

Improving access to quality early childhood education and care for refugee children in Europe

Context

Inclusive, high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) offers crucial benefits to young children who have experienced forced displacement, and to their families, parents and caregivers. Yet, numerous policy-related, practical and legal barriers limit access to ECEC for displaced children. Issues related to the quality and inclusivity of ECEC pose further challenges. This brief outlines recommendations for policy and practice to promote inclusive, equitable and high-quality ECEC for young refugee learners.

About the research

The findings and recommendations presented here stem from a scoping review conducted by the Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (HERE). The review synthesised evidence from 37 resources held within the HERE Knowledge Base on access to and experiences of early childhood education and care for refugee and asylum-seeking children in Europe.

Research demonstrates the importance of investing in high-quality, culturally and linguistically appropriate ECEC for young children that have experienced forced displacement. Yet, persistent policy-related and practical challenges limit refugee children's access to ECEC. This results in missed opportunities to address inequalities and to support refugee children to thrive, in education and beyond.

Policy recommendations

Address policy barriers that limit access to ECEC for refugee children: Ensure that the inclusion of refugee children is explicitly addressed in ECEC policies. Adopt a holistic, whole-system approach that involves different departments and levels of government, and remove barriers that restrict access to ECEC.

Provide training for ECEC practitioners: Invest in ongoing training and professional development opportunities to equip ECEC practitioners with the skills they need to effectively support displaced children. This should include training in trauma-informed care, culturally and linguistically inclusive pedagogies, support for multilingualism and effective engagement with caregivers of refugee children.

Draw on skills and expertise within refugee communities: Remove legal and practical barriers that prevent individuals from refugee communities from entering the ECEC workforce. Actively support recruitment from these communities to reflect and promote linguistic and cultural diversity in ECEC settings.

Key findings

The foundations for learning are built early in life, with experiences during children's early years influencing their long-term health, development and wellbeing.

For children who have experienced forced displacement, access to high-quality ECEC can be crucial. ECEC can help to overcome educational inequalities and reduce gaps in outcomes between refugee and non-refugee children, as well as aiding in the process of healing from traumatic experiences.

ECEC for refugee children also benefits parents and caregivers by providing opportunities for them to take up employment or study. ECEC services are often amongst the first that displaced families engage with and can be a gateway to wider support systems and services, easing their transition to life in a new context.

However, complex enrolment processes, eligibility restrictions, financial barriers and lack of information can all limit access to ECEC. These challenges are compounded by a lack of available places in overstretched ECEC systems, and by the accommodation of families in temporary housing or reception centres in areas lacking ECEC provision.

The benefits of ECEC to refugee children depend on the quality and inclusivity of provision. Importantly, research points to a lack of training and expertise in the provision of trauma-informed care, and in supporting second language learners. Studies also highlight the crucial role played by ECEC staff who share a linguistic and cultural background with refugee children, helping them to settle into and feel safe in a new learning environment.

Communication and collaboration between refugee caregivers and ECEC providers is crucial, but may be hindered by factors such as language barriers and power imbalances.

Promote and support multilingualism within ECEC: Encourage multilingual approaches that value and maintain children's home languages, while supporting acquisition of host country languages. Foster inclusive, language-rich learning environments within ECEC spaces.

Address structural barriers to ECEC access: Proactively remove logistical, financial and administrative barriers to the inclusion of refugee children in ECEC. This includes offering free or subsidised places, ensuring enrolment processes are flexible and accessible, and providing practical support, such as transport assistance.

Strengthen communication and collaboration with parents and caregivers: Build meaningful, trusting relationships with parents and caregivers, including through culturally responsive communication, translation facilities where needed and regular opportunities for communication and engagement.

High-quality early childhood education and care for refugee children is vital, representing a powerful tool to reduce educational inequalities, support wellbeing and promote inclusion. To realise this transformative potential, ECEC must be inclusive, equitable and responsive to the unique needs of children who have experienced forced displacement. This brief outlines key actions that policymakers and practitioners can take to help provide all refugee children with a strong foundation for future learning.

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