

# CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

## ECEC is vital for refugee and asylum-seeking children

Findings from this research illustrate and expand our understanding of the positive impacts that access to ECEC can have for refugee and asylum-seeking children. The benefits for children's social and emotional development, their ability to settle into a new environment, and their potential to thrive in primary school and throughout their childhood that are highlighted by this research substantiate existing evidence on the importance of ECEC for disadvantaged children in the UK, and for refugee children globally. But these findings are particularly pertinent considering what this research has uncovered about the significant precarity, hardship and insecurity facing refugee and asylum-seeking families in England, and the extent to which many young children are having their early childhood development put at risk.

This research reveals how the environments surrounding asylum-seeking children are often not conducive to vital early learning and development. Findings show that this is especially, but not exclusively, the case for those living in asylum accommodation, where families are forced to live in cramped rooms without space for their children to play and explore, where children are unable to access adequate nutrition, and where health issues with long-term consequences develop. This research provides further evidence on the unsuitability of such accommodation and living arrangements for families with the youngest children. Set against an asylum system that fails to monitor or consider the presence of these young children, and an early childhood system that also struggles to consistently track and engage with children before primary school age, these children are rendered effectively invisible and their wellbeing and development, including critical safeguarding concerns, overlooked. **However, ECEC can make this cohort of children visible and transform their life chances.**

This research shows how early childhood educators have a window of opportunity to provide otherwise unavailable space and resources for learning and play that help refugee and asylum-seeking children start primary school on a more equal footing to their peers. They can be a ray of **"sunshine"** (KI17, ECE) for families and provide them with a welcome they may not previously have received and an offer of a community of support. And they can signpost families towards vital early years and broader services crucial for their integration in the UK.

If trauma-informed and contextual, ECEC provision has transformative potential for refugee and asylum-seeking families. This research adds to the evidence base on the healing potential of high-quality ECEC for children who have been through traumatic experiences, and how it can initiate the process of settling into a new community, unlock feelings of belonging by making friends, and establish routine

and consistency that is important for self-regulation. It also indicates the value of providing parents – especially mothers on whom childcare responsibilities often fall – with child-free space and time to process their displacement, prioritise their own wellbeing and explore opportunities for study and employment (where the right to work is available). ECEC can be transformative and can shape positive futures for whole families who have been forced to flee their homes.

## The barriers to ECEC access stem from two policy systems

Despite the wide-ranging benefits of ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children and their families, this research also reveals a disheartening reality. Findings from this research bring forward new evidence to show that this cohort of children find themselves caught in the middle of two large and complex policy systems, neither of which have been designed with the best interests or rights of disadvantaged children at the heart of their design or implementation.

ECEC policy makes parents' ability to work, instead of the level of children's needs, the qualification for receiving the extended offer of 30-hours of free childcare for three-year-olds. Due to most asylum-seekers being denied the right to work, this research found ECEC policy intersects with asylum policy to embed structural barriers to access. Additionally, some families who are granted time-bound forms of leave have NRPF conditions that prevent their access to public funds, which includes the offer of 30 hours free childcare. In both cases, children miss out on crucial ECEC provision because of their parents' immigration status, over which they have no control or autonomy.

**The unique overlap of two systems that do not recognise children as individuals, or put their needs and rights first as policy objectives, results in the isolation and exclusion of refugee and asylum-seeking children from the support services that are vital for their early development.**

Findings from this research also reveal a cycle of exclusion. The limited availability of convenient free ECEC hours for three- to four-year-olds prevents parents who have the right to work from finding appropriate, meaningful and secure work, and then accessing enough hours for their child to become entitled to the full free 30-hour entitlement. Combined with the limited availability of local nursery places, this research portrays an ECEC system that locks out refugee and asylum-seeking parents out due to weaknesses within both its operational and policy design.

This research also spotlights broader consequences of the UK asylum system on ECEC access and quality for refugee and asylum-seeking families. Any parental reluctance to send children to ECEC settings identified by this research was linked to fear of services and nervousness about being reported or having their asylum

claim denied – a pattern consistent with broader literature on the impact of the hostile environment. The lack of perceived safety and security is a damaging element for children and their parents. The evidence is clear that stress induced and experienced as a consequence of this insecurity can affect children's development, limiting parent's capacity to form strong attachments with their young children. Additionally, dispersal policies in which ECEC considerations are largely, if not entirely, non-existent also see asylum-seeking children fall through the cracks of provision – with limited information-sharing between national and local government impeding local authorities' and local ECEC providers' ability to reach out to and engage these communities in ECEC. **Access to ECEC for refugee and asylum-seeking children in the UK is inconsistent and sporadic.**

This research shows how access to ECEC is largely dependent on where in the UK families are based, or indeed moved to, and the means through which they were able to seek safety in the UK. For the former, the ability of local authorities to intervene and support ECEC access for refugees and asylum-seekers within their jurisdiction depends on the funding and resourcing available in each geographical area. Those who arrived through resettlement schemes and who had been allocated and moved to a community (instead of living in temporary accommodation) seemed to be better provided with holistic wraparound support that is vital for navigating the complex ECEC system. However, the actual numbers of such resettled families within the broader refugee and asylum-seeking population in the UK are comparatively few. In this research, asylum-seekers, Ukrainians who had arrived through Homes for Ukraine, and parents who had received some form of status through the asylum system all described limited and challenging experiences of ECEC access for their babies and young children.

## Promising practice shines through

Despite the many barriers to ECEC access, this research reveals a raft of promising practices in supporting families to access meaningful ECEC provision.

Findings suggest that support from local authorities, when it exists, can be crucial in enabling families to overcome barriers. Families on resettlement schemes often have stronger wrap-around support from a local authority than asylum-seeking families. But this research also identified examples of local authorities meeting asylum-seeking families where they are, by going into temporary accommodation and registering children at local ECEC settings, or providing informal ECEC activities in temporary accommodation if take-up of nursery was low. Additionally, local authorities may be pivotal in providing settings with specialist support, such as for children with English as an additional language.

This research also emphasises the importance of the voluntary sector, particularly in filling in gaps where support from the local authority does not exist. Ample good practice was identified, and of particular note was their role in: providing practical

and motivational support to families while navigating the ECEC system; and providing the space and opportunity for informal ECEC provision while parents participate in community activities and learn English.

Finally, research findings highlight the central role of ECEC settings in both access to and quality of provision. This role encompassed reaching out to local families to extend welcome, and supporting them to access their setting, through to creating inclusive, compassionate, and flexible ECEC provision that enables the participation, sense of belonging and development of all children, regardless of their background – all of this despite the significant constraints on their resourcing and funding.

## **Case studies of promising ECEC practices in other countries**

Globally, ECEC provision is a mix of government policy-initiated services and local NGOs responding to the needs of refugee communities in their region. An international study conducted by the Migration Policy Institute, on the major challenges and successes that larger host countries in Europe and North America have experienced in the provision of high-quality ECEC services to refugee and asylum-seeking children, found that of the countries they examined, Germany and Sweden have implemented promising policies and programmes.<sup>i</sup> In both countries all children are legally entitled to ECEC services from birth to age five, and Sweden has one of the highest rates of ECEC enrolment among three- to five-year-olds (95% as of 2022).<sup>ii</sup>

In 2017, Germany implemented a nation-wide programme to work with families living in shelters, many of whom are refugees and are unfamiliar with the German ECEC system. Each participating municipality develops programmes to prepare families to access ECEC services and provides them with funding to reduce barriers they may face in accessing them. Another programme adopted by the government, called *Stadtteilmütter* (Borough Mothers), recruits mothers, who are often refugees, to work in local ECEC settings which has resulted in more effective and intimate relationships with refugee families.

Similarly, the Swedish Government has set up a fast track for newly arrived immigrants to become teachers and pre-school teachers to respond to the shortage of ECEC workforce, while also building inclusive classrooms in the process. To encourage diverse classrooms, Swedish policy sees newly arrived refugee families resettled across municipalities rather than dispersing them to a few limited locations.

In Belgium, to address the lack of coordination and ensure a holistic provision of ECEC services, a partnership was established among the relevant stakeholders. The public ECEC agency in the Flemish region, along with Belgium's Federal Agency for the reception of asylum-seekers, and the Red Cross which manages reception centres in the country, formed a partnership to ensure all refugee families with young children can access wider early years services. These services include

prenatal, postnatal and preventative healthcare, parenting support, and home visits and consultations.

There are significant lessons that the UK could learn from closely examining these systems, in creating an environment whereby children are enabled to achieve their early development and begin their integration into their new home.

## Conclusion

Findings from this research demonstrate how refugee and asylum-seeking children in their early years find themselves caught in the middle of two UK policy systems – the ECEC funding and asylum systems – that overlook their existence and de-prioritise their rights. Barriers to ECEC access caused by these two systems combine with other factors to ultimately isolate and exclude children from accessing the ECEC provision that is vital for their development, safety and wellbeing in the wake of forced displacement. This ultimately denies these children the crucial window of opportunity to thrive in primary school and later in life. While this is disheartening, there is nonetheless ample promising practice occurring at a local level, with local authorities, ECEC providers and the voluntary sector going above and beyond to facilitate access to ECEC, and to ensure a quality ECEC experience for children.

**A child-centred approach to policy-making that stands to benefit children, families, and their new communities, is vital. Recommendations to this end are made below.**

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<sup>i</sup> Park, M., Katasiaficas, C., & McHugh, M., Responding to the ECEC Needs of Children of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Europe and North America (Migration Policy Institute, 2018).

<sup>ii</sup> <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=SWE&treshold=10&topic=E>

<sup>iii</sup> OECD, Sweden: Overview of the education system (2023), <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=SWE&treshold=10&topic=EO>.