CHAVORE
Transforming young Roma children's well-being

Self-paced learning - Introduction

Welcome to CHAVORE self-paced learning on Supporting the mental health and well-being of young Roma children and their families

As an early childhood practitioner, you play a central role in nurturing the mental health and well-being of young children and their families. Early childhood is a critical period for emotional and social development, when children begin to trust, express themselves, cope with stress, and form relationships. For children growing up in vulnerable circumstances, including **Roma children**, who often face structural discrimination, poverty, and limited access to quality services, mental health challenges can emerge early and have lasting consequences. Poor mental health in early childhood is linked to reduced school readiness, lower resilience, and long-term difficulties in learning, relationships, and employment. The good news is: **supportive adults and safe, responsive environments can make a powerful differenc**e.

By investing your time in this self-paced learning experience, you are building your capacity to support the mental health and well-being of young children, promote emotional literacy, recognize early signs of distress and trauma, respond with empathy, engage with families and communities to foster environments where children feel safe, valued, and able to thrive. Even small, intentional changes in your daily practice can have a lasting impact, helping to shape a healthier future for every child.

Introduction: Course overview

This self-paced learning program is designed to support you in this important work by combining solid theoretical grounding with practical strategies you can use in your daily routines, interactions, and environments. The program is structured around **seven interconnected learning sessions**, each blending:

• **Foundational knowledge** to introduce and explain key concepts.

- **Examples from practice** to show how these ideas work in real early childhood settings.
- **Practical tools** that you can adapt and apply immediately.
- **Evaluation and reflection** to help you test your understanding and strengthen your practice.

Throughout the program, you are also invited to use a *Learning journal*. This is your space to pause, reflect, and apply what you learn through prompts, exercises, and personal notes. By recording your insights, challenges, and ideas, you will deepen your learning and create a resource you can return to as your practice grows.

Learning objectives

By the end of this course, participants will be able to:

- Understand foundational concepts in early childhood mental health and well-being, and their relevance in the context of Roma children and communities.

- Recognize the social, cultural, and systemic factors that impact children's mental health, including the role of discrimination, poverty, and marginalization.

- Apply inclusive, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive strategies to promote emotional well-being in both formal and non-formal early childhood settings.

- Strengthen collaboration with families, communities, and cross-sectoral actors to build protective environments for young children.

- Reflect on and adapt one's own practice to better support the mental health and resilience of Roma girls and boys in everyday routines, relationships, and settings.

The seven learning sessions

1.   Fostering mental health and well-being in early childhood

Understand the dimensions of early childhood mental health and the 360° well-being framework. Explore how early childhood settings can move from passive observation to proactive support, with special attention to Roma children's experiences.

2.   Emotional literacy and expression

Learn how to help children recognize, name, and express emotions through stories, games, calm corners, and reflective activities. Reflect on the role of culture, language, and gender norms in shaping emotional expression.

3. Building resilience and self-esteem

Discover how autonomy, predictable routines, and respectful communication foster resilience and self-esteem. Explore coping strategies such as mindfulness, morning circles, and persona dolls, alongside approaches that promote conflict resolution and a growth mindset.

4. Children in distress (Psychological First Aid)

Recognize signs of stress and trauma in young children and learn to apply the 3L Strategy (Look, Listen, Link). Reflect on how to work with families and professionals to provide sustained support.

5. Fostering inclusivity and embracing diversity

Explore diversity, equity, inclusion, and unconscious bias in early childhood settings. Learn how to create environments and routines that honour children's identity, voice, and agency, while advancing family engagement and gender equality.

6. Self-care

Reflect on how stress affects children, parents, and practitioners. Learn practical self-care strategies, tips, and routines, while exploring how to build resilience, prevent burnout, and model healthy coping for families and colleagues.

7. A community approach to mental health and well-being

Understand the principles of a community approach, explore enablers and barriers, and learn strategies for embedding mental health in daily practices. Case studies from Kosovo and the Balkan region, together with activity cards and reflection tools, will help you adapt ideas to your own context.

Moving forward

This program is not about adding more to your already full day. Instead, it is about weaving small, intentional actions into your routines that foster resilience, emotional safety, and inclusion. By combining knowledge with practice and using your *Learning journal* to guide reflection, you will build both confidence and capacity to support the well-being of every child and family you work with.

\ Remember: the changes you make, even in the smallest daily moments, have the power to transform children's lives and strengthen the communities around them.

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CHAVORE Self-paced Learning

Learning Session 1: Fostering Mental Health and Well-Being in Early Childhood

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Welcome to Learning Session 1: Fostering mental health and well-being in early childhood

We are excited to have you join us as we explore one of the most important foundations of early childhood development: Mental Health and Well-Being.

In this session, you will discover how early mental health is built through everyday experiences, relationships, and environments, and why fostering emotional, psychological, and social well-being from the very start is critical for children's lifelong growth and success.

This learning session is designed to be interactive, practical, and inspiring. You will find real-life examples, hands-on activities, reflection prompts, and tips you can bring into your daily practice.

Welcome and enjoy learning with us! Let's get started!

Overview of the Learning Session

This Learning Session explores the integral role of mental health and well-being in early childhood, framed by a holistic, 360-degree perspective. You will learn how early childhood settings and practitioners can become more responsive to children's emotional and psychological needs by understanding foundational concepts, reflecting on real-life practice examples, and engaging with practical tools.

In this Learning Session you will explore the following key topics and concepts:

- Defining mental health in early childhood
- Emotional needs and social/emotional learning (SEL)
- Nutrition and health as enablers of well-being
- Equity and the social determinants of health
- Specific considerations for Roma and other marginalized children

Learning objectives

By the end of this learning session, you will be able to:

- **Understand:** The foundational concepts of mental health and well-being in early childhood.
- **Identify:** Key protective and risk factors influencing children's mental well-being, including the role of early learning experiences.
- **Apply:** Practical tools and responsive strategies to promote emotional, psychological, and social development in early learning environments.

Introduction to early childhood mental health: definition and dimensions

In the earliest years of life, mental health is a powerful foundation for everything that follows, how children learn, build relationships, and experience the world. In this section, we will explore what early childhood mental health truly means: not just the absence of problems, but the presence of positive capacities that enable children to feel secure, express emotions, form strong relationships, and engage with curiosity and confidence.

We will dive into the three interconnected dimensions that shape mental well-being in young children:

- Emotional Well-Being — the ability to experience, regulate, and express a full range of emotions.
- Psychological Well-Being — the development of self-identity, agency, and cognitive curiosity.
- Social Well-Being — the capacity to form healthy relationships, cooperate, and feel a sense of belonging.

Understanding and supporting all three dimensions is critical not only for mental health, but also for children's broader growth, influencing their learning outcomes, physical health, and lifelong resilience.

To begin, let's take a closer look at how we define early childhood mental health, and why it is considered a core pillar of a child's overall well-being.

Mental health in early childhood is a core pillar of overall well-being and a decisive factor in a child's ability to grow, learn, and thrive.

It encompasses more than the absence of mental disorders, it refers to the positive developmental capacities that enable young children to feel emotionally secure, form strong relationships, and engage meaningfully with the world around them.

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Three pillars of mental health

Early childhood mental health is the foundation upon which emotional, psychological, and social well-being are built.

These three interrelated dimensions are essential for healthy development from birth to age six and are deeply shaped by the caregiving environment, early experiences, and broader social context.

Emotional Well-Being — feelings, attachments coping

Psychological Well-Being — self-concept, curiosity, confidence

Thriving Child

Social Well-Being — relationships, empathy, inclusion

Emotional well-being

This dimension refers to a child's ability to **experience, express, and regulate a range of emotions,** including joy, frustration, fear, and affection.

Emotionally well children are able to:

- **Form secure attachments** to caregivers;
- **Use appropriate coping strategies** in response to stress or conflict;
- **Develop emotional resilience** when facing everyday challenges.

Responsive caregiving plays a crucial role. When infants and toddlers **receive warm, consistent, and attuned responses from adults,** they learn to trust that their emotional needs will be met.

This nurtures a sense of safety that supports healthy brain development and the capacity to manage emotions.

Psychological well-being

This dimension involves internal processes such as the development of a sense of self, curiosity, and mastery.

It includes:

- **A child's self-concept and emerging identity;**
- **Their sense of agency and competence;**
- **The ability to concentrate, explore, and learn from their environment.**

Psychological well-being grows when children are encouraged to try new things, experience success, and develop confidence in their own abilities.

It is especially supported by safe, predictable environments and emotionally available caregivers who scaffold learning and independence.

Social well-being

Social well-being refers to a young child's ability to form and maintain healthy relationships, engage in social play, and develop empathy and cooperation.

It reflects a child's:

- Capacity to interact positively with peers and adults;
- Understanding of social norms and emotions;
- Growing sense of belonging and inclusion within their learning and living environments

Social well-being develops through interactions in safe, inclusive, and culturally respectful settings.

Shared play, guided conflict resolution, and opportunities for group learning contribute to a child's social competence and prepare them for active participation in group settings such as kindergarten.

Key takeaways

- Emotional well-being strengthens psychological growth;
- Psychological well-being supports positive social behavior;
- Social relationships reinforce emotional regulation and self-worth.

Supporting all three is critical not only for a child's mental health but also for their broader development, including learning outcomes, physical health, and future life satisfaction.

Exercise

Think of a child in your care or setting. Which of the three dimensions — emotional, psychological, or social well-being — do you believe is most supported in their current environment? Which one might need more intentional attention?

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Quiz

Question 1: What does early childhood mental health encompass?

A) The absence of emotional outbursts in young children

B) Only the prevention of mental disorders

C) Positive developmental capacities such as emotional security, strong relationships, and meaningful engagement

D) Teaching children to always behave properly

Question 2: Which of the following best describes psychological well-being in early childhood?

A) A child's ability to always feel happy

B) A child's sense of self, curiosity, and competence

C) A child's ability to strictly follow classroom rules

D) A child's physical health and strength

Question 3: How do social relationships contribute to a child's mental health according to the key takeaways?

A) They help reinforce emotional regulation and self-worth

B) They distract children from their emotional needs

C) They prevent children from developing independence

D) They replace the need for responsive caregiving

Introduction to the 360° well-being framework: mental health as an integrated whole

While emotional, psychological, and social well-being are at the heart of early childhood mental health, they do not stand alone. In this section you will explore how young children's mental health is deeply connected to every aspect of their environment — from their physical health and safety to their opportunities for learning, belonging, and growing within their communities.

You will learn more about the 360° Well-Being Framework, which views mental health not as a separate skill, but as part of a dynamic system where health, learning, relationships, and inclusion all play essential roles. Supporting children's mental well-being means looking at the whole picture: nurturing their bodies, minds, emotions, and social worlds together.

Let's dive together into the five key areas that shape a child's resilience, emotional security, and lifelong growth.

To begin, let's take a closer look at why mental health in early childhood must be understood as part of a broader, interconnected system — where every part of a child's world plays a role in their well-being.

The 360° dimensions of child well-being

Each of the following areas plays a vital role in shaping a child's mental health. When supported together, they form a strong foundation for lifelong resilience and well-being.
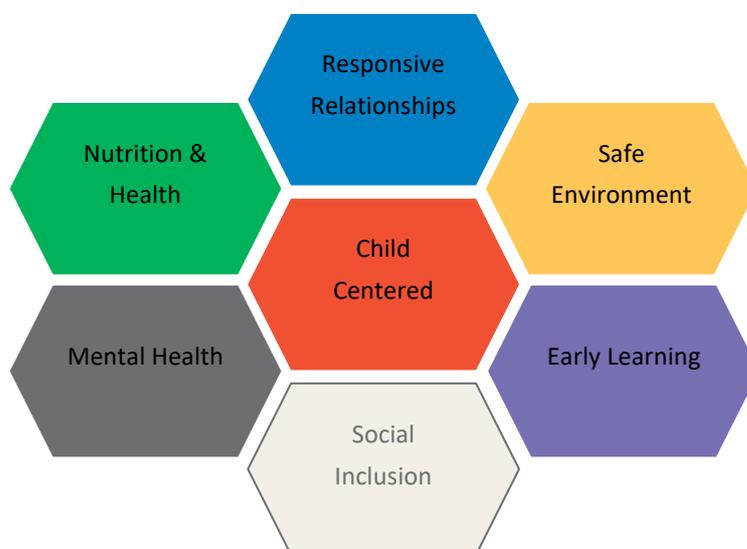
1. Physical health and nutrition

Good physical health and proper nutrition — especially during the first 1,000 days — are essential for brain development and emotional regulation. Undernutrition, chronic illness, or poor hygiene can impair attention, mood stability, and energy levels, making it harder for children to engage and learn.

> A well-fed child is not only healthier but also more emotionally balanced and cognitively ready to explore and interact.

2. Safe and stable environments

Children need environments that are physically safe (free from violence, neglect, or toxins), emotionally predictable, and socially supportive. Toxic stress — caused by prolonged exposure to unsafe or unstable environments — can alter the brain's development and disrupt emotion regulation.

> Living in fear or chaos limits a child's ability to play, trust others, and learn.

3. Early learning and stimulation

Access to quality early childhood education fosters cognitive and social-emotional growth. Participating in well-structured programs helps children build confidence, self-regulation, and a positive relationship with learning.

> A child who engages in guided play and storytelling not only develops language but also self-expression and empathy.

4. Responsive and loving relationships

Secure, consistent caregiving is the single most powerful buffer against adversity in early childhood. "Serve and return" interactions — where a caregiver attentively responds to a child's cues — form the neurological foundation for resilience, emotional regulation, and social skills.

> A warm caregiver is often a child's first teacher in how to love, cope, and grow.

5. Social inclusion and identity

Feeling accepted, valued, and respected — especially in culturally diverse and marginalized communities — is essential to a child's sense of belonging and identity. Discrimination or exclusion can lead to chronic stress and low self-worth, undermining both mental health and development.

> A child who sees their culture and language reflected in the classroom feels seen, safe, and confident.

Key takeaways

- Good health and nutrition support concentration and mood;
- Emotional safety enables curiosity and exploration;
- Social belonging strengthens self-esteem and motivation.

By recognizing this interplay, you can shift from a focus on emotional behavior to a whole-child approach that nurtures all aspects of well-being in tandem.

Exercise

Picture your daily practice in your early childhood setting or program - are all the domains of the 360° framework being addressed in your daily practice? Which area — nutrition, responsive caregiving, inclusion, etc. — could be strengthened to better support children's mental well-being?

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Question 1: What is the main idea behind the 360° Well-Being Framework?

A) Children's well-being depends only on emotional development.

B) Mental health is shaped by a combination of physical, emotional, and environmental factors.

C) Mental health and learning are unrelated in early childhood.

D) Children's development is determined mostly by their personality.

Question 2: Which of the following best supports a child's emotional regulation and brain development?

A) Strict discipline routines

B) High academic expectations

C) Proper nutrition and physical health

D) Isolating the child from group play

Question 3: Why is cultural inclusion important for children's mental health?

A) It makes it easier to teach language skills

B) It encourages conformity to mainstream values

C) It promotes a sense of belonging, confidence, and emotional security

D) It prevents conflict between different children

Supporting mental health and well-being: The role of early childhood settings

Early childhood settings are far more than places for academic preparation — they are vital environments where children's mental health and well-being are nurtured every day. In this section, you will explore how you can create spaces that protect, empower, and support children, especially those facing adversity.

You will learn how safe routines, emotionally responsive practices, social-emotional learning (SEL), cultural inclusion, and strong partnerships with families all work together to make early childhood settings proactive agents of mental well-being.

Let's explore how early childhood settings can move beyond simply "monitoring" children's emotions to actively building resilience, belonging, and emotional security.

To begin, let's take a closer look at why those settings are considered protective spaces — and how small daily practices can make a big difference for young children's mental well-being.

Supporting mental health and well-being: the role of early childhood settings

Background

Early childhood settings are not just places for learning letters and numbers — they are key environments where children's mental health and well-being can be nurtured every day. As safe, stimulating, and socially rich environments, they have a transformative role in shaping how children feel, relate, and grow.

Early childhood settings are uniquely positioned **to observe, respond to, and support young children's emotional, psychological, and social needs** — especially for those who may face adversity or exclusion at home or in their communities.

1. Early childhood settings as protective spaces

For many young children, especially those living in poverty or social exclusion, early childhood settings like kindergarten may be the most predictable and nurturing environment they experience each day. When early childhood practitioners create a space that is safe, inclusive, and emotionally attuned, it becomes a protective buffer against stress and adversity.

> Children experiencing food insecurity, instability, or discrimination at home can benefit profoundly from stable routines, warm relationships, and secure environments in early childhood settings.

2. Emotionally responsive practices

Early childhood practitioners play a direct role in supporting mental well-being through their day-to-day interactions by:

- *Responding to children's cues with warmth and empathy;*
- *Helping children name and manage emotions;*
- *Modeling positive social behavior and conflict resolution.*

These practices build emotional literacy and self-regulation, which are core components of mental health.

> Even brief, caring exchanges like "I see you're upset — let's breathe together" teach children that their emotions are valid and manageable.

3. Social and emotional learning (SEL) in daily practice

Early childhood settings are ideal for integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) through play, storytelling, group activities, and routines:

- *Circle time can become a moment for emotional check-ins;*
- *Stories and puppets can help children explore empathy and friendship;*
- *Games and cooperative play support conflict resolution and turn-taking.*

Embedding SEL in the daily rhythm reinforces emotional and social development without needing "extra time" or separate lessons.

> When SEL becomes a natural part of the day, children learn through doing — building resilience in real-time.

4. Cultural inclusion and belonging

Inclusive early childhood settings that reflect and respect children's home languages, cultural identities, and family backgrounds are powerful sources of positive identity development. This is particularly vital for Roma and other marginalized children, who may otherwise face cultural invisibility or discrimination.

Simple acts — such as using children's home language, displaying cultural symbols, or celebrating diverse traditions — can have a huge impact on mental well-being by affirming children's sense of self and belonging.

> When children feel seen and valued, they are more likely to engage, express themselves, and build trust in others.

5. **Early identification and partnership with families**

Early childhood practitioners often notice the early signs of distress, behavioral shifts, or developmental concerns. With proper training and systems in place, you can:

- *Provide early intervention and referral to health or social services;*
- *Collaborate with families to create individualized support strategies;*
- *Reduce stigma by normalizing conversations around emotions and well-being.*

Partnerships with parents and caregivers are key: when early childhood practitioners and families work together, children receive consistent, reinforcing support in all environments.

> A child who sees their culture and language reflected in the classroom feels seen, safe, and confident.

6. **From passive spaces to proactive support systems**

Early childhood settings must move beyond being passive spaces where mental health is "monitored," and instead become proactive agents of mental well-being — especially for children who face adversity.

This shift involves:

- Embedding well-being into pedagogy, routines, and relationships;
- Training and supporting staff to recognize and respond to mental health needs;
- Creating inclusive, rights-based spaces where every child feels safe, heard, and empowered.

> For some children, Early Childhood services and programs are safe places. Responsive early learning environments can buffer stress and help children thrive.

Key takeaways

- Consistent routines that feel safe and predictable,
- Relationships grounded in warmth, empathy, and trust,
- Daily opportunities to practice social and emotional skills,
- Respect for every child's identity, culture, and experience.

Mental health is not something we "add" to early learning — it is something we build through every relationship, routine, and interaction.

Exercise

Think about a typical day in your classroom or group. What routines or interactions already support children's emotional well-being? What small change could you make tomorrow to become even more responsive to a child's emotional needs?

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Quiz

Question 1: Why are ECEC settings considered protective spaces for young children, especially those facing adversity?

A) They focus mainly on academic skills like reading and math.
B) They offer predictable, nurturing environments that can buffer stress and build emotional security.
C) They ensure children behave perfectly through strict discipline.
D) They work independently without involving families.

Question 2: Which of the following is an example of embedding social and emotional learning (SEL) into daily practice?

A) Setting aside a special SEL lesson once a month
B) Correcting children only when they misbehave
C) Using daily circle time to check in on emotions and practicing cooperation through games
D) Focusing only on academic tasks during playtime

Question 3: What are two essential actions ECEC practitioners can take to move from passive to proactive mental health support?

A) Ignoring emotional issues until they escalate and focusing only on cognitive development
B) Embedding mental well-being into routines and forming partnerships with families
C) Conducting mental health assessments only at the end of the school year
D) Expecting children to regulate emotions without adult support

Social determinants and systemic barriers: mental health in early childhood

While early childhood mental health is strongly shaped by caregiving and relationships, it is also deeply influenced by the broader environments in which children live. In this section, we will explore how factors like poverty, housing conditions, access to education, and experiences of discrimination impact children's emotional and psychological development — often creating barriers that are beyond their families' control.

You will see how inequities, particularly for marginalized groups like the Roma, affect early mental health outcomes, and how early childhood practitioners can play a crucial role in both supporting resilience and advocating for systemic change.

Let's examine how mental health is not just a personal matter, but also a justice and equity issue that demands thoughtful, proactive action.

To begin, let's take a closer look at what we mean by 'social determinants of mental health' — and why understanding them is essential for supporting every child's full development.

Background

Mental health in early childhood is deeply influenced by the environments and conditions in which children grow up. While relationships and caregiving matter enormously, they are not the only forces at play. Social determinants of health and development — such as poverty, housing, education, and discrimination — shape a child's emotional and psychological world in profound ways.

For many children, especially those from marginalized groups like the Roma, these broader conditions can create systemic barriers to mental well-being, even when supportive caregiving is present. A child's access to safety, opportunity, and dignity is not evenly distributed — and this inequality must be acknowledged and addressed in any serious effort to promote early mental health.

What are social determinants of mental health?

Social determinants are the external conditions that affect health and development. In early childhood, these include:

- *Family income and material deprivation*
- *Access to quality healthcare and nutrition*
- *Housing and neighborhood safety*

- *Access to inclusive early education*
- *Caregiver well-being and parental stress*
- *Experiences of discrimination and exclusion*

These factors either support or undermine a child's ability to feel safe, valued, and able to thrive.

> Children living in poverty are two to three times more likely to experience emotional or behavioral difficulties — not because of who they are, but because of the stress and exclusion they face daily.

How inequities shape mental health

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds often face multiple overlapping adversities, which compound over time.

For example:

- *A child living in a substandard home may be exposed to environmental toxins and chronic stress;*
- *A lack of access to nutritious food can impair brain development and emotional regulation;*
- *Discrimination against parents (in health, education, or social services) can lead to parental stress and reduced trust in institutions;*
- *Language barriers or segregation in early childhood settings can damage children's sense of identity and belonging.*

These are not just social issues — they are mental health issues. When children do not feel safe, valued, or included, their emotional and psychological development suffers.

Systemic barriers: The case of young Roma children

The CHAVORE literature review highlights that Roma children across Europe are disproportionately affected by these systemic barriers:

- *Higher rates of poverty and overcrowded, unsafe living conditions;*
- *Limited access to healthcare, nutritious food, and preschool services;*
- *Segregation, exclusion, and racism in public institutions;*
- *Daily exposure to stigma and discrimination affects both children and caregivers.*

Despite these challenges, many Roma families possess strong protective factors — such as extended kinship networks, oral cultural traditions, and community resilience — which can and should be amplified through inclusive practices.

> Mental health interventions must go beyond the individual child to challenge the structures that exclude and harm.

What can early childhood practitioners do?

While many of these challenges stem from broader systems, early childhood practitioners have a critical role in mitigating harm and fostering resilience by:

- *Recognizing the impact of social context on child behavior and development;*
- *Avoiding deficit-based thinking, and instead focusing on strengths and potential;*
- *Creating inclusive spaces that affirm every child's identity and family;*
- *Building trusting relationships with families, especially those who may have had negative experiences with institutions;*
- *Advocating for systemic changes, such as equitable access to services and anti-discrimination measures in education.*

A rights-based, equity-driven approach

Children's mental health cannot be fully supported without addressing the root causes of inequality. A truly inclusive early childhood system must:

- *Protect children's rights to education, health, safety, and identity;*
- *Identify and dismantle barriers to access and participation;*
- *Center the voices and experiences of families from marginalized communities.*

> Equity is not just a policy goal — it is a pathway to well-being.

Key takeaways

Mental Health is a justice issue.

As an early childhood practitioner, you are more than a caregiver, you are a frontline advocate who can:

- Recognize the impact of inequity on child development,
- Create safe, inclusive, and affirming environments,
- Partner with families facing adversity,
- And speak up for system-level change.

Mental well-being begins with fairness. When we fight for equity, we are fighting for children's right to thrive.

Exercise

Think of a child in your setting who may be experiencing behavioral or emotional difficulties. How might their home or community context — such as housing, food insecurity, parental stress, or discrimination — be contributing to what you observe?

Write a brief reflection in your learning journal. Avoid making assumptions; instead, focus on how your awareness of context could influence your support strategies.

Quiz

Question 1: Which of the following are examples of social determinants that can affect a young child's mental health?

(Select all that apply)

A) Family income and material deprivation

B) Access to quality healthcare and early education

C) The child's innate intelligence

D) Experiences of discrimination and exclusion

Question 2: Why are systemic barriers particularly significant for young Roma children's mental health?

A) They face additional challenges like poverty, unsafe living conditions, and discrimination.

B) They receive special mental health support from every kindergarten.

C) Their families often prefer to keep children out of education settings.

D) They are less emotionally sensitive compared to other groups.

Question 3: What is one critical action early childhood practitioners can take to help address systemic barriers to children's mental health?

A) Focus only on cognitive development and academic skills.

B) Create safe, inclusive environments and advocate for equitable access to services.

C) Assume families are not interested in participating.

D) Provide mental health diagnosis without consulting professionals.

Examples from the practice

Case Study 1: A kindergarten supporting a child from a disadvantaged background using responsive routines

Title: "Every day the same – and that's a good thing"

Context:

In a low-income urban neighborhood, a kindergarten teacher notices that 4-year-old Amir often arrives late, hungry, and withdrawn. His mother is a single parent juggling two jobs, and the family faces housing instability.

Responsive strategy:

Instead of focusing on attendance or behavior, the educator designs a predictable arrival routine for Amir:

- Greeted every morning with a smile and gentle eye contact;
- Offered a quiet moment in the reading corner with a soft blanket and calming music;
- Provided with a light snack and water before joining the group;
- Encouraged to participate in a short, grounding ritual (e.g., drawing how he feels that morning).

Impact:

Over several weeks, Amir begins arriving more regularly and engages more openly. His drawings evolve from scribbles to expressive shapes and colors. He starts seeking out peers during play and initiates conversations. The consistent routine helps him feel safe, valued, and emotionally regulated.

This case shows how a calm, predictable environment can become a healing space — especially for children navigating instability at home.

Reflective question: How did the teacher help Amir feel emotionally secure?

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Case Study 2: Integrating Roma culture in non-formal early childhood settings to foster belonging

Title: "That's my song!"

Context: In a community-based early childhood center in Slovakia offering informal playgroups and family sessions, 5-year-old Elena, a Roma child, regularly attends activities with her grandmother. While she joins in free play, Elena becomes quiet and withdrawn during group storytelling, singing, or structured activities.

The center provides a relaxed, drop-in style program for young children and families, aiming to offer a safe, inclusive environment for early learning and socialization.

Responsive strategy: The early childhood facilitators decide to bring elements of Roma culture more intentionally into the center's activities by:

- Introducing traditional Roma lullabies and dances during free musical sessions;
- Inviting Elena's grandmother to share a short traditional story in Romani during family story hour;
- Adding books, posters, and crafts celebrating Roma children and communities;
- Preparing name tags and signs in both Slovak and Romani languages throughout the center.

These elements are integrated into the natural, relaxed flow of playtime and community gatherings.

Impact:

During a music session featuring a familiar Roma song, Elena beams with pride and corrects the facilitator's pronunciation with a playful laugh. She begins to sing along and gradually becomes more engaged in other group activities. Elena also teaches her peers a few Romani words during playtime, building friendships and confidence.

The broader Roma families visiting the center also feel more visible and welcomed, leading to stronger trust between the community and the staff.

This case shows that even in non-formal early childhood settings, affirming children's cultural identities can unlock participation, agency, and joy — essential building blocks for social and emotional well-being.

Reflection Questions:

Think about the children and families who attend your early childhood setting. Are there cultural identities that could be better reflected in your daily activities, materials, or environment? What is one simple action you could take to make a child or family feel more seen, valued, and included?

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Activity Cards

In this section, you will find two activities (below) that you can adapt and use in your own early childhood settings. These resources are designed to foster emotional security, social connection, and positive identity, particularly for children experiencing adversity or marginalization.

Each activity is based on the principles laid out in the CHAVORE framework and promotes responsive, inclusive practice that supports mental well-being from multiple angles.

Activity Card 1: "Food & Mood" — Exploring well-being through nutrition

Goal: Help children connect physical health (like hunger or sleep) with how they feel and behave.

Age Range: 3–6 years

Time: 20–25 minutes

Materials:

- Blank paper and drawing tools (crayons, markers)
- "Body Feelings" chart (simple icons showing tired, hungry, strong, sleepy, energetic, etc.)
- A selection of healthy snacks (fruits, vegetables, nuts – adapted to allergy considerations)
- Storytelling props (animal puppets like "Tired Tiger" or "Hungry Hippo")
- Small mirrors (optional) to help children observe their own expressions

How to do it:

1. **Set the scene**
   - Start with a short storytelling session using animal characters:
   - "Today, Tired Tiger feels slow because he didn't sleep enough. Hungry Hippo feels grumpy because he missed breakfast!"
   - Use puppets, drawings, or simple facial expressions to make the characters relatable and fun.
2. **Introduce the "Body Feelings" chart**
   - Show children the chart with different body states (tired, hungry, strong, sleepy, energetic).
   - Ask them: "How does your body feel right now?"
   - Encourage them to point to or circle the matching image.
3. **Healthy snack tasting**

- o Offer a small healthy snack (e.g., apple slices, carrot sticks, grapes).
- o After tasting, ask: "How does your body feel now?"
- o "Did the food give you more energy or make you feel happier?

4. **Creative expression (optional)**
   - o Let children draw a picture of their "happy body" — what it looks like or what it needs (e.g., sleep, food, hugs, play) .

5. **Daily check-in routine**
   - o Encourage using the "Body Feelings" chart daily at arrival or after meals to support awareness of their physical-emotional connection.

Why it works:
- Helps children recognize the link between physical needs (like hunger, tiredness, or energy) and how they feel or behave.
- Encourages children to notice and name their internal states, a key skill for developing emotional intelligence and self-regulation.
- Shows how nutritious foods and healthy routines can improve mood and energy in a simple, tangible way.
- Provides a fun, visual way for children to express their feelings, making it easier for adults to understand and support their needs.

Activity Card 2: Sensory drawing activity

Goal: Promote emotional safety, calmness, and creative expression through multi-sensory engagement.

Age Range: 3–6 years

Time: 20–25 minutes

Materials:

- Paper and drawing tools (crayons, markers, colored pencils)
- Soft textures (fuzzy fabric squares, cotton balls, felt, etc.)
- Calming scents (lavender sachets, vanilla-scented stickers, or essential oil-spritzed cotton pads)
- Background music (soft instrumental or nature sounds)

How to do it:

1. **Set the mood**
   - o Dim the lights slightly and play gentle music (e.g., ocean waves, forest sounds).
   - o Pass around calming scents and let the children choose one they like to keep near their drawing space.

2. **Explain the activity gently**

- "Today, we'll make a picture of a place where you feel safe and happy. It can be real or make-believe."
- "You can use these soft fabrics or puffy clouds to make your picture feel cozy."

3. Add texture while drawing

- Provide pre-cut soft materials like felt or faux fur that kids can glue onto their paper.
- Encourage them to describe how it feels: "Is this blanket soft like your bed at home?"

4. Incorporate scents

- Offer scent pads they can gently smell while drawing or tuck a lavender sachet under the corner of the drawing mat.
- Say: "Sometimes smells can help us feel calm or remember nice things."

5. Reflection and sharing (optional)

- Invite children to describe what they drew: "Who's in your safe place? What does it smell or feel like?"
- Validate each creation: "That soft blue cloud looks like it would feel so peaceful to lie on."

6. Keep it personal

- Let them take the drawing home or keep it in a classroom "calm corner" where they can revisit it when they feel upset.

Why it works:

- multiple senses (touch, smell, sound) to create a calming environment that helps children manage stress and big emotions.
- Provides a safe and creative way for children to express feelings that might be hard to put into words.
- Imagining and creating a "safe place" helps children strengthen feelings of security and comfort.
- Encourages children to notice how different textures, smells, and sounds affect their emotions and well-being.

Quiz

This section helps you consolidate your learning from the session. By answering these questions, you can check your understanding and reflect on how the content applies to your daily practice.

Instructions

- Answer the multiple-choice questions below.
- You must score at least **80% (4 out of 5 correct)** to successfully complete the session.
- Use this opportunity to revisit sections if needed.

Quiz

1. Which of the following best describes mental health in early childhood?

a) The absence of behavioural problems

b) The ability to form secure relationships, regulate emotions, and explore the environment

c) A child's academic performance in the early years

d) Good physical health alone

2. True or False: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) helps children develop skills such as empathy, self-regulation, and relationship building.

3. Which factor is considered an *enabler of well-being* in early childhood?

a) Nutrition and overall health

b) Access to digital technology

c) Standardized testing

d) Financial literacy

4. Which statement best reflects the concept of *equity and social determinants of health* in early childhood?

a) All children receive identical services, regardless of background.

b) Children's well-being is shaped not only by individual factors but also by family, community, and socio-economic conditions.

c) Only children with special needs require additional supports.

d) Mental health depends solely on parenting quality.

When working with Roma and other marginalized children, which approach is most effective?

a) Apply the same strategies without considering their unique context.

b) Focus primarily on academic learning outcomes.

c) Acknowledge systemic barriers, ensure cultural responsiveness, and provide inclusive support.

d) Limit engagement to health and nutrition issues only.

Conclusions and next steps

Summary of Learning Session 1

In this learning session, you explored the **foundational concepts** of mental health and well-being in early childhood, focusing on the holistic, interconnected nature of emotional, psychological, and social development.

You discovered how **early childhood settings** — through everyday practices, routines, and environments — can play a **transformative role** in supporting the mental well-being of all young children, particularly those experiencing adversity.

You examined how **social determinants**, like poverty, access to health services, discrimination, and systemic inequities, profoundly impact children's emotional and psychological development — and how as an early childhood practitioner you can act as frontline advocate for inclusion, resilience, and justice.

You also engaged with **real-life examples** showing how responsive practices and cultural belonging can change children's experiences — and reflected on ways to **apply these practices in your own setting.**

Topics covered

- **Definition and dimensions of early childhood mental health:** emotional, psychological, and social well-being explained.
- **The 360° Well-Being Framework:** how nutrition, health, environment, learning, and relationships interact to shape mental health.
- **The role of early childhood settings:** moving from passive observation to proactive mental health support through routines, relationships, SEL, and cultural inclusion.
- **Social determinants and systemic barriers:** how conditions like poverty, exclusion, and discrimination affect children's mental health, with a specific focus on Roma children's experiences.
- **Case studies and best practices:** practical examples of creating emotionally secure, culturally affirming learning environments.

Key takeaways

- **Mental health** in early childhood is built through safe relationships, responsive environments, and opportunities to express and manage emotions.
- **Early childhood settings can act as protective spaces** that build resilience and emotional security for young children.
- **Systemic factors** like poverty, exclusion, and discrimination are not just social issues — they are **mental health issues.**
- **Inclusion, belonging, and respect** for each child's identity and experiences are vital for promoting positive mental health.
- Early childhood practitioners are **key advocates** for building equitable, rights-based environments where all children can thrive.

Mental health is nurtured through daily routines, relationships, and environments — not through extra activities, but through intentional care.

Tips for practice

- **Embed emotional check-ins** into your daily routine using visual tools like "Feelings circles."
- **Ensure cultural representation** in your classroom through books, songs, displays, and languages.
- **Partner with families** early and often to ensure consistent emotional support across settings.
- **Be alert to systemic factors** affecting children's behavior and emotional regulation — think beyond the child to their broader environment.
- **Advocate for fairness** in access to services, learning opportunities, and inclusion for every child.

_____

As an early childhood practitioner, you hold extraordinary power, not only to educate, but to heal, protect, and inspire. By nurturing children's emotional, psychological, and social well-being every day, you are shaping healthier futures, stronger communities, and a more just society.

The insights and tools explored in this session are not about doing more, but about being more intentional: seeing each child fully, responding with empathy, and creating environments where every child can feel safe, seen, and strong.

Remember: every warm interaction, every inclusive practice, and every small act of care contributes to building a foundation of mental health for life.

Next Learning Session

In the next session, you will explore how families and communities play a vital role in sustaining children's mental well-being — and how you can work in true partnership with them to make a lasting impact.

Further readings

English only: CHAVORE literature review

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ROMANI
EARLY YEARS
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Learning Session 2: Emotional Literacy and Expression

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September 2025

Welcome to Learning Session 2: Emotional literacy and expression

In this session, we'll explore how you can support young children, including Roma children, in understanding and expressing their emotions in ways that are safe, respectful, and empowering. Emotional literacy is not just a set of skills, it's a path to confidence, connection, and well-being.

Whether you work in a preschool, a Play Hub, a community centre, or another setting, your role is vital. You're not just teaching children different skills — you're helping them understand who they are and how to relate to the world around them. This is especially important for children who face exclusion or discrimination.

We'll guide you through practical strategies and reflective questions so you can build your confidence and deepen your inclusive practice.

Let's begin.

Overview of the Learning Session

This Learning Session explores the vital role of emotional literacy in early childhood development. Together, we will examine what emotional literacy means and why the ability to express emotions is essential for children's growth and learning. You will gain practical strategies to help children recognise and name their feelings, as well as calming techniques that create a sense of safety and security. The session will also focus on inclusive approaches to supporting the emotional well-being of all children, ensuring every child feels seen, heard, and valued. You will feel better equipped to foster emotionally supportive learning environments where children can thrive.

In this Learning Session you will explore the following key topics and concepts:

- Feelings and how we express them
- Supporting children in staying calm with adult guidance
- Understanding different emotional needs of children
- Respecting cultural and gender differences in emotions

Learning objectives

By the end of this learning session, you will be able to:

- Understand what emotional literacy is and why it matters
- Learn how to support children in recognising, expressing, and regulating their emotions
- Reflect on how your own emotional responses influence your practice
- Discover simple tools to use in your setting to promote emotional development
- Explore how language, culture, and bias shape emotional learning — especially for Roma children

Introduction to emotional literacy

Emotional literacy is one of the most important skills children can learn in their early years. When children understand their feelings, they feel safer, calmer, and more confident. This section will explain what emotional literacy is, why it matters, and how it helps children grow and learn.

Definition

Emotional literacy means noticing feelings, understanding them, saying how you feel, and learning how to handle emotions. It helps children feel safe, learn better, and make friends.

Why are emotions important for children

Children don't just learn letters and numbers — they learn how to be in the world. How to feel, express, connect, and calm down. That's where emotional literacy comes in.

Understanding and expressing emotions helps children feel more secure and confident. When children can talk about their feelings, they learn how to ask for help, solve problems, and understand others. This supports them in having better relationships with peers and adults. Emotional skills also help children stay focused, enjoy learning, and get back on track after overcoming challenges. Developing these skills early builds the foundation for lifelong mental health and resilience.

As Daniel Goleman stated in *Emotional Intelligence*: *"Children's emotional competence — recognizing, expressing, and managing feelings — is as critical to their future success as their academic learning."*

BASIC EMOTIONS

Happy   **Sad**   **Angry**   **Scared**

The four pillars of emotional literacy

Emotional literacy includes four main skills: **recognizing, naming, expressing, and regulating emotions**. Each skill builds on the next and helps children better understand and manage their feelings.

- **Recognize**: Noticing how you or someone else is feeling.

- **Name**: Saying the word for that feeling (e.g., sad, happy).

- **Express**: Showing feelings in a safe way (e.g., talking, drawing).

- **Regulate**: Calming down or staying balanced with help.

Researcher Susan Denham (2006) puts it simply: *"Supporting emotional development in early childhood means intentionally guiding children through all four processes: recognition, vocabulary, expression, and regulation."*

As a practitioner, you are already doing this — when you name feelings out loud, stay calm during a meltdown, or help children learn to wait their turn.

Recognise

Children learn to notice their own feelings and the emotions of others by watching faces, body language, and voice tone. This helps them understand what is happening inside themselves and around them.

Name

When children can put words to their feelings, they feel more in control. You can help by teaching simple feeling words like happy, sad, angry, or calm, and using them during daily routines.

Express

Children need ways to show their emotions safely. This could be talking, drawing, using puppets, or playing. We can support them by showing it's okay to express feelings.

Regulate

Regulation means calming down or staying balanced. Young children need support from adults to learn how to breathe, take a break, or ask for help when feelings are big.

Key takeaways

- Emotional literacy means **understanding, naming, and safely sharing feelings**.

- These skills help children feel safe, confident, and connected to others.

- Emotional literacy includes **four steps**: recognizing, naming, expressing, and regulating emotions.

- Adults play a big role by **modelling healthy emotional habits** and helping children calm down.

Exercise

Think of a time when a child had a big feeling. What was it? How did you respond? What helped?

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Question 1: Emotional literacy includes all of the following *except***:**

A) Naming feelings

B) Hiding emotions

C) Noticing emotions

D) Calming down

Question 2: Why is it helpful when children name their feelings?

A) To stop them from crying

B) To make them behave

C) To help them understand and make them feel more in control

D) To make adults happy

Question 3: What is one thing adults can do to help children with emotional literacy?

A) Ignore children's emotions

B) Only praise children when they are quiet

C) Talk about feelings during everyday routines

D) Teach children not to cry

Emotional literacy: helping children learn feeling words

Language gives children the power to express their inner world. But what if a child doesn't have the words — or doesn't hear their home language in your setting?

As Vygotsky (1978) wrote, *"Language is the tool of thought."* When children learn words for their emotions, they begin to understand them — and that leads to self-awareness and empathy.

Children are not born knowing the words for how they feel. They learn these from the adults around them — through interactions, play, stories, songs, and conversations. Help children build a strong emotional vocabulary and you will give them the tools to express their feelings, ask for help, and understand others.

This section explores simple ways to teach feeling words and create a safe space where all children can talk about their emotions, no matter their background or language.

Think about the children you work with. Do they all hear their feelings named in a language they understand? Are their home languages part of the emotional vocabulary of your space?

According to the REYN Study (2023), "*On average, over 7 out of 10 Roma children have difficulties understanding the main language of instruction*", which can reduce both emotional safety and cultural confidence. At the country level, alarming rates of language difficulty are found in Bulgaria (97%), Slovenia (88%), and Slovakia (86%).

Tip: Use bilingual feeling charts, invite families to share words for emotions in Romani or other languages, and model how to use them in context.

Why children struggle to recognize or name emotions

Some children may say things like "*I am never angry*" or "*I don't know what makes me sad*". This doesn't mean they lack emotions, it often means:

- They haven't heard or practiced naming these feelings enough.

- They grew up in environments where emotions were not openly discussed.

- Cultural or gender norms discouraged expressing "big" emotions.

- They fear being judged or punished for showing certain feelings.

Important note: Remember that when children struggle to name or recognize their feelings, it doesn't mean they have fewer emotions. Instead, it often means they need more chances to hear adults talk about emotions, see feelings modeled in safe ways, and practice using this language themselves. Over time, these experiences help them understand and express what they feel.

Words for feelings

"If you can name it, you can tame it." – Dr. Dan Siegel

In *The Whole-Brain Child* (2011), Siegel introduces the idea of "name it to tame it," explaining that naming emotions engages the prefrontal cortex, helping children feel calmer and more in control.

Teach children basic feeling words like happy, sad, angry, scared, proud, calm, excited, tired, worried, and brave. Use pictures, songs, and books to help.

Helping all children talk about feelings: Practical tips for everyday practice

You can support young children to express emotions confidently with simple tools— a remember, consistent practices make a big difference. These are some of the everyday activities you can use with your group.

Use home language words for feelings

Whenever possible, include children's home language when naming feelings. This helps them feel understood and valued. For example:

- Say, "*In your family, you say 'bachtalo' for happy*."
- Create bilingual feeling cards or posters with families.

Show pictures of feeling faces

Display photos or drawings of real faces showing different emotions—happy, sad, angry, calm. Keep them visible at children's eye level and refer to them throughout the day:
"I see you pointing to the worried face. Do you feel worried?"

Use emotion cards in daily routines

Make emotion cards a part of your daily routine in your setting:
- At arrival: *"Which face shows how you feel today?"*
- Before going home: *"How are you feeling now?"*

In this way you will help children practice naming feelings.

Use stories or puppets

Stories and puppets are powerful tools especially for children who don't speak much yet or who are learning a new language language. Try this:

- Choose a puppet to act out different feelings.
  Tell a short story and pause to ask:
  "How do you think the puppet feels?"

Embed feeling words in everyday talk

Don't wait for big emotions—name small emotions during daily interactions:

- "You look proud of your tower."
- "It seems like you feel calm in the reading corner."
- "Y*ou look curious about that new game."*

Repetition helps children learn and remember these words.

Create a "Feelings basket" of props

Fill a basket with puppets, emotion cards, and comforting objects.

- During play or circle time, children can pick an object to "show" how they feel without needing to speak.
- This is especially helpful for shy children or children with limited language skills.

Include songs or traditions from Roma families

Invite Roma families to share lullabies, songs, or simple stories about feelings. This helps children see that their culture belongs in the learning space*.*

Emotion songs and rhymes

Use simple songs with gestures to help children learn feeling words. For example:
"If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands…"
Add your own verses for other feelings:

- *"If you're sad… give a sigh…"*
- *"If you're angry… stomp your feet…"*

Invite children to create a feelings song together.

se a "Mirror Game"

Sit with a child in front of a mirror and make different faces:

- *"This is my surprised face. Can you show your surprised face?"*
- *"This is my tired face. Can you make your tired face?"*

This helps children notice how feelings look on themselves and others.

Connect body clues to feelings:

Children sometimes describe body sensations instead of naming emotions. Link these clues to simple feeling
words so they can start making connections.

For example:

"When your tummy feels tight, that can mean you are worried."

"When your eyes feel heavy, that can mean you are tired or sad."

"When your fists are clenched, that might mean you are angry."

Why it works:

- It respects the child's natural way of describing feelings through body sensations.
- It builds a bridge from body awareness → emotion word.
- It supports children with limited vocabulary or a different home language.

Try one of these ideas each week. Over time, children will feel more comfortable talking about emotions
and will start using these words on their own.

Helping children to explore emotions

Try this with your group: act out basic emotions (happy, sad, angry, surprised) using only your face and
body. Let children guess the feeling and try their own version. This helps children notice and express
emotions even without words.

Reflection Questions:

After reading this, choose 3 emotions and ***write them down in your learning journal***:

- How would you act them out?
- What might a child's version look like?
- How could you include children who are shy or non-verbal?

Tip for practice

In some communities, children may feel unsure about acting in front of others. You can act first, use puppets, or play in pairs to make it more comfortable.

Supporting children through separation anxiety

When a child misses a caregiver, small rituals like songs, pictures, or a safe feelings box can help them feel more secure. If the feeling box contains items from their homes, they often feel safer. Drawing or writing gives children an outlet to express themselves without pressure.

Reflection Questions:

Think about a child you know (or imagine one) who might feel worried when separating from family. *Write a short response to these questions in your learning journal*:

- What signs of worry might you notice?
- What kind of goodbye ritual or tool could help?

Tip for practice

Create your own version of a "Feelings Box." It can be a shoebox or paper bag with simple drawing materials. Try using it for a day and write one sentence about how it went.

Some children may prefer to listen rather than draw or talk. Consider audio messages, a recorded lullaby, or a photo book of their caregivers.

Key Takeaways

- Children need help learning words for their feelings. They learn by hearing and seeing us use those words often.

- If you use books, songs, stories, and puppets, it makes learning about feelings fun and easier to understand.

- Every child expresses emotions differently — using pictures, their home language, or play helps everyone feel included.

- Teaching children feeling words helps them ask for help and understand others.

Exercise

Picture your daily practice in your early childhood setting or programme - What ways do you offer children to show their feelings safely?

Take your learning journal and complete this reflection task:

List three specific ways you currently support emotional expression in your early childhood setting or practice. These can include routines, materials, activities, or ways you respond to children's feelings.

Example prompts:

- What tools or spaces do you offer children to express how they feel?
- How do you talk about emotions during daily activities?
- How do you include children who are shy or use a different home language?

Question 1: Why is it important to teach children words for their feelings?

A) So they can express emotions and ask for help.

B) So they can follow rules better.

C) So they learn faster.

D) So they act like adults.

Question 2: What is one way to teach children about emotions?

A) Give them tests on feelings

B) Let them figure it out alone

C) Use songs, stories, or pictures

D) Only talk about feelings when problems occur

Question 3: What can help children who don't speak much or speak a different language?

A) Ignore their feelings

B) Wait for them to learn the language

C) Use visual tools and their home language

D) Only speak in the official language

Helping children with big feelings

What is co-regulation?

Children learn to manage emotions by being with adults who help them feel safe and seen.
Co-regulation means:

- Staying calm when a child is upset
- Helping them name the feeling
- Offering comfort and strategies to manage the moment

As Siegel and Bryson (2012) remind us: "*The brain develops through relationships. When caregivers co-regulate with children, they build the neurological foundation for emotional self-regulation*."
You've probably done this more times than you realise — with a comforting hug, a calm voice, or even just your presence.

Ask yourself: When a child is overwhelmed, what helps you stay regulated? What does co-regulation look like in your setting?
In Roma communities, children may face high stress due to poverty, stigma, or exclusion. Your ability to offer consistent, warm, attuned responses can make a profound difference.

Creating safe spaces

Children need quiet, comforting spaces where they can go when emotions feel overwhelming. These spaces help them feel safe, regain balance, and develop self-regulation skills. Set up quiet areas with soft items like pillows, blankets, or books. Use emotion tools like a Calm basket (Activity card 2).

Create a group "Calm basket" together

Invite each child to bring a small item from home that makes them feel calm (e.g., a soft toy, photo, smooth stone, or scarf). Together with the children:

- Introduce the idea of a "Calm basket" for everyone in the group.
- Let each child explain their item and how it helps them feel better.
- Place all the items into a shared basket that's kept in a quiet area.

This promotes empathy, emotional sharing, and a sense of community care.

Home Connection: Families can create their own version of the Calm basket at home. Encourage parents to discuss with their children which items make them feel comforted and place them in a shared calming space.

Show you understand - Why words matter

Children learn how to understand and manage their emotions through the way adults respond to them. Our words can either validate their feelings or unintentionally dismiss them.

Instead of saying:

"*You're fine*" or "*Stop crying*"

Try saying:

- "You seem sad. That's okay. I'm here with you."
- "It *looks like you're feeling frustrated. Let's take a breath together.*"

Why this matters: A quick look at the theory

According to attachment theory and neuroscience, young children need to feel emotionally safe in order to regulate their emotions. When adults validate a child's feelings (rather than dismissing or minimizing them), it activates a sense of safety and strengthens the child's ability to co-regulate.

Repeatedly hearing "you're fine" can lead children to:

- Feel confused about their emotions
- Suppress or ignore big feelings
- Believe their emotional needs are not important

Validating a child's feelings builds:

- Trust in adult relationships
- Emotional self-awareness
- Resilience and confidence

Key takeaways

- Young children need adults to help them calm down — this is called **co-regulation**.
- Simple things like sitting with a child, breathing together, or using a calm space can help children feel safe.
- Avoid telling children to stop feeling or ignore their emotions.
- **Creating soft, quiet areas** with comfort tools shows children that their feelings are accepted and manageable.

Connecting emotions as adults

Children learn emotional expression by watching how we manage our own feelings. Take a moment to think about your own emotions in your work. *Write your reflections in your learning journal.*

Think about this:

- How do you usually feel when a child cries, shouts, or refuses to listen?
- What helps you stay calm or grounded during difficult moments?
- How do you want children to see you respond to stress or frustration?

Try this small task:

Write down one feeling you often experience at work (e.g., tired, frustrated, joyful, proud). Then, write one healthy way you manage that feeling that children can learn from.

For example:

"*I often feel rushed. I take a deep breath and say, 'Let's do one thing at a time.'*"
By noticing and caring for your own emotions, you model emotional literacy for children — and create a more peaceful learning space for everyone.

Exercise

Think of a moment when a child in your setting had a big feeling like anger, sadness, or fear. What did you do? Did it help the child feel safe and calmer? What might you do differently next time? *Take your learning journal* and make a short list of 2 or 3 things you could try to support a child through a strong emotion.

Quiz

Question 1: What is a way to help a child who is upset?

A) Sit with them and take deep breaths together.

B) Walk away.

C) Tell them to stop.

D) Send them to another room to calm down.

Question 2: What is a calm corner or safe space?

A) A space where children are sent when they misbehave

B) A quiet area with toys and books for play

C) A soft, quiet area children can choose when they feel overwhelmed

D) A reward area for children who behave well

Question 3: What should you avoid saying to a child who is very upset?

A) "I see you're having a big feeling."

B) "I'm here with you."

C) "Stop crying."

D) "Let's breathe together."

Emotions, culture and fairness

Children grow up in a wide range of family, cultural, and social contexts. These backgrounds shape how emotions are experienced, expressed, and understood. In some communities, expressing emotions openly is encouraged. In others, feelings are shown through quiet behavior, gestures, or actions rather than words.

Understanding emotional expression through a cultural lens helps us recognize that no single way is "correct". Instead, we can aim to create emotionally safe environments that **respect cultural differences** while **upholding every child's right to feel, express, and be supported.**

Emotional expression is also shaped by **gender expectations and societal biases**. Some children may be praised for being quiet and obedient, while others are told to "toughen up" or not "make a scene." These messages can unintentionally limit a child's ability to process and express emotions in healthy ways.

What shapes emotional expression

Children do not all show their feelings in the same way. Culture, gender roles, family beliefs, all influence how emotions are understood and expressed.
As Bronfenbrenner (1979) explained, emotional development is shaped by layers of influence from the child's inner world to the society they grow up in.

That's why it's so important to:

- Learn about the emotional norms in children's families and communities
- Avoid judging behaviours based on your own expectations
- Invite families to share stories, songs, and customs that build emotional connection

In Roma families, emotions may be expressed differently — and some children might hold back in settings where they feel judged or unseen. Creating space for these differences fosters dignity and inclusion.

What influences how emotions are understood and expressed

Cultural norms: In some cultures, emotional expression is seen as a strength; in others, emotional control is highly valued. This affects:

- How children seek comfort
- Whether children are encouraged to name feelings
- How adults respond to strong emotions

Gender norms:

- Boys may be discouraged from showing sadness or fear
- Girls may be expected to be cheerful and agreeable

Power and bias in practice: Without realizing it, adults might praise some behaviors and correct others based on their own norms. For example:

- Comforting a quiet child but scolding one who cries loudly
- Rewarding emotional control in boys, but emotional openness in girls

This creates unequal emotional spaces, where some children feel seen and others silenced.

Reflection Questions:

Think of a time when a child's emotional expression surprised or confused you. How might their cultural or personal background have shaped it?

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Practical Guide for Fair Emotional Spaces

Learn about the home cultures and emotional norms of the families of children in your group. Ask caregivers how emotions are expressed at home.

- Make space for multiple ways to show feelings — through talking, drawing, play, or quiet reflection.
- Avoid using gendered language when responding to emotions. For example, instead of "*you're a strong boy*," say "*you're a good girl*".
- Notice your own reactions. Reflect on what kinds of emotional expressions make you uncomfortable and why.

All children deserve to feel, which means in practice:

It's okay for boys to cry.

Girls don't always have to smile.

Every child has a right to feel and be supported.

Key takeaways

- Children express emotions in different ways, and this is often influenced by their family and cultural background.
- There is no single "right" way to show feelings — some children may be more quiet, others more expressive.
- Gender expectations can unfairly limit how children are allowed to express their emotions.
- Adults can support fairness by creating safe, respectful spaces where all emotional expressions are welcomed and understood.

Exercise

Think back to your childhood. Reflect on the emotional rules you learned, either spoken or unspoken.

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

- How were emotions talked about in your family or community?
- Were there feelings you were allowed to show — or expected to hide?
- How do these experiences influence how you respond to children today?

Quiz

Question 1: How can culture affect how a child shows emotions?

A) It doesn't affect emotions

B) It only affects language

C) It shapes how children express and understand feelings

D) It teaches children to hide emotions

Question 2: What is a helpful way to support emotional fairness for all children?

A) Teach all children to behave the same.

B) Accept different ways of expressing emotions.

C) Avoid talking about emotions.

D) Let only older children share feelings.

Question 3: What can we do to challenge gender stereotypes about emotions?

A) Ignore them.

B) Teach girls to be quiet and boys to be strong.

C) Tell children how to feel.

D) Allow all children to express any feeling, no matter their gender.

Activity Cards

In this section, you will find two activities that you can adapt and use in your own early childhood settings. These resources are designed to promote emotional literacy.

Each activity is based on the principles laid out in the CHAVORE framework and promotes responsive, inclusive practice that supports mental well-being from multiple angles.

Activity Card 1: Story dice for feelings

Goal: Help children recognize and name feelings while using creativity and imagination.

Age Range: 3–6 years

Time: 15–20 minutes

Materials:

- Paper dice or wooden cubes with emotion faces (happy, sad, angry, scared, etc.)
- Drawing paper and crayons (optional)

How to do it:

1. Show children the dice and explain each feeling.
2. Let each child take turns rolling the dice.
3. After rolling, ask the child to tell a short story about a time they felt that way — or make one up!
4. You can also draw the emotion or act it out together.
5. Repeat as time allows. Make sure each child has a chance to participate.

Why it works:

- Children practice naming feelings in fun and safe ways.
- It builds confidence in expressing emotions.
- It helps children recognize feelings in others.

Activity Card 2: Calm basket

Goal: Help children co-create a shared corner for emotional regulation, while promoting empathy and emotional awareness.

Age Range: 3–6 years

Time: flexible, as needed, done over several days or sessions.

Materials:

- Soft, comforting items brought from home (stuffed animals, pillows, fabric squares) plus some extras from the classroom.
- Sensory items (stress balls, fidget toys, calming jars)
- Emotion books or storybooks with feelings themes
- A medium basket or bin to hold everything

How to do it:

1. **Introduce the concept**

Explain to the group that everyone feels big emotions sometimes — and that we can help each other feel better.

2. **Choose a quiet corner** of the classroom for the calm basket together.

3. **Personal item sharing**

Invite each child to bring one small comfort item from home that makes them feel safe, calm, or happy.

4. **Group discussion and sharing circle**

Each child shares their item and tells the group why it helps them feel better.

5. **Create the shared basket**

All the items are placed in a group Calm Basket, which is then available for anyone to use when they feel overwhelmed.

6. **Model the use**

Show the children what's in the basket and explain how and when to use it: "This is a basket to help you feel calm when you're upset or need a quiet moment. If you feel sad or angry, you can sit in the quiet corner and choose something from the Calm Basket to help you feel better."

7. **Reflect together**

At the end of the day/week, talk with the group:

– Did anyone use the Calm Basket today?

– How did it help you feel?

- Gives children tools to calm down and feel safe.
- Builds independence and awareness of emotions.
- Offers a predictable and comforting option for emotional regulation.

Self-assessment: How confident are you?

Check how well you understood the main ideas from this session. For each statement, choose the option that fits best:

I can explain what emotional literacy means.

□ Yes □ Somewhat □ Not yet

I can name the four parts of emotional literacy.

□ Yes □ Somewhat □ Not yet

I know at least three ways to help children talk about their feelings.

□ Yes □ Somewhat □ Not yet

I can describe how to help a child calm down using co-regulation.

□ Yes □ Somewhat □ Not yet

I understand how culture and gender might affect emotional expression.

□ Yes □ Somewhat □ Not yet

I can list at least one change I want to make in my practice to better support emotional expression.

□ Yes □ Somewhat □ Not yet

If you answered "Not yet" to any of the above, consider revisiting the related section in the session or writing down a goal for your next steps.

Conclusions and next steps

In this session, we explored how to support **emotional literacy and expression** in young children. We learned that children are not born knowing how to talk about their feelings — they learn by watching and listening to the adults around them. When we help children **name and express their emotions**, we give them tools for building confidence, forming friendships, and feeling safe in the world.

We looked at the **four key parts of emotional literacy**: **recognizing, naming, expressing, and regulating emotions**. We practiced strategies like co-regulation, storytelling, feeling games, and calm-down spaces. We also discussed how **culture, gender, and bias** affect how children are allowed to express emotions — and how we can make sure every child feels seen and heard.

By the end of this session, you had the chance to reflect on your own experiences, try out practical tools, and create a plan to support emotional literacy in your work with children.

To finish the learning session, you need to know that you already support children's emotional growth every day. This session is here to help you do that with more intention, more tools — and more understanding of how inclusion, language, and identity shape emotional literacy.

Topics covered

- **Emotional literacy** helps children understand, name, and safely share their feelings, which supports their overall development.
- **Recognizing, naming, expressing, and regulating emotions** are four key skills children build over time with adult support.
- **Practical strategies** such as stories, games, calm-down spaces, and reflection exercises help children manage their emotions in everyday settings.
- Adults play an essential role in **co-regulating emotions** by modeling calm behavior and providing comfort tools and routines.
- **Books, songs, and multilingual tools** are effective for teaching feeling words and supporting diverse language backgrounds.
- It's important to recognize how children's **emotional expression is influenced** by their family culture and experiences.
- **Gender stereotypes** can limit emotional freedom, so adults should create space for all children to express any feeling.
- **Calm corners and sensory materials** can help children feel safe and learn to manage strong emotions on their own.

Key takeaways

- **Emotional literacy helps children feel safe, learn better, and connect with others.**
- **It's okay for children to feel strong emotions.**
- **We can help children calm down by being calm ourselves.**
- **Emotions are shaped by culture, gender, and experience.**
- **Your words a**nd actions help children learn that emotions are okay.

Tips for practice

- **Talk about feelings every day** — during playtime, storytime, or while solving problems together.
- **Use clear and simple feeling words** that children can understand and repeat.
- **Create a calm space** with comforting items where children can go when they need a break.
- **Notice and name children's feelings gently**: "You look frustrated — do you want to talk or take a break?"
- **Use songs, puppets, or drawings** to make talking about emotions fun and safe.
- **Encourage all children to express how they feel**, and let them know it's okay to have big emotions.
- **Respect different ways of expressing feelings**, especially from children with diverse cultural or language backgrounds.

_____

As an early childhood practitioner, you play a vital role in helping children understand and express their emotions. By talking about feelings every day, modeling calming strategies, and creating safe spaces for children to pause and reset, you nurture their emotional growth and sense of security.

The practices proposed in this session are not about adding more to your day, but about weaving simple, intentional moments into routines—moments that help children recognize their feelings, feel supported, and learn that all emotions are valid. By embracing inclusive approaches that honor each child's unique background and way of expressing themselves, you are fostering classrooms where every child feels safe, valued, and ready to learn.

Remember: everyday moments help children learn about feelings — keep conversations simple, playful, and respectful of each child's unique way of expressing emotions.

Next Learning Session

In the next session, you will you will explore the importance of building resilience, self-esteem and addressing emotional needs from the early years of life — and how you can strengthen the foundation for mental health and well-being through your daily interactions with children.

Further readings

Picture books that promote emotional literacy in languages of Roma (Noćka)

Aflatoun Series (the listed resources are for children aged 6-7, teachers are always free to adapt all activities based on the needs and maturity of children; relevant parts - Theme 1 & Theme 2)

https://www.skoladokoran.sk/wp-content/uploads/BOOK-1-EN.pdf
https://www.skoladokoran.sk/wp-content/uploads/BOOK-2-EN.pdf

Aflatot Manual (for children aged 3-6, only available in Slovak; relevant parts - Theme 1 & Theme 2):

https://osf.sk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/IO2_AFLATOT_manual.pdf

Emotional literacy handbook: promoting whole-school approach (Fulton, 2003)

Articles and Practical Guides:

Emotional Literacy in Early Years – Childcare Studies UK

Clear overview of emotional literacy development in early childhood, with simple, practical ideas for daily practice.

Supporting Children's Emotional Learning in Early Childhood – The Education Hub (NZ)

Evidence-based strategies for educators to foster emotional competence and self-regulation in young learners.

Teaching Emotional Intelligence in Early Childhood – NAEYC

Explores how emotional intelligence can be taught in preschool settings and the long-term benefits for child development.

Benefits of Emotional Literacy in Early Childhood Education – Brightwheel Blog

A practical article with tips for nurturing emotional literacy through classroom routines and educator-child interactions.

Get inspired and watch these videos:

How Kids Can Benefit from Empathy and Love Language | Maple Zhang | TEDxKerrisdale

https://www.youtube.com/live/iCi4jkb2hZQ?t=85s

Empathy, Education, Inclusion: A Guide to Real Friendship | Emma Liu |
TEDxYouth@GrandviewHeights

https://www.youtube.com/live/RIwwPHeWQdA

Building Emotional Literacy

https://www.youtube.com/shorts/pGHjyVB9hmY

Download: text in the platform

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Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P. (2012). *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind*. Bantam Books.

Siegel, D. J. (2015). *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

Romani Early Years Network (REYN). (2023). *Breaking the Silence: The Right of Young Roma Children and their Families in Europe to Develop and Thrive (Early Childhood Research Study)*. REYN / University of Barcelona / CREA.

CHAVORE Self-paced Learning

Learning Session 3: Building Resilience and Self-Esteem While Addressing Emotional Needs

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Welcome to Learning Session 3: Building resilience and self-esteem while addressing emotional needs

We are excited to have you join us as we explore one of the important aspects of early childhood development: building resilience, self-esteem, and addressing emotional needs.

In this session, you will take a deeper look at how early experiences shape children's ability to navigate stress, build confidence, and feel secure in who they are. Resilience and self-esteem are not fixed traits — they develop over time, especially when children are supported by caring relationships and responsive environments.

Through practical tools, stories from the field, and guided reflections, you will gain insight into how to create environments where all children can feel seen, valued, and resilient.

Let's start!

Overview of the Learning Session

In this Learning Session you will reflect on how everyday practices — like setting clear routines, offering choices, and modeling calm responses — can help children feel safe and capable, even during difficult moments. You will also discover simple yet powerful techniques that support children in managing emotions, expressing themselves, and developing trust in their abilities.

This session invites you to think critically about your own role as a consistent, responsive adult and how you can strengthen the foundation for mental well-being in your daily interactions with children.

In this Learning Session you will explore the following key topics and concepts:

- Resilience and self-esteem
- The role of autonomy and predictable routines in emotional security
- Practical coping mechanisms
- Supporting peer communication and conflict resolution
- Respectful adult–child communication
- Empathetic and strengths-based communication
- Growth mindset

By the end of this learning session, you will be able to:

- **Understand** the concepts of resilience and self-esteem, their key components, and their significance in early childhood emotional development.
- **Identify** effective strategies and supportive factors that promote children's autonomy, resilience, realistic self-esteem, and emotional security.
- **Apply** practical coping mechanisms, predictable routines, and relationship-building techniques to foster resilience and enhance children's emotional well-being.

Understanding resilience and self-esteem

Defining Resilience and Self-esteem: What Is Resilience?

Resilience refers to a child's ability to recover from setbacks, adapt to change, and keep going in the face of challenges. It is not something children either have or don't have — resilience develops over time through relationships, experiences, and opportunities to face and manage **manageable stress**.

According to the *Harvard Center on the Developing Child*, there are three types of stress responses children may experience:

1. **Positive Stress**
   This is a normal and essential part of development. It's short-lived and moderate, like feeling nervous before a performance or learning to tie shoes. With supportive adults, children quickly recover and gain confidence.

2. **Tolerable Stress**
   More serious and longer-lasting (e.g., death of a loved one, serious illness). The body activates stronger stress responses, but with buffering support from caregivers, children can recover. Relationships are key to helping children navigate this level of stress.

3. **Toxic Stress**

Prolonged activation of stress systems in the absence of protective relationships. Often results from chronic neglect, abuse, exposure to violence, or extreme poverty. Without support, it can harm brain architecture and increase lifelong risk for mental and physical health issues.

You will learn more about stress and self-care strategies in Learning Session 6.

Rather than "toughing it out," **resilience comes from feeling safe and supported enough to try, fail, reflect, and try again**. Further research from Harvard Center on the Developing Child shows that children who thrive despite adversity usually have at least one stable, nurturing relationship and environments that offer structure, predictability, and encouragement.

Think of resilience like a balance scale: when children experience positive interactions and build coping skills, they develop the internal strength to tip the scale toward healthy development, even when life places weight on the other side.

What is self-esteem?

Self-esteem is how children feel about themselves — their sense of worth, capability, and confidence. Healthy self-esteem grows when children experience being **seen, understood, and supported** consistently.

A child with healthy self-esteem believes:

- *"I am capable."*
- *"I am valued."*
- *"I can try, even if I don't get it right the first time."*

Importantly, **self-esteem is not inflated praise or telling children they are perfect.** It grows when children are encouraged to take risks, reflect on their own efforts, and receive honest, supportive feedback. It's about helping them recognize their own strengths and feel proud of who they are

The building blocks of resilience and self-esteem

Resilience and self-esteem are supported by two essential categories:

Internal Strengths (within the child):

- Self-control – Ability to manage strong emotions and behaviors.
- Confidence – Trusting one's own abilities and efforts.
- Positive outlook – Seeing challenges as opportunities, not failures.
- Self-awareness – Recognizing and naming one's feelings, needs, and boundaries.

External Supports (in the environment):

- Stable relationships – At least one consistent, emotionally available adult.
- Predictable routines and expectations – Knowing what to expect helps children feel secure.
- Encouragement and feedback – Genuine recognition of effort, not just outcome.
- Safe risk-taking – Opportunities to try, fail, and try again with guidance.

These two domains work together: strong internal capacities help children cope with challenges, while nurturing environments strengthen those capacities.

Story: Mila's paper tower

Mila is a 5-year-old in her second year of preschool. One morning, her teacher Ms. Lena introduces a new challenge: *"Build the tallest tower you can using just paper and tape."*

The children are excited, and Mila jumps right in—her eyes shining with determination.

At first, Mila's tower collapses. She sighs, crosses her arms, and mutters, *"Mine is the worst."*
Ms. Lena kneels beside her and says gently, *"You really want this to work. Let's take a breath and try something new together."*

Mila takes a deep breath. Ms. Lena doesn't build the tower for her, but encourages her: "*Try folding the paper this way—it might give it more strength*." Mila follows the suggestion, and this time, the tower stands longer. She smiles.

Later, the tower falls again. Mila's eyes well up with frustration. Before Ms. Lena says anything, Mila grabs more paper and quietly starts folding again.

At the end of the activity, Mila's tower isn't the tallest. But when Ms. Lena gathers the group to reflect, Mila raises her hand and says, *"My tower didn't win, but I figured out how to make it stand. I didn't give up."*

Let's break it down

Mila's story illustrates how resilience and self-esteem develop in everyday moments, not through perfection, but through supportive risk-taking.

Mila showed internal strengths:

- Self-control as she managed her frustration after the tower collapsed.
- Confidence as she took initiative to try again, even after failing.
- Positive outlook as she focused on what she learned, not what she lost.
- Self-awareness as she recognized and shared her feelings in the group reflection.

Ms. Lena provided meaningful external support:

- Stable relationship, Ms. Lena responded calmly and respectfully.
- Predictable routine, Mila felt safe to take part because she trusted the environment.
- Encouragement and feedback, Ms. Lena acknowledged Mila's effort, not just success.
- Safe space for risk-taking, the challenge was meaningful but low-stakes.

Reflection Questions

Think of a child in your care who is struggling with confidence or persistence. How might you adjust your response or the environment to help that child build their internal strengths—just like Mila did with her paper tower? ***Write your reflections in your learning journal.***

Key takeaways

- **Resilience** is a child's ability to bounce back from challenges, and it develops over time through supportive relationships, manageable stress, and opportunities to try, fail, and try again.
- **Self-esteem** is how children view their own worth and abilities, built through consistent encouragement, honest feedback, and being seen and understood.
- Together, resilience and self-esteem grow through a combination of **internal strengths**—like self-control and confidence—and **external support**, such as stable relationships and safe environments. Everyday moments, like Mila's paper tower activity, show how children build these skills with guidance and reflection, not perfection.
- As an early childhood practitioner, remember that **resilience and self-esteem** aren't traits children are born with—**they're built through everyday interactions**. By offering consistent support, encouraging effort over perfection, and creating safe spaces for risk-taking, you help children develop the confidence to face challenges and the strength to bounce back. Your calm presence, honest feedback, and belief in their potential are powerful tools in helping them grow into capable, confident learners.

Strengthening autonomy and establishing security

Why autonomy matters for resilience

Autonomy—the ability to make choices, take initiative, and act independently—is essential for healthy emotional development. When children are given the space to explore, make decisions, and learn from their actions, they begin to see themselves as capable and resourceful. This directly feeds into their self-confidence and resilience.

As a practitioner, **you can nurture autonomy by:**

- Offering meaningful choices (*"Would you like crayons or markers?"*).
- Allowing problem-solving time before stepping in.
- Encouraging responsibility through small tasks (e.g., handing out cups, tidying up).
- Acknowledging effort rather than fixing or taking over too quickly.

When children feel ownership of their actions, they develop the belief that "*I can do it*"—a key foundation for both self-esteem and resilience.

The power of predictable environments

Just as autonomy builds confidence, predictability provides **emotional security**. Routines, clear expectations, and consistent adult responses help children feel safe. This sense of stability is particularly important for children who may be experiencing uncertainty or stress in other areas of life.

This is especially relevant for Roma children, who often face significant challenges that impact their sense of safety and stability. According to the REYN Early Childhood Research Study:

- 6 out of 10 Roma children under age 3 lack access to early childhood education services.
- Only 27% of Roma household members are employed.
- 6 out of 10 families report experiencing discrimination when accessing public services.
- Over 70% of Roma children face difficulties understanding the language of instruction.
- Less than 30% benefit from Roma-speaking assistants.

These barriers contribute to a heightened sense of unpredictability in daily life, making the need for safe, structured, and predictable environments even more critical.

Predictable environments:

- Reduce anxiety and emotional dysregulation.
- Support self-regulation and executive functioning.
- Create space for exploration and learning within clear, safe boundaries.

You can foster predictability by:

- Establishing consistent daily routines (e.g., greeting rituals, snack time, transitions between activities and spaces).
- Using visual schedules and cues to help children anticipate what comes next.
- Setting clear, consistent boundaries that are explained calmly and respectfully

Balancing freedom and structure

The key is finding a balance between giving children enough freedom to grow and enough structure to feel safe. In such environments, children are more likely to explore, take healthy risks, and recover from setbacks—hallmarks of resilience.

Tip for practice

Consider the concept of "**guided autonomy**"—freedom within a framework of caring support.

This concept can be further illustrated by introducing a few practical examples that show how "guided autonomy" works in everyday early childhood settings. Guided autonomy means offering children meaningful choices while maintaining caring, clear boundaries, fostering both independence and emotional safety. This is particularly important for young Roma children, who may not consistently experience nurturing and structured environments.

Here are a few examples of how this can be implemented:

- **"Choose a book" time** – Offer two or three books and invite the child to select one for shared reading. This supports autonomy within a structured choice.

- **Independent play with clear rules** – Set up a play area with diverse materials (blocks, drawing tools, puppets) and a few simple expectations such as "we share" or "we clean up together." This helps children self-regulate while exploring freely.

- **Child-led storytelling** – After pretend play or drawing, invite the child to narrate what they created and why. This encourages reflection, decision-making, and confidence.

Autonomy in action

Amir is a four-year-old who often refuses to join group activities. His educator noticed that Amir preferred quiet, individual play and rarely made choices when offered.

Instead of insisting he join every circle time, his

 practitioner started giving Amir simple, low-pressure choices:

- *"Would you like to sit on the blue cushion or the red one today?"*
- *"Would you like to listen to the story or draw while we read?"*

Gradually, Amir began participating more. He felt seen and respected and most importantly, in control of his experience.

This example illustrates how respecting the right of choice and encouraging participation core principles of child rights can promote guided autonomy in early childhood settings. These concepts help children build confidence, feel valued, and begin to regulate their emotions through meaningful decision-making.

Reflection Questions

Think of a child who struggles with confidence or emotional regulation. How might you adapt your environment or routine to support more autonomy or predictability for them?
Write in your learning journal two changes you could try to support their autonomy or sense of security.

Key takeaways

- **Autonomy**—giving children the freedom to make choices and take initiative—**helps build confidence and resilience** by allowing them to see themselves as capable and in control.
- At the same time, **predictable environments with consistent routines and clear expectations** provide the emotional security children need to explore and grow.
- Striking a balance between structure and freedom, or "**guided autonomy**," allows children to take healthy risks within safe boundaries. This is especially important for children facing instability, such as young Roma children, who benefit greatly from environments that are both nurturing and structured.
- As a practitioner, you play a vital role in helping children feel both secure and empowered. By offering meaningful choices and establishing consistent routines, you create a setting where children can develop independence and emotional regulation. **Small shifts**—like giving a child two options or using visual schedules—can make a big difference. Your thoughtful guidance helps children feel seen, valued, and safe enough to grow into resilient, confident learners.

1. **Why is offering choices important?**

   A) To avoid conflict

   B) To encourage independence and decision-making

   C) To make the day fun

   D) Because routines aren't necessary

2. **What helps children feel secure in a group setting?**

   A) Avoiding routines

   B) Letting them do whatever they want

   C) Clear, consistent expectations

   D) Limiting adult involvement

Why coping skills matter in early childhood

Coping mechanisms are the skills and behaviors we use to manage difficult emotions and situations. For young children, these skills are still developing—and they rely heavily on the adults around them to help them learn healthy ways to handle frustration, fear, disappointment, and change.

Early experiences of emotional overwhelm, when met with calm, consistent support, can shape children's long-term ability to self-regulate, ask for help, and bounce back from stress.

Practical coping tools

Here are several accessible, evidence-informed techniques you can integrate into early childhood settings to support emotional well-being:

1. **Mindfulness and relaxation techniques**
   - **Breathing buddies**: invite children to lie down with a small soft toy on their stomach. As they breathe in and out, they can watch the toy rise and fall—helping them learn to slow down and focus on their breath.
   - **Five senses grounding**: invite children to notice: 1 thing they see, hear, touch, smell, and feel—calms anxious thoughts and centers them in the present moment.
   - **Gentle movement**: introduce stretching, yoga for kids, or quiet body movements that can release tension and help regulate energy levels.
2. **Emotional expression through Persona Dolls**
   A Persona Doll is a specially created doll with its own name, personality, background, and life story.
3. Practitioners use these dolls as teaching tools to introduce scenarios that reflect children's real-life experiences, including emotions, challenges, and social situations. The doll becomes a "safe friend" who can experience feelings and events that children may find hard to talk about directly. Through storytelling and guided conversation, Persona Dolls allow children to explore emotions, navigate difficult situations, and process life transitions in a supportive and non-threatening way. By engaging with the doll, children often project their own feelings or ideas, making it easier for them to express and reflect on complex emotions.

   Example in practice

   "How do you think Jojo the doll felt when no one listened to her at the snack table? What could we do to help her feel better?"
   This type of question encourages empathy, problem-solving, and emotional vocabulary while giving children a safe distance from their own experiences.

4. **A container of worries**

   Provide a simple box where children can place "worry notes" they draw or dictate to an adult. This helps externalize concerns and creates space for discussion or resolution later, when emotions are less intense.

   You can revisit the notes during quiet times, helping children reflect on how they feel now and what helped.

   You will find clear instruction about this activity in Learning Session 4.

5. **Morning circles discussions**

   Use morning circles as safe spaces to talk about feelings, name emotions, and connect with each other. Encourage children to share how they are feeling that day using weather metaphors: "*I feel sunny today!*" or "*I'm a little cloudy.*"

Integrating coping into the everyday

Rather than being one-off exercises, these techniques are most powerful when **woven into daily routines and learning environments**. You don't need a separate time for "coping skills"—they can be naturally introduced during transitions, problem-solving moments, or group time.

Practical examples:

- After active play, try 1 minute of breathing or stretching together.
- During a conflict, use a persona doll to explore what happened and how everyone felt.
- At arrival, offer time to share feelings in the circle or draw them out or use the emotion calendar.

Reflection Questions

Think of a child who tends to become easily overwhelmed, frustrated, or withdrawn. *Which coping tool from this section could you try using with them? How might you introduce it in a supportive way?* **Write down your thoughts in your learning journal** or share them with a peer and try to implement them in your setting.

Key takeaways

- **Coping skills** are essential tools young children need to manage big emotions like frustration, fear, or disappointment. Since these skills are still developing in early childhood, children rely on calm, supportive adults to guide them.
- Techniques like mindful breathing, sensory grounding, emotional storytelling with persona dolls, and worry containers help children express and regulate emotions. When integrated

naturally into daily routines—like circle time or transitions—these practices not only reduce stress but also build long-term resilience and emotional awareness.

- As an early childhood practitioner, your calm presence and daily guidance help children learn how to cope with life's ups and downs. By **weaving simple strategies**—like breathing exercises, emotional check-ins, or reflective storytelling—**into everyday routines**, you give children tools to understand and manage their feelings. These small, consistent actions not only support emotional regulation in the moment but also build a foundation of resilience that will serve them for years to come.

Quiz

1. What is the main benefit of using Persona Dolls with young children?

A) They keep children entertained

B) They help children memorize emotions

C) They provide a safe way to express feelings

D) They replace adult-led discussions

2. What makes coping strategies most effective in early childhood settings?

A) They are introduced only when a child is upset

B) They are practiced regularly and integrated into daily routines

C) They are used as rewards for good behavior

D) They are kept as a secret between practitioner and child

Supportive relationships, meaningful communication and skill-building

In this section, you will reflect on how strong relationships, respectful communication, and skill-building interactions shape children's resilience and self-esteem. You will explore how to create safe, emotionally responsive environments where children feel seen, heard, and supported—both by adults and their peers—and how to partner with families to sustain this support across settings.

Why relationships matter

The single most important factor in a child's resilience is having at least one stable, committed relationship with a responsive adult. These relationships act as a buffer against stress and trauma, offering children a sense of safety, belonging, and trust.

As the Harvard Center on the Developing Child notes:

"These relationships provide personalized responsiveness, scaffolding, and protection that buffer children from developmental disruption."

Supportive relationships are built through:

- Consistent, caring interactions

- Active listening and empathy

- Respectful communication

- Recognition of children's emotions and perspectives

In early childhood settings, you play a central role in providing these protective, regulating connections—especially for children who may not experience them consistently elsewhere.

Respectful and meaningful communication with children

Children thrive when they feel genuinely listened to. Whether they're sharing an idea, asking a question, or expressing an emotion, the way we respond teaches them how communication works—and how they are valued.

Respectful communication with children includes:

- Active listening without rushing or interrupting

- Acknowledging and naming feelings: "It looks like you're frustrated. Do you want to tell me more?"

- Speaking at the child's level, both physically and emotionally

- Asking open-ended questions to encourage thinking and reflection

- Making children feeling listened to and welcomed in any circumstance

These small practices build trust and help children feel safe enough to take social and emotional risks—an essential foundation for resilience.

Helping children communicate with peers and resolve conflicts

Learning to communicate needs, emotions, and boundaries with peers is a lifelong skill that begins in early childhood. Children need support not only in expressing themselves, but also in listening to others, negotiating, and repairing relationships after conflict.

Ways you can support peer communication and conflict resolution are:

- Model language like "*I feel… when…*" or "*Can we find a solution together*?"

- Use persona dolls or role-play to explore conflict scenarios safely

- Guide children to notice each other's feelings and suggest ways to help:
  "*How do you think Maya felt when her block tower fell over?*"
  "*What could we do to make it better*?"

Conflict is not something to avoid—it is an opportunity to teach emotional literacy, empathy, and problem-solving.

Partnering with families through respectful communication

Just as children benefit from trusting adult relationships, families benefit from respectful, non-judgmental communication with practitioners. Open and empathetic communication creates continuity of care and builds shared strategies to support children.

You can build those by:

- Sharing small successes, not only concerns

- Using inclusive and strengths-based language

- Asking families for their observations, strategies, and insights

- Offering a consistent tone of curiosity and collaboration in emails, meetings, or messages

Example: "*We have noticed that Leo has been trying very hard to express his feelings in words lately. If you have seen anything similar at home, we would love to hear more—perhaps we can build on it together.*"

When practitioners and families work as partners, children receive the consistent support they need to feel secure and thrive.

Building skills, step by step

While relationships lay the foundation, resilience and self-esteem grow further through **skill-building opportunities**. Children need chances to try things out, make mistakes, and experience success. These experiences teach them:

- *"I can do hard things."*
- *"I can learn from challenges."*
- *"I can ask for help and try again."*

You can foster skill-building by:

- Encouraging children to set small, achievable goals (e.g., "*Today I want to zip my coat by myself.*")

- Celebrating effort and persistence, not just outcomes

- Using process-focused praise: "*You kept trying even when it was tricky—that was great thinking!*"

These approaches help children connect effort with growth and begin to internalize the belief that they are capable learners and problem-solvers.

Reflection prompt

Think of a time when respectful communication—between you and a child, between peers, or between you and a parent—helped resolve a misunderstanding or prevent a bigger conflict. What made that interaction effective?

Write down one approach you could use again in a similar situation ***in your learning journal***.

Key takeaways

- **Supportive relationships** are the foundation of resilience and self-esteem in early childhood. Children thrive when they have at least one stable, responsive adult who listens, respects their feelings, and helps them navigate emotions and social situations.
- **Meaningful communication**—through empathy, active listening, and open-ended dialogue— helps children feel valued and safe. Guiding

children in peer communication and conflict resolution builds lifelong emotional and social skills.

- Equally important is **partnering with families** through respectful, strengths-based communication to ensure consistent support across home and   early childhood settings.

- Skill-building opportunities further reinforce children's confidence and belief in their own abilities.

- As an early childhood practitioner, your **daily interactions** shape how children see themselves and others. When you listen with empathy, guide conflict with care, and celebrate effort, you teach children that they are capable, valued, and not alone. Your role also extends to families— when you engage them as partners with curiosity and respect, you create a web of support around each child. Through relationships, communication, and everyday learning moments, you help children develop the resilience and self-belief they need to thrive.

Activity Cards

In this section, you will find four activities that you can adapt and use in your own early childhood settings. These resources are designed to promote resilience, autonomy, emotional safety and respectful communication.

Each activity is based on the principles laid out in the CHAVORE framework and promotes responsive, inclusive practice that supports mental well-being from multiple angles.

Activity Card 1: Listening looks like this

Goal: Promote active listening as a daily practice that nurtures emotional connection, trust, and respect between adults and children. This activity also supports children to understand what being heard looks and feels like.

Age Range: 4-6 years

Time: 20–25 minutes

Materials: Blank paper, crayons, and "Body Feelings" chart

How to do it:

1. **Stop and focus**

   Pause what you're doing and give your full attention. Put away distractions (e.g., phone, papers, cleaning tools).

2. **Get at the child's eye level**

   Kneel or sit down to make eye contact without towering over the child.

3. **Show with your body**

   Use open and calm body language:

   - Nod gently to show you're listening
   - Keep a soft facial expression
   - Speak in a warm and steady tone

4. **Reflect what you hear**

   Show the child you're truly listening by repeating or paraphrasing what they've said:

   - *"You're telling me you felt left out?"*
   - *"So you wanted a turn with the red car?"*

5. **Acknowledge feelings**

   Validate emotions without judgment:

   - *"That sounds really hard."*
   - *"I understand why you're upset."*

Why it works:

This practice builds emotional safety and helps children:

- Feel respected and valued
- Learn how to listen to others
- Express themselves without fear of being rushed or ignored

Activity Card 2: Choose & Reflect

Goal: Support children in making choices and reflecting on their decisions, fostering independence, confidence, and emotional awareness.

Age Range: 4–6 years

Time: 20–30 minutes

Materials: Choice cards or picture options, blank paper, crayons

How to do it:

1. **Offer two meaningful choices**

   Avoid random or superficial options. Keep the choices relevant to the child's interests or current activity.

2. **Invite reflection**
   Gently ask the child why they chose one option over the other:
   - "Would you like to draw or build today?"
   - "Why did you choose that?"

3. **Listen actively and validate**
   Acknowledge their reasoning without correcting or judging:
   - *"That's a great reason."*
   - *"I see you enjoy using your imagination."*

Why it works:

This practice builds confidence, encourages critical thinking, and helps children feel seen and respected.

- Use this during transitions, free play, or learning moments.
- Keep the tone calm and non-directive.
- Praise the process of thinking and deciding, not just the outcome.

Activity Card 3: Independent play with support

Goal: Create a play environment that fosters independent choices within a framework of clear expectations, promoting self-regulation and collaboration.

Age Range: 4–6 years

Time: 30 minutes

Materials: Open-ended play materials (blocks, puzzles, role-play props), visual rules chart

How to do it:

1. **Set up a choice-based play area**
   Prepare a station with diverse materials (e.g., blocks, fabrics, art tools) where children can explore freely.
2. **Introduce clear expectations**
   Communicate simple ground rules in a positive tone "*You can use any of these materials. Just remember our rule: we share and clean up together*".
3. **Observe and support gently**
   Let children lead, stepping in only when needed to guide or reinforce agreed rules.

Why it works:

This activity balances freedom with structure, helping children grow in confidence while learning respect for shared spaces and others.

Activity Card 4: Decision helper

Goal: Give children a voice in everyday decisions, helping them feel included and capable, while supporting emotional self-awareness.

Age Range: 4–6 years

Time: 20–25 minutes

Materials: Daily choice board, picture cards, emotion chart

How to do it:

1. **Introduce daily decision moments**
   Offer regular opportunities for children to make small but meaningful choices (e.g., greetings, calming strategies).
2. **Use visuals as prompts**
   Create cards with images (e.g., hug, wave, fist bump; breathing, stretching, calm corner) and let the child choose.
3. **Honor their choices**
   Acknowledge their selection and follow through respectfully
   - *"You chose a wave today — I love that."*
   - *"Let's try the breathing card you picked."*

Why it works:

Daily decisions build confidence and agency. Visual tools support all children and foster emotional literacy.

- Use in morning circles, transitions, or emotional check-ins
- Give time to choose, don't rush the process
- Talk about how it feels to make choices

These activity cards connect directly to the scenarios presented, such as Amir's increasing engagement through respectful choice-making. By explicitly integrating the concepts of participation and the right of choice, they strengthen the theoretical foundation of guided autonomy and contribute to emotionally safe, empowering learning environments for all children, including those from marginalized backgrounds.

Quiz

This section helps you consolidate your learning from the session. By answering these questions, you can check your understanding and reflect on how the content applies to your daily practice.

Instructions

Answer the multiple-choice questions below.
You must score **at least 80%** (4 out of 5 correct) to successfully complete the session.
Use this opportunity to revisit sections if needed.

Quiz

1. What is resilience in early childhood?
   A) Always staying happy regardless of circumstances
   B) Avoiding difficult emotions
   C) The ability to recover from challenges and adapt positively
   D) The ability to follow all adult instructions without resistance

2. Why is autonomy important for young children?
   A) It helps children control others
   B) It teaches them to avoid asking for help
   C) It builds confidence and decision-making skills
   D) It encourages children to resist rules

3. Which of the following is an effective way to support emotional security?
   A) Letting routines change daily to keep children guessing
   B) Encouraging children to resolve problems with no guidance
   C) Establishing clear routines and consistent expectations
   D) Avoiding discussions about feelings

4. How do persona dolls help children build resilience?
   A) By entertaining children with fictional characters
   B) By offering a safe way to explore emotions and situations
   C) By distracting children from their worries
   D) By teaching them new vocabulary words only

5. What best describes respectful communication with young children?
   A) Telling them what to feel
   B) Correcting their speech immediately
   C) Listening actively and validating their emotions
   D) Speaking in long, complex sentences

Final reflection
Think back over the session. What is one new insight or practice you will take forward into your daily work with children? Take a moment to ***write your response in your learning journal***.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Summary of Learning Session 3

In this session, you explored how resilience and self-esteem are built in early childhood through intentional practices, caring relationships, and supportive environments. You gained practical strategies for helping young children develop the confidence, emotional regulation, and autonomy they need to thrive—even in the face of adversity. The session emphasized that resilience is a process—nurtured through everyday moments of trust, consistency, and connection.

Topics covered

- Definitions and core components of **resilience** and **self-esteem**

- The role of **autonomy** and **predictable routines** in emotional security

- Practical **coping mechanisms** (e.g., mindfulness, morning circles, persona dolls)

- Supporting **peer communication and conflict resolution**

- The power of **respectful adult–child communication**

- Partnering with **families** through empathetic and strengths-based communication

- Encouraging **goal setting**, celebrating **effort**, and reinforcing a **growth mindset**

Key takeaways

- Children build resilience through **secure relationships**, **emotional expression**, and **guided independence**.

- **Self-esteem** is strengthened when children are given meaningful roles, choices, and space to try, fail, and try again.

- Emotional safety grows in early childhood settings with **clear routines**, **predictable expectations**, and **responsive adults**.

- **Communication** is not just about information—it is a tool for connection, validation, and empowerment.

- Your everyday interactions—listening attentively, naming emotions, offering encouragement—are powerful tools for emotional development

Tips for practice

- Create **daily rituals** for emotional check-ins (e.g., weather boards, "*How are you feeling?*" circles).

- Use **open-ended prompts** and reflective questions to support children's communication and thinking.

- Introduce **containers of worries** or **calm corners** as part of your setting routine.

- Reinforce effort and **persistence**, not just outcomes (e.g., "*You really kept trying—well done!*").

- When communicating with families, **balance honesty and encouragement**. Share small wins, not just challenges.

- Support children in **resolving conflicts** using peer mediation steps: "*How do you feel? What do you need? What can we do next?*"

_____

As an early childhood practitioner, you help children build the inner strength they need to thrive. By fostering resilience and self-esteem, you give children the tools to face challenges, manage big feelings, and believe in their ability to grow and succeed. Creating predictable routines and offering meaningful choices help children feel safe and capable, while mindful practices and playful strategies like morning circles or persona dolls guide them in coping with stress and expressing themselves.

The practices shared in this session are about weaving resilience-building moments into daily life—moments where children learn to navigate conflict, communicate with peers, and see mistakes as opportunities to learn. By modeling respectful communication and working in partnership with families through empathetic, strengths-based conversations, you create a circle of support that extends beyond your setting.

Remember: small, intentional actions, like celebrating effort, setting achievable goals, and listening with care, nurture children's confidence and help them develop a growth mindset that will serve them throughout life.

Next Learning Session

In the next session, you will explore how to recognize and respond to children's stress and trauma using the Look Listen Link strategy, while strengthening collaboration with colleagues, families, and other professionals to provide effective psychosocial support.

Further readings

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Learning Session 4: Children in Distress (Psychological First Aid)

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Welcome to Learning Session 4: Children in distress (Psychological First Aid)

In this session, you will become familiar with the topic of children in distress and the importance of practitioners being able to provide quality psychological first aid to children.

As practitioners, we often think psychological support is a highly demanding area of competences which only professionals in mental health hold. Still all humans (and not only them) have the basic capacity to provide psychological first aid to others in distress on a spontaneous basis. These, what we call, "mirror neurons" enable empathy and make us act, sometimes even at extraordinary levels, providing help, shelter, emotional support and comfort to those in need of it, particularly children (WHO, 2011).

In this learning session you will find answers to some basic questions about distress and its damaging effects in early development, some real-life examples and hands-on activities, reflection prompts, and tips you can bring into your daily practice.

Finally, we will explore foundational concepts and practical strategies you can use to support children in distress.

Note: The session is inspired by ISSA - International Step by Step Association's *Foundational training on psychological first aid (PFA) and trauma-informed practices for young children and their caregivers* (Ionescu, Rudas, & Trikić, 2022).

Let's go!

Overview of the Learning Session

This session explores how young children—particularly those from vulnerable communities like Roma families—experience stress and trauma, and how early years practitioners can respond effectively using basic psychological first aid. You will gain foundational knowledge of trauma, learn to recognize behavioral warning signs (so-called red flags) across age groups, and apply the "Look, Listen, Link" (3L) strategy (Ionescu, Rudas, & Trikić, 2022) to provide appropriate support. The session also emphasizes intersectoral collaboration and the importance of building trusting relationships with families and professionals.

In this Learning Session you will explore the following key topics and concepts:

- Understanding stress, trauma, and defense mechanisms in young children
- Recognizing age-specific signs of distress (0–6 years)
- Applying the 3L strategy (Look, Listen, Link) for psychological first aid
- Emotional regulation and resilience-building for both children and practitioners
- Collaborating with families, colleagues, and external professionals to support children in need

Learning objectives

By the end of this learning session, you will be able to:

- **Describe** how stress and trauma affect young children's behavior and development.
- **Recognize** signs that indicate a child may need additional emotional or professional support.
- **Demonstrate** empathy and a collaborative attitude when working with children, families, and professionals.

What are stress and trauma, and how do we respond?

It is often said that stress or trauma are not what is happening to us but what is happening inside of us (Maté, 2022) as it is an emotional and physical response to extremely stressful or threatening events (stressors) that exceed our ability to cope. Once the effects of such events become damaging in any way, it is time to act.

Although professionals in mental health will assess and support children and families the best (if there is need for it), it is the parents and the practitioners who spend the most time with children, know them best and are crucial for not only recognising but also supporting their recovery or resilience in the long run. While parents can recognise signs intuitively, practitioners have a wider range of professional skills and tools to notice such negative effects.

Let's reflect for a while on these guiding questions:

- What are the most common stressors children face?
- Which of these do you need additional support for?
- What do you need to better cope with them?

What are stress and trauma?

Trauma and stress refer to emotional responses to extremely stressful or threatening events that exceed a person's ability to cope. These can result from physical, emotional, or psychological damage such as accidents, violence, unsafe or polluted environment, loss, big transitions or other challenging experiences. The body's response to environmental demands perceived as threats or challenges can have emotional and psychological consequences. Our reactions to these situations are called defense mechanisms.

Let's think of a usual situation in early childhood settings, such as adaptation. When separated from their caregivers for the first time, children (and parents) experience extreme stress and some might even have traumatic effects on them. Remember how children react while under such stress. Some try to run away, some just stay in the corner and do not even cry, some cry and even hit things.

Now think of the experience that Roma children have on their first day of kindergarten, if the staff and the neighborhood is culturally different than their own. On top of that, some or most of the Roma children do not speak the language of the kindergarten. Research suggests that children instinctively fear those that speak a language they do not know, and try to flee or move away. Therefore, they are faced with strange and frightening adults of authority that look differently, perhaps behave differently and speak some frightful unknown language. Just imagine how horrific this may feel.

Thankfully, this (adaptation accommodations) is something we can work with to make it less stressful for all involved, and many of you already know how to do this well.

Defense mechanisms

Let's now see what is happening in children under stress and trauma. We mentioned that children in extreme stress will most usually flee, freeze or act out. These are our natural defence mechanisms.

Defense mechanisms are unconscious mental processes through which people **protect** themselves from emotional pain or discomfort. These instinctive reactions are meant to literally save our lives, protect us from damage, protect others close to us. They commonly manifest as:

- Flight (withdrawing),
- Fight (confronting),
- Freeze (ignoring).

You will find more information on this in Learning Session 6, but here is an important notice.

Roma children are more immune to stress? No.

All children, regardless of their conditions of living, are susceptible to negative effects of toxic stress and trauma. It is simply not true that prolonged exposure to stress and trauma makes children or adults resilient. On the contrary, both stress and trauma, when accumulated, are even more dangerous. It significantly affects learning and in that sense a general development of children, such as their readiness for school or worse.

Research (including REYN Study, see Macías-Aranda & Valls Carol 2023) shows that Roma children face multiple challenges that cause stress and trauma, for instance unsafe environments in their neighborhoods (dangerous or the lack of infrastructure, pollution, street violence, etc.) and poor access to stress and trauma services such as mental health support or others. This puts them at higher risk of the negative effects of stress and trauma.

Therefore this statement can be seen as prejudicial.

Window of tolerance

A key concept for understanding our reaction to a single event or accumulated stress and trauma in children and adults is the *window of tolerance*. This is our individual emotional range where we can stay regulated and functional under stress.

This means that each of us, and children too, have our own, distinct emotional zone in which we can function in daily life while feeling emotionally stable and **capable of handling** stress. Here we can effectively regulate emotions, make decisions, and behave appropriately. Outside of this window, we may experience emotional overload or dysregulation. This zone is age- and development- appropriate, which means children should not be compared to adults, but to their developmental stage or peers in a similar environment.

You will find more information on this in Learning Session 6, but here is an important notice.

Dysregulation

Dysregulation occurs when a person moves outside their window of tolerance and becomes overwhelmed by emotional stress. In this state, the mind and body may become "flooded," resulting in a loss of rational thinking and emotional control. A person may become hyperaroused (anxious, panicked) or, conversely, hypoaroused (feel numb or unaware of their surroundings). In such a state, the ability to manage stress and make healthy decisions is significantly reduced. These are automatic responses of our body and no person, especially a child cannot control it. We can see similar behaviour in children in transitions or adaptations, where under stress they often cannot hear or see well, as they are experiencing negative effects of stress.

Resilience

Finally we come to resilience, which was discussed in more detail in Learning Session 3.

Here it is important to note that it is resilience that enables us to **recover** from stress or trauma. Resilience is not only the capacity to stay "untouched" by difficult circumstances but also the ability to learn and grow from such experiences. People with high resilience often possess well-developed social skills, emotional awareness, and positive coping strategies. **Re-building resilience** with children after prolonged stress and trauma, though, is not the same as building it with those children that did not have that experience. Think of it like building back strength after illness. More on how to do this in practice will follow.

Exercise

Let's think of the following:

- Which defense mechanism (flight, freeze, fight) have you used in stressful events?
- How did you recognize you were in a dysregulated state due to stress? What triggered it?
- How did you respond?

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Understanding these basic concepts helps us recognize when we or others are emotionally overwhelmed and this is the first step to recovery and building resilience.

We will end this block with a self-care activity: A container of worries (in Activity Cards, ICDI, 2022). This activity can support children experiencing worry or stress. Please note that it is not appropriate for working with children who have recently experienced any kind of trauma or they are in recovery. You

can do this activity with children in everyday stressful situations and as a regular activity with any group.

| 3.4 | **Container of Worries** | AGE GROUP 3 (6-8) |

This activity is focused on helping children identify things that are troubling them, while also encouraging and providing them a way to remember what to do to feel better.

DEVELOPMENTAL DOMAIN	DURATION
Socio-emotional	40 min

Preparation
- Cut the coloured paper into smaller pieces.
- Do not force participants to tell their worries to the rest of the children. If they prefer, they can simply draw their worries and solutions and put them in the container.

Activity Guidelines
- Begin a discussion with the children about sharing things that they are worried about. You can start the conversation by giving an example of a less severe worry, like being late for school. Ask the group to think of solutions for the simple problem. Ask the children to draw the problem on 1 side of the paper, and the solution on the other side. Before each child puts their worry inside the container, discuss their worry and solution as a group.
- Explain: Some worries are bigger than others and not easily solved, but the container can take the worry away from you and do the worrying for you. Take the container you have, and as you put the paper with the worry inside the container, explain to the group that the worry and solution is now going to be kept safe inside the Worry Container.

Materials:
A4 paper, scissors, pens, pencils, a container that can be closed.

Source: The UNICEF Education in Emergencies (EiE) Handbook, UNICEF Early Childhood Development Kit Guidance (2013)

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Source: ICDI. (2022). Play for Inclusion: A handbook for non-formal services supporting young refugee children and families.

Key takeaways

- Distress in children is a natural response to experiences that overwhelm their ability to cope, and it can significantly impact early development.
- Stress and trauma are not just about what happens externally, but how a child experiences these events internally—emotionally and physically.
- Children use defense mechanisms like flight, fight, or freeze to protect themselves in stressful situations, but stress and trauma can lead to long-term challenges if unaddressed.
- Understanding a child's window of tolerance helps adults recognize when a child is emotionally regulated versus overwhelmed or shut down (dysregulated).
- Re-building resilience—in safety and with supportive relationships—is key to helping children recover from distress and grow strong again.

1. What best defines trauma in young children?

A) Mood swing during transitions

B) An emotional response to extremely stressful or threatening events that exceed a child's ability to cope

C) Disobedience or disrespect

2. Which of the following are defense mechanisms commonly observed in children under stress?

(multiple answers possible)

A) Reasoning through the situation calmly

B) Aggressive behaviour

C) Freezing or becoming emotionally numb

3. What does the "Window of tolerance" describe?

A) A setting where children feel physically safe

B) The optimal emotional state where a child can manage stress and behave appropriately

C) A quiet time during the day when children are most relaxed

4. What is resilience in the context of child development?

A) Avoiding stressful situations at all costs

B) The ability to recover from stressful situations and grow from the experience

C) Ignoring emotions to stay strong in front of others

Introduction to Psychological First Aid and the 3L strategy

Let's now explore what responsible adults can do to support children in distress.

While distress in young children may appear as just plain irritability or distancing from others it often signals something much deeper. In this section, we explore how emotional discomfort in children surfaces in their small bodies—and how everyday moments offer us the chance to respond with care, presence, and protection.

We introduce the Look, Listen, Link approach (Ionescu, Rudas, & Trikić, 2022) as a simple yet powerful way to notice signs of distress, connect with empathy, and guide children toward safety and strength.

To begin, let's explore how psychological first aid is not about having all the answers, but about showing up with compassion in the moments children need us most.

Background

Psychological first aid can be described as providing practical support, understanding, and comfort, as well as meeting the basic needs of a child in our care who has experienced a stressful event. This type of support can also be offered by emergency services (a crisis teams or health professionals) if the event was reported, but many people, especially early childhood practitioners, can find themselves in the role of a psychological first aid provider in everyday situations, even if they are not always aware of it. We are all invited to provide it, as this is our human nature. A famous anthropologist Margaret Mead once said that the start of human civilization can be seen in a moment when a broken femur healed for the first time (as this bone cannot heal without others caring for the wounded).

It's important to recognize this opportunity so we can be as effective as possible in helping children in need.

These steps can be applied in any situation where we notice signs of distress in children.

L for LOOK

This step emphasizes the importance of closely observing children in different situations. Each child may respond differently to stressful events and may show various symptoms of mental health difficulties – from becoming silent to loud and aggressive, or from being sensitive to emotionally numb. A practitioner should monitor if this behaviour is usual for that child and how long such behavior lasts in order to refer the child for specialized support if it continues for more than a month (Ionescu et al., 2022).

Guiding questions

1. Questions that may help in identifying symptoms indicating difficulties include:
2. Is this behavior typical for this child?
3. Has the frequency or intensity of this behavior increased?
4. Is the child's behavior different compared to other children in the group?
5. Is there a lack of certain expression (is something missing)?

How to recognise signs of distress?

Children Aged 0–2

Excessive attachment to caregiver

Regression

Changes in sleeping and eating

Crying and irritability

Fear of previously non-threatening things

Hyperactivity

Changes in play activity

Defiance and demanding behavior

Excessive compliance

Oversensitivity to others' reactions

Children Aged 3–6

Unusual attachment to adults

Regression (e.g., thumb sucking)

Stopping communication

Inertia or hyperactivity

Stopping or repetitive play

Anxiety and fear that something bad will happen

Sleep disturbances and nightmares

Changes in eating habits

Easily confused

Poor concentration

Occasional role-reversal (acting like an adult)

Irritability

L for LISTEN

Before we go any further into asking the child what is going on and listening, it is important to know that small children rarely share their trauma or stress clearly. We can find out more from what they do and not say. So paying attention to the signs is the most important job for you even if you do not get clear verbal information.

Also, if you are already aware of the trauma or extreme and prolonged stress that happened (is happening) to this child, it is best that you leave the conversation about this to mental health professionals, by linking the family with them.

Now, if you are certain or want to check on your suspicions about the signs of possible distress you recognised, approach the child in a safe and calm environment for conversation and offer comfort if needed. The goal of this step (just like in observing) is to help you learn more about the child's needs and not to know all the details of the stressful event.

If the child opens up, express warmth, support, and acceptance, and show the child that you are there for them—without imposing or intruding on their privacy, or forcing them to speak. During conversations, remember to use empathetic and respectful listening techniques. By actively listening without interrupting and suggesting you will learn about a child's needs, you can identify the best ways to respond and support them.

At all times, keep in mind the importance of respecting the child, safeguarding their **privacy** and dignity.

On that note, we recommend that all early childhood development institutions have a high quality child safeguarding policy developed and published. Here are the guidelines on how to do this or improve your existing policy based on International Child Safeguarding Standards.

What NOT to do

Here is a helpful list of what not to do in real situation:

- Force the child to speak about traumatic event (**especially right after the traumatic event**)
- Keep reminders of traumatic event (e.g. loss of someone close)
- Interrupt or rush the child while talking
- Offer personal opinions on the child's situation
- Judge or demeanour the child's actions or feelings (e.g., "*You shouldn't feel that way*" or "*Be happy you survived...*")
- Share someone else's story
- Talk about their own story

- Make false promises
- Feel obligated to solve all the child's problems
- Physically comfort (a hug or shoulder tap) the child if they have not invited you to do so.

What to DO

Instead of opening up traumatic events and reliving the experiences right after the event occurred, it would be better to work on **children's feeling of safety and trust**, promote a **calm environment and routine** so that children regain some strength and recover without being retraumatized.

Since stress and trauma can block children's ability to interact, learn, do, your job is to give them safety, time and space, including if they need it in daily activities of the group. Don't force the activities on them nor single them out in any way. Keep them close and safe. More on this with concrete examples will follow.

L for LINK

A key element of support, after providing a safe space, is objective observation and descriptive documentation. Practitioners should restrain themselves from making any interpretations or evaluation (leave it to the mental health professionals). Perhaps you have heard of the DIE model, explaining our only natural human urge to follow the cognitive process of Description that leads to Interpretation that leads to Evaluation. Well, remember this when you document any child in your work, that it is always safer to remain on the level of description, to avoid discrimination or misleading effects. You can revisit your descriptions after some more observation and describe better, with more useful information. This will be useful to both you and other responsible adults such as parents or experts that might get involved.
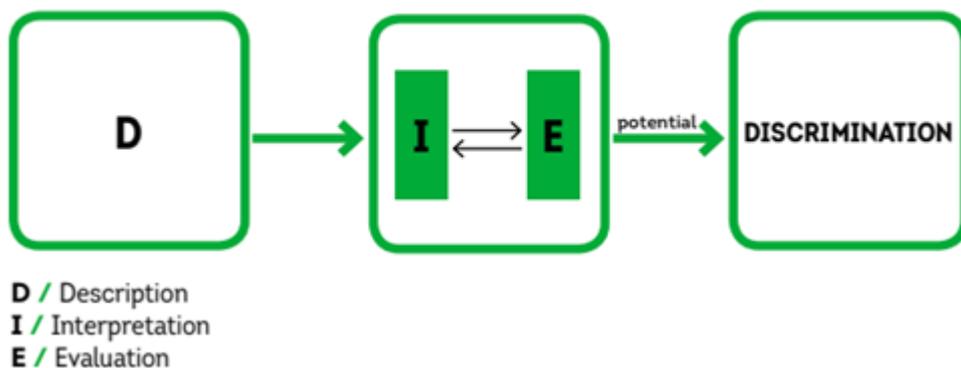
D / Description
I / Interpretation
E / Evaluation

Once behaviors or signs have been described, strategies can be developed in consultations with professionals (in-house or external) and parents. Practitioner's observations and documentations can help mental health professionals make assessments and they in turn can give counsel back to practitioners and parents on how to provide appropriate kind of support consistently.

When referring children to professionals, it is essential to inform parents in the most appropriate cultural way about available forms of help and self-help, encourage them to accept support, and **connect them with people who are known to be trusted and interculturally sensitive**. Each early childhood practitioner or kindergarten/school/Play Hub/etc. should have a list of available services for this kind of support (counseling centres for children and families).

It is important to remind ourselves of the limits of the support we as practitioners can offer. Mental health professionals (child therapists) are the only ones equipped to provide therapy (sometimes other experts such as child psychiatrists may be involved in treatment). Knowing the limits of our profession and working together with other professions (listening to their advice) means providing appropriate support to the child in our care.

Regardless of whether external experts are involved, have provided us with advice on how to proceed or none of that, the child will remain in our care. Besides, kindergarten or other early childhood settings is your area of expertise and no external expert will be able to give you ready made solutions.

Here are some tips for practitioners who are looking to implement stress or trauma-informed practice with children at risk:

- **Sensible routines and clear and consistent boundaries** - this is how we introduce safety. Visual tools can help (visually represented schedules and rules) and child participation should be implemented when setting the rules (children should have some say in daily practice that affects them). Meaningful child participation only strengthens children's mental health.
- **Organised and gentle transitions** in the day - can help reduce stress. Also give children in a sensitive state some leeway in this as they need time to fall back.
- **Attuned and warm interactions** - responsive to child's needs and developmental stage.
- **Practising regularly emotional regulation and coping mechanisms** such as deep breaths, movement breaks (including calming dance, stretching or yoga, more in Learning Session 3)
- **Play, play, play!**

Some examples in practice:

- **Morning circle** - united most of these tips. It helps the practitioner to check in with each child's needs and state of mind and supports children in developing trust to adults. It also helps children express their feelings and thoughts in a routine way.

- **Pairing children in a sensitive state with a calm and gentle mentor child** ensuring stability and trust in peers.

- **Use sensory toys** like sand or fidget toys or **art-integrated play** (guided drawing, colouring, crafts)

- Promote **structured play that allows for safe distance from stressful experience** (children making their own story with puppets, characters, masks, role-play, with more in the following block)

- **Movement play:** calm movement play, stretch.

- **Music play**: calm dancing and singing, especially of familiar music.

Source: OASBS. "That"s school" (https://www.korakpokorak.hr/materijali/to-je-skola) .

Let's take another break with a self-care activity such as deep breathing from this activity card set (ICDI: Activity Cards). These can also be used with children at any point, especially when in distress.

Deep Breaths

2.2

AGE GROUP 2 (4-5)

This activity can be used to facilitate and encourage children to feel present in their bodies and learn activities that will help them to feel relaxed, calm and comforted.

DEVELOPMENTAL DOMAIN	DURATION
Socio-emotional, physical and language	15 - 20 min

Activity Guidelines

- **Step 1:** Teach children how to become aware of their breath and to breathe deeply while also using their imaginations. Use this quick deep breathing exercise daily with the children.
- **Step 2:** While sitting or standing, ask each child to make a fist with his/ her right hand and imagine it is holding a sweet smelling flower, fruit, or favourite food.
- **Step 3:** Next ask each child to make a fist with his/her left hand and pretend it is holding a candle or fire.
- **Step 4:** Direct the children to inhale deeply the smell of the flower/fruit/ food in their left hands and then blow out the candle and fire in their right hands. Continue deeply breathing in the sweet smell through the nose and breathing out the fire from the mouth. Repeat the cycle of breathing in and out at least 3 times.

Activity also suitable for parents/guardians. Children and adults of any age can benefit from these relaxation activities.

Materials:
Open space within which to lie down or stand as a group. It can be done indoors or outdoors.

Source: The UNICEF Education in Emergencies (EiE) Handbook, UNICEF Early Childhood Development Kit Guidance (2013)

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Source: ICDI. (2022). Play for Inclusion: A handbook for non-formal services supporting young refugee children and families.

Key takeaways

- **Psychological first aid** is not just for emergency professionals—it's a compassionate, everyday response we can all offer to children in distress.
- The **3L strategy—Look, Listen, Link**—guides us in recognizing signs of emotional difficulty, building trust, and connecting children to the right kind of help.
- **"Look"** means being observant and aware of behavioral changes that may signal distress, especially those that persist over time.
- **"Listen"** involves creating a safe, respectful space where children feel seen and heard—without pressure, judgment, or intrusion.
- **"Link"** reminds us to stay within our role and confidently refer children and families to trusted professionals and culturally sensitive services when deeper support is needed.

Exercise

Larissa is 5. She enrolled in a preschool programme last year and she does not speak the language of the kindergarten well. Recently she started crying when the group went to take a nap. Her teacher Julia tried everything, finding her other activities to do, but when other children go to sleep, she cries. What should Julia do?

Suggest at least three advises to Julia based on the 3L strategy. ***Write them down in your learning journal.***

Quiz

1. What is the main goal of the "Look" step in the 3L strategy?

A) To ask the child about their feelings directly

B) To observe and recognize changes in a child's behavior

C) To refer the child to a psychologist

2. Which of the following is an appropriate way to "Listen" to a child in distress?

A) Give advice and share your own experiences

B) Let the child talk at their own pace in a safe environment

C) Encourage the child to forget the incident and move on

3. When should a practitioner refer a child to external support services?

A) As soon as the child misbehaves

B) Only after the parent makes a request

C) When the child's needs go beyond the practitioner's professional capacity

4. Which of the following should you avoid when supporting a child emotionally?

A) Offering a safe and private space

B) Making promises you cannot guarantee

C) Documenting patterns of behavior

Examples From the Practice

Case Study 1: A kindergarten supporting children after traumatic events in the community using the 3L strategy

Title: Our kindergarten days

Context: Giuseppe, a 5-year-old boy from a Roma community, had recently joined the local kindergarten. Giuseppe was quiet and withdrawn, avoiding group play and showing signs of distress from day one. After a period of several weeks, there was no improvement. Giuseppe was obviously not feeling well.

Responsive strategy: Ms. Ana, his teacher, observed Giuseppe's behavior over several weeks and documented her concerns. Instead of asking direct questions, she sat beside him during play and offered her quiet presence. At one point Giuseppe shared a broken block and said, "No house," but Ana could not understand more as it was in the local Roma language. Ms. Ana called the Roma cultural mediator, Santi, but to no avail, she too could not understand what the child was saying. She consulted the kindergarten psychologist and with the help of the mediator decided to speak with Giuseppe's family. The family shared that, due to faulty installations, there was a fire in the settlement where they used to live. The fire, among other damages in the settlement, also damaged their house and the family was now staying with the relatives in a different village. Giuseppe had to start kindergarten in the new location as it is a mandatory programme before school. Hearing all this, Ms. Ana adjusted Giuseppe's daily routine, giving him time and space when needed, and providing even a special space in the room where a "safe space" was created out of pieces of cloth by children themselves. With family consent, she connected them to a kindergarten psychologist. With the help of the mediator, the psychologist offered parents some guidance on what Giuseppe might need at this sensitive period. With time, Giuseppe began to play again, joined group activities, and gradually rebuilt trust with adults and peers. Ms. Ana's calm, respectful approach helped him feel safe without being overwhelmed.

This case shows that early childhood practitioners, even without being mental health professionals, can offer powerful psychological first aid through observation, empathy, and culturally sensitive collaboration.

Reflective questions:
- What signs of distress did Ms. Ana notice in Giuseppe, and how might similar signs appear in other children?
- How did Ms. Ana show respect for Giuseppe's cultural background?
- What would you need to know or do to ensure your own response is culturally sensitive?
- How did Ms. Ana stay within her role while still offering meaningful support?
- When might it be necessary to refer a child to external professionals, and how can we do this with care?

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Case Study 2: Supporting the community through non-formal early childhood services

Title: Our forest adventure

Context: During an afternoon session at the local Play Hub, the coordinator, Ms. Lejla, organized a storytelling and role-play activity where children could choose an animal character and invent a shared story. Children enthusiastically picked their roles—a fox, a bear, a bird, and more—each contributing a new idea to the adventure. Parents were invited to join, pairing with their children to take part in the play. One boy, Emir (age 4), chose to be a wolf but began growling loudly, knocking over props, and ignoring the story, even when his mother gently tried to redirect him.

Responsive strategy: Instead of stopping Emir's behavior immediately, Ms. Lejla observed from a distance, noting the intensity and repetition of his actions. She approached the group in the role of an "explorer in the forest," and began asking curious questions: "Who built this shelter?" "Did you or did you have lunch?" Redirecting the group, she introduced a calmer scenario—hearing the animals play, she came to see where all the fun was. Once meeting the animals, she proposed a group meal from forest ingredients that they can find and bring. The shift engaged the children and adults, including Emir, who gradually settled into helping "cook" with leaves and sticks. Later, Ms. Lejla checked in quietly with Emir's mother, who shared that Emir's father had left the family recently. Emir had been restless and clingy for weeks. Lejla mentioned to her that they were most welcomed to come again and play.

Impact: By using imaginative play and gentle redirection rather than discipline, Ms. Lejla helped Emir feel included without being singled out. The play gave Emir a safe space to express emotion while slowly rejoining cooperative activity. His mother, seeing this, felt supported and asked about future sessions. The group continued the "forest" story the next week, with Emir proudly leading the lunch preparations.

This case shows that even in informal settings like Play Hubs, psychological first aid can be offered through attentive observation, playful intervention, and inclusive, culturally sensitive approaches that support both children and caregivers**.**

Reflective questions:
- How did the coordinator use play to understand and respond to the child's emotional state?
- What role did the parent's presence play in supporting the child during the activity?
- How did the coordinator balance creativity and structure to maintain a safe, inclusive environment for all children?

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Activity Cards:

In this section, you will find two activities (below) that you can adapt and use in your own early childhood settings. These resources are designed to foster recovery in case of toxic stress or trauma and build resilience afterwards by providing emotional security, social connection, and positive identity, particularly for children experiencing adversity or marginalization.

Each activity is based on the principles laid out in the CHAVORE framework and promotes responsive, inclusive practice that supports mental well-being from multiple angles.

Activity card 1: My safe place

Goal: Promote emotional safety, calmness, and creative expression through building one's own safe space.

Age Range: 3–6 years

Time: 20–25 minutes

Materials:

- Pieces of cloth, cushions, scarves, cardboard, blankets
- Soft lighting (optional)
- Background music (soft instrumental or nature sounds)

How to do it:

1. **Explain the Activity:**
   Tell the children they will help build a "safe tent"—a special place where anyone can go to feel calm, rest, or just be quiet. Emphasize that this is their own creation and can be whatever they imagine a safe place to be.

2. **Provide Material:**
   Place all materials in the middle of the room and encourage children to choose what they would like to use. Let them collaborate or build individually. Offer help only if asked.

3. **Incorporate Music and Set the Mood:**
   Play soft background music or nature sounds to support relaxation and focus. Keep the lighting soft and the atmosphere calm. You may sit nearby silently or gently comment on the creativity without evaluating.

4. **Reflection and Sharing (Optional):**
   After building, ask: "How do you feel in your safe tent?" or "What would you like to do here?"

Validate all answers warmly without judgment. If children don't wish to speak, simply acknowledge their participation with a smile or nod.

5. **Keep It Permanently:**

Maintain the tent or shelter as a regular calm area in the room. Encourage children to use it whenever they need to feel safe or quiet.

Why it works:

- Creating a personal safe space helps children feel secure, calm, and in control of their environment.
- A designated calm area gives children a tool to manage big feelings and practice calming strategies independently.
- Building the space themselves empowers children to make choices and express their unique sense of comfort and safety.
- Keeping the safe place available teaches children that it's okay to seek quiet moments for rest and emotional balance.

Activity card 2: The healing power of play

Goal: Support emotional recovery, cooperation, and imaginative expression through storytelling and role play in a safe, playful environment.

Age Range: 3–6 years

Time: 30–40 minutes

Materials:

- Animal masks, ears, tails, or costume accessories (optional)
- Natural or recycled materials (e.g. leaves, sticks, cardboard, cloth)
- Space to build (indoor or outdoor)
- Light background music or nature sounds (optional)

How to do it:

1. **Explain the activity**

   Invite children to choose or invent an animal character. Explain that together, they'll create a story or a game—like living in the forest, building a home, or searching for food. Encourage them to imagine how their animal feels, what it needs, and what it might do during the day.

2. **Provide material**

   Lay out a variety of open-ended materials children can use to build their setting—such as shelters, food, nests, or playgrounds for the animals. Allow for creativity and improvisation.

3. **Incorporate music and set the mood**

   Play soft music or nature sounds to create an immersive atmosphere. The practitioner can join as an "outsider" asking questions like, "Who lives here?" or "Can I help you cook your forest soup?" This gently encourages storytelling without leading it.

4. **Reflection and sharing (Optional)**

   After the play, invite children to share what happened in their animal story or what their animal felt. "Was your animal happy today? What helped them feel better?" Accept all contributions with kindness. If parents are present, invite them to play too.

5. **Keep it for some time:**

   Create a small "Animal World" corner with reusable materials where children can return to this form of symbolic play anytime they choose.

Why it works:

- Symbolic play allows children to express and process feelings safely, supporting recovery from stress or difficult experiences.
- Acting out animal roles encourages children to understand different perspectives and work together toward shared goals.
- Open-ended storytelling and role play nurture creativity, flexible thinking, and decision-making skills.
- Designing their own "animal world" helps children feel secure and empowered in a playful, non-judgmental environment.

Evaluation

This section helps you reflect on and consolidate your learning about psychological first aid and the 3L strategy (Look, Listen, Link). The questions are designed to reinforce your understanding of how to recognize and respond to stress and trauma in young children, especially in diverse early childhood settings like kindergartens, community centers and Play Hubs.

Instructions

Answer the 10 quiz questions below.

To successfully complete the session, aim for a score of 80% or higher.

If needed, feel free to revisit earlier sections of the module to strengthen your understanding.

Quiz

Let's see how well you can apply what you've learned to real-life early childhood practice!

1. Multiple choice

Which of the following best describes the goal of psychological first aid in early childhood settings?

A) Diagnosing and treating children with trauma

B) Offering clinical therapy for behavioral challenges

C) Providing immediate emotional support and ensuring safety

D) Avoiding conversations about stress and trauma

2. True or False

The "Listen" step in the 3L strategy means asking children to talk about their trauma in detail so adults can understand.

3. Short answer

Name two signs of emotional distress that might appear in a 3–6-year-old child in an early learning setting.

4. Multiple choice

When applying the "Link" step, what is one of the practitioner's main responsibilities?

A) Making a diagnosis

B) Immediately removing the child from class

C) Documenting patterns and referring to professionals if needed

D) Repeating the child's story to other staff for feedback

5. Matching

Match each step of the 3L strategy to its core action.

Step   Action

A) Look   1. Provide referrals if needed

B) Listen 2. Notice and document behavior

C) Link   3. Offer empathy and calm space

6. Multiple choice

What should you do if a child begins to cry during a group activity and withdraws?

A) Tell them to rejoin the group immediately

B) Ignore the behavior—it will pass

C) Sit nearby and offer calm presence without pressuring them

D) Ask them to explain what's wrong in front of others

7. Scenario-based

You notice a child begins isolating themselves from peers and often stares blankly. What would be your first step following the 3L approach?

A) Ask the parents if the child has experienced trauma

B) Invite a psychologist to observe immediately

C) Observe and document the child's behavior over several days

D) Organize a group discussion with staff about the child

8. True or False

If a child is distressed, it is helpful to share your personal story to make them feel less alone.

9. Short answer

Why is it important to consider cultural context when supporting children experiencing stress or trauma?

Because children and families may express and cope with stress differently depending on cultural beliefs, language, or previous experiences, and support needs to be respectful and relevant to their context.

10. Fill in the blank

In the 3L strategy, educators are encouraged to _____ rather than solve all of a child's problems.

Correct answer: support and refer (or: "listen and support", "observe and guide" – accept similar accurate phrasing)

Conclusions and next steps

Summary of Learning Session 4

In this session, you learned how young children often express distress through behavior—and how early childhood practitioners can respond with empathy and practical support.

Through the 3L strategy—Look, Listen, Link—you explored the basics of Psychological First Aid: noticing signs of distress, building trust, and connecting children to the right help.

You also reviewed common stress responses and the value of observing behavior over time, while working closely with families and professionals.

Most importantly, you were reminded that being present, kind, and consistent can make a lasting difference.

Topics covered

- Understanding **distress, stress, and trauma** in young children
- Recognizing **age-specific signs** of emotional and behavioral difficulties
- Applying the **3L Strategy: Look, Listen, Link** for Psychological First Aid
- Identifying **defense mechanisms** and signs of emotional dysregulation
- Collaborating with families and professionals for long-term child support

Key takeaways

- Distress in children often appears through changes in behavior, Recognizing this early can prevent long-term emotional harm.
- **Psychological First Aid is not only for specialists** — all early childhood practitioners can support children using empathy and basic strategies.
- The **3L Strategy** (Look, Listen, Link) provides a simple, effective framework for identifying and responding to distress.
- **Each child's response to stress is unique** — observation over time is critical to understanding their needs.
- Defense mechanisms like fight, flight, or freeze are natural responses to trauma and should be understood, **not judged**.

- **Respectful, non-intrusive listening** builds trust and helps children feel seen and safe.
- **Collaboration with families and external professionals** is essential to providing comprehensive, culturally sensitive support.

Tips for practice

- Observe regularly and take notes on changes in children's behavior over time to spot early signs of distress.
- Create a calm and safe space before engaging in conversations, helping children feel comfortable to express themselves.
- Use empathetic listening — show warmth, avoid interrupting, and don't pressure children to share more than they want.
- Know your limits as a caregiver or practitioners and have a clear referral plan for when professional help is needed.
- Collaborate with colleagues and families, promoting intercultural awareness, to share observations, insights, and resources for a stronger support network around the child.

_____

As a practitioner, you can create a safe and supportive environment where young children can express their feelings and begin to heal. By carefully **observing changes in behavior**, you can identify early signs of distress and respond before challenges escalate into long-term emotional harm. Using the **3L Strategy — Look, Listen, Link**, you can take practical steps to support. Recognize that every child's response to stress is unique, and that behaviors such as fight, flight, or freeze are **natural defense mechanisms**, not misbehavior. Working closely with families and other professionals ensures the support you provide is consistent, culturally sensitive, and comprehensive.

_____

Remember: You hold a unique position, not only to educate, but to protect, and heal.

_____

Next Learning Session

Next, you'll explore how inclusive environments fosters a sense of safety, respect, and belonging for every child since their very early years.

Further readings

Online course on psychological first aid (available in several languages) developed in EU consortium by Terres des Hommes: https://childhub.org/en/online-learning-materials/psychological-first-aid-support-children

Online course on psychological first aid developed by Save the Children: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/psychological-first-aid-children-online-course

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Learning Session 5: Fostering Inclusivity and Embracing Diversity

TABLE
OF
CONTENTS

Welcome to Learning Session 5: Fostering Inclusivity and embracing diversity

In this session, you will explore how inclusive early childhood education and care, across both formal and non-formal settings, can help all children feel respected, safe, and valued. This is especially vital for young Roma children, who often face multiple barriers to inclusion and well-being. As an early childhood practitioner, whether in a formal classroom, a community centre, a playgroup, or other non-formal settings, you are in a powerful position to ensure every child experiences a sense of belonging.

As developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner explained, children grow and learn in a system of relationships that includes their family, community, and society. This perspective helps us see why your role, wherever you work, matters so much for Roma children's psychological well-being.

You'll reflect on how your own background shapes your work with children, explore the impact of unconscious bias, and learn practical strategies to create environments where all children and families feel welcome.

Let's get started!

Overview of the Learning Session

This learning session provides early childhood practitioners, across **formal, non-formal, and informal settings**, with knowledge and strategies to create **inclusive, welcoming environments** for all children, particularly those from diverse and marginalized backgrounds.

You will explore the concepts of **diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)** in early childhood settings, reflect on your personal experiences and biases, and learn practical methods to **foster belonging and participation** for every child and family.

In this Learning Session you will explore the following key topics and concepts:

- Diversity, inclusion, equity, and bias
- Culturally responsive environments (celebrating diversity)
- Gender equality in early childhood settings (ECEC)

By the end of this learning session, you will be able to:

- **Understand** the importance of diversity and inclusive education in various learning environments, including classrooms, community programs, and informal learning spaces.
- **Explore** how identity and language influence learning and group dynamics.
- **Examine** strategies to promote gender equality and challenge stereotypes.
- **Recognise and challenge** bias and stereotypes in early childhood practice.
- **Apply** inclusive practices that affirm each child's uniqueness and promote full participation.

Understanding inclusion and diversity in early childhood

In early childhood, every child's sense of belonging, identity, and dignity matters — especially for children from communities that have experienced exclusion, such as the Roma. In this section, you will explore what diversity and inclusion truly mean in practice — not just acknowledging differences, but intentionally creating environments where each child is seen, heard, and valued.

Children come into your care with a wide range of visible and invisible identities: their language, family structure, culture, ability, and gender expression are part of who they are. Inclusive practitioners recognize and celebrate this diversity as a strength — and adapt their approaches to meet each child where they are.

Let's explore three foundational concepts that shape inclusive early learning environments:

Diversity: the presence of differences in identity, background, and experience, including race, ethnicity, language, gender identity, ability, and socio-economic status.

Inclusion: ensuring that every child feels welcomed, safe, respected, and able to participate fully.

Equity: removing barriers and providing the support each child needs to succeed and thrive, rather than offering the same to all.

These principles are rooted in anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020) and multicultural learning approaches (Banks, 2016), which call on us to reflect critically on power, identity, and representation. Understanding them and the role of unconscious bias is critical to creating early learning settings that nurture every child's growth and voice.

Let's take a closer look at how diversity, inclusion, equity, and bias show up in early childhood settings — and how you can respond with intention and care.

Diversity

Diversity in early childhood includes visible and invisible differences: culture, language, race, ethnicity, ability, gender identity, family structure, and socio-economic status. Children bring their whole selves into learning — and all parts should be acknowledged and celebrated.

Inclusion vs. Integration

It's important to understand the difference between integration and inclusion, especially when working with young Roma children and families.

Integration means placing children in the same environment but expecting them to adapt without meaningful change to the setting itself.

Thus, children may be physically present, but they don't feel a true sense of belonging.

Inclusion, on the other hand, is about adapting the environment so that every child's culture, language, and identity is reflected and celebrated.

Inclusion involves:

- Listening to children's voices
- Building trust with families
- Reflecting Roma culture in materials, stories, and celebrations
- Challenging biased norms within early education systems

Inclusion means every child can contribute and thrive.

Voices from the field

Situations and conditions vary from country to country. In some places we are seeing positive trends, in others the status quo has been maintained for a long time. However, it is always important to listen to the views of the families of young Roma children and the professionals who work with them - in this way we can build up a more plastic picture of the real problems.

Here are some interesting examples, which were also published in the REYN Study.

"*In ECD services, there is no special attention being paid to cases where children do not understand the language. It is true that they most often learn the main language in pre-primary settings, but a special program should exist within ECD services. While non-Roma children can understand the teacher, the Roma are only learning the language. This problem also shows up later in primary schools.*" Families, Kosovo

"*Even compulsory pre-school education faces problems at the local level. This is because the municipalities are not prepared for it in terms of capacity. There are not enough schools, and not enough assistants who speak the Roma language.*" Professionals, Slovakia

"Our daughter could not speak Slovene when she entered school. One boy really tried to help her with the language so that he could understand her. Then her teacher decided to attend a course of Romani language to be able to help our children. All of us respected this noble decision. And we also had another teacher, who regularly took our children to the playground and worked with them on their physical fitness." Families, Slovenia

Important initiatives

There is a lot of initiatives that improve the status of young Roma children and their families. You can find an overview of them in "*Breaking the silence*" – European REYN Early Childhood Research Study.

We would like to highlight TOY for Inclusion that champions the idea that social inclusion starts with young children's desire to play together, establishing Play Hubs that promote inter-sectoral work and flexible solutions. These hubs offer contextualized responses to the unique needs of young children and their families, making services more accessible rather than labelling certain groups as 'harder to reach'.

Reflection Question

Think about the following and *write your reflections in your learning journal*:

- Are Roma children in my setting truly included — or just present?
- What messages do they receive from the language, visuals, and relationships around them?

Equality vs. Equity

- **Equality:** Everyone gets the same.

  Ex. The early childhood practitioner gives every child the same pair of right-handed scissors.

- **Equity:** Everyone gets what they **need** to succeed.

  Ex. The practitioner gives left-handed scissors to the left-handed children, rounded safety scissors to those who are still developing motor skills, and standard child-safe scissors to children who are ready for them—ensuring each child has the right tool to participate successfully and safely.

Bias in early childhood practice

Even well-meaning adults have unconscious biases that shape their expectations. Common biases include assumptions about gender roles, language abilities, or family backgrounds. Research on **intersectionality** (Crenshaw, 1989) shows us that children may experience multiple layers of discrimination - for example, a Roma girl may face both ethnic bias and gender expectations.

"*I don't think I'm biased.*" Most of us feel this way. But bias isn't always intentional, it often shows up in subtle ways we may not notice.

Think about the following and *write your reflections in your learning journal*:

- Have you ever expected less from a child because of their family's background or way of speaking?
- Do you feel more comfortable connecting with some parents than others?
- Have you unconsciously praised some children more often — or corrected others more quickly?

As early childhood practitioners, our assumptions can influence:

- Who we engage with during group time
- How we interpret children's behavior
- Which families we approach more often — and how warmly
- Whose languages and traditions we celebrate or overlook
- How much we expect from children based on their background

Why does this matter?

Our small choices add up — and they either build belonging or unintentionally reinforce exclusion. For Roma children, who may already feel on the margins, the effects of bias can be even deeper. It can affect their confidence, engagement, and mental well-being.

When a child constantly sees themselves represented negatively (or not at all), they may start to internalize the message that they don't belong — or that they must change to be accepted.

By **becoming aware** of your unconscious bias, you can:

- **Interrupt your automatic responses** and make more conscious, fair choices
- Reflect on how **your own background** shapes your expectations
- **Open up space** for every child to be seen, respected, and heard
- **Build stronger relationships with families**, especially those who may have felt unwelcome in institutional settings

Tips for practice

1. **Reflect regularly**
   Ask yourself if your expectations or reactions differ based on a child's gender, background, or language.
2. **Use diverse materials**
   Use books, toys, and visuals that reflect a variety of cultures, family types, and abilities.
3. **Observe your patterns**
   Notice who you call on, praise, or correct most often and why.

Being open to these questions isn't about blame, it's about growth. When we notice our patterns, we can create new ones that reflect fairness, care, and respect for all children and families.

Listening to children as core for inclusion

Inclusion also means that **children have a say** in shaping their learning experiences. When you listen to their ideas, preferences, and feelings, you support agency and trust. This reflects the Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2011), which focuses on helping each child develop their voice and agency — especially those often left unheard, like young Roma children in segregated environments.

Let children co-create group rules or rituals in your setting.

Use tools like:

- **Emotion check-ins**
  Invite children each morning to point to or select a visual that matches how they feel (e.g. happy, sad, tired, excited).
- **Suggestion jars**
  Provide a small box or envelope where children can add drawings or messages about what they'd like to learn or do.
- **Circle time "voice moments"**
  Set aside time for each child to share a thought, feeling, or story without interruption, encouraging active listening and turn-taking.

Even very young children can express what matters to them — we just need to ask, listen, and respond.

The results of the needs mapping we conducted in the CHAVORE initiative show that children naturally navigate towards the involvement or inclusion of other children, children who are excluded for some reason. The majority of children who participated in the research interviews demonstrated, when asked "*What could you do to help a child feel like part of the group?*" a very positive attitude.

Read a few examples of their answers:

"*I would ask her to play with us so she's not alone.*" – girl, aged 5, Hungary

"*I'd smile at them or say something kind.*" – boy, aged 4, Hungary

"*I would include her in the game, I would say 'Come on, are you coming to play with us?'*" – boy, aged 6, Kosovo

"*I would invite her to join.*" – boy, aged 5, Slovenia

"*I would tell the boy that everybody can play together.*" – girl, aged 5, Slovakia

Everyday micro-inclusion

Small acts of recognition and responsiveness create lasting impressions. Examples include:

- Learning to pronounce every child's name correctly.
- Using visuals and books that reflect all children's home cultures.
- Inviting children to teach others a word or greeting from their home language.

- Displaying rotating "family of the week" photos or drawings.

These micro-inclusions build bridges of belonging and let every child know they matter.

The **OECD (2022)** notes that everyday inclusive practices like these are especially critical for **Roma children**, who often do not see themselves reflected in mainstream early education.

Inclusion Spectrum tool

This self-reflection graphic can help you identify where your practice falls:

Unaware → Aware → Responsive → Inclusive → Advocate

This spectrum reminds us that **inclusion is a journey**. We're not aiming for perfection — we're aiming for progress, together.

Exercise: My diversity lens

Reflect: How has your own background (culture, education, language, gender, etc.) shaped the way you interact with children and families? Please take a moment and *write your answers in your learning journal*.

1. About me

- What cultural or ethnic background do I identify with?
- What language(s) do I speak or understand?
- What is my gender identity and how has it shaped my experiences?
- What was my own early childhood like (e.g., family values, traditions, education)?

2. My perspective in practice

- What values or beliefs from my background influence how I see children and families?
- How do I usually respond to behaviors or practices that are different from my own upbringing?
- Have I ever felt especially connected to a child or family because of a shared background? What happened?

3. Challenges and growth

- Have I ever made assumptions based on my own perspective that affected my teaching or communication?
- What might be one "blind spot" I have — something I didn't notice or consider because of my background?
- How do I try to stay open to learning about cultures or experiences different from mine?

4. Looking ahead

- What is one thing I can do to better recognize and celebrate diversity in my setting?
- How can understanding my own lens help me create a more inclusive environment?

1. True or False: Treating all children exactly the same ensures fairness

2. What is inclusion?

A) Giving every child the same toys and tasks

B) Creating environments where all children feel safe, valued, and able to participate fully

C) Ensuring children behave the same way

D) Allowing children to play only in small, separate groups

3. Which of these is an example of equity?

A) Asking all children to follow one routine regardless of needs

B) Displaying only the majority culture in learning environment visuals

C) Providing materials in multiple languages

D) Having one set of books available for the entire group, regardless of reading level or background

Key takeaways

- **Diversity** means recognizing and celebrating both visible and invisible differences among children and families.
- **Inclusion** ensures all children feel welcomed, involved, and valued — not just physically present.
- **Equity** focuses on giving each child what they need to thrive, not simply treating everyone the same.
- **Bias**, even when unconscious, can shape our expectations and behaviors — it must be acknowledged and addressed.
- **Inclusive early childhood education** starts with reflection and leads to responsive, equitable action in daily practice.

Examples from the Practice

From principles to practice: Inclusion in action

Inclusion in early childhood settings is truly meaningful when it moves from theory into everyday practice. In this section, you will look at how you can bring inclusive values to life through real-world decisions, environments, and interactions.

By exploring case studies and hands-on examples, you'll see how learning environments can evolve to reflect and respond to the needs of all children — through adapting spaces, affirming identities, or challenging stereotypes. Each example offers insight into how small, intentional changes can create powerful moments of connection, participation, and belonging.

Let's take a closer look at how you can transform learning environments into spaces where all children can thrive.

Inclusion in action

Inclusive practices can be applied not only in traditional classrooms but also in libraries, family centres, Play hubs, and home-based or community-led early years settings.

Case study: The language wall

In a multicultural setting that includes several young Roma children, a practitioner creates a "Language wall" displaying greetings and simple words in each child's home language — including Romani.

When a new child named **Kristína** joins the group, she immediately notices the Romani greeting on the wall. Her face lights up. She proudly points to "her" word each morning and begins using it with peers.

Soon, other children start using the greeting too. Kristína's confidence grows: she becomes more talkative and even teaches the class a short Romani rhyme with help from a Roma teaching assistant.

This small act of visible inclusion sends a strong message: "*Your language — and you — belong here.*" It boosts Kristína's confidence, strengthens her feeling of belonging, and encourages cross-cultural curiosity and respect among peers.

Case study: Accessible adventures

In an early childhood setting, practitioners redesign the building block area to ensure it is accessible for children with physical disabilities.

They lower shelves, provide floor-level building spaces, and include adaptive tools. As a result, children with mobility challenges can fully participate—and overall collaboration and creativity increase among all children.

This inclusive change not only supports access but enriches the learning experience for the entire class.

Case study: Challenging gender norms

During role-play time, a boy chooses to wear a dress. The practitioner affirms his choice without hesitation and later reads a story celebrating diverse self-expression.

This simple, supportive response opens the door for a class conversation about personal preferences. Over time, children begin expressing themselves more freely, showing greater acceptance of one another's choices.

A small moment becomes a powerful lesson in inclusion and identity.

Exercise

Each case study in this section highlights a different way you can make inclusion a reality. Take a few minutes to reflect on the following and *write your thoughts in your learning journal*:

- Which of the three case studies resonated most with you? Why?
- What would you have done similarly — or differently — in that situation?
- Can you think of a child or moment in your setting that mirrors one of the case studies?
- What new ideas or actions did the stories inspire for your own practice?

Then, move into a practical challenge: design an inclusive corner that reflects your group's diversity:

- What books, visuals, languages, or materials would you include?

If you work outside a formal classroom (e.g., in a community setting), imagine how you might adapt these ideas to a mobile or shared space.

1. What is one key feature of inclusive practice based on the case studies?

A) Ensuring children only play with peers who share their background

B) Making activities easier for some children

C) Adapting environments and materials so all children can participate meaningfully

D) Avoiding talking about differences

2. Why is it important to display children's home languages in the learning environment?

A) To encourage competition between languages

B) To validate children's identities and build a sense of belonging

C) To reduce the need for language instruction

D) To decorate the learning environment

3. How did the practitioner in the gender norms case study respond to a boy choosing a dress in dramatic play?

A) Corrected him and redirected to other clothes

B) Ignored the choice to avoid attention

C) Affirmed his choice and used it as an opportunity to support self-expression

D) Removed all dress-up clothes from the area

Key takeaways

- Inclusion happens through **everyday choices and learning environment design.**
- **Adapting materials and environments** helps every child participate meaningfully.
- Case studies show how small actions (language walls, dress-up choices, accessible spaces) can create big impacts.
- Reflecting on your practice helps you uncover new, inclusive possibilities.
- **Inclusive practice is** not confined to schools; it is **a mindset and practice** that can thrive in preschool and school settings, community centres, homes, and wherever children and families come together to learn and grow.

Tools for inclusive practice

Inclusive language guide

The language we use as practitioners shapes how children see themselves and each other. These simple tips will make your everyday speech more inclusive, affirming every child's identity and avoiding limiting labels or stereotypes.

- Use "*families*" instead of "*moms and dads*"
- Say "*children with disabilities*" (people-first language)
- Avoid gendered praise ("*strong boy*" vs. "*kind girl*")
- Replace labels like "*troublemaker*" with "*a child expressing big feelings*"
- Avoid labels like "*cappuccino kid*," "*cacao-kid*" which stereotype children based on ethnicity. Use terms that describe individual traits or interests instead.

Learning environment checklist

Use this quick checklist to assess how inclusive your learning environment really is. From books and visuals to play spaces and language, each question helps you ensure that all children feel represented and included.

- Are books culturally diverse?
- Do play materials represent a range of abilities, cultures, and family types?
- Do visuals in the setting reflect all children's identities?
- Are multiple languages represented?
- Are family photos and home culture items included in displays?

Tip for practice

This playful and meaningful activity invites children to share something from home that tells a story about who they are. It supports identity, cultural connection, and inclusive peer learning through storytelling. Ask each child to bring 3 items that represent their home or culture. Create a display and encourage storytelling about the items.

Persona Dolls

What is it?

A powerful storytelling tool using lifelike dolls with real-world identities to spark empathy, promote inclusion, and challenge bias in early learning. It is an enjoyable, meaningful way to foster inclusion and challenge discrimination, while empowering children to care, think, and act.

- Encourages participation, inclusion, and diversity
- Supports fairness and equality
- Develops communication, empathy, and problem-solving skills
- Helps children explore and respond to real-life issues like unfairness or exclusion

- Builds emotional literacy, self-esteem, and critical thinking

How is it used?

Practitioners tell stories using a "special" Persona Doll with a backstory and emotions. Children engage with the doll as a peer and help solve problems the doll encounters.

More information:

Persona Doll Manual

Gender equality checklist

This checklist helps you evaluate how your setting supports gender equity. It includes prompts about:

- Do boys and girls appear equally in posters, books, and materials?
- Are all children equally encouraged to explore STEM, arts, and emotions?
- Are both parents engaged in communication and events?
- Are family roles portrayed with diversity (e.g., dads baking, moms fixing things)?
- Do your routines avoid assigning tasks based on gender (e.g., "boys clean up blocks" and "girls clean after lunch the tables")?

Use it during planning or to reflect on improvements after observation.

Diversity audit: toys, books and environment

Use this audit as a deeper follow-up to the Inclusion Checklist. This tool helps you reflect on whether your materials — books, toys, and visuals — reflect the children and families in your group.

Ask yourself:

- Do the books and toys reflect the cultures and languages of all the children?
- Are there materials that challenge gender and cultural stereotypes?
- Do visuals and displays promote positive, diverse representations?
- Do you include musical instruments, fabrics, or household items from diverse cultures?
- Are holiday celebrations and cultural traditions represented beyond dominant or mainstream events?

Children need to see themselves reflected positively in their learning environment to feel they belong.

Listening to children: Agency in action

Encouraging children's agency is essential to inclusive practice. These reflection questions help you assess how children's voices are heard and acted upon:

- Do children make daily choices about what and how they learn?
- Are children consulted about routines, books, or songs?
- How do you encourage children of all abilities to participate in decision-making?

- Do children help create or change the rules and routines in the setting?
- Is there a space in the room where children can post suggestions or feedback?

Consider creating a simple "Weekly listening log" to document how you're listening to and acting on children's ideas.

<div style="background-color:#e8542a; color:white; padding:8px 16px; display:inline-block; border-radius:8px;">**Partnering with families**</div>

Families are partners in fostering inclusive learning environments. Reflect on your approach using these prompts:

- Do you involve parents, grandparents, and siblings in the life of the setting?
- Do you reach out to families who might feel marginalized (e.g., Roma, migrants)?
- Are you hosting a "Family Culture Week" to celebrate home traditions?
- Are communications (emails, signs on the wall) accessible in families' home languages?
- Are there informal ways for families to participate (e.g., send in photos, share traditions)?

Optional download: "Inclusive Family Engagement Planner."

The European Roma Inclusion Framework (2020) stresses: "*Trust-building with Roma families is essential, it begins with respect, recognition, and invitation*".

Exercise

Choose two tools presented in this section (e.g., Persona Dolls, Diversity audit, etc). For each one, answer the following:

- How could I use this tool in my group next week?
- What preparation or support might I need?
- How would I know it's having a positive impact on inclusion?

Write a short plan or sketch an idea to share with your peers or colleagues *in your learning journal*.

1. Which of the presented tools best supports children's emotional literacy through storytelling?

A) Gender Equality Checklist

B) Weekly Listening Log

C) Persona Dolls

D) Family Culture Week

2. Why is it important to perform a diversity audit of learning materials?

A) To meet inspection criteria

B) To avoid using old toys

C) To ensure all children see themselves positively represented

D) To reduce visual clutter

3. How can practitioners promote inclusion through family engagement?

A) Ask families to attend mandatory meetings

B) Invite families to share traditions and participate in the life of the setting

C) Limit communication to written newsletters

D) Focus on involving only the mothers

Key takeaways

- Inclusion is built through **everyday actions** — from how we speak to to how we set up our space.
- **Representation matters**: ensure children see their identities, cultures, and families reflected in the environment.
- Inclusive tools like Persona Dolls and Diversity Audits help bring values into visible practice.
- **Children's agency and family partnerships are essential**: inclusion means shared voice, not just access.
- Use checklists and self-assessments to grow your awareness and guide continuous improvement.
- These strategies are adaptable to your unique context — whether you're working in a kindergarten, a family day care setting, a drop-in playgroup, or a non-formal community programme.

Activity Cards

In this section, you'll find two practical activity cards to adapt in your early childhood setting. These are designed to help you implement the strategies explored in this learning session — with a special focus on children's identity, voice, and inclusion.

Each activity is based on the principles laid out in the CHAVORE framework and promotes responsive, inclusive practice that supports mental well-being from multiple angles.

Activity Card 1: Our language wall

Goal: Celebrate the linguistic diversity in your group and build children's pride in their home language.

Age range: 3–7 years

Time: 20–40 minutes (initial setup) + short ongoing updates

Materials:

- Large wall space or bulletin board
- Paper
- Markers
- Photos
- Translations of greetings

How to do it:

1. Ask families to share how they say "*hello*" in their home language.
2. Write each greeting with a child's photo or drawing next to it.
3. Practice using the greetings during circle time or transitions.

Why it works:

- Children feel proud and seen when their language is valued.
- This activity promotes belonging and encourages peer-to-peer respect.

Activity Card 2: Role play for all

Goal: Create a space where children can explore identity and self-expression freely.

Age range: 4-8 years

Time: 30-45 min.

Materials:

- Dress-up clothes that are not gender-labeled
- Books about diverse identities

How to do it:

1. Offer a variety of costumes and roles without assigning them to specific genders.
2. Read a story about characters challenging gender norms.
3. Encourage children to talk about their choices: "*Who are you today?*"

Why it works:

When children see that self-expression is safe and welcomed, they become more confident, inclusive, and empathetic.

Self-assessment: How confident are you?

Check how well you understood the main ideas from this session.

1. Understanding inclusion
Which of the following best describes the difference between inclusion and integration?
 A) Inclusion and integration are the same
 B) Integration means full participation; inclusion is just being present
 C) Integration places children in mainstream settings without changes; inclusion adapts the environment to every child
 D) Inclusion is for children with special needs only

2. Recognizing bias
What is unconscious bias?
 A) Intentional discrimination
 B) A conscious choice to exclude children
 C) Assumptions and beliefs we 'are unaware of that affect our behavior
 D) Only relevant in formal education settings

3. Reflective practice
True or False: "*Because I treat all children the same, I don't need to consider their cultural background.*"

4. Inclusive tools
Which of these is NOT an example of inclusive practice?
 A) Creating a language wall with all home languages
 B) Assuming all Roma families speak the same dialect
 C) Inviting families to share their songs and games
 D) Using persona dolls to discuss emotions and identity

5. Confidence rating (Scale 1–4)
On a scale of 1 (Not at all confident) to 4 (Very confident), how confident are you in each of the following?
- Recognizing unconscious bias in your own setting
- Using inclusive tools (e.g., emotion check-ins, Persona dolls)
- Communicating effectively with Roma families
- Adapting your activities to reflect diverse cultures and languages
- Promoting participation and agency for all children

Conclusion and Next Steps

Summary of Learning Session 5

In this learning session, you explored the many dimensions of fostering inclusivity and embracing diversity in early childhood settings. From foundational principles such as equity and bias to real-world case studies, hands-on tools, and daily practices, you've been invited to deep reflection and acting intentionally. You've now developed a clearer picture of how inclusive values come to life in early learning environments — not as abstract ideals, but as meaningful, everyday experiences that empower children and practitioners alike.

Topics covered

- Diversity, inclusion, equity, and unconscious bias
- Identity, language, and belonging in the early years
- Children's voice, agency, and representation
- Inclusive practices through environment design, language, and routines
- Family engagement and gender equality

Key takeaways

- **Inclusion** goes beyond physical presence — it involves **full participation, voice, and representation.**
- **Diversity** is not a challenge to overcome but a **strength** to celebrate in every setting.
- **Equity** requires **intentionally giving each child what they need to thrive.**
- **Children's agency and family partnerships are core elements** of an inclusive approach.

Tips for practice

- Greet children in their home language and use multilingual materials.
- Use tools like Persona Dolls, Inclusive Checklists, and Weekly Listening Logs to embed inclusion in daily routines.
- Create spaces in your setting that reflect all children's identities — visibly and meaningfully.
- Reflect regularly on the language you use, your assumptions, and on interactions in the group.
- Partner with families by inviting them to share traditions and be part of the life of your setting.

_____

As an early childhood practitioner, you play a powerful role in creating spaces where every child feels seen, valued, and included. By reflecting on diversity, equity, and unconscious bias, you help ensure that children experience belonging from their earliest years. Through the words you use, the routines you design, and the opportunities you provide for children's voices to be heard, you shape how they see themselves and others.

The practices explored in this session are about weaving inclusion into every aspect of daily life, whether through thoughtful environment design, empowering children's agency, or engaging families as equal partners. When inclusion becomes part of the rhythm of your setting, diversity is celebrated as a strength, and every child has equitable opportunities to thrive.

_____

Remember: true inclusion is more than being part of a group — it's about feeling valued, having a voice, and knowing that who you are truly matters.

_____

Next Learning Session

In the next session, you will explore how stress can affect young children and adult and learn self-care techniques to support the families you work with and take care of yourself at the same time.

Further readings

1. Respecting Diversity Toolkit (EDC+): https://www.skoladokoran.sk/wp-content/uploads/PR3_ECDPLUS_EN.pdf
2. Genderbest Erasmus+ Tools: https://www.genderbest.eu/files/SA_Tool_EN_FINAL.pdf, https://www.genderbest.eu/files/Toolkit%20for%20Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation%20FINAL%20ENG.pdf
3. TED Talk: "The Danger of a Single Story" (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story
4. Persona Doll Methodology https://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/www-issa/u672/Training%20Manual%20-%20Persona%20Doll.pdf
5. Teaching Young Children About Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion https://naes.agnt.unr.edu/PMS/Pubs/2021-4645.pdf
6. Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education (NAEYC Position Statement) https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/advancingequitypositionstatement.pdf
7. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Early Childhood Education and Care (OECD) https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/equity-diversity-and-inclusion-in-early-childhood-education-and-care_72ab31c1-en.html

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Learning Session 6: Self-Care

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Welcome to Learning Session 6: Self-Care

In this session, you will explore **self-care** for early childhood practitioners, children, and caregivers. Together, we will learn how looking after our own well-being can reduce stress, support resilience, and help us create nurturing and supportive environments for young children, especially those experiencing adversity or marginalization, such as Roma families.

Let's go!

Overview of the Learning Session

This session supports early childhood practitioners in building a deeper understanding of the emotional demands experienced by themselves, the children they work with, and the caregivers they support.

Common stress responses are explored as well as a range of self-care strategies. Throughout this session, practical tools, tips, routines, and read real-life case studies show how to support mental well-being in everyday practice, model healthy coping mechanisms and support family resilience.

In this Learning Session you will explore the following key topics and concepts:

- **Understanding stress**: we will identify the sources of stress and recognize symptoms of toxic stress and burnout among adults. You will understand the sources of stress and recognize its symptoms in young children.
- **Impact of stress**: We will see how adult stress affects young children's development, and why your well-being is deeply connected to theirs.
- **Self-care strategies**: Try out and reflect on self-care ideas and stress prevention strategies that can support your own well-being and that of children and parents you support with your daily work.

Learning objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- **Recognize** why self-care matters for you as an early years practitioner and for the children and families you support.
- **Explore** practical ways to promote well-being and prevent burnout in your own daily work and among parents and caregivers.
- **Learn** how to introduce self-care practices to young children to support emotional regulation and build resilience.
- **Find** simple, everyday strategies to help parents integrate self-care into their routines to foster a healthy family environment.

Understanding stress

Stress is our body's response to pressure. Any type of challenge, such as performance at work or school, a significant life change, or a traumatic event, can be stressful.

Not all stress is bad! In fact, a little bit of stress can be helpful. Experiencing stress is a normal, biological response that we all have and that is necessary for our survival. But when stress becomes constant or overwhelming, it can start to affect our well-being and that of the children and families we support.

✅ Positive stress: Feeling a bit nervous before speaking at a parent meeting can be a positive stress, it helps you focus and prepare thoroughly.

❌ Distress: On the other hand, being constantly overwhelmed by high child-to-staff ratios, lack of planning time, and repeated behavioural challenges without support can lead to negative stress or even burnout.

Types of stress responses

As we said, not all stress is harmful, in fact, it's a normal part of life. What really makes a difference is how long it lasts and whether supportive relationships are available.

In early years settings, this means that your presence and care as a practitioner can play a big role in helping children (and parents) cope with stress in healthy ways.

The visual below highlights three types of stress:

POSITIVE — Brief increases in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels.

TOLERABLE — Serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships.

TOXIC — Prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships.
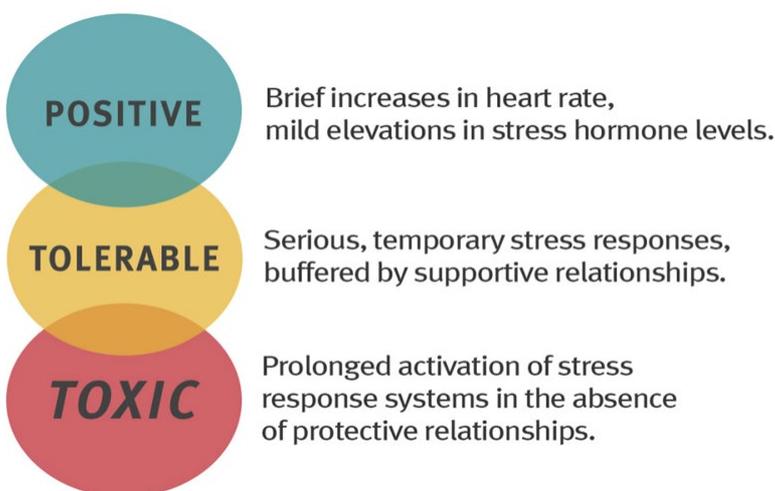
Roma and disadvantaged children and stress

For many Roma and disadvantaged children, stress can be made worsened by factors like discrimination, poverty, unstable housing, or lack of access to health and social services. These ongoing challenges may turn tolerable stress into toxic stress, especially if there aren't consistent, supportive adults in their lives.

As an early years practitioner, your role is vital: by offering safe, respectful spaces and emotionally responsive interactions, you help protect children from the harmful effects of stress and promote resilience. The tools and strategies you'll explore in this session are especially important in supporting young Roma children's well-being.

Stress responses

When we feel threatened, overwhelmed, or unsafe, our bodies respond automatically. These stress responses are part of our survival system, and children experience them too.

There are three common types of stress responses:

- **FIGHT:** you feel anger, become irritable, or react impulsively

- **FREEZE**: you become numb, indecisive, feel stuck and short of breath

- **FLY**: you get away, feel nervous, are restless and need to move

Let's see how these stress responses might look in young children's everyday experiences:

🟥 FIGHT

A child becomes frustrated during play when others don't share toys. He yells, throws objects, or hits.

🟦 FREEZE

A child is asked to speak in front of a group. She freezes, avoids eye contact, and becomes silent and tense.

🟩 FLIGHT

When a loud noise occurs or an argument starts, the child runs to a corner or hides under a table to avoid the scene.

Common symptoms of stress

When we feel threatened, overwhelmed, or unsafe, our bodies respond automatically. These stress responses are part of our survival system, and children experience them too.

> This image shows some of the most common physical and emotional symptoms, including fatigue, headaches, muscle tension, stomach problems, and difficulty concentrating.

These reactions are completely normal. But if they go on for too long without support, they can lead to burnout or affect your physical and emotional well-being.

Self-assessment
Symptoms of stress

MUSCLE TENSIONS
APATHY
ANXIETY
LOW ENERGY
SKIN IRRITATION
TEETH GRINDING
STOMACH PROBLEMS
HEADACHES
FATIGUE
TROUBLE CONCENTRATING
DECREASED SEX DRIVE
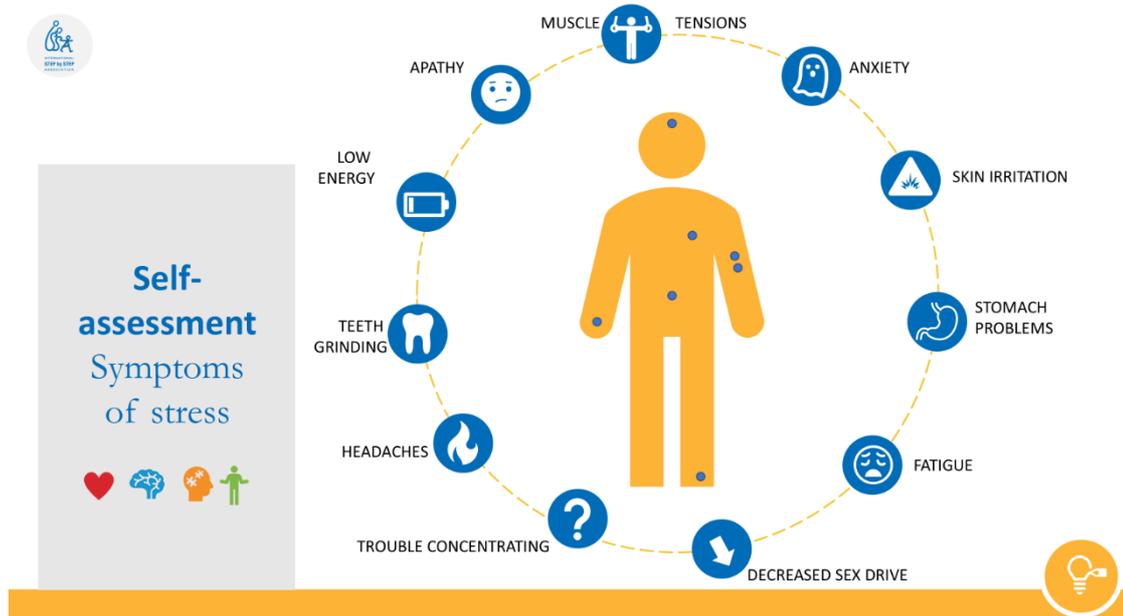
Why does this happen?

We experience stress when there is an imbalance between the sources of stress and the resources we have at our disposal, to cope with that stress. When the stressors outweigh our coping resources for a longer period, this imbalance can lead to exhaustion, health problems, and burnout.

IMBALANCE

SOURCES OF STRESS

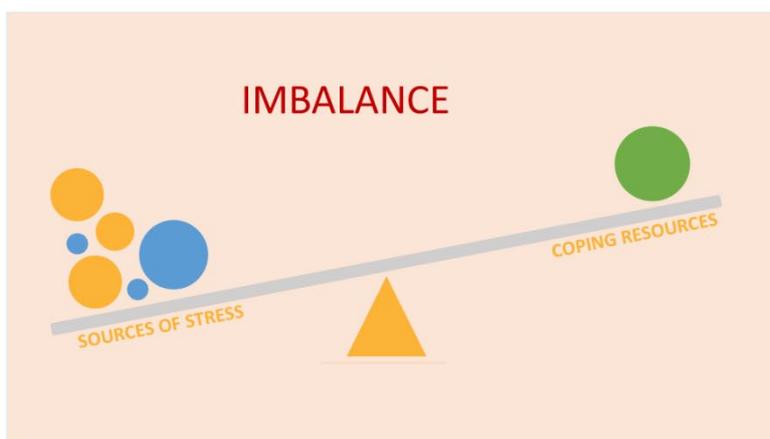COPING RESOURCES

Imbalance between sources of stress and resources to cope

Tips for practice

In your work with children and families, including Roma communities, these signs of stress might not always be obvious. Children may not say "I'm stressed," but their behaviour often tells the story. Being tuned into your own stress, and recognising it in others, helps you respond with patience, empathy, and care.

Reflection Question

Take a quiet moment to think about what's causing stress in your daily life, both at work and at home. *Write your reflections in your learning journal*.
Make a simple list and divide it into two parts:

- **Personal** – things outside of work (e.g. family, finances, health)
- **Professional** – things related to your role as an early childhood practitioner (e.g. workload, behaviour challenges, lack of support)

There are no right or wrong answers; just be honest with yourself.

Tip: Keep this list somewhere safe. You will come back to it later in the session as we explore strategies to manage and balance these pressures.

The Window of tolerance

Now that we've explored what stress is and how it can show up in our bodies and minds, it's time to understand how we manage it. Everyone has a personal threshold for how much stress they can handle before feeling overwhelmed: this is called your Window of tolerance.

When you are within your window of tolerance, you feel like you can deal with whatever is happening in your life. You may still feel stress, but it feels manageable, you remain calm, focused. When we are in this state, we are *"emotionally regulated"*.

Understanding emotional regulation

We all have moments when our emotions feel too big, we are overwhelmed, frustrated, or anxious. In those moments, it can be hard to think clearly or make kind, healthy choices.

That is where emotional regulation comes in.

In these moments it is helpful to calm ourselves down to help us to return to our window of tolerance, the zone where we feel safe, balanced, and able to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively.

- **Emotional regulation is not one-size-fits-all**: Everyone is unique, so remember that different things work for different people.
- The key is **practice**: The more often we practice emotional regulation techniques, the more natural and effective they will become.

Some helpful approaches to emotional regulation are:

1. Self-Regulation

This is what we do on our own to bring our nervous system back into balance. It might include:

- Deep breathing
- Grounding exercises (like focusing on what you can see, hear, or touch)
- Movement (gentle stretching, walking, or dancing)

These strategies help us stay in or return to our "window of tolerance" — the place where we can think clearly, manage emotions, and make good decisions.

2. Soothing

Soothing is anything that helps reduce stress in a gentle, comforting way. For example:

- A warm drink
- Wrapping yourself in a blanket
- Listening to calming music

These small actions have a powerful effect on our body and mind, especially when we are feeling dysregulated.

3. Co-regulation

This happens between people, when connection and emotional attunement help calm and steady both sides. For instance:

- A caregiver speaking softly to a distressed child
- A colleague offering a kind word when you're overwhelmed
- A shared hug or moment of eye contact that helps both people feel safe

Co-regulation is especially important for young children, who are still learning how to manage big emotions. In early years settings, your calm presence can help children (and even parents) feel more settled and supported.

Tips for practice

In many Roma communities, co-regulation often takes place in intergenerational settings, where grandparents, aunts, or older siblings play an important role in comforting young children. Soothing lullabies, storytelling, or rhythmic movements (like rocking) are commonly used to calm and connect — rich cultural practices that support emotional development.

As early years practitioners, recognising and valuing these forms of co-regulation can strengthen trust with Roma families and build on what they already do well at home.

Reflection Question

Take your learning journal and reflect on the following:

"*What are the activities that make you feel calm and at peace?*"

Take a moment to make a list of activities that help you to get back to balance when you are stressed or overwhelmed. These could be simple everyday actions or special routines that bring you comfort.

As we have learned, it is crucial to keep the balance between sources of stress and coping strategies. This list will help you identify what works best for you.

BALANCE

SOURCES OF STRESS

COPING RESOURCES

"What helps you to keep the balance?"

Now that you've identified your stressors and the activities that help you feel calm, it's time to make a simple plan.

Think of common stressors in your life, both personal and professional, and write down how you can respond to each one with something that helps you feel better. These might be things you enjoy, routines that bring you peace, or strategies that have worked in the past.

For example:

- Going for a short walk outside during your break
- Taking a few deep breaths before starting a new task
- Listening to calming music on your way home
- Writing down your thoughts in a journal
- Doing a short stretching or movement activity
- Talking to a supportive colleague or friend
- Drinking a warm cup of tea in silence
- Setting clear boundaries for rest time (e.g., turning off notifications after work)

Key takeaways

- **Stress is normal** — it's how our body responds to pressure. Sometimes it helps us focus, but when it becomes too much for too long, it can overwhelm us.
- We usually react to stress in one of three ways:
- **Fight, Freeze, or Flight**, and the response depends on how safe or supported we feel in the moment.
- The goal is not to avoid stress entirely, but to stay within our **window of tolerance** which is the space where we can think clearly, respond calmly, and feel in control.
- **Emotional regulation** helps us get back to balance. This includes:
  - Self-soothing strategies (like breathing or movement)
  - Soothing routines (like music, touch, or rituals)
  - Co-regulation with others (like calm connection with a child or trusted adult)

Supporting young children through stress

Young children experience stress in ways that may seem small but are deeply significant. Transitions, changes in routine, family tensions, or overstimulation can all affect their behavior, emotions, and well-being. Because young children are still developing the language and skills to express themselves, stress can show up in many ways, like:

- Physical signs (like tummy aches)
- Emotional signs (like sudden crying)
- Behavioral changes (like clinginess, tantrums).

Healthy stress can help children learn and grow (like trying a new game), but high or ongoing stress, known as *toxic stress*, can harm a child's development.

🟢 **Positive Stress**

What it means:

Mild stress that helps children learn and grow. It's brief and manageable, it goes away quickly with love and support.

Example:

- A 4-year-old feels shy starting at a new preschool, but their teacher gives him/her a warm welcome, and soon he/she makes friends and feels happy.

🟡 **Tolerable Stress**

What it means:

A bigger, harder feeling that might be upsetting or sad, but adults give lots of comfort and help the child feel safe again.

Example:

- A 5-year-old's dog passes away, and he/she feels very sad. His/her parents talk with him/her about feelings, offer comfort, read stories about loss, and spend extra cuddle time together.

🔴 **Toxic Stress**

What it means:

Really big, scary, or sad feelings that might happen again and again, and no one is there to help the child feel safe. This can hurt a child's body and brain over time, and it can disrupt development.

Example:

- A 3-year-old often hears fighting at home and doesn't get comfort from adults. He/she may stop talking much, have tantrums, or get sick more often.

Your Role Matters

Whether in an early years setting or at home, your role as a trusted adult makes a real difference. By being observant, responsive, and emotionally available, you help children feel safe and supported.

Simple actions like:

- Offering comfort
- Keeping routines predictable
- Helping children name and manage big feelings

…are powerful steps in protecting their mental health and building the coping skills they'll carry into the future.

Practical strategies for supporting young children through stress

1.   Create predictable routines

Use consistent daily schedules with visual cues to help children feel secure and reduce anxiety. Consistency builds trust and helps children know what to expect next.

Prepare children for transitions and changes with advance warnings and simple explanations.

2.   Offer emotional language

Label emotions in real time: "*You look frustrated that it's cleanup time.*" Over time, this builds their emotional vocabulary and helps them name what they feel.

Read books and tell stories that explore feelings and coping.

3.   Use calming techniques

Introduce age-appropriate calming strategies like:

- Deep belly breaths ("*Smell the flower, blow out the candle*")
- Gentle movement or stretching
- Listening to soft music or calming sounds
- Squeezing a stress ball or hugging a stuffed animal

4.   Create a calm-down space

Designate a cozy area with soft materials, sensory items, and visuals of calm strategies.

Teach children that this is a comforting space for taking a break, not a place for punishment.

5. Model healthy coping

Show children how you manage your own emotions using calm voice, deep breaths, or talking through problems. Children learn by watching, your self-regulation teaches them how to handle strong feelings.

Narrate your process: *"I'm feeling a little overwhelmed, so I'm going to take a deep breath.*"

6. Encourage play and expression

Offer open-ended play that lets children work through emotions (e.g., role play, drawing, sensory bins).

Listen without judgment or rushing to "fix" their feelings.

7. Build connection and safety

Greet each child warmly and with intention.

Provide lots of reassurance, especially during times of change or uncertainty.

8. Communicate with Families

Share observations gently if a child seems stressed.

Collaborate with parents on consistent strategies between home and school.

Reflection Question

Think of a time when a child in your care showed signs of stress. *"How did you respond in the moment? What might you add or change based on the strategies above to better support that child's emotional regulation?"*

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Key Takeaways

- Young children's brains are growing fast!
- When they feel safe and loved during tough times, their brains actually grow stronger. These **supportive relationships** help build the foundation for lifelong emotional well-being and learning.
- When big scary feelings happen without comfort, the stress can get "*stuck*" in the body and brain, it can slow their learning and make it harder to feel safe later.
- **Recognizing and gently responding to stress early** helps build a child's lifelong resilience, emotional well-being, and learning skills.

Caring for the caregivers

Parenting is joyful - but also stressful

Parents of children aged 0 to 6 often carry a heavy load. The early years are filled with:

- Sleep disruptions
- Constant supervision
- Emotional ups and downs
- Juggling work, family, and finances
- Very little time for themselves

Add to this the costs of childcare, medical needs, and early learning and it's no surprise that many parents feel exhausted, overwhelmed, or stretched to their limits.

What research tells us

Studies show that high levels of parenting stress can negatively affect both parental mental health and child outcomes (Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012).

When caregivers are under chronic stress, it becomes harder to stay patient, emotionally available, or responsive, even with the best intentions.

Roma parents, in particular, may face additional, ongoing stressors, such as poverty, insecure housing, limited access to services, or social discrimination. These pressures can make parenting even more challenging and increase the risk of toxic stress for both parent and child.

However, research also highlights that supportive relationships, community belonging, and respect for cultural identity are key protective factors. This means that practitioners who build trust and affirm Roma families' strengths can play a powerful role in reducing stress and promoting resilience.

Coping strategies such as establishing routines, accessing social support, practicing self-care, and seeking professional guidance when needed can help manage stress. Mindfulness practices, parent support groups, and therapy have also been shown to reduce anxiety and improve overall well-being in parents of young children.

Tips for early childhood practitioners

As an early childhood practitioner, you play a vital role not only in children's development but also in supporting the well-being of their parents. By offering empathy, resources, and encouragement, you can be a crucial source of support and guidance.

Here are some practical ways to help parents care for themselves and cope with stress:

1. **Normalize the challenges of parenting**
   - Reassure parents that feeling overwhelmed, tired, or anxious is common and not a sign of failure.
   - Use inclusive language and a nonjudgmental tone to create a safe space for parents to open up.

   For example: Instead of saying *"You should try to spend more one-on-one time with your child,"* you might say, *"Many parents find it hard to get individual time with their children—what has worked for you so far?"*

   This approach shows empathy and invites sharing without placing blame.

2. **Encourage small acts of self-care**
   - Remind parents that self-care doesn't have to be elaborate or time-consuming.
   - Suggest manageable practices like taking a short walk, calling a friend, or enjoying a quiet moment with a cup of tea.

3. **Share practical self-care tips**

   Offer: handouts, newsletters, or casual verbal reminders that promote simple self-care ideas such as:

   - Rest when the child sleeps
   - Stay hydrated and eat nourishing meals
   - Take screen-free breaks to reduce mental fatigue
   - Do one small thing each day that brings joy

4. **Promote positive coping strategies**

   Help parents develop coping tools by:

   - Encouraging them to establish daily routines for predictability
   - Teaching calming techniques like deep breathing or mindfulness
   - Connecting them with parenting resources, workshops, or hotlines

5. Provide community and connection

- Facilitate parent discussion groups or informal chats during drop-off or pick-up
- Connect parents with local support networks or mental health professionals
- Encourage peer support by introducing parents to one another

For example: You could say, *"We're starting a short coffee chat every Thursday morning after drop-off for any parents who'd like to share tips or just connect. No pressure—just a space to talk and support each other."*

This creates a welcoming atmosphere and encourages informal peer connection without requiring a big commitment.

6. Model and advocate for balance

- Be mindful of your own well-being and communicate the importance of balance
- Validate that asking for help is a strength, not a weakness
- Help parents reframe "self-care" as an essential part of good parenting, not an indulgence.

Reflection Question

Take your learning journal and reflect on the following:

Think about a recent interaction you had with a parent who seemed stressed or overwhelmed. "*How did you respond? What might you say or do differently next time to help them feel more supported and to encourage their self-care?*"

Key Takeaways

By actively supporting parents in their journey, you help create a **healthier and more resilient family environment**. When parents feel seen, supported, and empowered, they are better equipped to nurture their children's development and take care of themselves along the way.

Self-care for early childhood practitioners

Working in early childhood is deeply rewarding, but also physically and emotionally demanding.

Early childhood practitioners often experience significant stress as they balance the emotional, physical, and cognitive needs of young children with work-related demands and personal responsibilities.

Common sources of work-related stress at early childhood settings are:

- High job demands and constant multitasking
- Lack of professional, emotional and peer support
- Poor communication and unclear expectations
- Limited or lack of feedback
- Criticism
- Unclear job roles and responsibilities
- Long working hours
- Overall job dissatisfaction
- Overwhelming administration
- Dissatisfaction with working conditions or available tools/resources
- Lack of support from leadership
- Working in isolation or feeling lonely at work
- Lack of emotional support, signs of burnout

These factors not only affect your well-being. They can also impact how you show up for children and families.

Two common reactions to chronic stress

Practitioners often respond to stress in one of two ways:

- **Over-involvement**
  You take on too much, feel overly responsible, or blur the boundaries between your work and personal life. You might work through breaks, stay late, or feel guilty when you can't do more.
- **Under-involvement**
  You emotionally withdraw or start to disengage. You might feel cynical, numb, or detached, early signs of burnout or compassion fatigue.

Both reactions are normal, human responses to stress. They're signals that something needs to shift, not signs of failure.

The emotional weight of caring

As an early years practitioner, you do not just manage your own stress but you are also often exposed to the stress, trauma, and emotions of others. Whether it is a distressed child, an overwhelmed parent, or a tense family situation, you carry the emotional weight of the work.

Over time, this can create an additional burden that affects your own well-being.

Common responses to ongoing emotional exposure

- **SECONDARY TRAUMA**: You begin to feel the stress or trauma of others as if it were happening to you. You might carry home the emotional pain of children or families, replay distressing moments in your mind, or feel emotionally raw.

- **COMPASSION TIREDNESS**: After repeated exposure to others' struggles, you may begin to shut down emotionally. This is your nervous system protecting itself, but it can make it hard to stay connected or feel present with others.

- **BURN OUT**: When stress and emotional overload go on for too long without enough support, you may feel numb, overwhelmed, or unable to keep giving. You might stop feeling effective, lose motivation, or withdraw from your role.

These reactions are not signs of weakness: they are signs that you have been carrying too much, for too long, without enough rest or support.

Why self-care matters

As you learned in the introduction of this learning session, self-care is not a luxury: it's a professional necessity. To care for others, we need to care for ourselves first.

Keeping the balance between sources of stress and coping strategies is essential if you want to continue being there for children and families, especially those experiencing trauma or marginalisation, such as Roma communities.

Circle of Concern and Influence

When we are stressed or overwhelmed, it helps to pause and sort our worries into two categories:

- Things we can influence
- Things we cannot control

This simple activity, known as the Circle of Concern and Influence, helps us focus our energy where it matters most and let go of what is out of our hands.

Take your learning journal and follow these instructions.

Step 1: List your worries (your Circle of Concern)

Take a moment to think about the things that are currently stressing or worrying you in your work or personal life.

Write down 5–7 concerns.

Examples:

- A child's home situation
- Lack of time for planning
- Policy changes
- Financial pressure
- A colleague's behavior
- Health issues

Step 2: Identify what you can influence (your Circle of Influence)

Now, go through each item and ask yourself: "*Can I do something about this directly? Even something small?*"

If **YES** → Move it to your Circle of Influence (Even tiny steps like asking a question, offering support, or setting a boundary count.)

If **NO** → Leave it in your Circle of Concern (Acknowledge it, but give yourself permission to release it from daily focus.)

Focusing on what you can influence helps reduce feelings of helplessness and puts you back in the driver's seat.

Step 3: Reflect

- Which concerns are outside your control?
- How much energy are you spending on those?
- Where could you shift your attention to regain a sense of control or peace?

🟢 *Focus on what you can influence*

Use your time and energy on what you can control. This builds confidence, reduces stress, and helps you feel more empowered, even in challenging situations.

Team-based self-care for a healthy work environement

Self-care isn't just an individual practice, but it thrives when supported by a team culture that values connection, reflection, and mutual support.

Building small but meaningful routines into team life can reduce stress, prevent burnout, and strengthen trust across your setting.

Here are some simple, effective team-based practices to support a healthy and emotionally safe work environment:

1. **CHECK-IN and CHECK-OUT**

   At the beginning and end of the day or week, create a safe space for team members to briefly share how they're feeling.

   - What's going well?
   - What's been heavy?
   - What support do I need today?

2. **TEAM REFLECTION MEETINGS:**

   Set regular times to:

   - Reflect on your work with children and families
   - Share challenges and problem-solve together
   - Update one another on key developments

3. **CELEBRATING MOMENTS:**

   Make space to recognise:

   - A breakthrough with a child
   - A positive moment with a family
   - A professional goal reached

4. **ENERGIZERS AND BONDING ACTIVITIES:**

   Have fun together! Whether it's a shared lunch, a quick game, a walk, or a creative activity, these moments help:

   - Strengthen team bonds
   - Reduce tension
   - Create a more joyful atmosphere

Reflection Question

Take your learning journal and reflect on the following:

"Think about your professional working environment. What are the coping resources you and your team have at your disposal to keep the balance?"

Key takeaways

When adults take care of their own well-being, they are better equipped to create calm, responsive, and nurturing environments for young children.

By modelling:

- Resilience
- Emotional regulation
- Self-care in action

…you help children feel safe and supported and show them what healthy coping looks like in real life.

Self-care checklist for early childhood practitioners

☐ I take at least one mindful breath or break every workday.

☐ I seek support (talk to a peer, supervisor, or mentor) when I feel overwhelmed.

☐ I set clear boundaries around work and rest time.

☐ I practice kindness toward myself when I make mistakes.

☐ I prioritize sleep, hydration, and regular meals.

☐ I find small daily joys (music, nature, laughter) that refill my energy.

☐ I recognize that caring for myself is an essential part of caring for children.

1. What does the "Window of Tolerance" describe in relation to stress?

A) The amount of time a person can stay awake

B) A child's ability to follow routines

C) The range within which a person can manage stress and remain emotionally regulated

D) The limit of physical activity a person can perform before fatigue

2. Which of the following is an example of co-regulation?

A) A child calming down alone in a quiet room

B) A caregiver using a soft voice and breathing together with a child during a stressful moment

C) A practitioner meditating privately

D) Ignoring a child's emotional outburst to encourage independence

3. What is a key characteristic of toxic stress in children?

A) It is brief and goes away quickly

B) It occurs with strong adult support

C) It happens repeatedly without supportive relationships

D) It helps children grow and learn

Examples from Practice

Case Study 1: Helping Thomas find his calm

Subtitle: Supporting a 4-year-old's emotional regulation through consistent, responsive practice

Context: Thomas is a 4-year-old attending a full-day preschool program. Over the past few weeks, his teachers observed that Thomas was frequently becoming overwhelmed during transitions, especially after outdoor play. He would throw toys, refuse to participate in group activities, and sometimes yell or cry. These behaviors escalated quickly and disrupted the classroom flow. Thomas struggled to express what was upsetting him, often saying, "I don't know" or shutting down when approached.

Responsive Strategy: Thomas's educators implemented a consistent emotional regulation strategy tailored to his needs:

- **Calm corner creation**: A quiet calm space was introduced in the classroom, featuring a soft rug, some puppets, visual breathing prompts, and calming sensory items.
- **Emotion coaching**: During calm moments, the teacher used emotion cards to help Thomas learn to label feelings (e.g., *"frustrated," "disappointed," "tired"*). She modeled self-talk such as, "I feel upset, so I'll take a breath."
- **Predictable transitions**: A visual schedule with photos was used to prepare Thomas for transitions, and a two-minute warning was given before each change. The teacher provided extra adult support right before and after outdoor play.
- **Co-regulation ritual**: When Thomas began to show signs of distress, the teacher gently guided him to the calm corner and offered to do breaths with him using a stuffed puppet and a short breathing rhyme.

Impact: Over several weeks, Thomas's emotional outbursts decreased significantly. He began independently moving to the calm space when feeling overwhelmed. He started using feeling words like *"angry"* or *"too much"* to express his state and often asked for the puppet when he needed help. Other children began to follow his lead, making the calm corner a shared tool in the classroom culture.

This case illustrates how young children can learn to regulate their emotions when adults respond with empathy, consistency, and developmentally appropriate tools. By creating safe, predictable routines and co-regulation opportunities, practitioners can empower children like Thomas to recognize, express, and manage stress in healthy ways.

Task: *Take your learning journal* and design a plan or a drawing of a calm corner creation. Engage with children you work with, your colleagues, or parents in the discussion on how to set up a calm corner in the settings you work, list what you would put into the corner (i.e. materials, toys, items, etc).

- *"What challenges might arise when creating a calm corner in your setting?"*
- *"How might you adapt the materials to children of different ages or needs?"*

Case Study 2: Empowering parents through gentle self-care

Subtitle: Creating a community space where caregivers can learn to manage stress and rediscover their strengths

Context: In a weekly community-based playgroup for parents and children aged 3–6, facilitator Amina noticed that many caregivers arrived visibly stressed, often expressing feelings of overwhelm, guilt, and isolation. One parent, Sara, a single mother of two young children, shared that she had no time for herself and felt "*burned out every day*." Informal conversations revealed that many parents had little awareness of self-care strategies and lacked support networks.

Responsive strategy: Amina, a trained early childhood educator and parenting support worker, introduced gentle, low-pressure self-care practices into the playgroup's weekly routine:

- **Weekly "wellness pause":** At the start of each session, parents were invited to participate in a 5-minute mindful breathing activity while children were engaged in free play nearby. Calming music and visual breathing cards were introduced.
- **Parent check-in board:** A "*How Are You Today*?" feelings board allowed parents to place a magnet on an emotion each week, sparking brief supportive chats and normalizing emotional sharing.
- **"Care for the caregiver" table**: A small station with tea, affirmations, and rotating self-care ideas (e.g., journaling prompts, simple stretches, or reflection cards) was available for parents to use during sessions.
- **Community reflection activity**: Parents created and shared "small wins" on leaves for a growing "Tree of strength," reinforcing collective encouragement and resilience.
- **Gentle follow-up**: Amina checked in with individual parents during outdoor play or cleanup, using open-ended questions like "*What helped you get through this week*?" to keep the self-care conversation going.

Impact: Over several months, parents reported feeling more seen, less alone, and more able to pause for themselves—even briefly—during the day. Sara began setting aside 10 minutes at night to write in a journal and shared that "just those few minutes changed my whole mood." The group culture shifted from one of quiet exhaustion to one of mutual encouragement. Parents began suggesting and leading their own self-care ideas in the group.

This case highlights how non-formal early childhood practitioners can play a vital role in supporting parental well-being. Through small, consistent gestures of care and community, practitioners help parents reconnect with themselves, reduce stress, and feel supported—ultimately strengthening the family environment and the child's development.

Task: Choose one of the above-mentioned routines and try to implement it in your own settings or at home, then *write your reflections in your learning journal*. You can also add a photo.

1. What is one way practitioners can support young children experiencing stress in early childhood settings?
A) Ignore emotional behavior to build resilience
B) Use consistent routines and calming techniques like deep breathing
C) Send children home when they show stress symptoms
D) Avoid talking about feelings to prevent distress

2. How did the calm corner support Thomas's ability to self-regulate?
A) It gave him a place for punishment
B) It distracted him with toys unrelated to emotions
C) It provided a safe space with emotional tools and adult support for co-regulation
D) It isolated him from others when he was upset

3. What was one benefit reported by parents after participating in Amina's community-based self-care activities?
A) They became less involved with their children
B) They reported more confidence and used small self-care routines daily
C) They avoided group participation
D) They requested formal therapy for all sessions

Activity Cards

In this section, you will explore practical tools and activities you can adapt and use in your own early childhood settings. These resources are designed to foster self-care practices, particularly for children experiencing adversity or marginalization and their parents.

Each tool is based on the principles laid out in the CHAVORE framework and promotes responsive, inclusive practice that supports mental well-being from multiple angles.

Activity 1: "Turtle time" – A calm-down activity for young children

Goal: To help children learn to pause, breathe, and relax their bodies when they feel overwhelmed, frustrated, or overstimulated and to support emotional regulation and stress relief through imaginative play, body awareness, and breathwork, using a turtle puppet and storytime to guide the experience.

Age Range: 3–6 years

Time: 10–25 minutes

Materials:

- A turtle puppet or stuffed turtle (named something friendly like "*Toby the turtle*")
- A picture book to introduce the idea of calming down (e.g. "*A quiet place"* by Douglas Wood, or "*The feelings book"* by Todd Parr)
- A quiet space or calm-down corner (optional: pillows, soft lighting, ocean sounds)

How to do it:

1. **Start with a story** (5–7 minutes)

Gather the children and read a story that explores emotions or the value of quiet time. Pause during the story to name feelings and ask gentle questions:

- *"Have you ever felt like Sophie when she got really angry?"*
- *"What helps you feel better when you're upset?"*

2. **Introduce Toby the turtle**

 Bring out the turtle puppet and say something like:

"This is Toby the turtle. When Toby feels overwhelmed or upset, he doesn't yell or stomp, he takes Turtle Time to calm down. Want to learn how he does it?"

Let children hold or greet the puppet to build connection.

3. **Lead the "Turtle time" ritual** (3–5 minutes)
   - **Turtle pose**:
     - o Sit cross-legged or kneel on the floor.
     - o Tuck your head down, wrap your arms around your knees—like you're pulling into your shell.
     - o Close your eyes if you want.
   - **Turtle breathing**:
     - o "*Let's breathe like Toby the turtle*."
     - o Inhale slowly through your nose: "*Smell the ocean breeze*…"
     - o Exhale slowly through your mouth: "*Blow a bubble*…"
     - o Make a quiet "*whooo*" sound as you breathe out.
     - o Repeat 3–5 times with the puppet modeling each breath.
   - **Turtle thoughts**:
     Ask: "*What helps you feel calm and safe, like Toby in his shell*?"
     Let children share ideas like snuggles, music, hugs, or soft blankets.

4. **End with gentle movement**

   "Toby feels calm now. He's ready to peek out of his shell—slowly stretch, wiggle your fingers, and give yourself a big hug."

Optional enhancements:

- **Calm corner:** Create a space with a soft rug, a turtle toy, emotion cards, and the storybook.
- **Daily routine:** Use "Turtle time" regularly after transitions or high-energy activities.
- **Home connection:** Send a "Turtle time" story card home so parents can use it at bedtime or after tough moments (see below the story card)

Why it works:

This activity teaches self-regulation through:

- Embodied movement (curling into shell = physical containment)
- Breathing to reduce physiological stress
- Imaginative play to make calming strategies feel safe and fun
- Story and connection to build emotional vocabulary

Toby the Turtle's Turtle Time Story Card

A calm-down story card for children ages 3–6

Hi! I'm Toby the Turtle.

I'm a happy little turtle who loves to play, explore, and make new friends.

But sometimes… I feel all kinds of big feelings.

Sometimes I feel frustrated.

Sometimes I feel sad.

Sometimes I feel like shouting or hiding in my shell forever!

Do you ever feel that way, too?

☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Sometimes

When I start to feel too full of feelings, I take a special break.

I call it Turtle Time.

Would you like to do it with me?

🐢 Toby's Turtle Time steps:

1. Get into Turtle Pose

 I sit down and curl up—head down, arms around my knees.

 I tuck into my shell. It's quiet in here.

2. Take 3 Turtle Breaths

 I breathe in slowly through my nose: Smell the ocean breeze...

 I breathe out gently through my mouth: Blow a bubble…

 (Do it with me: In… 2… 3… Out… 2… 3…)

3. Think a calm thought

 I think of something that helps me feel safe—like warm sunshine,

 my favorite blanket, or a hug from someone I love.

What helps you feel calm?

☐ Hugs   ☐ Music   ☐ My bed   ☐ My pet   ☐ Something else: _____

4. Peek out slowly

 When I feel ready, I stretch out my arms and legs and come out of my shell.

 Now I feel calmer and ready to keep going.

Activity 2: The five-minute anchor

Goal: To help parents feel more grounded, present, and calm in just five minutes, no special tools or prep needed.

Time: 10 minutes

How to do it:

1. **Find a quiet spot** (or as quiet as possible):

This could be the bathroom, a corner of the bedroom, or even the parked car.

2. **Set a timer for 5 minutes.**

Let yourself fully pause during this time. If five minutes feels like too much, start with two or three.

3. **Ground your body**

Sit comfortably. Place your feet flat on the ground. Rest your hands in your lap. Notice the support beneath you.

4. **Breathe intentionally** (1 minute)

Take slow, deep breaths:

- Inhale through the nose for 4 seconds
- Hold for 2 seconds
- Exhale slowly through the mouth for 6 seconds
- Repeat

5. **Use the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique** (2 minutes)

Gently bring your awareness to your senses:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste or one positive word you can say to yourself (like "strong" or "patient")

6. **Choose a kind thought** (1 minute)

Say something kind to yourself, such as:

- *"I'm doing my best."*
- *"It's okay to take a moment for me."*
- *"I am enough, just as I am today."*

7. Re-enter your day gently

Stretch, roll your shoulders, and take one more deep breath before rejoining your family.

Why it works: Parents often do not have time for long breaks or formal self-care routines. This activity provides a fast, effective reset during stressful moments or at the start/end of a busy day.

Activity 3: Pause & Plant – A self-care activity for early childhood practitioners

Goal: To ground yourself emotionally, reflect on your impact, and reconnect with the joy and purpose of your role.

Time: 10-15 minutes

Materials:

- A small plant (real or symbolic: succulent, seedling, or even a paper cutout)
- Pen and sticky notes or a small journal
- A quiet corner or outdoor space (even just by a window)

How to do it:

1. **Pause & breathe** (2 minutes)

Find a calm spot. Close your eyes.

Take 3–5 deep breaths. With each breath out, release the noise of the day.

- Inhale: "*I am here.*"
- Exhale: "*I am enough*."

2. **Reflect & write** (5 minutes)

On your sticky note or your learning journal, answer one of these prompts:

- "*Today, one small way I made a difference was…*"
- "*A moment that made me smile was…*"
- "*I am proud of how I…*"

Stick the note on your plant pot or nearby. It's your growth reminder.

3. **Plant your intention** (5 minutes)

Look at your plant. Imagine it represents your care and energy.

As you water it or simply observe it, silently repeat:

- "*As this plant grows, so do I.*"
- "*I deserve care, too.*"
- "*Tiny things grow into something meaningful*."

Optional add-on:

Invite your colleagues to do this once a week as a shared ritual. Create a staff "*wellness garden*" wall with sticky notes and reflections.

- **It builds mindfulness through ritual.**
  The act of pausing, breathing, and engaging the senses helps calm the nervous system. This reduces cortisol (stress hormone) and increases present-moment awareness- a known stress regulator.

- **It reconnects you to purpose.**
  Reflecting on your impact (even briefly) activates the brain's reward center, helping to counter burnout and emotional exhaustion. Small wins re-anchor you in why your work matters.

- **It creates a symbolic "anchor."**
  The plant becomes a visual metaphor for your growth, patience, and nurturance — qualities you give to others daily but may forget to honor in yourself.

- **It supports emotional regulation**.
  Taking 10 minutes of reflective time helps practitioners reset emotionally after challenging moments with children, families, or coworkers.

- **It fosters a sense of control.**
  In a field where days are full of unpredictability, this simple, repeatable practice gives you one thing you can tend to and control: your own inner care.

Self-assessment: How confident are you?

Check your understanding of the main ideas from this session.

For each statement, tick the option that best reflects your current confidence.

I understand why self-care is essential in early years practice.

□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

I can explain the difference between positive, tolerable, and toxic stress in children.

□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

I can name at least three emotional regulation strategies for myself or others.

□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

I feel more confident in recognising signs of stress in young children.

□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

I understand the risks of burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue.

□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

I can describe how co-regulation supports emotional safety.

□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

I am aware of the added stressors Roma families may face and how to respond respectfully.

□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

I've identified at least one change I want to make to support my own or my team's well-being.

□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

What next?

If you answered "*Not yet*" to any item:

- Revisit the relevant section of this learning session
- Talk with a colleague or supervisor
- Write down a small goal for change or improvement

Remember: Reflection is the first step toward growth. Even small actions make a big difference over time.

Conclusion and Next Steps

In this learning session, you explored the foundational role of self-care in early childhood: for practitioners, young children, and parents alike.

You examined how understanding stress and its impact can empower adults and children to develop healthier coping mechanisms, enhance emotional regulation, and build resilience.

You learned how the well-being of early childhood practitioners directly influences the emotional climate of settings, and how burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue can be mitigated through intentional self-care practices and team-based support.

You discovered practical tools and strategies - from calming techniques and reflection prompts to wellness rituals - that help create nurturing environments where children and adults can thrive.

You also engaged with real-life examples illustrating how responsive routines, mindful pauses, and supportive communities can transform the experiences of both young children and caregivers. These stories reinforced your capacity to advocate for collective well-being and model resilience in your professional role.

Working with Roma Families: culturally sensitive support in practice

Roma families across Europe often face multiple layers of stress, including poverty, housing instability, limited access to services, discrimination, and exclusion. These challenges do not just impact adults, but they deeply affect the well-being and development of young Roma children.

As an early years practitioner, you are in a unique position to provide a sense of safety, dignity, and emotional support for both children and caregivers.

Topics covered:

- Understanding the **unique stressors** experienced by early childhood practitioners, children, and parents.
- **Emotional regulation and stress response**s (Fight, Flight, Freeze; Window of Tolerance).
- **Self-care strategies** tailored to different groups: young children, parents, and professionals.
- **Practical tools and routines** to support mental well-being and resilience.
- Case studies showcasing real-life applications in early childhood settings.

- The **role of practitioners** in supporting families and modelling healthy coping.

- **Stress is a natural response** but can become harmful if left unmanaged; **self-care is a necessity, not a luxury**.

- Emotional regulation techniques support both adults and children in **returning to balance**.

- Creating predictable routines, safe spaces, and empathetic communication enhances young children's ability to **cope** with stress.

- **Practitioners are at risk of burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue**, therefore protective practices and support systems are crucial.

- **Small, consistent self-care actions** (for practitioners, teams, parents, and individuals) have a long-term impact on well-being, home/setting environment and workplace culture.

Tip for practice

- **Notice your own stress signs** and regularly check in with your emotional state. Use breathing, grounding, or calming rituals to stay within your Window of tolerance.

- **Support young children's emotional regulation** through consistent routines, calm-down spaces, and co-regulation practices like deep breathing and storytelling.

- **Engage caregivers gently** by validate their experiences, share quick self-care tools (like the "Five-minute anchor"), and normalize that parenting is hard, especially without support.

- **Care for yourself as a professional**. Create small but regular rituals (e.g., "Pause & Plant"), reflect on daily successes, and build peer connection through check-ins and wellness tools.

- **Use reflection prompts with your team** to explore emotional well-being and support collective resilience. Consider group wellness activities that promote shared care.

- **Model emotional openness** with children, colleagues, and families. Demonstrate what healthy coping looks like because your example matters more than perfection.

- **Integrate small wellness actions into your work culture**, like setting up calming visuals, keeping affirmations nearby, or simply making space to pause and breathe.

_____

As an early childhood practitioner, you play a vital role in supporting the emotional well-being of children and families. This work is deeply rewarding, but it can also bring unique stressors — for you, for the children in your care, and for the parents you work alongside. By understanding how stress shows up in the body and mind, and how it impacts behaviors and relationships, you can respond with empathy and intention.

In this session, you have explored practical tools and routines that promote resilience and balance. From calming rituals and co-regulation practices for young children, to quick, accessible self-care strategies for parents and professionals, you have learned ways to create safe, predictable spaces where everyone feels supported.

Remember: self-care is not a luxury, it is a necessity. By caring for yourself and modelling healthy coping, you not only protect your own well-being but also inspire children, families, and colleagues to build resilience together.

Next Learning Session

In the next session, we will explore how preschools and early learning environments can actively promote mental health and well-being for every child and how by adopting a community approach in your everyday practice you will contribute in building emotionally safe, inclusive, and supportive environments, where children's emotional, psychological, and social needs are recognized and nurtured from the very beginning.

Further Readings

The Importance of Self-Care: Nurturing the Caretaker Within
https://www.centerffs.org/blog/2024/05/09/importance-self-care-nurturing-caretaker-within

Ways for Early Childhood Educators to Prioritize Mental Health
https://mybrightwheel.com/blog/ways-for-early-childhood-educators-to-prioritize-mental-health

Nurturing the Nurturer: Elevating Educator Well-Being
https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/journal/nurturing-the-nurturer-elevating-educator-well-being-and-competencies-through-comprehensive-wellness-programs/

Self-Care: The Key to Your Child's Mental Health
https://www.skillpointtherapy.com/self-care-key-to-childs-mental-health/

Promoting Social and Emotional Health in Young Children
https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/mar2018/promoting-social-and-emotional-health

Age-by-Age Guide to SEL Activities
 https://www.parents.com/age-by-age-guide-to-sel-activities-6752825

Essential Self-Care Strategies for Parents https://southeastpsychnashville.com/essential-self-care-strategies-for-parents-navigating-every-age-and-stage/

Creating a Nurturing Home Environment for Every Family Member
https://pmpediatriccare.com/blog/creating-a-nurturing-home-environment-for-every-family-member/

Understanding and Addressing Caregiver Burnout
https://www.bakercenter.org/self-care-2

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Shanker, S. (2016). Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life. Penguin.

Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P. (2012). The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind. Bantam.

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CHAVORE Self-paced Learning

Lesson 7: Community Approach to Mental Health and Well-Being

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Welcome to Learning Session 7: Community Approach to Mental Health and Well-Being

Welcome to the final learning session of this self-paced learning program!

Congratulations on coming this far. By reaching this last session, you have demonstrated dedication and commitment to deepening your knowledge and practice to better support young Roma children and their families. After completing this session, you will have successfully accomplished the entire learning programme.

In this session, we will explore how **a community approach** can effectively support the mental health and well-being of young Roma children. You will learn how mental health and well-being can be integrated into the daily practices, routines, and cultures of both **formal and non-formal early childhood settings**, creating environments where every child feels safe, valued, and included.

While **grounded in the whole-school approach to mental health** (Weare and Nind, 2011; Barry et al., 2013), this session acknowledges the need for inclusive strategies that are also **relevant for practitioners working outside formal education systems**.

This approach recognises that **mental health** is not an isolated issue to be addressed individually but a **collective responsibility** shared by early childhood practitioners, families, communities, and local services. By adopting a community approach, we can ensure that mental health and well-being are embedded as core components of children's learning and development from their earliest years.

Throughout this session, you will **reflect** on your own practices, **learn about** key principles, enablers, and barriers, and **discover** practical strategies to strengthen your role in promoting the well-being of all children—especially young Roma girls and boys—within your community.

We are glad to have you with us on this journey.

Let's begin this final step together.

Overview of the Learning Session

This learning session focuses on the community approach to mental health and well-being for young Roma children and their families. It explores how both formal and non-formal early childhood settings can integrate mental health promotion into their daily practices, cultures, and wider community connections. The session introduces the principles of a community approach, highlights key enablers and barriers to effective implementation, and provides practical examples to support early childhood practitioners in creating emotionally safe, inclusive, and supportive environments where every child can thrive.

In this Learning Session you will explore the following key topics and concepts:

- The importance of a **community approach** to mental health and well-being for young Roma children
- **Principles and framework** of the community approach in early childhood settings
- **Key enablers and barriers** to effective implementation of a community approach

Learning Objectives

By the end of this learning session, you will be able to:

- **Define** the community approach to mental health and well-being and explain its relevance for young Roma children in both formal and non-formal early childhood settings.
- **Identify** the key principles underpinning the community approach and how these can be applied in daily practice.
- **Recognise** the role of families, communities, and intersectoral partnerships in promoting mental health and well-being.
- **Describe** key enablers and barriers to implementing a community approach in early childhood settings.
- **Apply** strategies for embedding mental health promotion into everyday routines, interactions, and organisational cultures.
- **Reflect** on your own practices and identify areas for strengthening community-based mental health and well-being initiatives in your work settings.

Why a community approach to mental health and well-being of young Roma children?

It is widely acknowledged that promoting mental health and emotional well-being in children is key to their overall development. Supporting these areas helps children build the social and emotional skills needed to achieve positive outcomes in education, employment, and life more broadly (OECD, 2015).

In the 21st century, mental health and well-being must be embraced as core components of children's success—especially in the face of increasing stress, inequality, and mental health challenges (Cefai et al., 2021). A whole-school approach is widely recognized as the most effective way to promote mental health in education.

Since it is recognised that educational settings are only one of many places where the environment affects young people's wellbeing (Wyn et al., 2000), A whole-school approach involves the entire community—children, early childhood practitioners, formal and non-formal early childhood settings, families and caregivers, and local services—to create safe, inclusive, and supportive environments where every child can thrive.

Based on findings that count not on early childhood settings solely, but rather on the very broad range of stakeholders that are active in **formal and also non-formal learning environments**, we will use the term **"community approach"** (instead of widely recognised "*whole-school approach*") for the purposes of this learning session. With this notion, we wanted to highlight the importance of not only formal, but also non-formal learning environments, which play an important role in communities where young Roma children (girls and boys) live and develop.

A community approach means taking action both through what children learn (curriculum) and through the broader environment they grow up in (context). It combines strategies that support all children with more focused help for those who may be at risk.

Children are at the center of this approach, surrounded by support from early childhood practitioners, peers, families, and the wider community. Collaboration with local professionals and partners helps strengthen the support for children who need it most.

These different levels are all connected and influence each other over time. This approach not only supports children's mental health, but also takes care of the well-being and growth of the adults who support them — including early childhood practitioners and families (Cefai et al., 2021).

Figure 1 : The whole-system, whole-school approach (WSA) to wellbeing and mental health
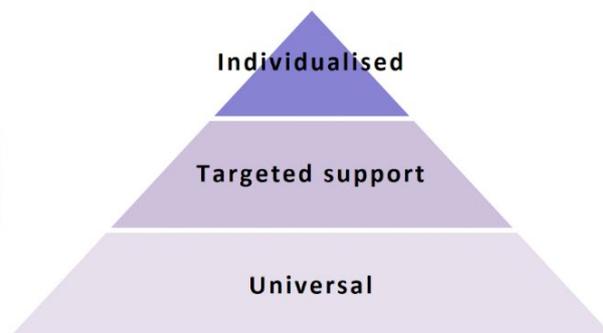
Figure 2 : Levels of support in the whole-school approach

Source: European Commission. (2024). Wellbeing and mental health at school: Guidelines for education policymakers. Publications Office of the European Union. https://doi.org/10.2766/901169

Description of the image

Figure 1 illustrates the whole-school approach (WSA) to wellbeing and mental health, highlighting interconnected areas: Local community, Parents, caregivers and families, Staff's education and wellbeing, Pupils' voices, Extra-curricular activities, Classroom climate, School climate and ethos, safe space, Curriculum, Pupils with mental health needs. The outer ring also mentions **coordination and consistency of measures with other policy areas such as health, migration, social services, employment, and justice**.

Figure 2 illustrates three levels of support—universal, targeted, and individualised—within the WSA framework.

The benefits of this approach are far-reaching. It enables **early action and prevention**, **reduces stigma**, improves **motivation, self-esteem, resilience**, and fosters **positive relationships and a sense of belonging**. It also contributes to lower dropout rates, better academic outcomes, and the overall emotional and social development of all children—not just those considered "at risk" (WHO, 2022; OECD, 2021; Cefai et al., 2021).

Mental health must be a right, not a privilege, embedded across the entire formal and non-formal educational settings.

Reflection Question

Take a moment and think back to **when you first started working** in an early childhood setting (formal or non-formal):

- *Were **mental health** and **well-being** a **visible part of the early childhood setting's culture**?*
- ***How was it supported** (if at all)?*
- *If it wasn't in focus, why do you think that was?*

Now, think about **your current working place** (in formal or non-formal learning environment):

- *Are **mental health** and **well-being visible parts of your current working place's culture**?*
- *If yes, please give examples.*
- *If not, why do you think this is the case?*

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Key takeaways

- Mental health is essential for children's development and success. It should be a right, not a privilege;
- Children grow not only in schools but also in families and community settings therefore, a **community-based approach** is needed;
- This approach involves formal and non-formal settings, families, *early childhood practitioners,* local services, and peers working together;
- It helps prevent problems early, reduces stigma, and improves self-esteem, motivation, relationships, and sense of belonging;
- It leads to better early childhood settings outcomes, lower dropout rates, and stronger emotional and social development especially important for young Roma children and communities.

1. Why is it important for early childhood settings to address mental health and children's well-being?

A) Only diagnosed children need support.

B) Children need therapy in early childhood settings.

C) Mental health impacts learning, relationships, and long-term success.

D) Early childhood practitioners are underworked.

2. What is a key benefit of a community approach?

A) Less parental involvement

B) Early recognition of distress and stronger resilience

C) Greater children competition

D) Stricter academic focus

3. Who does the community approach involve?

A) Only early childhood practitioners of an early childhood setting (formal or non-formal)

B) Just children with diagnoses and their families

C) The entire community: preschool children, early childhood practitioners parents (caregivers), and local services

D) Only management of an early childhood setting (formal or non-formal)

Implementing a community approach to mental health and well-being

In practice, the community approach to mental health and well-being—grounded in a whole-school approach (Cefai et al., 2021)—is most effective when it is part of a long-term, coordinated effort. This involves integrating mental health and well-being promotion into the everyday culture and routines of early childhood settings. The approach relies on collaboration across the whole community, actively involving early childhood practitioners, children, families, and local stakeholders.

Below, we present a possible implementation of a community approach to mental health and well-being in communities, where Roma families with children live. The presentation is based on a recent NESET Report, prepared for the European Commission (Cefai et al., 2021). Examples of how community approach to mental health and well-being can be implemented in formal (e.g. preschools, early childhood settings as well as non-formal (e.g. community playgroups, outreach sessions) early childhood settings are also provided.

The community approach to mental health builds upon the principles of a systemic whole-school approach, adapting them to early childhood settings and the communities where young Roma children and their families live. In practice, this means that mental health and well-being are not treated as"silos" (isolated, individually), but as collective responsibilities embedded within daily interactions, relationships, and environments in which children grow up.

A community approach to mental health and well-being should be implemented by following the **principles** below (based on and adapted from: Cefai et al., 2021):

1. **Embedding mental health and well-being into everyday practice**

   Early childhood practitioners integrate mental health promotion into daily routines, play, and learning activities, creating emotionally safe, predictable, and nurturing environments. This includes fostering social and emotional skills, building resilience, and ensuring that both young Roma children feel valued and included.

   Examples

   Formal early childhood setting

   - Practitioners integrate daily group activities focusing on emotional literacy (e.g. naming feelings, recognising emotions in self and others) using culturally relevant stories and language.

   - Create visual emotion charts with images and symbols to help children express their feelings.

   - Include songs, dances, and games from Roma traditions to strengthen identity, belonging, and positive self-image.

Non-formal early childhood setting

- Organise weekly parent-child play sessions in community early childhood settings or informal settings, focusing on games that build connection, trust, and emotional security.

- Use simple puppets or storytelling circles to discuss feelings and coping strategies in a culturally familiar way.

- Facilitate (mobile) toy libraries with resources promoting social-emotional development, bringing materials directly to communities with limited access.

2. Engaging families and communities

Practitioners actively involve Roma families in planning and implementing activities that promote well-being, recognising their cultural strengths, traditions, and perspectives on child development. Outreach strategies, home visits, and community-based events can help build trust and ensure that mental health support is appropriate and accessible.

Examples

Formal early childhood setting

- Involve Roma parents in co-designing well-being activities, asking what makes their children feel safe, happy, and confident.
- Host monthly "Family Well-being Days" with discussions on children's mental health, nutrition, sleep, and positive discipline, facilitated by Roma community mediators or leaders.
- Display children's and families' photos, crafts, and cultural symbols within settings to strengthen a sense of belonging.

Non-formal early childhood setting

- Conduct home visits to discuss children's well-being with parents, identify worries, and share practical tips on supporting emotional development at home.
- Organise community events celebrating Roma cultural days with integrated well-being activities such as mindfulness-based games, circle dances, or relaxation exercises for parents and children.
- Facilitate peer-support groups for Roma mothers and fathers to discuss parenting challenges, stress management, and supporting children's mental health and well-being.

3. Building collaborative partnerships

Effective implementation relies on strong partnerships between early childhood settings, health and social services, NGOs, Roma community organisations, local authorities and other relevant stakeholders. These partnerships enable coordinated support for children's and families' mental health needs, combining universal promotion with targeted interventions for those at greater risk.

Examples

Formal early childhood setting

- Collaborate with local health clinics to provide onsite screening or workshops on child development, stress, and mental health.
- Invite Roma cultural mediators or NGO representatives to co-deliver sessions with early childhood practitioners on mental health promotion.

Non-formal early childhood setting

- Work with Roma community associations to identify families needing targeted mental health support and co-organise referrals to professionals.
- Partner with local libraries or cultural early childhood settings to hold weekly play-and-learn sessions focused on emotional well-being, creativity, and cultural expression.

4. Addressing structural barriers

The approach includes identifying and addressing social determinants of mental health, such as discrimination, poverty, housing insecurity, and barriers to accessing services, which disproportionately affect Roma communities. This requires advocacy, intersectoral collaboration, and policies that promote equity and inclusion from early childhood onwards.

Examples

Formal early childhood setting

- Advocate with local authorities to reduce administrative barriers preventing young Roma children's enrolment in early childhood settings.
- Implement anti-discrimination workshops for practitioners of any profession to strengthen inclusive, culturally safe practices within early childhood settings.

Non-formal early childhood setting

- Set up mobile outreach teams to reach families in Roma settlements with mental health and well-being information, support, and play-based activities.
- Facilitate discussions with community leaders to identify systemic barriers affecting mental health (e.g. housing insecurity, discrimination) and plan joint advocacy actions.

5. Ensuring professional development and well-being of practitioners

For this approach to be sustainable, early childhood practitioners who work with young Roma children need training on mental health promotion, trauma-informed care, cultural competence, and gender-responsive approaches. Their own well-being must also be supported through reflective practice, supervision, and supportive organisational cultures.

Examples

Formal early childhood setting

- Schedule regular reflective practice sessions for early childhood practitioners to discuss challenges, successes, and emotional impacts of their work.
- Provide training on trauma-informed approaches, cultural competence, and gender-sensitive mental health support.

Non-formal early childhood setting

- Train Roma community mediators and parent volunteers on mental health promotion and referral pathways.
- Organise informal peer-support circles among non-formal *early childhood practitioners* and volunteers to share experiences and strengthen resilience.

6. Applying a multi-level, integrated framework

Implementation of Community Approach to Mental Health and Well-being operates at three interconnected levels:

- Practice level: creating inclusive, emotionally supportive interactions and activities within formal and non-formal early childhood settings.
- Institutional level: fostering organisational cultures and policies that prioritise mental health and well-being.
- Intersectoral level: collaborating with health, social, and community services to address wider needs and strengthen community resilience.

Formal early childhood setting

- Align mental health promotion with institutional policies (e.g. anti-bullying, inclusion) and collaborate with intersectoral services such as child protection, health, and social services for comprehensive support.

Non-formal early childhood setting

- Build local networks linking non-formal *early childhood practitioners*
- Roma community associations, health services, and early childhood practitioners to ensure coordinated interventions for families.

7.   Monitoring and evaluation

To ensure impact, it is important to monitor changes in young Roma children's well-being, practitioner practices, and community engagement. Evaluation should include the voices of Roma families and community members to ensure that services are responsive and respectful to their realities. The examples below can ensure that monitoring and evaluation are not top-down or extractive, but instead empower Roma families and communities to shape mental health and well-being approaches to fit their needs, realities, and aspirations.

Examples

Formal early childhood setting

Child well-being monitoring

- Use simple, visual well-being check-ins where children place their photo or symbol (including culturally relevant images) on a "feeling board" each morning, enabling practitioners to notice patterns and discuss concerns with families when needed.
- Regularly observe and record children's social-emotional behaviours (e.g. confidence in group play, ability to express needs) using structured observation tools adapted to young Roma children's cultural and linguistic context.

Practitioner practice evaluation

- Conduct termly reflective practice sessions where early childhood practitioners review their approaches to supporting mental health and identify areas for improvement, facilitated by an internal or external mentor.
- Include self-assessment checklists focusing on cultural responsiveness, gender sensitivity, and mental health promotion activities.

Family and community voice integration

- Hold feedback meetings with Roma parents and caregivers to discuss their perspectives on how the setting is supporting their children's well-being and what could be improved.
- Use anonymous suggestion boxes or short oral surveys (supported by community mediators if needed) to gather input from families on services, routines, and cultural inclusivity.

Non-formal early childhood setting

Child well-being monitoring

- During community playgroup sessions, facilitators observe and note children's participation, engagement, and emotional expressions in a simple logbook after each session.
- Collect short narratives from facilitators and volunteers describing changes they notice in children's confidence, communication, and relationships over time.

Practitioner and volunteer practice evaluation

- Facilitate regular debrief sessions with community facilitators and Roma mediators to reflect on what activities worked well for supporting children's well-being and what needs to be adjusted.
- Use participatory tools, such as drawing reflections or group mapping, to capture experiences of volunteers and mediators about their practice and learning needs.

Family and community voice integration

- Organise informal feedback circles with Roma parents and caregivers at the end of a playgroup cycle to discuss what they found helpful, any concerns, and suggestions for future sessions. These can be facilitated in Roma language by trusted community members.Question
- Conduct short interviews with Roma community leaders to understand community-level changes and gather recommendations for adapting mental health and well-being activities to local realities.

Cross-cutting M&E practices for both settings

- Involve Roma parents and community members in designing monitoring tools to ensure they are culturally appropriate and accessible (e.g. oral feedback options, visuals, home-based discussions).
- Share evaluation findings back with families and communities in simple, respectful formats (e.g. community gatherings, visual posters in settings) to demonstrate accountability and encourage continued engagement.

This **community approach to mental health and well-being** supports young Roma children's well-being by fostering environments where they feel safe, respected, and supported. It builds on the strengths of families and communities, while addressing systemic challenges that affect children's mental health and development from the earliest years.

Examples provided, which can be used as an inspiration for your own contexts, show that a community approach to mental health and well-being is not a stand-alone programme, but an integrated way of working that strengthens relationships, cultural identity, inclusion, and resilience across all levels of early childhood systems and communities.

Exercise 1: For early childhood practitioners in formal early childhood settings: Reflecting on embedding well-being into daily practice

Instructions:

1. **Read the following scenario:**

In your early childhood setting you notice that some young Roma children rarely express their feelings during group activities. Recently, you introduced an emotion chart, and one child consistently points to 'sad'. You want to reflect on how your daily practices support children's mental health and well-being.

2. **Reflect and write your answers to these questions:**

- *What steps have you already taken to integrate mental health and well-being into your daily practice for all children?* List at least two examples.
- *Thinking about the child who chooses 'sad', what might this behaviour tell you about their well-being and emotional safety in the setting?*
- *How could you adapt your environment, routines, or interactions to better support this child and other young Roma children in feeling emotionally safe and included?*
- *Who in your team or community could you consult or involve to understand this child's needs better and respond in a culturally sensitive way?*

Summarise your reflections in your learning journal.

One practical change you will implement in your daily routine this week to strengthen mental health and well-being support for this particular young Roma child in your setting. Consider reflecting on all 7 principles of a community approach to mental health and well-being (presented in the section before).

Exercise 2: For early childhood practitioners in non-formal early childhood settings: Reflecting on community engagement and well-being

Instructions:

1. **Read the following scenario:**

You organise a weekly parent-child playgroup in a Roma settlement. Recently, during puppet storytelling about feelings, a few parents shared that they feel unsure how to talk to their children about emotions. Some parents left early and seemed disengaged from the activities.

2. **Reflect and write your answers to these questions:**
- *How do you currently engage Roma parents in your playgroup sessions?* Give one example.
- *Why might some parents feel uncomfortable discussing emotions with their children in this setting?*
- *What culturally appropriate strategies could you use to build parents' confidence in supporting their children's mental health and well-being at home?*
- *How can you involve Roma community leaders or mediators to strengthen trust and participation in your sessions?*

Summarise your reflections in your learning journal.

A short plan describing one new activity or approach you will introduce in your next session to better engage parents and support children's emotional well-being. Consider reflecting on all 7 principles of a community approach to mental health and well-being (presented in the section before).

Key takeaways

- A community approach works best when it is **long-term, coordinated**, and part of the everyday culture of early childhood settings;
- It is based on the **whole-school approach**, adapted to early childhood and Roma community contexts;
- Mental health and well-being should not be treated as separate activities but as a **shared responsibility**, embedded in daily routines, relationships, and environments;
- **Collaboration across the community** is essential involving early childhood practitioners, children, families, and local stakeholders;
- This approach applies to both **formal settings** (preschools, kindergartens) and **non-formal settings** (community playgroups, outreach programs).
- The first core principle is **embedding mental health and well-being into daily practice**, meaning practitioners support emotional safety, social-emotional skills, resilience, and ensure young Roma girls and boys feel valued and included.

Exercise 2 – Non-Formal Settings

- Parent engagement is essential, but some Roma parents may feel uncertain or uncomfortable discussing emotions.
- This may be due to cultural norms, lack of confidence, or fear of judgment.
- Use culturally respectful strategies and involve Roma community mediators/leaders to build trust.
- Reflection should lead to one new activity or approach to better support parent involvement and children's emotional well-being.

1. What is a key principle of the community approach to mental health and well-being in early childhood settings?

A) It focuses mainly on targeted interventions for children with mental health problems.

B) It treats mental health and well-being as isolated issues to be addressed individually.

C) It embeds mental health and well-being into daily routines, relationships, and environments.

D) It requires practitioners to work alone without involving families or communities.

2. How can practitioners effectively engage Roma families and communities in promoting children's mental health and well-being?

A) Delivering information sessions without involving families in planning.

B) Involving Roma parents in co-designing well-being activities, asking what makes their children feel safe and happy.

C) Developing well-being activities independently and informing families later.

D) Focusing only on practitioner-led interventions within the classroom.

3. Why is practitioner well-being important in implementing a community approach to mental health?

A) Because it ensures practitioners feel appreciated by their managers.

B) Because practitioners' well-being directly affects their ability to create emotionally safe and supportive environments for children.

C) Because it is required for compliance with employment regulations.

D) Because it allows practitioners to complete administrative tasks more efficiently.

Key enablers and barriers in implementing a community approach to mental health and well–being

Effective implementation of a community approach to mental health and well-being in formal and non-formal early childhood settings can be complex. Successful implementation depends on several **key enablers**, including **strong leadership, early childhood practitioners engagement, and a shared understanding** of mental health and well-being **as a collective responsibility**. Research (Higgins and Booker, 2022) highlighted a positive and supportive 'early childhood settings culture' where 'all members of the early childhood settings community acknowledge the 'importance of well-being promotion' as a facilitator to effective implementation of the (in the case of this learning program) community approach to mental health and well-being.

When leadership commits to well-being as **a strategic goal**, it creates space for consistent communication, role modeling, and dedicated time for professional learning. Backed by evidence, the importance of a **"*shared vision*"** and **"*holistic approach to education*"** in promoting mental health and well-being is crucial for successful implementation of a community approach (Higgins and Booker, 2022).

Teamwork, trust among early childhood practitioners and effective **internal partnerships** and relationships are also recognised as essential to successful implementation (Cefai et al., 2021; Higgins and Booker, 2022; OECD, 2021), as well as **collaboration with external partners** (Cefai et al., 2021; OECD, 2021) and **parents**; and guidance and **support from external professionals** (Higgins and Booker, 2022).

However, many formal and non-formal early childhood settings encounter **barriers** such as **time constraints, lack of training, staff burnout**, or **a culture** that still views mental health as an "*add-on*" rather than part of core practitioners' work. Involving all stakeholders can be difficult **if early childhood practitioners feel overwhelmed or unsupported**, or **if parents are disengaged** due to stigma or past negative experiences.

Recognizing and addressing these challenges openly is a key part of making the approach sustainable. This can be done by building **a shared understanding**, integrating mental health and well-being activities into **everyday practice**, and ensuring **institutional support** (e.g., leadership support, time, and professional development).

Well-being efforts that are based on a community level, require not just goodwill, but **strategic planning**, **resources, and cultural shifts** that take time and collective effort (Cefai et al., 2021; OECD, 2021). They also require **clear government policy, adequate planning and government priorities** (Higgins and Booker, 2022), as well as negotiation and communication between the designers of change (politics) and implementers of change (administrators, management, principals and teachers) (Fullan, 2009; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009).

Mental health initiatives should not rely on one enthusiastic individual, they should be **embedded into** the (formal and non-formal) **early childhood setting's culture**. Involving children and families in **ongoing evaluation** helps maintain relevance, while **regular team reflection** strengthens early childhood practitioners' engagement.

Reflection Question

Think of your own early childhood setting (formal or non-formal).

- What are two enablers that would support a community approach to mental health and well-being in your setting?
- What are two barriers that might get in the way? What could help reduce or overcome those barriers?

Write your reflection in your learning journal.

Key takeaways

- Strong and committed leadership that makes well-being a strategic priority;
- Shared understanding that mental health is a collective responsibility, not an extra task;
- Positive and supportive culture among early childhood practitioners, teamwork, trust, and open communication;
- Professional development, time, and institutional support for early childhood practitioners;
- Collaboration with parents, community partners, and external professionals;
- Clear vision, long-term planning, and supportive government policies.

1. Which of the following is identified as a key enabler for effective implementation of a community approach to mental health and well-being in early childhood settings?

A) Strict individual responsibility for mental health promotion

B) A positive and supportive culture where all community members value well-being promotion

C) Having external professionals lead all well-being activities without early childhood practitioners involvement

D) Focusing only on children with existing mental health issues

2. What is a common barrier faced by early childhood settings when implementing a community approach to mental health and well-being?

A) Too many external partnerships

B) Excessive government funding

C) Mental health being viewed as an "add-on" rather than core educational work

D) Overtraining of early childhood practitioners in mental health promotion

3. Why is leadership commitment important for implementing a community approach to mental health and well-being?

A) It ensures external professionals manage all activities independently

B) It reduces the need for early childhood practitioners training and teamwork

C) It creates space for consistent communication, role modeling, and professional learning

D) It allows settings to avoid involving parents in well-being efforts

Examples from Practice

The two case studies further illustrate how such everyday, context-based practices align with the community approach to mental health and well-being.

Examples from the practice

In Kosovo and the broader Balkan region, efforts to strengthen mental well-being in communities have been implemented through **concrete and inclusive practices**. These include the establishment of relaxation corners in classrooms, continuous teacher training on social-emotional learning, and active partnerships with local and international organizations to support marginalized communities. Through programs led by NGOs such as KEC, communities have embraced practical, culturally responsive approaches that promote safety, belonging, and emotional support as part of everyday routines (KEC, 2022: Policy Brief on Mental Health in Schools).

Increasingly, community-based actors are using **self-assessment tools** to guide improvements and embedding well-being into local practices and culture, reflecting the principles of a community approach. Complementing these efforts, civil society actors have initiated **community-centered activities** to promote mental health awareness and provide free psychosocial support, particularly targeting underserved populations (source: https://diakonie-kosova.org).

In addition, Kosovo has actively participated in **regional and European-wide awareness campaigns** such as Mental Health Awareness Week. This initiative creates space for dialogue about mental health challenges, encourages individuals to share lived experiences, and highlights the need for action to combat stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion. It serves as a valuable platform for amplifying advocacy efforts and promoting inclusive mental health support for all (source: https://careleaverpp.org/sq/mental-health-awareness-week/).

These examples show the importance of **multisectoral collaboration, preventive care, and the integration of mental health into both educational and community-based systems**.

Case Study 1: No one lets me play

Context:

In a preschool in Prizren, a six-year-old Roma boy shared during an individual conversation with the practitioner: "Not once, but several times," when asked if other children excluded him from play. He further expressed, "I got angry, I didn't want to see them at all." These statements were accompanied by behavioral reactions such as hitting and shouting, signaling frustration and emotional hurt resulting from social exclusion.

Responsive strategy:

The early childhood practitioner noticed repeated patterns of exclusion during free play, where certain children dominated group dynamics. In response, the *early childhood practitioner* initiated a group circle-time activity using puppets and visual cues to spark discussion on inclusion, feelings of being left out, and strategies to invite others. A "*Friendship helper*" role was introduced rotated daily among children to support peer inclusion.

To reinforce the inclusive classroom approach, the *early childhood practitioner* sought support from the early childhood settings psychologist to better understand the social-emotional needs of the child and worked in close collaboration with a Roma community mediator, who helped contextualize the child's behavior within the family and cultural setting. The mediator met with the parents and explained the importance of emotional regulation and inclusion for early learning, while also helping the family understand the school's efforts.

In parallel, cooperative learning structures were introduced where small group tasks required children to collaborate and share responsibility. The family was invited to observe parts of the day and participated in a joint classroom activity organized by the practitioner and the mediator.

Impact:

Within weeks, children began verbalizing invitations to others: "*Come on, are you coming to play with us?*" The boy, previously excluded, reported: "*I play with other friends.*" Emotional outbursts diminished significantly. He was nominated as a Friendship helper, boosting his self-esteem and sense of belonging. The involvement of the early childhood settings psychologist and Roma mediator built a stronger trust bridge between the preschool and the family, reinforcing a community of care around the child.

Reflection Question

- *What routines, roles, and partnerships can we establish to empower children and families in building inclusive early learning environments, especially where exclusion is linked to wider social marginalization?*

Case Study 2: Strengthening Child Well-Being Through Community Engagement

Context:

In a preschool in Dubravë, a five-year-old Roma girl shared: "Then mom and dad beat me." This disclosure emerged during a conversation about fear. The same child, when asked what she does when scared, responded: "I cry, because mom hits." Her responses, along with body language and withdrawal in class, pointed to chronic emotional distress, lack of safety at home, and absence of healthy coping mechanisms — all of which are critical indicators of mental health vulnerability. Her case reflects the intersecting risks young Roma children may face due to marginalization, poverty, and lack of access to early intervention services.

Responsive strategy:

The early childhood practitioner built a quiet, trusting relationship with the Roma child by providing consistent daily routines and emotional safety within the classroom. Observing signs of fear and withdrawal, the *early childhood practitioner* collaborated with the early childhood settings psychologist and engaged a Roma community mediator to approach the family respectfully. A joint visit was arranged to open dialogue and offer support without judgment. In the classroom, the *early childhood practitioners* used storytelling, puppets, and drawing to help the child express emotions, and gently introduced emotional vocabulary. Group activities were adapted to promote a sense of inclusion and belonging, while the family was connected to a Roma-focused support NGO offering positive parenting guidance.

Impact:

The child began expressing her emotions more openly and showed increased engagement in play and drawing. She demonstrated reduced fear responses and more frequent help-seeking behaviors, such as sitting close to the *practitioner* when upset. Trust between the early childhood settings and the family was strengthened, and the child's sense of safety and belonging improved visibly.

Reflection Question

- *How can we support the mental health of young Roma children experiencing family distress without reinforcing stigma?*

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Case Study 3: A community approach in a non-formal setting

Context:

In a Roma neighbourhood of a municipality in Kosovo, a Learning Center serves as a safe, non-formal learning space for children. One Roma girl, aged 6, was identified as highly withdrawn, rarely speaking in group activities and showing signs of low self-confidence. During one session, when asked to draw something she liked, she quietly said: "I don't know anything." Her drawings were consistently minimal, and she avoided interaction with peers. The facilitator noticed that the child's behavior reflected deep insecurity, lack of emotional expression, and a possible sense of invisibility, all indicators of emotional vulnerability linked to marginalization.

Responsive strategy:

The facilitator built trust through daily routines, positive reinforcement, and small group support. The team collaborated with a Roma community mediator who had an existing connection with the family and arranged home visits to better understand the child's background. The mediator and facilitator jointly spoke with the parents, who expressed worry but felt unsure how to help.

Together, they co-created a weekly routine that included expressive activities (art, storytelling, music) rooted in the child's cultural context. Traditional Roma songs were introduced, and children were invited to draw or talk about things that made them feel safe or proud. Gradually, she started participating in small group games and was often paired with confidence. A psychologist from a partner NGO also visited the center to guide the facilitator on creating an emotionally responsive space.

Impact:

Her sense of connection with others had strengthened. The partnership between the center, the Roma mediator, and the family proved essential in building trust, emotional safety, and a stronger foundation for her mental well-being.

Reflection Question

● *How can non-formal spaces help identify and respond to emotional needs of children who might otherwise remain unseen in formal systems?*

Write your reflections in your learning journal.

Activity Cards

In this section, you will find two activities (below) that you can adapt and use in your own early childhood settings. These resources are designed to promote the community approach to mental health and well-being of young Roma children.

Each activity is based on the principles laid out in the CHAVORE framework and promotes responsive, inclusive practice that supports mental well-being from multiple angles.

Activity 1: Our community wall or the wall where we all belong

Goal: Foster a sense of belonging, respect for diversity, and group identity by co-creating a visible, inclusive classroom/community space.

Age Range: 4–6 years

Time: 30–40 minutes

Materials:

- Large poster board or wall space
- Colored paper, crayons, markers, stickers
- Printed name tags (in children's home languages if possible)
- Photos or drawings of the children and their families
- Fabric or craft materials from different cultures (patterns, textures)
- Audio device to play traditional songs (e.g., Roma lullabies)

How to do it:

1. **Set the tone:**

Gather the children in a welcoming circle. Introduce the activity using clear and inclusive language:

"This is our place, and everyone belongs here. We're going to make something together that shows who we are, our names, our families, the things we love." If possible, have a Roma cultural assistant or parent present.

2. **Invite each child to decorate their part of the Welcome wall with:**
- Their name in their home language (with support if needed);
- A drawing of themselves or something they enjoy (e.g., bike, flower, ball);
- A small object, sticker, or piece of cloth that reminds them of home (e.g., a scarf, color, or shape);

- A photo with a family member (especially grandmother, as many young Roma children refer to her as a source of comfort).

3. **Cultural connection:**

Invite children to say "*hello*" in the language they speak at home, and include it on the wall. Many children in the study identified strongly with their home environments and caregivers incorporating their language and voice helps foster a sense of safety and belonging.

Instead of only sharing a greeting, children can draw or attach something they love like a bicycle, a toy block, a flower, or a drawing of their family. These reflect the real things children mentioned with joy and pride in the interviews (e.g., "*I water flowers for my mom*" or "*I ride my bike*").

- *"What did you choose to put on your part of the wall?"*
- *"Why is this important to you?"*
- *"Who helped you think of it?"*

4. **Celebrate every contributions equally**:
- *"I love that you chose flowers that show how much you care about your grandma."*
- *"Your bicycle drawing is so special we all have something unique we enjoy!*

5. **Keep it visible:**

Display the wall where children often gather (e.g., arrival space, reading corner). You can refer to it during routines especially when a child feels excluded or shy as a reminder that everyone belongs. Some children in the report said they were left out of play or felt sad when others wouldn't include them; the wall can serve as a visual, daily affirmation of community.

6. **Possible modifications**

If you consider that these steps might be too challenging for the children in your group, the activity can be adapted or simplified by first focusing on the children's everyday life in the group. For instance:

    (1) next to the stickers with the children's names, each child may add a fingerprint or handprint;

    (2) You might also offer pictures of various animals (or other items related to the current group theme) and invite each child to select their favorite one to place beside their name;

    (3) Additionally, you can include photos that capture moments from everyday group life, helping children recognize their place and connections within the group community;

    (4) *If your group has a name, such as The Bees, you might invite each child to draw one as a way to show belonging to the group, etc.*

Why it works:

- **Fosters belonging and builds identity:** Children see their identities, languages, and families valued.
- **Encourages respect for diversity:** Sharing personal items fosters respect for different backgrounds.
- **Strengthen emotional safety:** Inclusion of home life reduces feelings of exclusion.
- Promotes social connection: Co-creation builds empathy and peer relationships.
- **Supports language development:** Including home languages validates children's linguistic identity while enriching group communication.
- **Provide a visual reminder:** A visible wall affirms daily that everyone belongs.

Activity 2: The feelings train – Supporting emotional transitions

Goal: Help children identify and communicate their feelings during daily transitions (arrivals, changes, goodbyes), promoting emotional security and self-awareness.

Age Range: 3–6 years

Time: 20-minute setup + daily check-ins (5-10 minutes)

Materials:

- Large poster or felt board of a train with different train cars
- Emotion faces (happy, sad, worried, angry, tired, excited, calm)
- Clothespins or tokens with each child's name/photo

How to do it:

1. **Introduce the train:**

Show the children the Feelings train and explain that each train car is for a different feeling.

Say: "*Every morning when we come in, we're going to board the train by choosing how we feel. There's no right or wrong, just what's true for you.*"

2. **Daily check-in:**

As part of the arrival routine, invite children to place their name or photo on the feeling that best matches their mood.

Reinforce their choice: "*You're feeling sleepy today. Thank you for telling us.*"

3. **Responsive follow-up:**

If a child places their name on '*sad*' or '*angry,*' gently check in with them later:

Say: "*Would you like to talk about it or visit the calm corner*?"

Help them explore tools to shift emotions if they want (e.g., deep breaths, hug a soft toy).

4. **Reflection:**

End the day with a moment of review: "*Did anyone move to a new feeling today? What helped you feel better?*"

5. **Make it a routine:**

Use the Feelings Train daily to normalize emotional expression and track patterns. You can also include it in group discussions about kindness and respect.

- **Promotes emotional awareness**: Children learn to recognize and name their feelings.
- **Provides expression and voice**: Gives every child a safe way to share emotions daily.
- **Strengthens a feeling of security**: Normalizes all feelings, reducing stigma around sadness or anger.
- **Fosters supportive response**: Helps adults notice and respond to children's needs early.
- **Builds resilience**: Encourages reflection and strategies for managing emotions.

Self-assessment: How confident are you?

Check your understanding of the main ideas from this session.

For each statement, tick the option that best reflects your current confidence.

I understand what a community approach to mental health and well-being means.
□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

I can explain how this approach is different from school-based or individual approaches.
□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

I understand the role of families, caregivers, and cultural identity in supporting well-being
□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

I can name one barrier a community might face and one possible solution.
□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

I have at least one idea I want to try to apply this approach in my work.
□ Yes   □ Somewhat   □ Not yet

What next?
If you answered "Not yet" to any item:
- Revisit the relevant section of this learning session
- Talk with a colleague or supervisor
- Write down a small goal for change or improvement

Remember: Reflection is the first step toward growth. Even small actions make a big difference over time.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Summary of Learning Session 7

This final learning session focused on the **community approach to mental health and well-being** for young Roma children and their families. It emphasized how mental health can be embedded into the daily practices, routines, and culture of both formal and non-formal early childhood settings, ensuring environments where every child feels safe, respected, and included. The session built on the whole-school model, adapting it to diverse community contexts and realities.

Topics covered

- The **definition and relevance** of a community approach to mental health and well-being.
- **Key principles and framework** supporting the approach.
- **Enablers and barriers** to successful implementation.
- **Practical strategies** for embedding mental health in daily practices.
- Real-life examples and case studies from Kosovo and the Balkan region.
- Use of activity cards and self-reflection tools to apply learning in context.

Key takeaways

- Mental health and well-being are **collective responsibilities**, not isolated interventions.
- A community approach engages children, families, practitioners, and services working together.
- **Leadership commitment, supportive culture, and team reflection** are key enablers.
- Barriers include time constraints, burnout, and treating well-being as an "*add-on*."
- **Practitioners' own well-being** is essential for sustainable support to children.
- Roma **families should be actively involved** in co-design and feedback processes.
- **Continuous monitoring and evaluation** help maintain relevance and responsiveness.

Tips for practice

- **Reflect on how your current practices** support emotional safety and inclusion.
- **Co-design well-being activities with Roma families** to enhance cultural relevance.

- **Build intersectoral partnerships** with community services, health, and Roma organizations.
- **Advocate for the removal of systemic barriers** (e.g., enrollment, discrimination).
- Invest in **your own professional development and emotional well-being**.
- Use **simple inclusive tools** (like emotion boards or peer-feedback) to track and adapt practice.

_____

As an early childhood practitioner, you have completed this final session on the community approach to mental health and well-being for young Roma children and their families. You now know that mental health is not a separate activity to add on, but something you can embed in your daily practices, routines, and the culture you create. By adapting the community approach model to your own context, you can make sure every child feels safe, respected, and included.

In this session, you explored the principles behind a community approach, reflected on the enablers and barriers, and discovered practical strategies you can put into action. You saw how case studies from Kosovo and the Balkan region demonstrate what is possible, and you practiced using activity cards and reflection tools to apply the learning in your own setting.

Remember: you are not alone in this work. Mental health and well-being are collective responsibilities. By partnering with Roma families, collaborating with community services, and caring for your own well-being, you strengthen the foundation for children and families to thrive. The steps you take each day, small, intentional, and consistent, make a lasting difference.

Further readings

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Congratulations!

You have completed this self-paced learning on supporting young Roma children's mental health and well-being! We invite you to take a moment and reflect:

- What has been the most valuable insight or lesson you are taking from this experience?
- How will you apply this knowledge in your daily work with children, families, and communities?
- What is one small but meaningful change you can implement starting this week?

You may *write your thoughts in your learning journal* or discuss them with your colleagues or supervisor.

Next steps

To continue strengthening your practice, consider the following:

- Revisit any sections of the course where you marked "Not yet" in the self-assessments.
- Review and try out one or more of the Activity Cards in your setting.
- Explore additional resources shared in this course or connect with local Roma organizations for collaborative learning.
- Stay informed about new approaches by joining professional networks or participating in local/regional initiatives focused on child well-being and inclusive education.

We value your feedback

If you have a few minutes, please let us know what you thought of the course:

- What worked well for you?
- What could be improved?

ROMANI
EARLY YEARS
NETWORK

CHAVORE PARTNERS

PEDAGOŠKI INŠTITUT

Škola Dokorán
Wide Open School n. o.

KORAK
PO
KORAK
pučko otvoreno učilište

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Hungary
Alapítvány

KEC
Qendra per Arsim e Kosoves
Kosova Education Center

25+
years for
Early Childhood
Development

CHAVORE:

Answer Key for Quizzes

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Learning Session 1

Quiz 1

Question 1: What does early childhood mental health encompass?

A) The absence of emotional outbursts in young children
B) Only the prevention of mental disorders
C) Positive developmental capacities such as emotional security, strong relationships, and meaningful engagement
D) Teaching children to always behave properly

Correct Answer: C
Early childhood mental health refers to positive capacities like emotional security, forming strong relationships, and engaging meaningfully with the world.

Question 2: Which of the following best describes psychological well-being in early childhood?

A) A child's ability to always feel happy
B) A child's sense of self, curiosity, and competence
C) A child's ability to strictly follow classroom rules
D) A child's physical health and strength

Correct Answer: B
Psychological well-being involves a child's emerging self-concept, curiosity, agency, and ability to learn and explore.

Question 3: How do social relationships contribute to a child's mental health according to the key takeaways?

A) They help reinforce emotional regulation and self-worth
B) They distract children from their emotional needs
C) They prevent children from developing independence
D) They replace the need for responsive caregiving

Correct Answer: A
Social relationships are essential because they reinforce emotional regulation and self-worth, strengthening children's overall mental health.

Quiz 2

Question 1: What is the main idea behind the 360° Well-Being Framework?

A) Children's well-being depends only on emotional development.

B) Mental health is shaped by a combination of physical, emotional, and environmental factors.

C) Mental health and learning are unrelated in early childhood.

D) Children's development is determined mostly by their personality.

Correct Answer: B

Mental health is a multidimensional system influenced by physical health, relationships, learning, and social context.

Question 2: Which of the following best supports a child's emotional regulation and brain development?

A) Strict discipline routines

B) High academic expectations

C) Proper nutrition and physical health

D) Isolating the child from group play

Correct Answer: C

Nutrition and physical health, especially in the first 1,000 days, are essential for emotional regulation and cognitive development.

Question 3: Why is cultural inclusion important for children's mental health?

A) It makes it easier to teach language skills

B) It encourages conformity to mainstream values

C) It promotes a sense of belonging, confidence, and emotional security

D) It prevents conflict between different children

Correct Answer: C

When children see their culture and language reflected in their environment, it supports their identity, safety, and well-being.

Quiz 3

Question 1: Why are ECEC settings considered protective spaces for young children, especially those facing adversity?

A) They focus mainly on academic skills like reading and math.
B) They offer predictable, nurturing environments that can buffer stress and build emotional security.
C) They ensure children behave perfectly through strict discipline.
D) They work independently without involving families.

Correct Answer: B
ECEC settings provide stability, warmth, and inclusion, which can buffer children against the negative effects of adversity.

Question 2: Which of the following is an example of embedding social and emotional learning (SEL) into daily practice?

A) Setting aside a special SEL lesson once a month
B) Correcting children only when they misbehave
C) Using daily circle time to check in on emotions and practicing cooperation through games
D) Focusing only on academic tasks during playtime

Correct Answer: C
Integrating SEL naturally throughout daily routines, such as emotional check-ins and cooperative play, helps build resilience and emotional skills in real-time.

Question 3: What are two essential actions ECEC practitioners can take to move from passive to proactive mental health support?

A) Ignoring emotional issues until they escalate and focusing only on cognitive development
B) Embedding mental well-being into routines and forming partnerships with families
C) Conducting mental health assessments only at the end of the school year
D) Expecting children to regulate emotions without adult support

Correct Answer: B
Proactive support means weaving mental well-being into everyday practice and building strong, trusting partnerships with families to ensure consistent support across settings.

Quiz 4

Question 1: Which of the following are examples of social determinants that can affect a young child's mental health?

(Select all that apply)

A) Family income and material deprivation
B) Access to quality healthcare and early education
C) The child's innate intelligence
D) Experiences of discrimination and exclusion

Correct Answers: A, B, and D
Social determinants are external conditions like income, healthcare access, and discrimination — not intrinsic traits like intelligence.

Question 2: Why are systemic barriers particularly significant for young Roma children's mental health?

A) They face additional challenges like poverty, unsafe living conditions, and discrimination.
B) They receive special mental health support from every kindergarten.
C) Their families often prefer to keep children out of education settings.
D) They are less emotionally sensitive compared to other groups.

Correct Answer: A
Roma children disproportionately experience poverty, exclusion, and stigma, which create additional barriers to mental health and well-being.

Question 3 What is one critical action early childhood practitioners can take to help address systemic barriers to children's mental health?

A) Focus only on cognitive development and academic skills.
B) Create safe, inclusive environments and advocate for equitable access to services.
C) Assume families are not interested in participating.
D) Provide mental health diagnosis without consulting professionals.

Correct Answer: B
Practitioners play a key role by creating inclusive spaces and advocating for systemic change to promote equity and mental well-being.

Quiz 5

1. Which of the following best describes mental health in early childhood?
 a) The absence of behavioural problems
 b) The ability to form secure relationships, regulate emotions, and explore the environment
 c) A child's academic performance in the early years
 d) Good physical health alone

Correct answer: B *Mental health in early childhood is about positive development — forming relationships, managing emotions, and engaging with the world, not just the absence of problems.*

2. True or False: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) helps children develop skills such as empathy, self-regulation, and relationship building.

Correct answer*:* True *SEL focuses on building core emotional and interpersonal skills that are essential for resilience and well-being.*

3. Which factor is considered an *enabler of well-being* in early childhood?
a) Nutrition and overall health
b) Access to digital technology
c) Standardized testing
d) Financial literacy

Correct answer: A *Good nutrition and health are foundational for children's brain development, emotional regulation, and learning capacity.*

4. Which statement best reflects the concept of *equity and social determinants of health* in early childhood?
a) All children receive identical services, regardless of background.
b) Children's well-being is shaped not only by individual factors but also by family, community, and socio-economic conditions.
c) Only children with special needs require additional supports.
d) Mental health depends solely on parenting quality.

Correct answer: B *Equity means recognizing that circumstances like poverty, housing, and access to services significantly impact children's health and well-being and addressing these differences fairly.*

When working with Roma and other marginalized children, which approach is most effective?
a) Apply the same strategies without considering their unique context.
b) Focus primarily on academic learning outcomes.
c) Acknowledge systemic barriers, ensure cultural responsiveness, and provide inclusive support.
d) Limit engagement to health and nutrition issues only.
Correct answer: C *Effective practice requires recognizing and addressing systemic inequities, respecting cultural contexts, and ensuring inclusive approaches that go beyond academics.*

Learning Session 2

Quiz 1

Question 1: Emotional literacy includes all of the following *except*:
A) Naming feelings
B) Hiding emotions
C) Noticing emotions
D) Calming down

Correct Answer: B
Hiding emotions is not part of healthy emotional literacy. It's important that children learn to understand and express emotions, not hide them.

Question 2: Why is it helpful when children name their feelings?
A) To stop them from crying
B) To make them behave
C) To help them understand and make them feel more in control
D) To make adults happy

Correct Answer: C
Naming feelings gives children the tools to express themselves and begin managing their emotions.

Question 3: What is one thing adults can do to help children with emotional literacy?
A) Ignore children's emotions
B) Only praise children when they are quiet
C) Talk about feelings during everyday routines
D) Teach children not to cry

Correct Answer: A
Talking about emotions during daily activities helps children learn that feelings are normal and can be shared safely.

Quiz 2

Question 1: Why is it important to teach children words for their feelings?
A) So they can express emotions and ask for help.
B) So they can follow rules better.
C) So they learn faster.
D) So they act like adults.

Correct Answer: A
Knowing feeling words helps children talk about emotions and understand what they need.

Question 2: What is one way to teach children about emotions?
A) Give them tests on feelings
B) Let them figure it out alone
C) Use songs, stories, or pictures
D) Only talk about feelings when problems occur

Correct Answer: C
Fun and simple activities like songs, stories, or pictures help children learn about feelings.

Question 3: What can help children who don't speak much or speak a different language?
A) Ignore their feelings
B) Wait for them to learn the language
C) Use visual tools and their home language
D) Only speak in the official language

Correct Answer: C
Using visual tools and respecting children's home language helps all children feel included.

Quiz 3

Question 1: What is a way to help a child who is upset?
A) Sit with them and take deep breaths together.
B) Walk away.
C) Tell them to stop.
D) Send them to another room to calm down.

Correct Answer: A
Co-regulation means supporting a child to calm down by staying close, being calm, and helping them feel safe.

Question 2: What is a calm corner or safe space?
A) A space where children are sent when they misbehave
B) A quiet area with toys and books for play
C) A soft, quiet area children can choose when they feel overwhelmed
D) A reward area for children who behave well

Correct Answer: C
A calm space gives children a chance to manage strong feelings in a safe and comforting environment.

Question 3: What should you avoid saying to a child who is very upset?
A) "I see you're having a big feeling."
B) "I'm here with you."
C) "Stop crying."
D) "Let's breathe together."

Correct Answer: C
Telling children to stop crying may make them feel ashamed or ignored. Validating their feelings and offering support is more helpful.

Quiz 4

Question 1: How can culture affect how a child shows emotions?
A) It doesn't affect emotions
B) It only affects language
C) It shapes how children express and understand feelings
D) It teaches children to hide emotions

Correct Answer: C
Culture influences whether emotions are shown quietly or openly, and which emotions are accepted or encouraged.

Question 2: What is a helpful way to support emotional fairness for all children?
A) Teach all children to behave the same.
B) Accept different ways of expressing emotions.
C) Avoid talking about emotions.
D) Let only older children share feelings.

Correct Answer: B
Emotional fairness means respecting each child's way of feeling and expressing emotions.

Question 3: What can we do to challenge gender stereotypes about emotions?
A) Ignore them.
B) Teach girls to be quiet and boys to be strong.
C) Tell children how to feel.
D) Allow all children to express any feeling, no matter their gender.

Correct Answer: D
Every child deserves to express emotions freely, regardless of gender. Adults can support this by modeling and encouraging it.

Learning Session 3

Quiz 1

1. **Why is offering choices important?**
   A) To avoid conflict
   B) To encourage independence and decision-making
   C) To make the day fun
   D) Because routines aren't necessary

Correct answer: B
Offering choices supports children's sense of autonomy. It helps them practice making decisions, builds confidence, and reinforces their ability to take initiative—key foundations for resilience and self-esteem.

2. **What helps children feel secure in a group setting?**
   A) Avoiding routines
   B) Letting them do whatever they want
   C) Clear, consistent expectations
   D) Limiting adult involvement

Correct answer: C
Predictable routines and consistent expectations help children know what to expect, which reduces anxiety and builds emotional security. This structure supports safe exploration and positive group interactions.

Quiz 2

1. What is the main benefit of using Persona Dolls with young children?
A) They keep children entertained
B) They help children memorize emotions
C) They provide a safe way to express feelings
D) They replace adult-led discussions

Correct answer: C
Persona Dolls help children explore emotions and difficult situations in a non-threatening way. Children often project their own feelings onto the dolls, which creates a safe space for emotional expression, empathy, and problem-solving.

2. What makes coping strategies most effective in early childhood settings?
A) They are introduced only when a child is upset
B) They are practiced regularly and integrated into daily routines
C) They are used as rewards for good behavior
D) They are kept as a secret between practitioner and child

Correct answer: B
Coping strategies are most effective when they're part of the everyday environment—not just used in moments of distress. Regular practice helps children internalize the skills so they can use them independently when challenges arise

Quiz 3

1. What is resilience in early childhood?

> A) Always staying happy regardless of circumstances
>
> B) Avoiding difficult emotions
>
> C) The ability to recover from challenges and adapt positively
>
> D) The ability to follow all adult instructions without resistance

Correct answer: C

Resilience is about a child's capacity to bounce back from setbacks, adapt to change, and keep going in the face of challenges. It's not about avoiding difficulty or always being happy, but learning to manage stress with support and internal strength.

2. Why is autonomy important for young children?

> A) It helps children control others
>
> B) It teaches them to avoid asking for help
>
> C) It builds confidence and decision-making skills
>
> D) It encourages children to resist rules

Correct answer: C

Autonomy helps children see themselves as capable and resourceful. Giving them chances to make choices and take initiative supports the development of self-confidence, independence, and resilience.

3. Which of the following is an effective way to support emotional security?

> A) Letting routines change daily to keep children guessing
>
> B) Encouraging children to resolve problems with no guidance
>
> C) Establishing clear routines and consistent expectations
>
> D) Avoiding discussions about feelings

Correct answer: C

Predictability helps children feel safe. When routines and adult responses are consistent, children know what to expect, which reduces anxiety and supports emotional regulation.

4. How do persona dolls help children build resilience?

> A) By entertaining children with fictional characters
>
> B) By offering a safe way to explore emotions and situations
>
> C) By distracting children from their worries
>
> D) By teaching them new vocabulary words only

Correct answer: B

Persona dolls allow children to project feelings and explore difficult scenarios in a safe, supported way. This helps them understand and manage emotions, practice empathy, and develop coping strategies.

5. What best describes respectful communication with young children?

A) Telling them what to feel
B) Correcting their speech immediately
C) Listening actively and validating their emotions
D) Speaking in long, complex sentences

Correct answer: C
Respectful communication involves listening without interrupting, acknowledging children's feelings, and responding with empathy. This builds trust, encourages expression, and helps children feel valued and understood.

Learning Session 4

Quiz 1

1. What best defines trauma in young children?
A) Mood swing during transitions
B) An emotional response to extremely stressful or threatening events that exceed a child's ability to cope
C) Disobedience or disrespect
Correct answer: B
Trauma refers to an internal emotional and physical response to overwhelming or threatening experiences. Unlike temporary mood swings, trauma impacts a child's sense of safety and ability to regulate emotions over time.

2. Which of the following are defense mechanisms commonly observed in children under stress? (multiple answers possible)
A) Reasoning through the situation calmly
B) Aggressive behaviour
C) Freezing or becoming emotionally numb
Correct answers: B and C
Under stress, children may respond with defense mechanisms like fight (aggression), flight (withdrawal), or freeze (emotional shutdown). These are instinctive survival strategies—not deliberate behaviors—and are not the same as calm reasoning, which typically requires emotional regulation.

3. What does the "Window of tolerance" describe?
A) A setting where children feel physically safe
B) The optimal emotional state where a child can manage stress and behave appropriately
C) A quiet time during the day when children are most relaxed
Correct answer: B
The "Window of tolerance" is the range of emotional arousal within which a child can remain regulated and responsive. Outside of this window, children may become overwhelmed (hyperaroused) or shut down (hypoaroused), making it difficult for them to function or cope.

4. What is resilience in the context of child development?
A) Avoiding stressful situations at all costs
B) The ability to recover from stressful situations and grow from the experience
C) Ignoring emotions to stay strong in front of others
Correct answer: B
*Resilience is the capacity to **bounce back** from hardship. It doesn't mean avoiding or suppressing emotions—it means having the support, coping skills, and emotional strength to heal and adapt, often emerging stronger than before.*

Quiz 2

1. What is the main goal of the "Look" step in the 3L strategy?
A) To ask the child about their feelings directly
B) To observe and recognize changes in a child's behavior
C) To refer the child to a psychologist

Correct answer: B
The "Look" step is about careful observation—noticing changes in a child's behavior, emotional state, or physical actions. These signals may indicate distress or trauma. It's the first and essential step before any discussion or referral.

2. Which of the following is an appropriate way to "Listen" to a child in distress?
A) Give advice and share your own experiences
B) Let the child talk at their own pace in a safe environment
C) Encourage the child to forget the incident and move on

Correct answer: B
"Listen" means offering a non-judgmental, safe space for the child. It's about being present and supportive without pressuring the child to talk or giving them advice. Listening with empathy helps build trust and emotional safety.

3. When should a practitioner refer a child to external support services?
A) As soon as the child misbehaves
B) Only after the parent makes a request
C) When the child's needs go beyond the practitioner's professional capacity

Correct answer: C
Early childhood practitioners are not mental health professionals, so it's important they know their limits. If a child's behavior suggests deeper emotional or psychological needs, referral to a specialist is necessary. Early documentation and communication with families are key.

4. Which of the following should you avoid when supporting a child emotionally?
A) Offering a safe and private space
B) Making promises you cannot guarantee
C) Documenting patterns of behavior

Correct answer: B
Offering false hope or unrealistic promises can damage trust. Instead, focus on providing emotional safety and honesty. Documentation of behavior is helpful, and creating a safe space is essential—both are appropriate actions.

Quiz 3

1. Multiple choice

Which of the following best describes the goal of psychological first aid in early childhood settings?

A) Diagnosing and treating children with trauma

B) Offering clinical therapy for behavioral challenges

C) Providing immediate emotional support and ensuring safety

D) Avoiding conversations about stress and trauma

Correct answer: C

2. True or False

The "Listen" step in the 3L strategy means asking children to talk about their trauma in detail so adults can understand.

Correct answer: False

3. Short answer

Name two signs of emotional distress that might appear in a 3–6-year-old child in an early learning setting.

Sample correct answers:

Sleep disturbances or nightmares

Defiance or excessive compliance

Regression (e.g., thumb sucking)

Hyperactivity or withdrawal

4. Multiple choice

When applying the "Link" step, what is one of the practitioner's main responsibilities?

A) Making a diagnosis

B) Immediately removing the child from class

C) Documenting patterns and referring to professionals if needed

D) Repeating the child's story to other staff for feedback

Correct answer: C

5. Matching

Match each step of the 3L strategy to its core action.

Step   Action

A) Look   1. Provide referrals if needed

B) Listen 2. Notice and document behavior

C) Link   3. Offer empathy and calm space

Correct answers:

A–2, B–3, C–1

6. Multiple choice

What should you do if a child begins to cry during a group activity and withdraws?

A) Tell them to rejoin the group immediately

B) Ignore the behavior—it will pass

C) Sit nearby and offer calm presence without pressuring them

D) Ask them to explain what's wrong in front of others

Correct answer: C

7. Scenario-based

You notice a child begins isolating themselves from peers and often stares blankly. What would be your first step following the 3L approach?

A) Ask the parents if the child has experienced trauma

B) Invite a psychologist to observe immediately

C) Observe and document the child's behavior over several days

D) Organize a group discussion with staff about the child

Correct answer: C

8. True or False

If a child is distressed, it is helpful to share your personal story to make them feel less alone.

Correct answer: False

9. Short answer

Why is it important to consider cultural context when supporting children experiencing stress or trauma?

Sample correct answer:

Because children and families may express and cope with stress differently depending on cultural beliefs, language, or previous experiences, and support needs to be respectful and relevant to their context.

10. Fill in the blank

In the 3L strategy, educators are encouraged to _____ rather than solve all of a child's problems.

Correct answer: support and refer (or: "listen and support", "observe and guide" – accept similar accurate phrasing)

Learning Session 5

Quiz 1

1. True or False: Treating all children exactly the same ensures fairness

Correct Answer: False
Fairness means giving each child what they need to succeed, not treating everyone the same. Equity ensures that every child can participate and thrive.

2. What is inclusion?
A) Giving every child the same toys and tasks
B) Creating environments where all children feel safe, valued, and able to participate fully
C) Ensuring children behave the same way
D) Allowing children to play only in small, separate groups

Correct Answer: B
Inclusion means that every child has not just access to education but also the ability to participate meaningfully in a setting where they feel they belong and are actively engaged.

3. Which of these is an example of equity?
A) Asking all children to follow one routine regardless of needs
B) Displaying only the majority culture in learning environment visuals
C) Providing materials in multiple languages
D) Having one set of books available for the entire group, regardless of reading level or background

Correct Answer: C
Equity means giving each child what they need to succeed — in this case, access to language they understand fosters inclusion and learning.

Quiz 2

1. What is one key feature of inclusive practice based on the case studies?

A) Ensuring children only play with peers who share their background

B) Making activities easier for some children

C) Adapting environments and materials so all children can participate meaningfully

D) Avoiding talking about differences

Correct Answer: C

Inclusive practices focus on designing environments and activities that enable full participation for all children.

2. Why is it important to display children's home languages in the learning environment?

A) To encourage competition between languages

B) To validate children's identities and build a sense of belonging

C) To reduce the need for language instruction

D) To decorate the learning environment

Correct Answer: B

When children see their home language represented, they feel seen, valued, and connected to the learning space.

3. How did the practitioner in the gender norms case study respond to a boy choosing a dress in dramatic play?

A) Corrected him and redirected to other clothes

B) Ignored the choice to avoid attention

C) Affirmed his choice and used it as an opportunity to support self-expression

D) Removed all dress-up clothes from the area

Correct Answer: C

Affirming diverse expressions helps build a culture of acceptance and encourages children to explore freely.

Quiz 3

1. Which of the presented tools best supports children's emotional literacy through storytelling?
A) Gender Equality Checklist
B) Weekly Listening Log
C) Persona Dolls
D) Family Culture Week

Correct Answer: C
Persona Dolls help children express feelings and build empathy by representing diverse experiences in story-based interactions.

2. Why is it important to perform a diversity audit of learning materials?
A) To meet inspection criteria
B) To avoid using old toys
C) To ensure all children see themselves positively represented
D) To reduce visual clutter

Correct Answer: C
Diversity audits help practitioners assess whether children's identities, cultures, and experiences are reflected in their environment.

3. How can practitioners promote inclusion through family engagement?
A) Ask families to attend mandatory meetings
B) Invite families to share traditions and participate in the life of the setting
C) Limit communication to written newsletters
D) Focus on involving only the mothers

Correct Answer: B
Inclusive family partnerships recognise and celebrate the richness of children's home lives, fostering deeper connections and belonging.

Learning Session 6

Quiz 1

1. What does the "Window of Tolerance" describe in relation to stress?

A) The amount of time a person can stay awake

B) A child's ability to follow routines

C) The range within which a person can manage stress and remain emotionally regulated

D) The limit of physical activity a person can perform before fatigue

Correct Answer: C

The Window of Tolerance refers to the range of stress a person can handle while still functioning effectively and staying emotionally balanced.

2. Which of the following is an example of co-regulation?

A) A child calming down alone in a quiet room

B) A caregiver using a soft voice and breathing together with a child during a stressful moment

C) A practitioner meditating privately

D) Ignoring a child's emotional outburst to encourage independence

Correct Answer: B

Co-regulation involves mutual support where an adult helps a child manage emotions through connection and calm presence.

3. What is a key characteristic of toxic stress in children?

A) It is brief and goes away quickly

B) It occurs with strong adult support

C) It happens repeatedly without supportive relationships

D) It helps children grow and learn

Correct Answer: C

Toxic stress results from prolonged exposure to stressors without adequate adult support and can negatively affect development.

Quiz 2

1. What is one way practitioners can support young children experiencing stress in early childhood settings?
A) Ignore emotional behavior to build resilience
B) Use consistent routines and calming techniques like deep breathing
C) Send children home when they show stress symptoms
D) Avoid talking about feelings to prevent distress

Correct Answer: B
Predictable routines and calming strategies like deep breaths help children feel safe and learn how to manage their emotions.

2. How did the calm corner support Thomas's ability to self-regulate?
A) It gave him a place for punishment
B) It distracted him with toys unrelated to emotions
C) It provided a safe space with emotional tools and adult support for co-regulation
D) It isolated him from others when he was upset

Correct Answer: C
The calm corner offered sensory items, breathing prompts, and adult guidance to help Thomas recognize and manage his emotions.

3. What was one benefit reported by parents after participating in Amina's community-based self-care activities?
A) They became less involved with their children
B) They reported more confidence and used small self-care routines daily
C) They avoided group participation
D) They requested formal therapy for all sessions

Correct Answer: B
Parents began using brief self-care actions, felt more supported, and contributed actively to the group culture of mutual encouragement.

Learning Session 7

Quiz 1

1. Why is it important for early childhood settings to address mental health and children's well-being?
A) Only diagnosed children need support.
B) Children need therapy in early childhood settings.
C) Mental health impacts learning, relationships, and long-term success.
D) Early childhood practitioners are underworked.

Correct answer: C
Supporting mental health in an early childhood setting is crucial because emotional well-being lays the foundation for cognitive development, positive social behavior, and lifelong learning success.

2. What is a key benefit of a community approach?
A) Less parental involvement
B) Early recognition of distress and stronger resilience
C) Greater children competition
D) Stricter academic focus

Correct answer: B
A whole-school approach helps identify emotional difficulties early and strengthens children' s ability to cope with challenges over time.

3. Who does the community approach involve?
A) Only early childhood practitioners of an early childhood setting (formal or non-formal)
B) Just children with diagnoses and their families
C) The entire community: preschool children, early childhood practitioners parents (caregivers), and local services
D) Only management of an early childhood setting (formal or non-formal)

Correct answer: C
A community approach is effective because it creates a unified, supportive environment by actively involving children, early childhood practitioners, families, and community services in promoting mental health and well-being.

Quiz 2

1. What is a key principle of the community approach to mental health and well-being in early childhood settings?

A) It focuses mainly on targeted interventions for children with mental health problems.

B) It treats mental health and well-being as isolated issues to be addressed individually.

C) It embeds mental health and well-being into daily routines, relationships, and environments.

D) It requires practitioners to work alone without involving families or communities.

Correct Answer: C

The community approach treats mental health and well-being as a collective responsibility, integrated into daily practice, interactions, and environments rather than as stand-alone or isolated interventions.

2. How can practitioners effectively engage Roma families and communities in promoting children's mental health and well-being?

A) Delivering information sessions without involving families in planning.

B) Involving Roma parents in co-designing well-being activities, asking what makes their children feel safe and happy.

C) Developing well-being activities independently and informing families later.

D) Focusing only on practitioner-led interventions within the classroom.

Correct Answer: B

Involving Roma families in planning and implementing well-being activities ensures they are culturally appropriate, build trust, and support children's emotional safety and development.

3. Why is practitioner well-being important in implementing a community approach to mental health?

A) Because it ensures practitioners feel appreciated by their managers.

B) Because practitioners' well-being directly affects their ability to create emotionally safe and supportive environments for children.

C) Because it is required for compliance with employment regulations.

D) Because it allows practitioners to complete administrative tasks more efficiently.

Correct Answer: B

When practitioners' well-being is supported, they are better able to foster nurturing, emotionally safe environments and integrate mental health promotion effectively in their daily practice with children.

Quiz 3

1. Which of the following is identified as a key enabler for effective implementation of a community approach to mental health and well-being in early childhood settings?
A) Strict individual responsibility for mental health promotion
B) A positive and supportive culture where all community members value well-being promotion
C) Having external professionals lead all well-being activities without early childhood practitioners involvement
D) Focusing only on children with existing mental health issues

Correct Answer: B
A positive and supportive culture, where all members of the community acknowledge the importance of well-being promotion, facilitates effective implementation of the community approach.

2. What is a common barrier faced by early childhood settings when implementing a community approach to mental health and well-being?
A) Too many external partnerships
B) Excessive government funding
C) Mental health being viewed as an "add-on" rather than core educational work
D) Overtraining of early childhood practitioners in mental health promotion

Correct Answer: C
When mental health is seen as an "add-on" instead of an integral part of formal or non-formal education, it acts as a barrier to successful implementation.

3. Why is leadership commitment important for implementing a community approach to mental health and well-being?
A) It ensures external professionals manage all activities independently
B) It reduces the need for early childhood practitioners training and teamwork
C) It creates space for consistent communication, role modeling, and professional learning
D) It allows settings to avoid involving parents in well-being efforts

Correct Answer: C *Leadership commitment ensures well-being is treated as a strategic goal, enabling consistent communication, role modeling, and time for professional development, all of which are crucial for effective implementation.*

ROMANI
EARLY YEARS
NETWORK

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Wide Open School n. o.

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