

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first five years of everyone's life are some of the most crucial. They are a period of unprecedented growth and cognitive, social and emotional development. They are the foundations for a life-long ability to learn, thrive, cope with adversity, be healthy and build strong relationships, providing an "irreplaceable window of opportunity to set a path towards success in primary school and later in life". However, the early years are also a time of risk, especially for vulnerable babies and toddlers; without access to services and support, cycles of disadvantage, poor mental health, low academic achievement and poverty can become entrenched. The evidence is clear about the vital importance of high-quality early education and care for the youngest children, especially the most disadvantaged.

Refugee and asylum-seeking babies and young children under the age of five represent one of the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in England. Despite this we know very little about them - how many there are and their experience of accessing vital early years services, especially early childhood education and care (ECEC). What is clear is that there are significant numbers of children whose experience of, and access to, ECEC are being overlooked. This research uncovers multiple challenges for refugee and asylum-seeking babies and young children, including barriers to learning at home, accessing adequate nutrition and support for their physical development. All children have the right for their development to be supported, enabled and guaranteed.

Against this backdrop, UNICEF UK and Refugee Education UK (REUK) undertook exploratory research into their ECEC experiences. Through in-depth focus groups and interviews, researchers heard from 15 refugee and asylum-seeking parents of children under the age of five, who came to the UK from a range of countries of origin and through a variety of means. The findings incorporate the perspectives and experiences of those who have claimed asylum and are waiting on an outcome, those who have had their status granted through asylum routes, and those who have arrived through Government initiatives for Afghanistan and Ukraine. Findings also include the perspectives and experiences of 23 experts in the refugee support and/or early education sectors, who worked in research and academia, the voluntary sector, local government and early education settings. This research highlights a myriad of findings about the experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking children in their early years.

Key findings

Refugee and asylum-seeking children's home environments can be uncondusive to their early development

Many parents and key informants discussed the environments surrounding the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children, and how they often undermine positive early development. One of the most damaging environments uncovered by this research is temporary asylum accommodation, where families often live in cramped conditions with a lack of baby and child friendly space. They also rely on small, weekly asylum allowances, which limit children's learning opportunities. Research findings also suggest that asylum accommodation restricts other parts of children's development, with parents describing health issues developed from inadequate food options and poor living conditions, such as dust and damp. Key informants and parents also emphasised the lack of safety and security for the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children. Families reportedly experience "significant precarity" due to their immigration status, whether claiming asylum or on time-limited statuses, such as Limited Leave to Remain, as well as constant anxiety about being moved from place to place by dispersal policies.

ECEC is vital for the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families

Against this backdrop, a significant research finding is the extent to which access to an ECEC setting benefits the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children. For these children, accessing settings:

- Helps prepare them for primary school by promoting positive social, emotional and cognitive development, nurturing confidence and supporting the formation of relationships with adults and peers.
- Provides a safe space, opportunities and resources for learning and play that they may otherwise not have, including with other children of their age.
- Plays a crucial role in the healing process from traumatic experiences that they may have encountered as a result of their forced displacement.

ECEC access also benefits parents, supporting their wellbeing in the context of displacement and providing the opportunity for study or work (for those parents who have the right to work), all of which combine to help families integrate into their new environments. This research suggests particular benefits for mothers who may be particularly isolated, especially when they have childcare responsibilities. It also finds that the ECEC sector plays an important role in signposting families to other services, such as special educational needs (SEN) support, and so facilitating families' engagement with normally difficult-to-engage-with services.

A myriad of complex barriers hinder access to ECEC, but promising practice at a local level shines through

Despite the clear value that ECEC provides to refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families, the research finds consistent and significant barriers to accessing it. This can embed disadvantage and deny them the many short- and long-term benefits of ECEC.

Key informants were concerned about current early education policy which restricts access to the additional free hours for 3- and 4-year-olds, because it is based on parents' ability to work. Alongside the restrictions to asylum-seekers' ability to work, asylum policies create other, indirect barriers to ECEC: inadequate living arrangements, enforced poverty through small weekly allowances, and perpetual instability resulting from dispersal policies. Not only do these make it difficult to secure a consistent ECEC place in a setting, they create environments that limit children's development. The findings suggest that consideration and provisions for the youngest children are "bottom of the pile" in asylum policy.

A host of non-policy related barriers were also highlighted by parents and key informants:

- Parents can be reluctant to send their children to nursery if they don't necessarily know about the value and benefits of ECEC for the youngest children, and it may not be usual practice within their culture.
- Some parents may be fearful of services as a result of being in a hostile asylum system, leading to a fear of engaging with ECEC services.
- Challenges with navigating a complex ECEC system, particularly for parents for whom English is an additional language or for whom online applications are challenging.
- Practical barriers that may be hidden at first, including difficulties finding spaces at local ECEC settings at convenient hours, and financial barriers.
- Poor flow of information which prevents local authorities being aware of children in their locality and hinders accessible and correct information reaching families.
- The level of support provided by local authorities can be sporadic and inconsistent depending on where families are living.

The many barriers uncovered arguably paint a bleak picture, but the research also revealed positive practice at the local level. From effective, well-coordinated local responses by local authorities, to welcoming and holistic practice in settings, and local organisations providing expert and practical support, this research found that local areas often deliver for their local refugee and asylum-seeking families.

Many ECEC settings create positive environments for children

Key informants described excellent practice and approaches enabling refugee and asylum-seeking children to benefit from ECEC, despite a backdrop of limited resourcing and funding of the wider sector. Examples include:

- Considering the distinct barriers facing refugee and asylum-seeking children, such as potential trauma, culture and background, and English as an additional language, and providing contextual and equitable approaches in response, such as flexible and compassionate early transition periods.
- Practitioners taking the time to build meaningful and trusting relationships with parents, involving them in aspects of the ECEC.
- Ensuring the presence of diverse and skilled educators, and providing them with adequate training and support to respond to the children's distinct needs.
- Inclusive environments in which toys, books and classrooms reflect the diversity of the children in the setting, and where activities are 'poverty-proof', enabling all children to participate despite parents' finances.

Conclusion

Refugee and asylum-seeking children in their early years are caught in the middle of two UK policy systems: the ECEC funding and asylum systems. Each overlooks their existence and de-prioritises their rights. A key factor is the dependence of ECEC access on the parents' situation, rather than being in the best interests of the child. Similar can be said for the asylum system, which this research suggests is failing to provide children with adequate nutrition, living arrangements and development opportunities.

The effect of a multitude of barriers across both systems, is that the children are more likely to be isolated and excluded from the ECEC provision that is shown to be vital for their development, safety and wellbeing in the wake of forced displacement. These children are denied a crucial window of opportunity to go on to thrive in primary school and later in life.

This research and its recommendations provide a clear roadmap to ensure refugee and asylum-seeking children are supported to develop in their early years, by putting the most marginalised children at the heart of policy-making.

Recommendations

Placing children at the centre of policy-making has the potential to create a cohesive, coordinated, and comprehensive system; one in which the youngest refugee and asylum-seeking children have access to quality ECEC services in England. Achieving this requires action by a range of actors outlined below.

The UK Government should support this by:

1. Removing the systemic barriers facing parents:

- Widen the 30-hour ECEC entitlement to the parents of all refugee and asylum-seeking children, including those with No Recourse to Public Funds.
- Remove the right to work restrictions placed on asylum seeking parents waiting on their claim, thereby providing the means for children to attend the additional ECEC hours, while also enabling families to escape enforced poverty.
- Work with stakeholders such as Strategic Migration Partnerships and local authorities to ensure young children seeking sanctuary in the UK are housed in accommodation that facilitates consistent access to mainstream ECEC, promotes and maintains a high standard of physical and mental health, and provides highly nutritional food.

2. Removing the funding barriers facing local authorities

- Provide additional funding to local authorities for each 'placed individual', to increase provision and capacity, and to support the varied and unique needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children.
- Set a viable per-hour funding rate for ECEC settings to ensure all entitlement hours are free at the point of access for families.
- Increase Pupil Premium funding to bring it in line with school levels of funding.

3. Supporting ECEC providers to meet the needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children

- Work with academics, providers, practitioners and beneficiaries to surface and share best practice in supporting refugee and asylum-seeker children, including those experiencing trauma and those with English as an additional language.

4. Improving data and information flow

- Improve mechanisms for timely sharing of information between the Home Office, Department for Levelling Up, Department for Education, and Local Authorities, to enable planning and preparation before the arrival of children in each jurisdiction.
- Collect data and/or disaggregate data for all children from birth to five years entering England.

Local Government can support this by:

5. Removing the practical barriers facing parents

- Compile information in the most common languages for refugee and asylum-seeking families in England, including information about their rights and entitlements.
- Simplify and streamline the application process for the disadvantaged two-year-old offer, and provide application guidelines and forms in the most common languages for refugee and asylum-seeking families in England.
- Coordinate with other local authorities to secure ECEC places for families who are being moved to different locations, ensuring they do not need to reapply.

Researchers and academics can support this by:

6. Continuing to build the evidence-base and addressing gaps in knowledge on:

- The impact of the Illegal Immigration Act on early years experiences and access to ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children.
- The experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking children in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland and other parts of England to build on the qualitative primary research in this report.
- Good practice in systematic support for refugee and asylum-seeking children domestically and internationally.

ⁱ UNICEF, A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education (New York, 2019), 6.