

# Stay and Play Sessions in the Early Years

## A medium for integrating Ukrainian children and their families into communities in Ireland

### The Ukrainian humanitarian crisis

In 2022 around 89.3 million people were displaced by war (UNHCR, 2023). The humanitarian crisis unfolding in Ukraine has posed significant challenges, particularly for the youngest victims of the conflict. As families fled their homes seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, the need for rapid integration and support became paramount. Ireland, responding to this global crisis, took proactive measures through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY).

During a crisis, children are among the most vulnerable, facing significant challenges to their overall development and wellbeing. Quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and play-based pedagogical approaches have emerged as crucial factors in meeting the developmental needs of early minds, often a ray of hope and resilience amidst adversity.

This article explores the exemplary approach taken by the Westmeath County Childcare Committee integration team's (WCCCIT) Stay and Play sessions, grounded in evidence-based practices and guided by the *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) frameworks that underpin quality ECEC. It delves into the pivotal importance of early brain development and play-based educational and care methods, emphasising their role in addressing the developmental needs of children fleeing a humanitarian crisis.

In County Westmeath, despite its rural landscape and limited transportation system in some areas (Carroll et al., 2021), the community has emerged as a haven for Ukrainian families. Challenges persist, notably the trauma experienced by these children, which requires a specialised approach for their integration. Bearing this in



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**When traumatic situations like war occur early in life, the wiring of children's neural pathways is affected negatively. In light of the current Ukrainian humanitarian crisis, this article addresses the integration of Ukrainian children (0–18 years) into the Irish community through Early Childhood Education and Care settings and after-school support programmes. Underpinned by the *Aistear* and *Síolta* frameworks, Stay and Play sessions were facilitated in children's residential facilities.**

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mind, Stay and Play sessions were tailored to the developmental needs of the families that were located in the county (Figures 1 and 2).

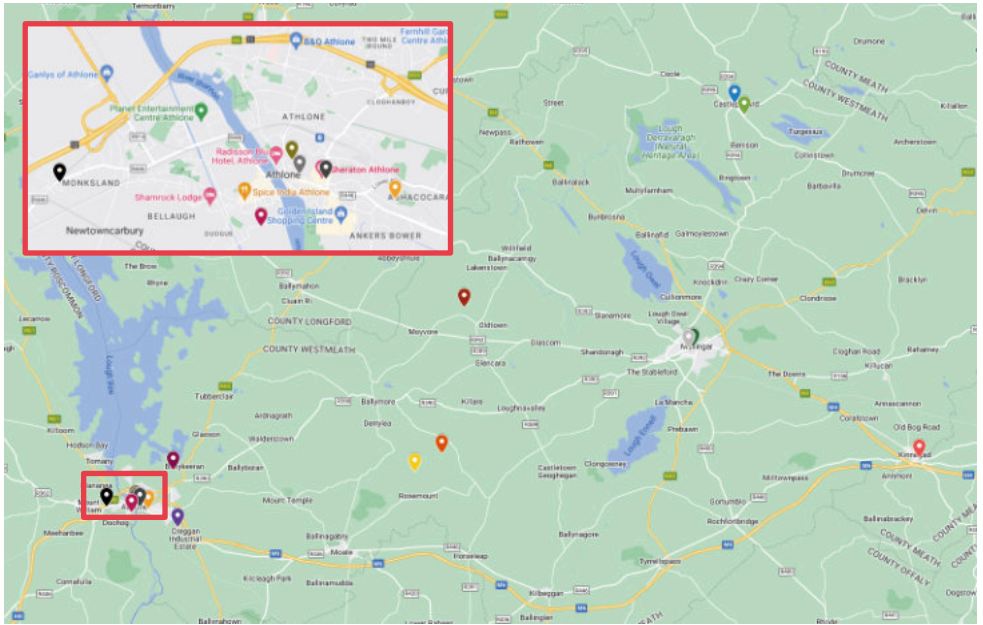


Figure 1: Map of County Westmeath

Ballykeeran Lodge - Ballykeeran	N37P6Y0		Mearscourt House B&B - Rathconrath	N91Y40H	
Bishopstown - Rosemount	N37X430		Mullingar B&B - Mullingar	N91V2FV	
Bower Hall - Athlone	N37W403		Newbury Hotel - Mullingar	N91Y9P9	
Coolatore House - Moate	N37FN70		Prince of Wales - Athlone	N37T2P0	
Court Devenish house - Athlone	N37NF77		Sheraton Hotel - Athlone	N37D953	
Creggan Court - Athlone	N37YW25		Shines Guesthouse - Athlone	N37X5N8	
Harrys, Kinnegad - Kinnegad	N91KT2F		The Callows B&B - Athlone	N37N7Y8	
Maple Court - Castlepollard	N91RX30		The Courtyard B&B - Castlepollard	N91ED68	

Figure 2: Legend for map

### Play-based pedagogy and lifelong learning

Quality early brain development is the cornerstone on which a child's future is built. The early years from birth to six years are a critical period of rapid brain growth and neural connectivity. During this phase, the brain exhibits remarkable plasticity, making it highly receptive to environmental stimuli and experiences. Positive interactions, stimulating environments, and responsive

caregiving during these formative years lay the foundation for overall developmental milestones (Garner et. al., 2012).

Play-based pedagogical approaches provide a natural and effective platform for early learning. Play is not merely a recreational activity but a fundamental mechanism through which children explore, experiment, and make sense of the world around them (NCCA, 2009). Play-based learning encourages curiosity, creativity, problem-solving, and social interaction (Smith, 2019). By engaging in play, children develop essential skills such as communication, collaboration, and critical thinking, forming a robust basis for future academic achievements (Johnson, 2017).

Children fleeing humanitarian crisis, whether due to conflict, displacement, or natural disasters, often face substantial trauma and stress. Meeting their developmental needs becomes paramount in mitigating the long-term impact of these adversities. Quality ECEC rooted in play-based pedagogy acts as a healing mechanism. Through carefully designed play activities, these children can express emotions, build connections, and regain a sense of normalcy amidst chaos (Garcia & Smith, 2016).

## Stay and Play

Stay and Play programmes are structured, interactive sessions designed to provide a safe, supportive, and intellectually stimulating environment for children; in this case, children facing crisis situations. These programmes, often facilitated in community centres, shelters, or temporary housing facilities, focus on interactive games and storytelling. The key components of Stay and Play initiatives lie in their ability to offer children a nurturing environment where they can explore, learn, and interact with others (Spry-Hartley, 2010).

The benefits of Stay and Play sessions for children exposed to crisis can be categorised as follows:

*Psychological wellbeing:* Stay and Play sessions serve as therapeutic spaces, allowing children to express their emotions through play. Engaging in creative activities helps them cope with stress and trauma, reducing anxiety levels and promoting a sense of emotional stability (Smith, 2019).

*Social interaction and communication:* Through interactive play, children develop essential social skills. Engaging with peers and adults in a supportive environment enhances their ability to communicate effectively, thereby building self-confidence and a sense of belonging (White, 2012).

*Cognitive/intellectual development:* Stay and Play activates and stimulates cognitive growth by encouraging problem-solving, creativity, and critical

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*Through carefully designed play activities, children can express emotions, build connections, and regain a sense of normalcy amidst chaos (Garcia & Smith, 2016).*

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thinking. Engaging in puzzles, games, and artistic endeavours enhances children's cognitive abilities, laying a strong foundation for future learning (Brown & Lee, 2018).

*Language acquisition:* For children facing language barriers due to displacement, Stay and Play programmes provide opportunities for language acquisition. Through storytelling and conversational play, children develop language skills that help their integration into new environments (Johnson, 2016).

*Emotional expression and regulation:* Play-based activities offer a non-verbal platform for children to express their emotions. By engaging in creative expression, they learn to regulate their emotions, leading to improved emotional intelligence and resilience (Garcia & Smith, 2016).

*Parental involvement:* Stay and Play sessions often involve parents and caregivers, fostering positive parent-child interactions. These interactions promote a supportive family environment, essential for the child's emotional and psychological stability (Roberts & Martinez, 2015).

*Play-based pedagogy and community engagement:* This approach not only engaged the children but also actively involved parents, creating meaningful interactions that fostered a sense of belonging and community. The collaborative efforts between parents, children, the facility management teams, and the integration team proved instrumental in nurturing a supportive environment (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Documenting the children's learning in pictures

## Outcomes and future implications

The integration of Ukrainian children and their families into the County Westmeath integrations programme showcased the transformative power of play-based learning. By combining safe and stimulating play activities, encouraging parental involvement, and meticulously selecting educational resources, the session provided a conducive environment for positive integration. The outcomes of this initiative are promising, illuminating a path for future integration endeavours.

These sessions acted as a bridge connecting young minds with broader Irish society, fostering understanding, empathy, and unity. Stay and Play sessions have become beacons of hope, reducing inequality and integrating children and their families into their communities in Ireland.

By recognising these children's unique needs and addressing them through evidence-based, play-oriented interventions, the DCEDIY, through WCCIT, not only facilitated education and care experiences but also sowed the seeds of understanding, empathy, and unity in the community. As this initiative continues to flourish, it illuminates a path towards a harmonious and inclusive society, where every child, regardless of their background, is positively supported with quality ECEC experiences in which to thrive.

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**Capturing the Joy of Learning** - This image showcases a toddler deeply engaged in assembling a jigsaw puzzle with a playful cartoon mouse motif. Jigsaw puzzles are more than just fun; they are a gateway to enhancing cognitive skills, improving problem-solving abilities, and fostering hand-eye coordination in young children.