



25 years for
Early Childhood
Development

Case Study on ISSA's Ukraine Response

Mind the gap: Ensuring early childhood workforce's capacity to support children in times of crisis

Recent emergencies, like the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have clearly shown how much our societies are vulnerable and exposed to risks and threats without adequate protective and coping mechanisms in place. This is also very true for the early childhood system¹ which has struggled to ensure all children have the best conditions to thrive. The early childhood workforce is one of the main players in this system and despite its pivotal role, has long suffered from a lack of adequate recognition and support. This case study highlights the responsibility of the early childhood system to create conditions which enable early childhood professionals and practitioners to be adequately prepared and equipped for their role, by looking at the endeavours of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) in strengthening the capacity of the early childhood workforce in response to the war in Ukraine.

The imperative of equipping the early childhood workforce to effectively respond to trauma

The war in Ukraine has led to an influx of young children and caregivers in situations of forced displacement within their own country and abroad and family separation—with fathers engaged on the front lines. It has also given rise to trauma due to the loss of loved ones, destruction of homes, and violence witnessed firsthand. Early childhood professionals and practitioners coming into contact with these young children and parents to support their immediate needs have often realized that they were not prepared to face such atypical situations and, although highly committed, did not have the proper instruments to adequately support their emotional and psychological needs, to help them heal from trauma and regain their well-being. The imperative to equip early childhood professionals and practitioners interacting directly with young children and caregivers affected by the war with the necessary skills and knowledge to respond effectively to those complex and diverse needs was outstanding and has become a priority for ISSA.

Key priorities identified to best support the early childhood workforce in emergencies:

- Learn from professionals and practitioners on the ground about their needs and challenges and provide tailored support.
- Enhance the social-emotional competencies of professionals and practitioners through pre- and in-service training.
- Focus on the self-care and wellbeing of professionals' and practitioners'.

Learning directly from early childhood professionals and practitioners is key to designing programs and interventions that are tailored to their **specific needs** and meaningful for them. Notwithstanding the pivotal role that the early childhood workforce plays in the daily lives of young children and their caregivers, especially those who have faced trauma and displacement, pre- and in-service training has often overlooked trauma-informed practices and approaches. **Social-emotional competencies** that have a strong component of knowledge related to trauma and distress in young children and caregivers are becoming increasingly critical nowadays, as today's many crises are proving. They are key to ensuring that children's healthy development is not hindered by adverse experiences and that children themselves learn how to cope in distressing situations.

Moreover, **self-care** has not been a focus or priority in the professional development of early childhood practitioners. Recognizing its importance is essential for sustaining a resilient workforce. Caring for those who support young children and families is a must in any environment, but even more so in emergency contexts.

“ Thanks to the training I became more attentive to ensuring sufficient rest, refraining from self-judgment, and cultivating self-compassion, especially when facing challenges. ”

Hungarian ECD professional, training evaluation, 2024

Impact of the ISSA Network (June 2022–March 2024)

- ▶ ISSA empowered 190 masters trainers from 30 organizations in 21 countries (22 of them are ISSA Members)
- ▶ Resource package created and translated into 8 languages and 3 more in progress
- ▶ 12 Peer learning and 11 coaching sessions with country teams
- ▶ The PFA training reached a critical mass. Data collected thus far in four countries confirmed:
 - 14.000 professionals and practitioners reached
 - 18.000 young children and 10.000 parents benefited from PFA support

Effectively supporting the early childhood workforce to better serve children affected by the war in Ukraine

As the leading early childhood network and learning community for Europe and Central Asia, ISSA has worked over the past 25 years to strengthen the capacity of the early childhood workforce to navigate challenges, sustain commitment, and respond to challenging contexts and crises with professionalism, empathy, and resilience. By establishing meaningful learning and collaboration across countries and by co-constructing new approaches and models with its members in Europe and Central Asia, the ISSA network has not only supported the development of a competent workforce, but also contributed to building competent early childhood systems for all children.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, ISSA has drawn on existing expertise and experience at both the country and network levels to develop a strategic, holistic and proactive approach to address the competence gaps within the early childhood workforce. This has consisted of the following strategic steps:

1. NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Providing the best possible support to ECEC professionals requires first learning about their needs, their experiences, and the challenges they encounter. Only then can the support provided be sharply defined and most effective.

Before designing any interventions, ISSA held bilateral and group consultations with its members in Ukraine and in the neighboring countries to learn from them about the concrete challenges faced by early childhood professionals and practitioners working with internally displaced and refugee young

children and parents, as well as their immediate and long-term needs. Data collected indicated an acute need for learning how to properly approach and interact with children and families in distress,, as well as the types of activities that can best support them in overcoming feelings, memories and experiences that may have been stressful or harmful.

2. RELEVANT TRAINING

Capacity-building programs must be tailored and responsive to the needs of the target groups identified: workforce, young children, and caregivers.

Noticing the competence gap of professionals working directly with children affected by the war in Ukraine, ISSA, in collaboration with War Child Holland and Amna, developed a comprehensive training program, *Foundational Training on Psychological First Aid and trauma-informed practices with young children and their caregivers*, focused on psychological first aid (PFA), trauma-informed interventions, resilience-building, and self-care. The training provided new knowledge and evidence-based practices for supporting young children and families affected by trauma and displacement, to counterbalance the negative effects on child development and well-being while addressing the self-care needs of frontline professionals and practitioners. The training followed a cascade model: master trainers from several countries were empowered to roll out the training and enable essential skills and knowledge within their communities.

3. RESOURCE PACKAGE IN MULTIPLE LANGUAGES

Ready and easy-to-use materials are a cornerstone for early childhood professionals and practitioners in their daily work with young children and caregivers. Providing relevant and practical resources in the languages spoken by professionals greatly supports the early childhood workforce in making the new knowledge their own.

In the case of the PFA training, ISSA developed a resource package to accompany the training and has so far translated it into eight languages and uploaded it to an online password-protected platform. The package consists of PowerPoint presentations, recordings from training sessions, a training guide, manuals and activity cards specifically aimed at early childhood professionals and practitioners in their daily practice and allows for contextualization and for leveraging existing expertise at the country level. In addition, ISSA Members in countries developed country-specific platforms providing the workforce with a virtual space for continuous peer learning (platforms continuously updated with additional resources), particularly valuable for those working in challenging environments.



“ I applied for the training because I wanted to provide meaningful help to children and families in emergencies. The PFA training is bridging a gap in the competencies of ECD professionals. The “Do no harm” concept is something that stays with me and guides any action I take. ”

Hungarian trainer, Peer learning session, 2023

4. PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Building a resilient early childhood workforce relies on providing belonging, supportive and safe environments for professionals and practitioners to share and learn, where they feel valued, appreciated, supported and recognized for their professionalism.

ISSA provided continuous follow-up support and coaching to professionals trained, particularly to those living in high-stress environments. The cross-country learning exchange sessions where teams of trainers and ISSA Members shared experiences, learned from one another, and discussed strategies for addressing the emerging needs of young children and families served as valuable platforms for collaboration and peer support. They enabled practitioners to reflect and enhance their skills and knowledge, while at the same time building supportive relationships and a sense of belonging and resilience among trainers and practitioners and within the ISSA network.

5. CONSTANT LEARNING ABOUT EMERGING NEEDS

Staying flexible and responsive to the evolving needs of the workforce ensures relevant and impactful interventions and programs.

To enhance the effectiveness of the ISSA network response, ISSA Members in countries have continuously identified emerging priorities to be addressed. These include issues related to discrimination, inclusion, and diversity; adopting flexible formats to enable access and participation in training programs; developing additional and contextualised resources for work with specific target groups or in specific environments (for example with parents on the move or while in the shelters).

Persisting challenges

While enhancing the competencies of early childhood professionals and practitioners working on issues related to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, several challenges persist. Understanding these challenges is crucial for providing effective and long-term support.

▶ Limited and restricted resources

One of the primary challenges is the scarcity of resources, including financial constraints for rolling out training programs at country level, and project-bound funding with scarce flexibility. These limitations may restrict the implementation of comprehensive training programs and support initiatives, hindering the capacity-building efforts of grassroots organizations, such as ISSA Members and regional networks who are able to swiftly mobilize knowledge and operational resources.

▶ Enduring impact of crisis

The protracted nature of crises such as the war in Ukraine poses enduring challenges for the early childhood workforce. Sustained exposure to conflict-related trauma and displacement can exacerbate stress and burnout among practitioners, necessitating the development of ongoing support mechanisms to build resilience and maintain mental health and well-being. At the same time, developing the appropriate sensitivity to interact with young children and families who might have experienced the loss of family members and/or have to adapt to a new reality created by the war is highly needed.

▶ Biased attitudes

Prejudices and stereotypes present significant barriers to effective support for young children and families. Assumptions based on nationality, ethnicity, legal status, gender, and disability can influence the way early childhood professionals and practitioners approach young children and deliver services. The lens adopted can lead to the perpetuation of inequality without considering the “100 languages”² children speak and the richness of their potential. Specific interventions that promote inclusivity, respect for diversity and recognition of multiple identities are extremely needed to overcome personal and professional attitudes.

▶ Lack of integrated approaches

Children’s development in the early years requires a 360° view regarding the policies, services and programs that address young children and their caregivers, where a wide range of early childhood workforce practitioners is involved. Even in peaceful times, such complexity brings many challenges in terms of ensuring effective coordination and clear distribution of responsibilities between different levels of governance and services. This is even more important in emergencies where intersectoral collaboration and coordination is highly required for addressing multilayered challenges and providing holistic support to young children and their parents.

Opportunities

The capacity-building program implemented by the ISSA network for the early childhood workforce in emergencies revealed many opportunities for greater impact which can be further leveraged at regional and country level:

► **Scaling up the program**

Integration of trauma-informed competencies into both pre-service and in-service training curricula ensures that practitioners are not only equipped with essential knowledge and skills to operate in disruptive contexts, but also that these competencies become a foundational aspect of their professional development building readiness, confidence, and effectiveness in service delivery.

► **Connecting theory and practice**

The Training of Trainers (ToT) bridges the gap between theory and practice. It underscores the importance of applying psychological first aid principles in the day-to-day interactions of practitioners, with a particular focus on recognizing and addressing signs of distress in young children, caregivers, and fellow practitioners.

► **Nurturing a culture of learning and mutual support**

Fostering a nurturing learning environment and encouraging mutual support among the early childhood workforce contributes to building resilience and significantly improving the outcomes for young children. This stands out as a critical element, especially in challenging and adverse contexts.

► **Partnerships with local communities**

Collaboration with local communities and grassroots organizations provides valuable opportunities to strengthen the early childhood workforce. By engaging community stakeholders as partners in capacity-building efforts, membership associations, like ISSA, can foster contextually relevant solutions and grassroots support networks, while at the same time ensuring that the new knowledge is ingrained in the community and professional practices, leading to sustained impact.

“ I will never forget during our first meeting how you made me feel. You made me feel that my experience is valuable. I would like to pass these feelings to the others to whom I will pass this knowledge. ”

Ukrainian trainer, Peer learning session, 2023

Closing the gap: early childhood system-level recommendations

Lessons learned from ISSA's Ukraine Response highlight the importance of investing in transformative programs that can produce shifts in the way early childhood professionals and practitioners look at themselves as professionals and as individuals operating and living in challenging contexts and times. Adopting a systemic approach to readying early childhood services, including creating conditions for the early childhood workforce to be prepared and equipped to provide adequate support to young children and families emerged as a key priority.

Concrete steps forward towards systemic change include:

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1 Ensure that early childhood professionals and practitioners can access relevant training in times of emergency or crisis. It is important to guarantee accessibility and prioritize training country accreditation and dissemination to reach a broader audience of early childhood professionals and practitioners, which facilitates widespread adoption and implementation.
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2 Foster and sustain collaboration and mutual support among professionals and practitioners to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of training initiatives. This can be done by creating spaces such as learning communities where professionals and practitioners are empowered to lead discussions, share lessons learned, insights and resources, and support each other in their work.
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3 Build bridges across sectors and services to promote holistic approaches to early childhood development support. Dismantling siloed approaches in sectors and services and encouraging professionals and practitioners to promote the vision of the eco-system around the child by collaborating across disciplines is key to ensuring a comprehensive intake and referral system.
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4 Enhance awareness and competence to ensure equity when addressing diverse needs. Incorporating social justice competency training into professional development and creating opportunities for reflective practice and dialogue on issues of diversity, equity, and identity plays a crucial role in guaranteeing all young children are provided with equal opportunities to thrive.
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5 Prioritize the well-being of the early childhood workforce. Integrating self-care and resilience components into training programs and offering concrete strategies and tools for stress management, self-regulation, and boundary setting can help prevent and manage burnout, overstress, and trauma. At the same time, encouraging the early childhood workforce to prioritize self-care as an essential aspect of professional practice can help them recognize the interconnectedness of personal well-being and effective service delivery.

Learn more

Learn more about the extensive efforts of the ISSA Network to respond to the needs of the young children and their families affected by the war in Ukraine:

- **ISSA's strategic response** encompassing five key areas of action.
- **Examples of how ISSA Members in Ukraine and neighbouring countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania and Slovakia)** mobilized to respond to early childhood needs.
- Wealth of resources and **materials tailored for professionals** working with Ukrainian children, alongside **guidance for parents and caregivers**.

Visit www.issa.nl/Support_for_Ukraine

- ¹ An early childhood system is a system of policies, services, and programs at country level supporting the holistic development of young children from birth to around 8 years old and their families. It includes formal, non-formal and informal services, public and private, across health, education, social protection sectors, that aim to nurture children's cognitive, social, emotional, mental and physical growth during their crucial early years. It involves a range of stakeholders such as parents, caregivers, the early childhood workforce, policy and decision-makers working together to create a supportive environment where children can thrive and reach their full potential.
- ² Originated from the Reggio Emilia approach to education, the '100 languages' children speak refer to the diverse ways in which children express themselves and interact with the world around them beyond verbal language: see [Reggio Children - 100 languages](#)



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