

Refugee children: after reception during the crisis, what now?

The organisations providing reception and education services for the youngest refugee children and their parents are inadequate

Young children in refugee and asylum seeker families have undergone stressful and traumatic experiences which can seriously hamper their ongoing development. Research has shown that these children are seriously in need of a safe environment that is free from stress. That is essential in order to improve their cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. It is therefore essential that after their initial reception during the crisis, these families should continue to receive robust support during the early years of a child's life. A study in nine Western countries, including Belgium, has shown, however, that this support is inadequate.

The independent think-tank Migration Policy Institute in Washington, acting at the request of a consortium of Foundations brought together by the King Baudouin Foundation, has coordinated a study in nine countries into the services provided to refugees and asylum seekers with young children. The study was carried out in Belgium, Canada, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Turkey and the United States. The results have just been published in the report *'Responding to the ECEC Needs of Children of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Europe and North America'*. (ECEC= Early Childhood Education & Care).

The countries in the study are facing very similar challenges in reaching refugee and asylum seeker families with young children and providing adequate, high-quality care and education. Both in the initial reception phase and particularly during the integration process that is needed subsequently, the capacity of the organisations involved is often inadequate. Scientific research has shown the importance of stimulating preschool care for the cognitive, psychosocial and physical development of young children. In many cases young refugee children are denied this.

The importance of the expert support and services provided by these organisations after stressful and traumatic experiences is recognised everywhere, but in practice no systematic support is provided by the organisations involved. Only in Germany, has funding amounting to hundreds of millions of euros been provided to set up targeted ECEC programmes for these families, with the emphasis on addressing trauma and overcoming language and cultural barriers. Better results have been achieved in Sweden than in other countries due to a better spread of families and the inclusion of the toddlers in 'regular' classes with Swedish children.

In a number of countries the division of powers between national, regional and local levels is hampering the coordination of educational and care services. The report mentions the partnership in Belgium between Fedasil and Kind&Gezin (Child and Family) and its French equivalent ONE as an example of *good practice*: consultation agencies have been set up in reception centres to provide vaccinations and hearing tests for these young children and monitor their growth and early development. In Belgium, however, the families involved still find it very difficult subsequently to access existing services: they are not aware what is available and there are waiting lists, costs and administrative procedures that they are unable to negotiate. No-one is recording what proportion of these children are actually attending nursery schools.

The study was carried out at the initiative of the Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years (TFIEY), a consortium of foundations in Europe and the US, set up by the King Baudouin Foundation. Its members are the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Bertelsman Stiftung, Calouste Gulbekian Foundation, Aga Khan Foundation, Jacobs Foundation, Learning for Well-Being Foundation, Bernard van Leer Foundation, Compagnia di San Paolo and Open Society Foundations.

The full report in English and a summary in Dutch can be found here:

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/responding-ecec-needs-children-refugees-asylum-seekers-europe-north-america>

More information about the TFIEY: <http://www.europe-kbf.eu/en/projects/early-childhood/transatlantic-forum-on-inclusive-early-years>