian aggression against Ukraine (including third-country nationals who were residing permanently in Ukraine when the war broke out). It complements such protection with a comprehensive and harmonised set of rights, including residency rights, suitable accommodation, access to education and training, healthcare, and the labour market.

- Young children from Ukraine arriving in the EU should have swift access to their rights, without discrimination, including the necessary psychological support, healthcare, and access to early childhood education. It is important that they are immediately registered upon arrival to avoid falling under the radar.
- Particular attention must be given to unaccompanied children, and family tracing must be a priority. Temporary protection has already been extended until March 2024.

Today, some four million people enjoy temporary protection in the EU. Of these 47% are women, and over one-third are children, whose protection remains a critical priority. Around 69% of the displaced children were under 13 years of age and 0.5% were registered as unaccompanied minors. At the end of 2022, almost half of the total current beneficiaries of temporary protection were hosted in Germany and Poland, followed by Czech Republic, Italy, and Spain.

ECEC systems across Europe have successfully integrated children fleeing Ukraine into their services at varying levels since their arrival in the spring of 2022.<sup>21</sup> At the beginning of 2023, Poland reported that an estimated 50% of children aged 0–6 were engaged in some form of ECEC. Good enrolment rates were also reported in the Czech Republic, where the percentage of ECEC-aged children enrolled in ECEC had increased from 19.1% in the school year 2021/22 to 34% in the school year 2022/23. Furthermore, a government-backed study of people with TPD-status in Germany (n=11,225), which was published in December 2022, estimated enrolment rates in KITA facilities (various forms of childcare, including nurseries, preschool and after-school centres) to be 22% for children aged 0–3, and 49% for children aged 3–6.

20 Temporary protection for those fleeing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: one year on Ukraine Refugee Response Plan – January–December 2023', available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/97958>

21 Situation analysis of early childhood education and care services in support of Ukrainian refugees across EU Member States – Cycle 2 Synthesis Report, Ecorys (June 2023) <https://www.ecorys.com/moldova/our-work/monitoring-provision-early-childhood-and-care-eccec-services-ukrainian-refugee>

## NATIONAL POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES SUPPORTING YOUNG MIGRANT CHILDREN AND THEIR CAREGIVERS

### PORTUGAL

#### KINDERGARTEN ESPAÇO A CRIANÇA AND CHILDCARE FREE FOR ALL CHILDREN IN PORTUGAL

The Portuguese Refugee Council (CPR) runs the nursery/kindergarten, Espaço a Criança. Children who attend are Portuguese nationals, immigrants or asylum seekers and refugees, including resettled refugees. The preschool provides a safe space in which children from different backgrounds can socialise. It also enables refugee parents to connect with other parents from various backgrounds. This project, inaugurated in 2007, was designed to promote diversity and support interaction between refugees and the local community. It was conceptualised by conducting participatory assessments with the local population and refugees. In 2018, the kindergarten was awarded an “Intercultural Stamp” by the National Education Directorate, the High Commissioner for Migration, and the Aga Khan Foundation. The Stamp is intended to distinguish entities that promote diversity and inclusion through educational projects.

In July 2022, the Portuguese government passed an order giving free childcare provision at crèches for children up to the age of three, alongside the free preschool services they could already access.<sup>22</sup> This free childcare includes “food, hygiene, educational, recreational and motor-skills activities, registration, insurance and after-hours care.” The reform has been introduced gradually: all children born after 1 September 2021 (including those who are undocumented) benefit from free childcare. That means that in September 2023, children up to two years old will have access to free childcare. By September 2024, all children who will be of the age to attend childcare in Portugal will benefit. Although low-income families were already exempt from paying an income-based childcare fee, this reform removes the bureaucratic hurdles that families needed to jump to prove their income. For undocumented parents who cannot provide proof of (low) income, this reform makes an important improvement: making crèches free and more accessible to their children.

### GERMANY

#### A FLYING START - PROMOTING THE WELL-BEING AND DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG REFUGEE CHILDREN

In 2016, with partners and UNICEF ECARO, ISSA contributed to the development of a toolbox and training package for managers, child protection coordinators and trainers of staff working in refugee reception centres in Germany. The resources were disseminated by the German Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and were used in 100 refugee centres across Germany. The training package and the toolbox focus on child-friendly spaces, early learning and playgroups, mother/father and baby groups and after-school support with a special focus on respect for diversity. Training of trainers to further spread tools and knowledge was also provided.

*“EU Member States should pay specific attention to young refugee and migrant children and their families.”*

<sup>22</sup> <https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Access-to-Early-Childhood-Education-and-Care-for-Undocumented-Children-and-Families.pdf>

**CHILDREN FIRST**

One in five children in Ghent are born into a deprived family. The city government wanted to ensure that no child has to live in poverty. The [‘Children First’ programme](#) aims to reach families not served by regular social welfare services. The city works towards a better future for children through early intervention and ensuring access to basic universal services. The primary audience is people with preschool children. There are walk-in teams in disadvantaged areas that organise free activities for parents and children, such as parent groups, playgroups, excursions, and information sessions. Additionally, the Houses of the Child ([Huis van het Kind](#)) unite local networks of public and private organisations that work with parents. In these houses, families can find educational support, childcare, health, social assistance, and youth services. While the Houses of the Child assists all types of families, the small walk-in centres really focus on those who are most vulnerable. Furthermore, the government provides a living wage for the poorest households.

In addition to that, since 1997, the Department of Education of the city of Ghent has worked with [school mediators](#) (*brugfiguren* or “bridging figures”) to improve the relationships between schools, families and neighbourhoods, especially in those with a larger proportion of marginalised and/or excluded groups. Over the years, school mediators have become strong partners in parental engagement, communication, and care policy in the educational system in Ghent. They have proven to be successful in building positive relationships between parents and schools and promoting equal opportunities for all children (aged between 2.5 and 12 years old). This has happened for many reasons: school mediators consider all parents, regardless of their background and connect them to opportunities in the district and with networks outside the district; they increase the confidence of parents in the school and in that sense, help to secure the greater well-being of children; and they bridge the gap between home and school and manage the respective expectations. Bridging figures are unique because they operate from the inside of a school (and are therefore familiar with the character of the school, policies, and expectations) but help to open the school up to external organisations and other perspectives (both for parents and for non-educational partners).

## RESPONSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVES DURING THE INFLUX OF PEOPLE FLEEING UKRAINE

### CAPACITY-BUILDING PROGRAMME FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE ON PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST-AID AND TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

The humanitarian crisis in Ukraine has brought to the surface a critical knowledge and skills gap in the early childhood workforce capacity. To fill this gap, ISSA in partnership with its member organisation Amna and War Child Holland, and with support from UNICEF ECARO, has developed and implemented a capacity-building programme focusing on Psychological First-Aid and Trauma-informed Practices to promptly respond to the high demand for capacity building among ECD professionals. Through a Training of Trainers (ToT), the aim was to bring early childhood practitioners closer to understanding the impact of war and trauma on children and their caregivers, enabling

them to use attuned practices when approaching and interacting with children in distress and equipping them with tools to protect themselves from stress and burnout. The ToT provided experienced trainers with core content to be used in training early childhood practitioners working in formal or non-formal early childhood services with children under six years of age and their caregivers, using child-responsive, play-based, and trauma-informed approaches and practices. In 2022–2023, the training was provided by ISSA to trainers from 19 countries, to be rolled out at the country level in a cascade model; 190 experienced trainers completed the training and became part of a learning community that receives ongoing technical and programme support. Moreover, a training package has been developed.

It comprises training modules, recordings, a training guide and other relevant resources for practitioners to use in their daily work with children and families affected by trauma. It has been translated into eight languages and made available to the certified trainers.

### **SETTING UP NON-FORMAL INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL SPACES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES – TOY FOR INCLUSION PLAY HUBS**

The TOY for Inclusion Play Hubs are community-based inclusive non-formal educational spaces for children and families. They include and engage young children (0–10 years old) from vulnerable minority groups and those growing up in difficult circumstances. From 2017, International Child Development Initiatives' (ICDI) partners have opened Play Hubs in 8 EU countries, reaching over 15,000 children, 6,000 parents and carers and 1,000 professionals. Between 2022 and 2023, with support from UNICEF, new Play Hubs were established in Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic to offer a safe and welcoming space for children and families coming from Ukraine while promoting their integration into welcoming societies. Staff of Play Hubs have been trained by ICDI on the pillars of the TOY for Inclusion Approach and a practical handbook on inclusive play-based activities that promote integration and healing from trauma for young children has been developed.

The Play Hubs have been successful in:

- increasing the access of children (aged 0–12) to playful learning in inclusive and high quality non-formal ECEC settings and improving their transition to schools and kindergarten.
- improving the skills of parents to provide playful learning and responsive parenting.
- increasing trust between families of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (migrant and local).
- increasing the capacity of Play Hub staff to work with migrant and refugee children and families and to support their inclusion.

### **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES IN POLAND FOR YOUNG CHILDREN FROM UKRAINE**

When the conflict in Ukraine began and thousands of Ukrainian families crossed the border to Poland, the Comenius Foundation for Child Development mobilised to initially open drop-in childcare centres next to the refugee services offices as well as create and facilitate playgroups in high-density Ukrainian communities. The ambitious target was to have 100 childcare centres, or Spynkas. Thanks to partnerships with international donors, NGOs, and local governments, the Comenius Foundation has almost reached that goal. Now, Spynkas are widespread all over the country (75 across Poland as of May 30, 2023) and they have reached out to more than 10,000 young children from Ukraine.

Spynkas are responding to the gaps in the childcare system which is unable, by itself, to respond to the needs of the increasing number of children in nurseries and preschool groups and to provide quality care for vulnerable children. But the Spynka programme provides more than just early education and care; it provides therapy and counselling services for children, parents and teachers, creating a community infrastructure to support families. At the same time, Spynkas provide reliable support to Ukrainian mothers who can rely on high-quality services and are empowered to work, to have a secure income and find purpose and dignity in their communities, choosing to return to Ukraine only when they feel ready.

The next goal for the Spynka programme is to train and certify a critical mass of educators and administrators who will be the leaders in the creation of a nationwide Ukrainian ECEC system after the war. In recent months, the work implemented by the Comenius Foundation in support of Ukrainian young children and their families has been widely recognised both in Poland and internationally. In May 2023, the Foundation received the Janusz Korczak Award, an award honouring the outstanding work of a Polish organisation leading the charge to create a better world for children.

## KEY PRIORITIES FOR ADDRESSING THE WELL-BEING OF YOUNG MIGRANTS, INCLUDING REFUGEES

### **Policy decisions based on real needs**

Develop data-collection systems to inform needs-based policy and programme decisions targeting refugee and migrant children and their caregivers at the national and local level. Data systems should also monitor the demand, supply, and quality of early childhood services (ECEC, health, social assistance, and protection, etc.) offered to refugee and migrant young children and caregivers. The provision of relevant support increases the chances of social inclusion of refugees and migrants in countries and local communities.

### **Empowerment and involvement of refugees and migrants in decision-making processes**

Create mechanisms for informing, consulting, and involving refugee and migrant families in creating inclusive health, education, and social protection services for their young children.

### **Access to and quality of services**

Ensure the quality of short-term interventions, non-formal and formal services while ensuring quick and free access to services for young refugees and migrants. Responsive and inclusive services should be set up to help young children and families integrate and transition into new environments. Such services should cover health, nutrition, education, social protection services to address the needs of children (including undocumented) and their caregivers (i.e., maternal healthcare, employment, legal advice, etc.).

### **Qualified and diverse workforce**

Provide high-quality initial education and training and continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities to the early childhood workforce while diversifying the composition of the staff is key to ensuring the quality of the service provision and to improving refugee and migrant children's access to ECEC services. The ECD workforce needs to be well-equipped with competencies to create safe and stimulating learning environments, responsive to the needs of every child, where diversity is respected and valued.

### **Learning and care matter equally in emergencies**

Include early learning and care alongside the humanitarian support in the emergency response measures and programmes at EU and country level.

Prioritising early learning and care is as important as providing young refugee and migrant children with safe and secure spaces, nutrition, and goods. A child's rounded development and learning is a right and an ongoing process that requires sustained support, even in very hostile contexts.

### **Best interest of the child and do no harm procedures**

Develop and implement “best interest” procedures to determine durable solutions for children and families that prioritise their rights. This may mean granting them permission to continue living in the country or helping them move to the country of their origin and/or to unite with family members elsewhere. Children should only be returned when a fair procedure has found it is in their best interests. Detention of children should always be avoided, as it is a harmful procedure impacting on their physical and psychological well-being.

### **Coordination across policies and services**

Refugees and low-income migrant groups of young children and their caregivers encounter multiple challenges that require coordinated policies and services. Providing safe, welcoming, multi-service environments for them is crucial to promote their psychosocial well-being while ensuring universal access to education, health, and protection.

### **Resilient early childhood systems**

Accompany short-term interventions with a mid- and long-term vision to ensure sustained support and outcomes, and to contribute to a functional and resilient eco-system of early childhood services able to respond to the specific needs of refugee and migrant young children.





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## LEAD AUTHOR

International Step by Step Association

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## THE CAMPAIGN

The **First Years First Priority** Campaign focuses on prioritising children from birth to six years, with special attention to the first 1,000 days, and is rooted in an understanding that, from the first day they are born, all children are rights holders — despite their dependency status. The Campaign advocates for more political visibility and resource allocation to early childhood, focusing especially on the most vulnerable children — such as Roma and Traveller children, children with disabilities, migrant and refugee children, children in or at risk of entering alternative care, and those living in extreme poverty. With these aims in mind, the campaign works to ensure that early childhood development (ECD) remains high on the political agenda, by building a strong community of advocates at the EU and national level.

### NATIONAL COORDINATORS OF THE CAMPAIGN:

- Bulgaria — [For Our Children Foundation and Trust for Social Achievement](#)
- Finland — [Central Union for Child Welfare](#)
- France — [Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance](#)
- Hungary — [Family, Child, Youth Association](#)
- Ireland — [Child Rights Alliance](#)
- Italy — [Centro per la Salute del Bambino \(Centre for Child Health and Development\)](#)
- Portugal — [Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso](#)
- Romania — [Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development](#)
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## THE PARTNERSHIP

First Years First Priority is a joint initiative of **Eurochild** and the **International Step by Step Association** (ISSA). We are the leading European networks representing the children's rights and the early childhood sectors. Our partnership pools our respective strengths to campaign for the prioritisation of early childhood development in public policies across Europe. The [European Public Health Alliance](#) and [Roma Education Fund](#) are associate partners.

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