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REPORT ON THE "SAFE SPACE PROGRAMME" IN MANDRYK KINDERGARTEN

This project is implemented with the support of Restart Foundation in cooperation with the Ukrainian NGO, Words Help, and the Centre for Mental Health at NaUKMA

DISCLAMER

This report was prepared as part of the implementation of the psychosocial support programme for preschool children, "Safe Space", at the **Mandryk** kindergarten.

The initiative was implemented with the support of **Restart Foundation** in partnership with **the non-governmental organisation "Words Help"** and the **NaUKMA Mental Health Centre**.

The report presents the key results of the programme's implementation at the **Mandryk** kindergarten in Kyiv from **April to August 2025**. The document covers the experiences of all parties involved in the programme: parents, teachers, the institution's administration, and specialists who directly implemented it. They talk about how participation in the programme affected the children — it helped them to understand better and express their emotions, reduced their anxiety levels, and taught them how to cope with aggression. At the same time, adults — both parents and teachers — gained significant experience in emotional interaction and support.

This kindergarten placed special emphasis on educators' professional growth and organised a new support system for them — supervision — which enabled them to understand children more deeply and cope with their own negative feelings. The training of interns who participated in the programme was also necessary: they had the opportunity to undergo practical training and acquire new tools for working with children in stressful and traumatic situations. One of the interns received mentor training.

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INTRODUCTION

The programme began at the end of April and lasted four months. These were difficult months for everyone in Ukraine. Families in Kyiv and the group leaders lived in constant danger, which affected all participants, the dynamics of the group work, and the emotional state of children and adults alike.

Photo credit: Army Inform and Kyiv City Military Administration, published by The Kyiv Independent

Over the course of four months, Kyiv experienced a series of massive shelling attacks, which significantly affected the lives of families with children. Combined attacks took place almost every week, turning nighttime into a source of constant anxiety. In May, 3,973 drone launches were recorded, an average of 128 per day. In June, 5,000 drones were recorded, which is 183 per day. Each of them was sent to destroy something or kill someone.

The shelling on 24 April, 10 June, 17 June, and 23 June were particularly tragic, destroying residential buildings and killing dozens of people, including children and teenagers. The attack on 17 June alone killed 28 people, and on 23 June, nine more, including two children and a pregnant woman. At night, Kyiv is ablaze with fires from strikes, and in the morning, the city is covered in smoke. The air quality has deteriorated significantly and poses a danger to people after each attack.[1]

The left bank of Kyiv has been particularly hard hit during this time. On 28 July 2025, a UAV struck a 25-storey residential building in the Darnytskyi district. Eight people were injured, including a three-year-old child. After such nights, children and adults continue their lives, but it leaves a mark on their mental health. Children begin to fear any loud noises, whether it is rain or a car passing by. The strike was not far from the homes and work locations of our team's specialists, and it is fortunate that none of them were injured; however, shock and emotional trauma are also unpleasant conditions that modern Ukrainians are already forced to live with side by side.

[1] Monitoring Air Pollution in Wartime Kyiv (Ukraine): PM2.5 Spikes During Russian Missile and Drone Attacks: https://www.mdpi.com/3588616

Due to constant shelling, families are forced to spend their nights in shelters or the metro. About 17,000 residents regularly hid underground during attacks, including more than a thousand children. No one can be safe, day or night, because homes, kindergartens, and schools are being destroyed — childhood is being destroyed, and sometimes lives are being taken.

No matter how hard parents and teachers try to cope, this has a profound effect on them, causing considerable stress from which there is no respite. As a result, they begin to burn out, become exhausted, and lose emotional control. Therefore, with each passing week, with each new shelling and each new air-raid siren, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to support their children.

Therefore, there is a critical need to create conditions that allow everyday life to continue. Where children can play freely, develop their imagination, learn new things, and build relationships. Adults can play with children, talk to them, and understand their needs, becoming reliable sources of support and guidance. In a safe space, we take care of adults in the hope that they will pass on this spark of warmth to children. Joint meetings between children and their parents are always very touching and emotional.

These simple things are a source of strength. They counteract the traumatic events that war brings every day.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The Safe Space programme, developed by the NaUKMA Mental Health Centre, is a comprehensive psychosocial initiative aimed at increasing children's stress resistance, supporting their emotional health, and developing self-regulation skills in wartime conditions. Between May 2025 and August 2025, the programme was implemented at the Mandryk kindergarten in Kyiv in partnership with Restart Foundation and the NGO Words Help. The programme was adapted to the kindergarten's needs.

Features of this kindergarten:

- tense relations between parents and the administration, frequent open conflicts;
- among the parents are both military families and those who avoid talking to their children about the war;
- children show signs of anxiety, aggression, and emotional overload;
- Teachers have difficulty understanding children's emotions, pay little attention to their own state of mind, and sometimes behave aggressively towards children.

In this context, the Safe Space programme worked on three levels:

1. **Children** — thematic classes that help them cope with complicated feelings, regulate their reactions, and leave room for play and joy.
2. **Parents** — group meetings to discuss war, safety, children's behavioural and emotional reactions, and ways to provide support.
3. **Teachers** — supervisory support and training aimed at reducing tension, improving understanding of children's behaviour, and developing non-violent interaction skills.

A team of four specialists was involved in the implementation of the programme:

- supervisor — Oksana Zaleska;
- mentor — Olena Tkachenko;
- 2 interns — Yevheniia Zavorotynska and Hanna Shvets

The programme covered participants, including:

- 18 children
- 2 teachers
- 35 parents
- 1 kindergarten director
- 2 interns.

One intern was a kindergarten director, and the training was a new experience for her, changing her views on the organisation of psychological work in kindergartens. The experience of group work with children, participation in mentoring discussions, and supervision highlighted the importance of respect for confidentiality, an ethical attitude toward one's practice, and the limits of competence in working in an educational institution. We managed to motivate both psychologists to continue their work, and they continued to run the programme in the kindergarten after the project ended, participating in a weekly supervision group on the implementation of the programme.

PREPARATORY STAGE

WORKING WITH TEACHERS

As part of the programme implementation, a series of supervisions was conducted in one of the preschools with a teacher, Ms. Yana, who works with a boy named M. From the age of 4, the boy was "obedient," helped adults, and integrated well into the group. About a year ago, after the birth of his younger sister, his behaviour changed dramatically: he began to make angry remarks about his mother, reacted oppositionally to her arrival, and, since spring, has been aggressive towards teachers (swinging, scratching, rudeness). About a month before the first supervision session, he stopped eating at the nursery and refused to participate in activities. After a holiday with his parents, he returned very agitated, with a pronounced need to control everything. For the teacher, this became a source of severe exhaustion and countertransference aggression: at the first supervision session, she spoke of her desire to "scratch back" (but she did not act on these fantasies) and thoughts of quitting, lacking the internal resources for a constructive response.

In response, three consecutive supervision meetings were held. The first supervision session focused on stabilising the adult: containing the teacher's feelings, normalising her anger and powerlessness in the context of war and the child's challenging behaviour, and rethinking M.'s behaviour in the context of family changes and background trauma. The teacher was given a specific task: before making any request, she should first establish contact with the child (make eye contact, address the child by name, and use a brief verbal bridge).

During the second supervision session, which took place after a night of shelling (the teacher had hardly slept and was exhausted when she took the children in), emotional support was provided. The results of the previous intervention were analysed: the teacher noted that M. had become noticeably calmer when her approach to him changed. The next step was to introduce the principle of "calm attention" — consciously paying attention to the boy when he was playing, observing, or in a state of relative calm (eye contact, touch, a short conversation about the game) to change the pattern of "attention only due to problematic behaviour." At the same time, the teacher received psychoeducation: a film was discussed as a resource for understanding children's experiences, basic ideas of attachment theory were introduced, and the article "Attachment in the Classroom" was provided for independent study. The third supervision session was devoted to a new episode of M.'s oppositional behaviour, when the teacher again "just wanted to leave." Together, they analysed the children's play and the boy's behaviour in relation to another very loud night-time shelling with tragic consequences; i.e., noisy, "chaotic" play was seen as a way of processing traumatic experiences, not just as "disobedience". Separately, we worked on how to give children feedback on undesirable behaviour without escalating or humiliating them. At this stage, the teacher explicitly requested further training on challenging behaviour.

This work resulted in changes in both the child's behaviour and the adult's professional position. According to the teacher's feedback, the boy became much calmer when transitioning from one activity to another, and the intensity of his immediate aggressive reactions decreased. The problem of full engagement in class remains, but the relationship has become less conflictual and more predictable. The most noticeable changes occurred on the part of the teacher herself: she began to understand better the connection between children's behaviour, military events, and family circumstances, learned to distinguish her own emotions and reactions, reduced the level of countertransference aggression, and increased her confidence in difficult situations. The teacher's written feedback confirms the qualitative changes and expresses gratitude for the supervisory support.
"Thanks to your support, it has become much easier for me to work with children (especially with M) — I have begun to understand their reactions better, behave more confidently in difficult situations, and use the knowledge I have gained every day in my work. I am sincerely grateful for your professionalism, attentiveness, and the warm atmosphere you create."

Thus, the supervision provided within the project not only reduced tension in a specific case but also strengthened the teacher as a key figure in children's security in a war context, with the potential to scale these developments across other teachers at the institution.

WORKING WITH PARENTS

The parents in this group show high levels of tension and mistrust towards each other and the institution: once a month, there are outbreaks of conflict, usually initiated by one family, which the most reactive parents join; such episodes last up to two weeks and create a chronic background of tension. Against this backdrop, conflicts between children in the group have escalated since September last year, due to the arrival of new children and the general instability of the adult environment. During group meetings and surveys of parents about how they respond to the situation in the country, it became clear that this tension runs deeper.

Parents described pronounced anxiety, insomnia, a state of constant alertness ("sleepless nights," "anxiety," "negative reactions," "fear of shelling," "I moved with my children — it was complicated"), as well as behaviour reflecting hypervigilance and preparation for the worst ("last week, I put a ceiling in the hallway in the evening and, when there is a threat, we move to the hallway with the children"). A significant proportion of parents express their position as the need to "hold on for the sake of the children": "my main reaction is to hold on for the sake of the children. Internally, there is a lot of pain and tension, but externally I try to remain stable," "I try to behave calmly," "calmly, as far as possible," "I reassure her. I am worried myself." At the same time, there are statements about "adapting to war," which indicate a forced, "functional" adaptation rather than genuine internal stabilisation. Some parents speak directly about anger and fear ("anger, sometimes fear"), others about stress and sadness. Still, the common denominator in the responses is a prolonged state of anxiety against the backdrop of war, displacement, shelling, and loss of life.

This emotional background of the parental community explains the regular outbreaks of conflict between adults: unreflected anxiety, insomnia, and a sense of danger easily translate into mutual recriminations, a struggle for "rightness", and polarisation within the group. The meetings with parents held as part of the programme became an essential diagnostic and supportive stage: adults had the opportunity to name their own condition, to see that anxiety, fear of shelling, the experience of moving with children, and insomnia are everyday experiences for most, rather than a "personal failure." At this level, a more differentiated language for describing their reactions began to emerge ("I am usually calm, but...", "I am in a lot of pain inside, but I keep it together on the outside"), as well as an awareness of the dual position of "I am worried, but I have to be a support for my child." This allowed the programme team to clearly identify the high level of anxiety and exhaustion among parents as a key risk factor for the emotional state of children and the climate in the group, and laid the foundation for further interventions aimed at supporting parental self-regulation, reducing conflict in the parental community, and gradually restoring trust in the institution. This became the basis for targeted work with parents within the programme.

During the first meeting, parents were informed about the programme's objectives and expected impact, informed consent forms were collected, and answers were provided to the questions that concerned them most. Most parents attended the first session, and all parents signed the consent forms. At the second meeting, dedicated to children's emotional and behavioural responses to stress and war, only seven mothers attended, which indicates a high level of resistance and exhaustion among parents. The atmosphere was emotional: parents shared their fatigue from sleepless nights, lack of energy, and feelings of exhaustion. Their stories reflected different styles of responding to the war — from attempts to "keep a cool head" to open admissions of anxiety, stress, and insomnia. One mother said that she was already preparing a "bed in the corridor" with her children and would move there with them in case of danger; another admitted that she put on headphones and turned on music when she heard loud explosions. A separate topic was the dilemma of how to talk to children about the war: one mother insisted that it was better to say it was just thunder, but at the same time, she did not know how to explain the constant air-raid sirens and the need to go to shelters.

Another mother repeatedly apologised when she involuntarily switched to Russian, explaining that Ukrainian was currently associated with the loss of her home and painful memories. She spoke of her minimal inner resources — not to explode, not to scream, not to cry — and expressed intense gratitude that "her child is still needed by someone other than her." These statements show that behind the parents' outward conflict lies deep anxiety, experiences of loss, displacement, danger, and emotional exhaustion, as well as a feeling of loneliness in their responsibility for their child. The meeting allowed parents to talk about their condition, see that others share similar experiences, and ask questions about how to talk to children about war and air raid sirens without causing additional trauma.

The final meetings with parents and children took place in challenging conditions. During the preparation and conduct of the meetings, three air-raid sirens sounded, requiring the sessions to be interrupted and moved to a safer location. Despite this, all three groups demonstrated good dynamics and the ability to return to working together. The children looked forward to meeting with their parents (both) and performed the proposed exercises with interest and pleasure; it was clear that the shared experience with adults was meaningful and emotionally rich for them. After the air raid sirens, the children's behaviour naturally became more restless and agitated, but they quickly rejoined the tasks and games, guided by the adults. Parents actively participated in the exercises, supported their children, and took part in the games, which in itself was an indicator of increased trust in the programme and a willingness to be emotionally present with their children even in difficult circumstances. The meeting ended with a shared meal of treats, creating a warm, friendly atmosphere. Parents openly shared their positive impressions and noted the programme's usefulness and importance for their children and themselves.

As a result, working with parents made it possible to:

1) make visible and discuss the high level of anxiety, exhaustion and ambivalence regarding the topic of war;
2) provide adults with a safe space where their reactions are understood rather than judged;
3) reinforce the feeling that the child is essential not only to their family, but also to the community and the professionals who work with them;
4) take the first steps towards restoring trust between parents and the institution. This, in turn, creates better conditions for children's emotional security and reduces conflict in both the children's and parents' groups.

PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION: GROUP WORK WITH CHILDREN

DYNAMICS OF SESSIONS

As part of the Safe Space programme, three children's groups were created at the Mandryk kindergarten, comprising 18 preschool-aged children. The programme sessions were held weekly for 12 weeks in a therapeutic group format, which included psychological information for children, play activities, creative exercises, physical activities, and work on emotions through metaphor.

There were six children in each group. However, not all of them were able to attend every session: some were ill, some were on holiday, and some stayed at home after difficult nights. On average, most children attended eight sessions, some attended seven, and some attended six. Children who attended up to six sessions were recommended to repeat the programme. Classes were held on days following shelling as well as on regular days, and each time it was clear how differently the children reacted.

The first sessions had different dynamics: while the first was calm and focused on getting acquainted and learning the rules, the second, after the shelling, was marked by high anxiety and overexcitement among the children. Despite this, the structure of the sessions remained the same, which helped the children better understand their emotions. Subsequently, the children gradually got used to the group. They began to participate more actively in joint activities, but a significant number of them continued to show symptoms of anxiety and fears related to the war and family experiences.

By the fifth session, the children had begun to open up little by little. During this time, the children learned to identify their emotions clearly, and a great deal of work was done on emotional intelligence. Some children showed positive dynamics:

- The children became calmer;
- They began to notice their achievements and their good mood;
- All children, regardless of the severity of their condition, began to learn to be among other children without harming them;
- They began to understand that you cannot always get everything you want right away.

The classes were especially valuable for children after the heavy shelling of Kyiv. Although they were sleepy and noisy when they arrived, they grew quieter during class and began to unite around a common goal. Even though some children were a little overexcited, the group was overall more polite and responsive after class than at the beginning.

A sense of sadness and reluctance marked the final classes as they parted. It was clear that the children had learned to focus on their work, felt more comfortable, and had become more attentive and responsive — they began to notice when an adult was absent and showed compassion for one another. Unfortunately, it was evident that not all children in the group had improved significantly. Among a large part of the group, it was noticeable that:

- The children continued to violate others' personal boundaries.
- Children still interrupted others, did not listen to their peers, and focused exclusively on themselves.
- Children did not follow the rules, even after numerous repetitions
- Children continued to shout during classes.

A significant number of children showed improvement, but due to the challenging conditions of the day, implementing the programme was not easy, so assistants, psychologists, and educators did everything they could to support the children throughout the programme. However, for those children who did not show improvement, specialist support is recommended after the programme, and the Safe Space team suggests that some children be redirected and repeat the programme.

OBSERVATIONS OF BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES AND DIAGNOSTIC DATA

At the beginning of the programme, the parents of the children who agreed to participate completed a questionnaire about the child's general condition, family circumstances, and psychological well-being. A total of 18 children participated in the Safe Space programme.

Among them were:

- 8 boys and 10 girls;
- None of the children are internally displaced persons, but four children are members of military families;
- 1 child was prone to self-harm, such as hitting or cutting themselves, at the start of the programme;
- One child had a close relative who was killed or wounded during the war or a terrorist attack;
- All children have a supportive social circle — according to their parents, they interact with caring adults daily.

In open-ended questions, some parents mentioned the inability to answer their children's questions about war, anxiety, and shelling. Many children are afraid that a rocket will hit their home, and they worry and wait for their parents to return from the front. Children have become less obedient and more aggressive, and they constantly wake up at night.

Parents of children who participated in the programme completed two questionnaires: a children's mental health questionnaire and an Emotional Regulation Scale (ERS) questionnaire.

Eighteen parents underwent initial diagnosis. According to the results:

- On average, according to the Mental Health Questionnaire, each child had four anxiety symptoms, the main ones being constant anxiety and phobias, intense clinging to adults, stubbornness, and severe irritability.
- According to the EMRA, all 18 children had average emotional lability. None of the children had abnormal emotional lability, nor were any low levels observed. The average score for a child was 35 out of 60.
- According to the ERS, one child had an abnormal (low) level of emotional regulation on the emotional regulation scale, while the other 17 children had an average level. None of the children had a high level of emotional regulation. The average score for a child was 19.5 points on a scale of 8 to 32.

These results indicate that the children in this group were very "on the edge." Although none of the children required special attention or serious intervention, they were agitated, anxious, and did not understand how to exist and be around their peers. Therefore, they needed support in overcoming stress and developing self-regulation skills.

Twelve parents completed the repeat diagnosis. Although this is not enough to draw truly valid conclusions, we still saw the following at the individual level:

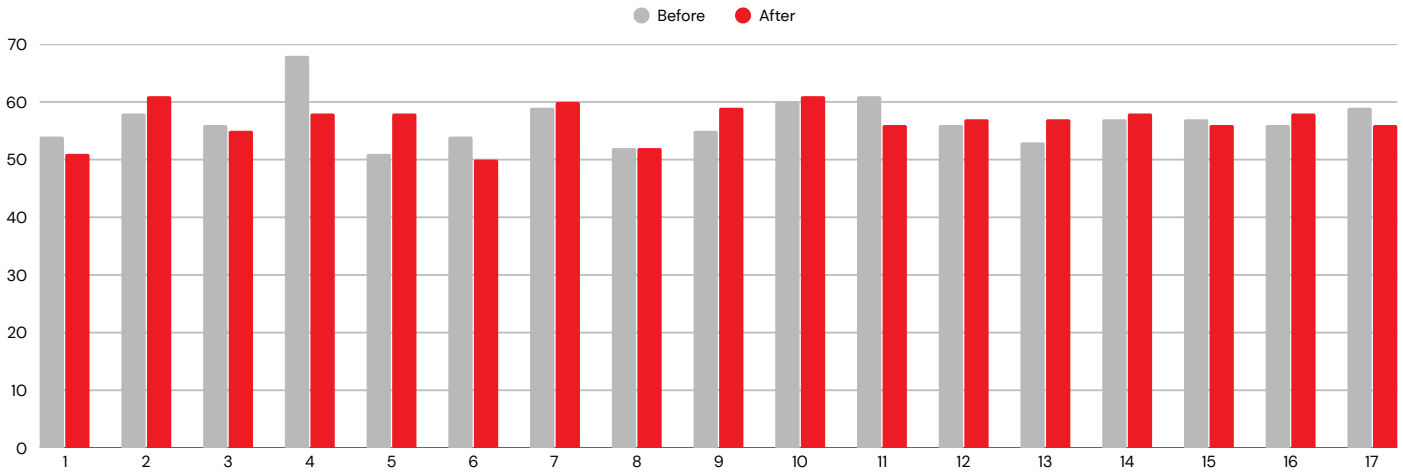
- According to the SER, among all 12 respondents, emotional lability did not change and remained at an average level. The average score for children also remained unchanged at 35 points.
- According to the ERS, in 12 respondents, the level of emotional regulation remained statistically unchanged; in 1 child, it was abnormal (low); and in the other 11 children, it was average. The child's average score was 17 points on a scale of 8 to 32.
- However, the parents themselves noted improved communication with peers, increased trust in others, and an overall increase in calmness.

Thus, we see limited results, as some children still need help, including those in crisis. Despite this, there are positive changes, primarily in interpersonal behaviour, according to the parents. Therefore, the data can be used to understand the overall picture, especially in combination with other stages of the programme.

Since we had experience with previous programmes, we knew that data collection could be difficult in this project. Therefore, two kindergarten teachers who were with the children throughout the programme were provided with the questionnaire, which they completed based on their own observations and experiences interacting with the children. The teachers filled out the questionnaire initially for 17 children (before the project) and then for 18 children (three months later, after the project was completed). Since one child was not assessed from the outset, they will be excluded from the comparison results to ensure accuracy.

INDIVIDUAL RESULTS OF CHILDREN ON THE SHER SCALES BEFORE AND AFTER THE PROJECT

EMOTIONAL REGULATION — BEFORE / AFTER THE PROJECT



We see that 8 children (47%) showed an overall decrease of -1 to -10 points, another 8 children (47%) showed an increase of 1 to 7 points, and 1 child (6%) remained unchanged.

Average score before the programme: 56.8
Average score after the programme: 56.6
Average change: -0.2 points

We can see that the results were very divided: half of the group of children showed improvement, with a decrease in points, while the other half showed higher results than at the beginning. It is also worth noting that teachers and parents rated the children equally for emotional lability — 35 average points. However, the teachers assessed the children in such a way that, in their opinion, the children's emotional regulation was significantly higher than the parents evaluated it. At the end, the parents gave 17 points, while the teachers assessed emotional regulation at 21.5 points.

However, this also shows the importance of continuing to work with children after the end of the project, because these heterogeneous dynamics indicate that, in conditions of constant shelling and anxiety, children need special attention, and some more than others.
It is also important to note that the results of parental observation differ significantly from those of educators, which may also indicate a greater need for support for adults, both parents and educators, who work with children daily and devote considerable resources to this in such difficult conditions.

INTERACTION WITH INTERNS

There were two interns at the Mandryk kindergarten: Yevheniia Zavorotynska and Hanna Shvets. Each of them led their own group for 12 weeks, with the children joining in for the first 2–3 sessions. Both interns noted that it was a little tricky at first, as they did not know which children would ultimately stay with them. Hanna's group consisted mainly of boys — twice as many as girls — so it was active, and the children were very eager to play. It took Yevheniia longer to establish contact, so there were no clear motives in her group at the beginning.

From the very beginning, the children's groups had many problems. Conflicting parents, distrust of others, regular clarifications of relationships, constant problems between children, and the complex emotional state of the teachers — all of this was a real challenge for the interns from the very first session. Therefore, the trainees repeated the rules of each session, placed particular emphasis on group rituals, and involved the teachers to make the group work much more harmoniously.

Even after the initial stage was coming to an end, the difficulties persisted. After a few sessions, the classroom where the sessions were held was changed, and one group reacted very strongly to this — Anna's group. She had problems maintaining a balance between the dynamics and structure of the sessions. She faced significant challenges because her group included children who severely violated the boundaries of others, ran around, did not listen to anyone, and were subsequently referred for redirection.

After more than half the classes had been conducted, the trainees introduced a rule to remind the children how many courses remained. By this time, everything had stabilised for Yevgeniya. The children talked a lot, told stories, and shared everything. Some children began to show positive dynamics; they improved at coping with frustration and at regulating their emotions. Hanna’s group also began to show positive dynamics. She worked very hard to achieve this, talking to the children about boundaries, discussing past classes with them, and emphasising the rules. The children were under a lot of stress due to the war, and during the classes, they did not complete all the tasks as required, but imitated rocket strikes and suicide bombers due to the large number of shellings this summer. This significantly slowed the interns' process.

After the final class, the trainees noted that all the children in Yevheniia's group showed positive changes, with some making progress both at kindergarten and at home. In Hanna's group, which was difficult from the outset, the whole process was dynamic, but positive dynamics were also noticeable.

Although some children in her group showed very little progress, we recommend repeating the programme. This is because Anna's group faced obstacles beyond her control, such as irregular attendance (only 2 children attended a session), low parental involvement, and their unwillingness to participate in the work. However, in her essay, she writes:

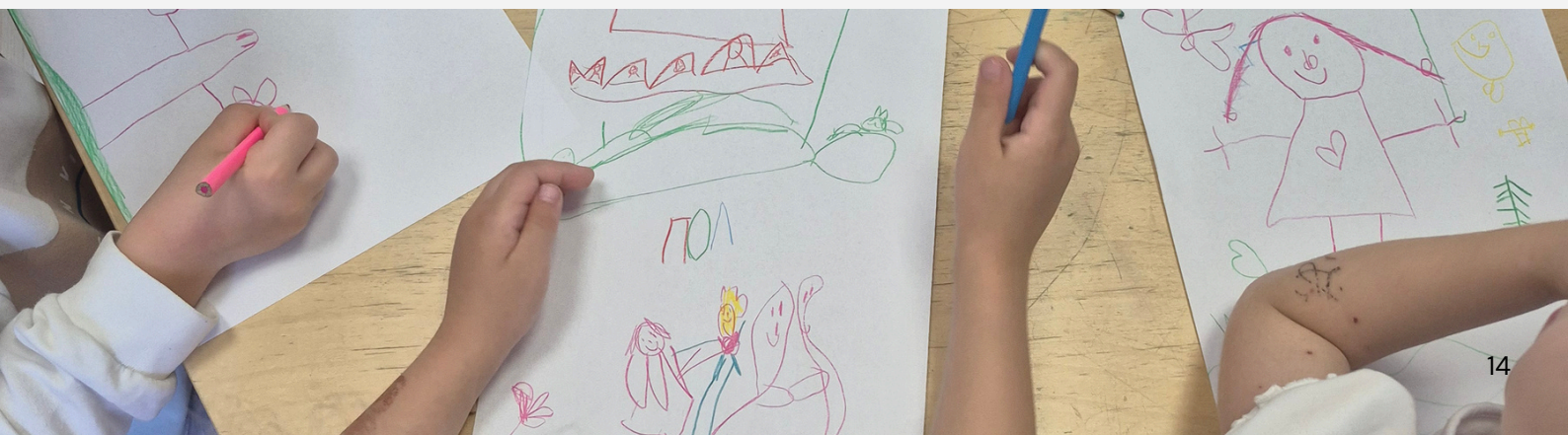
"From the very first days, I felt the uniqueness of the programme, which was developed by an incredible team of specialists with great respect and love for children. These are not just classes or games, but a holistic space where a child can feel protected, where their emotions, mood, and needs are taken into account. During my internship, I had the opportunity to observe experienced psychologists at work and teach my own classes. Observing the professionals was an absolute pleasure and a source of genuine admiration for me. It was interesting to see how they were able to sense the group, respond to different situations, and find an approach to each child. At the same time, when I conducted the classes myself, I felt the full responsibility and joy of such activity. It was a challenge to get the children interested, establish contact, and explain the tasks in simple and accessible language. I was particularly inspired by how games and various exercises can be used to teach children essential skills: understanding their emotions, respecting others, and working together as a team. It was a revelation to me that even the simplest exercises can be profoundly therapeutic. Thank you for your trust and the opportunity to learn from the best. The supervision sessions with Ms Oksana were particularly valuable, as she opened up new possibilities for understanding children and their behaviour in different situations.

Therefore, in summary, each intern found this 12-session path challenging, but they noted professional growth and benefits in understanding themselves.

REFERRAL TO SPECIALISED PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSISTANCE

At the end of the programme, children, parents, and educators who needed additional support could be referred to free specialist assistance at the NaUKMA Psychological Centre. Parents also had the right to choose a specialist themselves. Within the programme, support was provided to three families and one educator. The kindergarten teacher was visibly exhausted and nervous, and was also dealing with personal difficulties. One family affected by the war was referred for counselling for the father and child. Another child was referred for a neuropsychological examination and to a neurologist because, for over a year, she had been biting her nails, pulling her ears, and putting various objects in her mouth.

Another boy exhibited challenging behaviour both during the Safe Space classes and in the group. We recommended that the child undergo a mental health assessment. It was difficult for the parents to accept this recommendation, but the child is now receiving professional help.



IMPRESSIONS OF THE PROGRAMME: FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

PARENTS' IMPRESSIONS

The parents of children who participated in the Safe Space group sessions at the Mandryk kindergarten generally gave the programme a positive assessment. 75% of parents noted the warm, friendly, and interactive atmosphere of the sessions, the opportunity to discuss emotions, get to know their child's feelings, and spend time together, for example, drawing or doing exercises together. Interaction with psychologists was useful and enjoyable for most parents (91%), who received answers to their questions and began to understand how to better help themselves and their children; 75% of parents are willing to participate in the programme again.

Regarding children's emotional state, 42% of parents reported positive changes: children became calmer, more aware of their emotions, and their sleep improved. However, some parents note that some children are still in crisis due to the full-scale invasion. Parents also said that the programme helped children become more confident in interacting with their peers and cope more easily with air raid sirens.

Relationships and activities at home also improved in 42% of families: there were fewer conflicts, mutual understanding increased, children communicated more often about their feelings, and participated in joint activities. They continue to do the exercises from the programme, including building huts, doing exercises with candles, or "classes" with toys. Overall, 84% of parents expressed a desire for their child to participate in Safe Space again. They note that the programme promotes emotional intelligence, improves communication, strengthens family relationships, helps overcome fears, and fosters a more gentle attitude among children towards each other. Almost all parents recommend the programme to different families and see it as significantly beneficial for children and families as a whole.

YANA KEMENYASH, TEACHER AT THE FACILITY

Good afternoon! My child had the opportunity to participate in the Safe Space programme. Although we did not attend from the beginning, I would like to note the positive impact. First, my child has a peculiarity: he needs four sessions to warm up to a teacher. During the course, it was noticeable that he observed for the first month but did not participate. Now, it is essential to note the positive dynamics: he participates in the classes and, after the first or second class, he can interact calmly with others. Secondly, understanding basic emotions. He not only understood them, but also learned to express what he is feeling with words rather than tantrums. His feelings have become more controllable. Thirdly, as I understand it, the course included special exercises that help children overcome emotions such as fear and sadness. Misha even asks us to do them in everyday life.

IMPRESSIONS OF EDUCATORS

At the Mandryk kindergarten, the Safe Space programme was a valuable experience for the teachers, who were involved as partners, observers, and participants. All the teachers noted that the material was understandable and aligned with their professional values, and they have already begun using the skills they acquired in their daily work. Each teacher noted the importance of working with a psychologist, who provided emotional support and helped them respond constructively to challenging situations. The teachers emphasised that they particularly valued the attention paid to the children's emotional state, the atmosphere of mutual respect, and the development of listening and communication skills in the group.

According to the teachers' observations, after the classes, the children became calmer, more open, and friendlier towards each other. The children's ability to talk about their emotions and share their experiences with adults and peers improved, and trust within the group increased. The children enthusiastically told others about the classes and encouraged their peers to join. All teachers expressed their desire to participate in the Safe Space programme again and recommended it to their colleagues, noting its benefits for both children and adults.

YANA KEMENYASH, TEACHER AT THE FACILITY

I have been working at the kindergarten for three years, but I only recently became familiar with the Safe Space programme.

Participating in the programme has been an invaluable experience for me, because I have seen how the children have changed. They have become more united, calmer, and have begun to understand and name their emotions. They have become more sensitive to each other.
I have begun to understand not only the children in my group better, but also to see and feel the needs of children in general more clearly.

The tools the psychologists used to work with children in the programme were also valuable.
The programme is essential and supportive for families and people who work with children, especially during wartime. I understood how to talk to children about war and work through their emotions. After all, this is a complicated issue — you don't always know how to talk to children about such complex topics or convey information in a way that isn't traumatic for them.

Relations with the children's parents have also become more open and warmer after the programme. The programme will continue in our kindergarten with our group.

FEEDBACK FROM THE MANAGEMENT OF THE KINDERGARTEN

The kindergarten management highly appreciated the Safe Space programme for its content and results. The programme is being implemented in the institution for the third time and contributes to the formation of a friendly and supportive atmosphere in the groups: children become more attentive, sensitive, calm, and show more respect for each other. Participation in the programme helps kindergarten staff better understand children's emotions, interact more effectively with parents, and support children even after stressful events such as nighttime shelling. The management notes that Safe Space is a valuable resource for developing teachers' psychological literacy and children's emotional intelligence, and is ready to rejoin the programme and recommend it to other educational institutions.

ANNA SHVETS, CO-FOUNDER OF THE INSTITUTION:

This programme is taking place for the third time since I became the head of the M'Andryk kindergarten. These two years have coincided with a full-scale invasion. And each time, Safe Space comes to the older group of our kindergarten, just when we most need professional psychological support for the team, children, and their parents. And each time we get the result we expected, the atmosphere in the group of children becomes more friendly, they begin to see and hear each other.

Unfortunately, the present day for children in Ukraine is filled with fear, anxiety, and restrictions. Thanks to the programme, our team knows how to interact with parents, children, and each other in a way that makes our environment supportive and professional during the war. So that children feel safe and parents know that their children are in the reliable hands of trustworthy adults.

Also, thanks to the programme, the team and the pupils' parents know how to talk about the war honestly, but in a way appropriate for the children's age. In almost every group, some families feared their children's questions about the war, and others told their children the explosions were thunder, avoiding the truth. The lectures helped families understand not only that children need to be told the truth, but also how to tell it.

The last group's programme coincided with intense shelling. Often, children came to class after terrible sleepless nights, talking about how scared they were, about how someone slept in a shelter, in the corridor, or in the car park. There needed to be a space where children could express their feelings and emotions, a safe space.

I would like to express my immense gratitude to the entire team behind this incredible programme, to everyone who cares for children who continue to live with their families in Ukraine, in conditions of war. Special thanks to Oksana Zaleska and Aliona Tkachenko for their support of our kindergarten. Their professionalism and desire to help children cannot fail to bring positive results. Each time we work together, we gain new experience, but each time it is with enormous gratitude and sincere enthusiasm.

We would like to continue developing teachers' psychological literacy, expand cooperation with parents, and gain even more practice in developing children's emotional intelligence through the Safe Space programme, which we eagerly await again in our kindergarten.

INTERN FEEDBACK

Participation in the Safe Space programme had a noticeable impact on both the children and the interns who worked with the group. They note that the classes were interesting and full of discoveries about children's emotions and behaviour. Each meeting was unique: the children came with their own experiences, feelings, and moods, and each time the group reacted in a new way. The format of the sessions allowed the children not only to express their feelings but also to listen to each other, support and help their peers, and learn cooperation and attentiveness. The interns particularly noted how valuable supervision and analysis of individual cases were — this enabled them to respond quickly to tricky situations and support children in crises.

At first, the interns felt nervous, but as time went on, this faded, and the work began to satisfy them. They noticed how the children's behaviour changed before their eyes: shy, quiet children became more courageous and active, learning to express their own thoughts and to participate in joint work. At the same time, some children remained in difficult emotional states, mainly due to the fears they had experienced during the war, from explosions and sirens to separation from their parents. The interns helped the children to process these emotions by creating a safe atmosphere where everyone could be heard and understood.

The experience was extremely valuable for the interns. They noted that they learned to notice subtle emotional cues, adapt their approaches to each individual, and maintain the group's focus without losing their individual approach. Through games and exercises, they saw how children master essential skills — distinguishing emotions, respecting others, and working in a team. The programme helped the interns understand their own strengths and weaknesses, grow professionally, and feel responsible for the safety and development of children in difficult conditions.

YEVHENIIA ZAVOROTYNSKA, INTERN AT THE MANDRYK KINDERGARTEN

"I observed positive dynamics in children during the classes. During supervision, successful strategies were selected for working with children who had difficulty concentrating. This demonstrates an individual approach to each child, because, based on the discussions during supervision, exercises were chosen that would help these children, for example, slime to calm them down, or giving unexpected attention to a boy who was gradually coming to class (he was initially resistant and did not want to come). Thus, the supervisor's and psychologists' attentiveness and flexibility enabled the children to get precisely what they needed from the programme. The group formed gradually over 2–3 sessions, and it was difficult to tune in to the children in my group because they moved from group to group.

There were many intense combined attacks on Kyiv (during the project, from June to August), and I often had to come to sessions after only a few hours of sleep, which was, of course, difficult. I got a feel for the group after 8–9 sessions, given the context we were living in during those months. The children talked a lot about shelling, fear of shahids, rockets, and thunderstorms. I believe that by the end of the project, the children were more open and friendly with each other.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

1. **Programme participants.** The programme involved 18 children, 2 teachers, 35 representatives of the parent community, 1 manager, and 2 interns. The children who participated were those who had experienced loss or injury during the war, children who were confused, anxious, and had regular nightmares. All participants received support tailored to their needs through various activities, including group sessions, individual work, consultations, etc.

2. **Parents' impressions.** Most parents rated the programme positively, liking both their own participation (communication with the psychologist and involvement in joint sessions with their children) and the programme's impact on their children. Although most parents cannot yet identify specific changes, the following main improvements have been highlighted: children have become more responsive in their relationships with others, calmer, and learned to express their feelings clearly. Some parents note that they need to spend more time with their children, but the Safe Space programme has affected every child in some way. All parents emphasized the programme's usefulness and would be very happy if their child participated in it again.

3. **Assessment by the institution's management.** The Safe Space programme is being implemented at the Mandryk kindergarten for the third time, and the kindergarten management finds this programme relevant, as it always appears when they need it most. The programme was described as extremely useful and valuable in practice, greatly helping children, teachers, and parents. This is particularly relevant in the context of war, when many parents do not even know how to talk to their children about what is happening and lie to their own children, telling them that it is "thunder" rather than shelling.

4. **Impressions of the teachers**. The teachers who participated in the programme noted that it was not only beneficial for the children but also for themselves, as it aligned with their personal values and offered them a unique experience of working with children. They noted that their understanding of the children's conditions had improved, they had learned to work with children, and trust between children and adults had grown. Therefore, all teachers will continue to use the knowledge they gained from the Safe Space programme and will definitely recommend that other teachers participate in it as well. The teachers also requested supervision, as they felt that this type of work was beneficial.

5. **Interns' impressions.** The interns noted that participating in the programme was helpful for them and they are very grateful for this opportunity. They note that this experience was crucial to their professional growth, as they learned to work with children, understand them, and provide the support they need. They noted the strong communication with the kindergarten staff and the high-quality supervision, which helped them in their professional growth. However, due to difficult conditions, such as the regular shelling of Kyiv throughout the programme, they feel the children still need support, noting in particular that the last sessions were the best for them.

6. **Programme effects.** We see that the programme's results are mixed. We see that parents are currently unable to understand how their children's condition has changed, but they would like their children to continue participating in the programme. We see that part of the group has improved its results, while another part has not, which is why the group's average score has remained almost unchanged. We see that the trainees note that they only felt the necessary group dynamics during the last sessions. We understand that, unfortunately, in the context of a full-scale invasion, it is impossible to predict how children will react. However, even in such difficult conditions, there have been positive changes, some smaller, some larger, and it has been particularly beneficial for adults, who will be able to help children more effectively when they need it.

Thus, we see that the Safe Space programme is effective as a comprehensive model of psychosocial support, even under conditions of constant shelling and heightened anxiety among both children and adults. Despite the many challenges of modern life in Ukraine, we are already seeing noticeable positive changes in everyone involved in the programme. Even in the critical conditions Ukrainians face today, the Safe Space programme provides a place for trust, growth, and support for both others and themselves.

Regular supervision of kindergarten staff is essential for preventing emotional burnout and improving the quality of care provided to parents and children, especially during regular shelling of Kyiv. Adults are currently under tremendous pressure from uncertainty, danger, and tension. This causes burnout and affects their ability to care for children. It is essential to continue providing ongoing support so that small interventions, such as supervision, supportive resource meetings, and reflexive groups with parents, create a space for caring for adults who care for children. It is this step-by-step approach that will strengthen adults' resilience and create better conditions for children to grow.