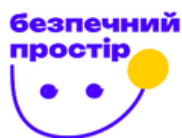


SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2025

REPORT ON THE "SAFE SPACE PROGRAMME" IN MRIY-DIY 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



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DISCLAIMER

This report was prepared as part of the implementation of the 'Safe Space' psychosocial support programme for pre-school children, which was carried out at the kindergarten **Mriy-Diy**.

The initiative was implemented with the support of **the Restart Foundation** in partnership with **the NGO 'Words Help'** and **the NAUKMA Mental Health Centre**.

The report presents the key findings of the programme's implementation at the nursery, which took place in Kyiv from **September to December 2025**. The document covers the experiences of all parties involved in the programme: parents, nursery staff, the nursery's management, and the specialists who directly delivered the sessions. They describe how participation in the programme affected the children — helping them to better understand and express their emotions, reducing anxiety levels, and teaching them to regulate complex feelings, particularly how to manage aggression. At the same time, the report highlights the challenges and difficulties faced by the adults providing support — parents and teachers. The Safe Space team encountered barriers to implementing the programme, such as parental exhaustion, a lack of interest among teachers, and differences in approaches to the child and principles of organising the learning process.

Particular emphasis is placed on reflecting on the problematic aspects of the project's implementation and developing recommendations both for the nursery (regarding the future work of the institution's psychologist and improving collaboration with teachers) and for the project itself (refining implementation guidelines, assessing the kindergarten's capacity to implement the project, and ensuring alignment between the Safe Space philosophy and the institution's philosophy).

The report also addresses the professional development of the trainees who participated in the programme: they had the opportunity to undergo practical training and acquire new tools for working with children in situations of stress and trauma.

The report was prepared by the project team: **Oksana Zaleska** (supervisor), **Alla Yansons** (CEO of Restart Foundation), and **Yevheniia Zavorotynska** (project mentor).



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INTRODUCTION

Each of our reports begins with a description of the context in which the 'Safe Space' programme was implemented. Each time, we remind readers of the difficult conditions of wartime, in which Ukrainians try to maintain the natural rhythms of their lives — going to work, raising children, studying, playing, rejoicing and loving. At the same time, they must be able to run quickly to shelter, get used to sleep deprivation, and overcome their fear every day during heavy shelling. Constant readiness and vigilance in the face of danger. This is the backdrop against which adults live, trying to create conditions so that the children growing up alongside them feel its impact less. Of course, this is a misconception: children experience and witness the war first-hand and are also alert to dangers, but they often adapt to their parents' beliefs and hide behind bad behaviour, psychosomatic symptoms, or withdrawal.

During the project's implementation, we faced not only constant shelling but also an energy crisis, blackouts, a lack of heating, and communication disruptions. The nurseries became places where, thanks to extraordinary efforts (back-up power supplies, generators, alternative heating), there was warmth and light. But this placed an additional burden on the nursery's administration and posed a challenge for the entire team. There were also several hits on residential buildings near the nursery. On the night of 23 October, enemy drones attacked the Podilskyi district, damaging one of the residential complexes in particular ¹. Across the city, 32 casualties were reported at that time ².



¹ The attack on Kyiv on 23 October: the Podilskyi district suffered the most damage._
<https://suspijne.media/kyiv/1146034-zitlovi-i-ofisni-budivli-ta-sinagoga-najbilse-poskodzen-pisla-rosijskih-obstriliv-u-podilskomu-rajoni-kieva/>

² Enemy attack on the capital on the night of 26–27 December. (Kyiv City State Administration Official Portal – Home)

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 resilience to stress, supporting their emotional well-being and developing self-regulation skills in wartime conditions. Between **September 2025 and December 2025**, the programme was implemented at a nursery school in Kyiv in partnership with the Restart Foundation and the NGO 'Words Help'. The project's launch at this facility coincided with a difficult period — autumn 2025 — when the overall situation was significantly affected by intense shelling, prolonged power cuts, heating difficulties and the general instability of daily life, which placed an additional burden on both the facility's team and the Safe Space team, as well as on the implementation of the project itself. At the start of the collaboration, it was evident that the first meeting with the facility's team took place on a rather high emotional level, particularly on the part of the administration. A clear stance was expressed that the institution was already doing a great deal for the children's safety and was striving to strengthen this aspect further. Such motivation appeared positive; however, as work progressed, it became apparent that there was insufficient established organisational support behind it to implement the project. Below, we outline the challenges the project team and the school's specialists encountered during their collaboration.

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

- supervisor — Oksana Zaleska;
- mentor — Yevheniia Zavorotynska;
- 2 trainees — Iraida Mukhina, Yulia Yartchevska

Both trainees were psychologists. One of the trainees is a psychologist at the institution, the other is a master's student in psychology.

The programme involved **the following participants:**

- 21 children, including 7 girls and 14 boys
- 1 carer
- 28 parents
- 1 nursery manager
- 1 nursery methodologist
- 2 trainees



PREPARATORY STAGE

ORGANISATIONAL CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT AT THE INSTITUTION

One of the key difficulties was a lack of administrative support. The institution effectively had no dedicated person to oversee the project's organisational processes: to be responsible for preparing materials, coordinating the timetable, communicating with staff, and carrying out other routine but critically important tasks. Formally, these functions were the responsibility of the headteacher; however, for the head of a large school, such a volume of additional operational work is excessive. Despite her commitment and willingness to support the project, it was clear that this model was vulnerable and did not ensure sufficient sustainability of the process. This likely reflects a broader organisational issue within the institution — a lack of structure in administrative processes and a failure to allocate responsibility for practical coordination.

In day-to-day work, this manifested itself in the project team often having to resolve basic organisational issues independently: preparing the premises, sourcing materials, securing equipment and agreeing on the technical details of running the sessions. Communication with parents was also a particular challenge. The team had no direct contact with the parent community, and all information was passed on indirectly—through the institution's administration. Some materials reached the parents; others did not, undermining the consistency of communication and making it difficult to establish a meaningful partnership.

Another important observation was that the centre was clearly oriented towards an educational-academic model. The nursery's space was virtually devoid of toys, open-ended play materials and unstructured creative resources, which are vital for children's emotional development, symbolic play and the psychological processing of their experiences. In some cases, children were forced to bring toys from home. It can be assumed that this was partly due to the facility's relatively recent opening and to the environment not yet being fully equipped. However, this likely also reflected the centre's broader pedagogical orientation – towards structured sessions, adult-led activities and minimal space for free play. According to observations, children's free, spontaneous activity occupied a very limited amount of time (up to 30 minutes a day).

During observations of adult-child interactions, forms of interaction were also noted that indicated a high level of external control and insufficient reliance on self-regulation, dialogue and the child's agency. This was of fundamental importance for the implementation of the 'Safe Space' project, as the very logic of the programme envisages a different type of pedagogical presence — one that is more sensitive, supportive and conducive to the development of the child's internal regulation.

It is also important to acknowledge that some of the difficulties were linked to our own organisational decisions. During the launch phase, we underestimated some risks and rushed to get started, as we were keen to roll out the project in time for the New Year and avoid interrupting our work with the children for an extended period. As a result, the institution's management also found itself under additional pressure — it was necessary to quickly change the timetable, integrate new activities, involve teachers and organise support for the process. For any institution, joining the 'Safe Space' project means not only inviting an external team but also a certain internal reorganisation: reviewing routines, ensuring adults are ready to participate, and involving teachers and the administration in the joint process. In this case, such a transition proved to be too abrupt.

This, in turn, led to tension in interactions with the teachers. Some of them took part in the first training session and were present during the initial sessions with the children, but subsequently some of the teachers effectively withdrew from active participation in the project. It was evident that they disagreed with certain working principles, in particular the less directive approach to managing the children's group, the lower level of external discipline, and a different structure for children's activities. As a result, the project team had limited...

opportunities to influence the children's daily environment through the teachers, which significantly reduced the potential depth of the programme's implementation within the institution. It is regrettable to admit, but the work with the teachers at the facility was unsuccessful. However, thanks to the efforts of the headteacher and the Safe Space team, as well as external supervision by experts, the work with the children was carried out to a sufficiently high standard. Despite all the difficulties, we managed to establish a stable programme of sessions and achieve results.

PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION: GROUP WORK WITH CHILDREN

As part of the 'Safe Space' programme, three children's groups comprising 21 pre-school children were formed at the 'Mriy-Diy' nursery. Programme sessions were held weekly over 10 weeks in a therapeutic group format, which included psychological guidance for the children, play activities, creative exercises, physical movement games and work on emotions using metaphors.

At the start of the programme, the parents of the children who agreed to take part completed a questionnaire containing questions about the child's general condition, family circumstances and psychological well-being. Thus, 21 children took part in the 'Safe Space' programme. Among them were:

- 14 boys and 7 girls;
- 4 children are internally displaced persons;
- 5 children are family members of military personnel;
- Almost all the children have a supportive social circle — according to their parents, they interact with caring adults on a daily basis;
- All the children have experienced anxiety, taking shelter, and the sounds of shelling and explosions.

There were 7–8 children in each group. However, not all of them were always able to attend the sessions. Sometimes children were absent due to illness, and sometimes shelling prevented them from attending the nursery. On average, most children attended 8 sessions, some 7, and some 6. Children who attended up to 6 sessions were advised to repeat the programme. Sessions took place both after quiet nights and after heavy shelling. This had a significant impact on the children's state of mind. The start in some groups was quite difficult — the children were excited, active, and did not settle down straight away. In all groups, there was a strong desire for free play. They seemed almost hungry for it — at the start of each session, they needed space to play. Each time, we adapted the sessions to meet this need.

Throughout the cycle of sessions, a positive trend was generally observed across the three groups of children. At the start, the children approached the process with wariness, testing the rules and boundaries, and struggling to maintain a shared framework; in some groups, they also displayed heightened excitement, impulsiveness, noise, jokes about bodily functions, or, conversely, cautious observation and withdrawal from shared activities. Subsequently, the children gradually became better at staying in the circle, remembered the rules, remained in the shared process for longer, participated more actively in the rituals, and began to express their feelings not only through behaviour but also through drawing, play, stories and discussions of emotions. In all groups, themes of fear, anger, joy, loss, uncertainty, and the need for support and safety emerged, indicating a growing capacity for symbolic processing of experience.

Group 1 demonstrated a shift from pronounced chaos and overexcitement to partial stabilisation through shared play and the gradual acceptance of boundaries. At the start, the children, particularly the boys, actively tested boundaries, found it difficult to follow rules, required a great deal of movement, and tension within the group often manifested as noise, a struggle for attention, laughter and difficulty concentrating.

Subsequently, the group began to respond better to rituals, movement activities, and object mediators, particularly toy cars, a car wash, a playhouse, and scooters. Although overexcitement did not disappear entirely, there were episodes of greater composure, collaborative play and a return to contact after disengagement. The individual reactions of the children in this group clearly illustrated the overall process: some children joined the group due to hyperactivity, whilst others did so because of sensitivity to noise and a need for a more gentle approach. Towards the end of the cycle, themes of abandonment and the need for parental presence became particularly pronounced; however, even during these difficult episodes, the children were able to return to group activities provided they received support and engaged in play.

Group 2 proved to be the most balanced and structured in terms of its dynamics. Even in the early stages, the children showed interest in the session format, accepted the rules relatively well, and engaged in discussions about emotions, active games, drawing, and rituals. By the middle of the cycle, the children's ability to name their own experiences and talk about their fears—particularly regarding darkness, danger, the unknown, and wartime experiences—had noticeably increased. Even when individual children remained on the periphery of the process or required additional support, the group as a whole maintained a shared framework and did not fall apart. By the end of the cycle, the children demonstrated greater calm, predictability, self-organisation, and interest in their own work and emotional themes. This group moved most consistently from becoming familiar with the language of emotions to actively using it in group interaction.

Group 3 progressed from initial interest and good rapport to a deeper exploration of themes such as impulsivity, loss, hurt feelings and separation anxiety. At the start, the children were eager to engage, actively participating in the rules, compliments, games and rituals. Over time, impulsive reactions, conflicts between children, episodes of aggression, difficulties with self-regulation, and jokes related to physicality became more pronounced in the group. At the same time, it was in this group that deeper emotional themes emerged particularly clearly: the death of pets, pain, hurt, the need for support, and anxiety over the absence of a mother. By the end of the cycle, the group had become calmer; the children were more willing to follow the facilitator, and their feelings were increasingly expressed through stories, play, cards, shared games and requests for support. Individual challenging behaviours were less disruptive to the group and increasingly became material for collective processing.

The final meetings with parents confirmed that the group process had not only a situational but also a broader supportive effect. In their interactions with parents, the children demonstrated greater joy, interest, an ability to play cooperatively, to share memories and to accept adult support. In some cases, it was the very presence of parents or a supporting adult that helped to alleviate anxiety, cope with sadness or feelings of abandonment, and bring the child back into the shared process. Parents also noted positive changes outside the sessions, including reduced tension, improved sleep, and greater openness in the children towards contact and emotions.

Overall, the dynamics of the three children's groups indicate the gradual formation of a safer emotional space, in which the children were able to move from testing boundaries, impulsive reactions, chaotic excitement or cautious withdrawal to greater trust, emotional awareness and symbolic processing of their own experiences. Despite the groups' differing starting points, by the end of the cycle, all of them showed an improvement in their ability to connect with others, participate in shared activities, follow rules more effectively, discuss difficult experiences, and rely on adults and the group as sources of support.



WORKING WITH PARENTS

An analysis of parents' responses shows that the war remains a constant backdrop to family life and affects children's emotional state, even when their behaviour appears calm on the surface. The responses reveal fear, anxiety and tension during air raid alerts, as well as experiences of loss, displacement and uncertainty. Most often, parents describe their children's fear of loud noises, anxiety before bedtime, and worries about their home and loved ones. Children say: *"I'm scared"*, *"are we definitely going to win?"*, *"Will a rocket hit our house?"*, *"Why are they attacking us?"*, *"When will this end?"* For some children, these feelings are situational; for others, they become a more persistent emotional backdrop. After shelling, parents note that their children become irritable, cry, become highly emotional, have difficulty falling asleep, and are afraid of being left alone. In some cases, the experience of war finds its way into play and creativity: the child *"becomes more irritable and emotional"*, and their *"games, drawings, and imaginative language play come to be about aggression, fear of death, aggressor-defender, kill-save"*. At the same time, even in children who appear calm on the surface, anxiety may manifest indirectly — through a need to be closer to adults, a reluctance to be left alone, or changes in behaviour. Parents try to maintain stability and not exacerbate their child's anxiety: *"we don't cause a panic"*, *"I keep myself under control, I don't show the children my anxiety"*, *"I try to minimise their stress"*. At the same time, this is often driven by their own difficult experiences — *"restless sleep"*, *"lack of sleep"*, *"it was very scary, not for myself, but for my children"*. Despite this, many parents adopt a resourceful approach: they answer their children's questions, support them, and help them express their emotions through play and creativity.

Overall, the results indicate that the war continues to affect the emotional state of children and adults. Parents want to be a source of support for their child and create a sense of security, but at the same time they feel tired, exhausted, and stressed.

As part of the work with parents, a series of meetings was held (**3 joint meetings and 10 feedback sessions with families**) in a hybrid format (offline meetings at the nursery and online): an introductory presentation of the programme, a training session on children's reactions to stress, a final joint meeting with the children, and a separate feedback session for families. The overall aim of the meetings was to familiarise participants with the programme, provide educational information on the effects of stress, support parents' understanding of the processes taking place in their children, and provide final feedback upon completion of the programme.

The discussion unfolded gradually — from initial wariness and questions about safety/control to greater trust and engagement. At the first meeting (presentation), the topic that caused the most anxiety among parents was the possibility of talking to their children about the war, as well as the issue of children adapting to new adults (three new psychologists, 'is there too many adults?'). It is important that the purpose of such a structure was discussed, as well as the child's option not to participate, to observe, to refuse exercises, to have time to adapt, and the family's right to withdraw if they feel uncomfortable. A separate set of questions concerned the programme's evidence base and previous implementation experience; following the discussion, parents were generally willing to give their consent for their children to participate, meaning the programme launched against a backdrop of moderate anxiety, which was partly contained by the clarity of the rules and the predictability of the process. Subsequently, parental involvement was largely low, partly due to administrative difficulties. In this nursery, we had no direct contact with parents, and information about parent meetings and sessions with the children was relayed via the administration. In their feedback, parents mentioned a general lack of timely or any information about events.

The second meeting (training session) revealed group dynamics typical of the new format: initially, there was 'mistrust', caution, and an incompletely formulated understanding of 'how exactly this could help'; this was followed by gradual engagement, and by the end, active participation from everyone. Few parents attended, and we were able to engage deeply with their concerns.

The final session took place against a backdrop of external stressors (power cuts, anxiety and shelling the previous day), which affected the general state of the parents and children. Overall, the parents looked tired in each group. They responded positively to playing games with their children. During the sessions and in discussions afterward, the following topics were raised: how to handle a child who behaves boisterously in public places; gratitude for the 'Safe Space' programme and the improvement in the children's condition during the sessions; and how to approach children's war games.



PARENTS' FEEDBACK ON THE PROGRAMME

An analysis of parents' feedback indicates a generally positive perception of the programme by both adults and children. Parents highlight the value of the programme both as a supportive space for their child and as an opportunity for their own learning, for reflecting on emotional processes and for gaining a better understanding of how to interact with their child. The feedback repeatedly mentions characteristics such as informativeness, timeliness, constructiveness, an atmosphere of acceptance, mutual respect and support. One parent succinctly summed this up as "useful from the point of view of parental education", whilst another mother emphasised the "incredible atmosphere of acceptance, understanding and support". For some parents, the very fact that attention was being paid to children's mental health amidst the war was particularly significant. In the feedback, this was explicitly described as "very informative and timely" and "unexpected and valuable that so much attention was paid to the mental health of the youngest Ukrainians". Overall, parents perceived the programme as a safe, useful and appropriate format for supporting children in difficult circumstances.

Most often, parents highlighted the value of the playful, gentle and unobtrusive format, in which children could interact, discuss important topics and process their emotions in a way that was accessible to them. Joint games, group interaction, the opportunity to discuss important matters in a playful way, and the focus on the warm, supportive aspects of the experience were all well received. Feedback highlighted that the sessions helped...

children 'focus on pleasant and heart-warming things and events', 'feel that they are not alone', and also contributed to stabilising their psychological and emotional state. Parents also found the meetings and the information section of the programme useful, where they could receive advice from psychologists, ask their own questions, and view difficulties 'from a different angle'. Participants noted that during the group meetings for parents, they felt 'comfort and freedom of self-expression', and also received 'useful advice from psychologists'. The value of parents participating alongside their children is particularly highlighted, as it allows them not only to observe the process but also to connect with their child during shared activities.

In most feedback, children are described as engaging well in the sessions and responding positively to them. Parents note that the children found it interesting and fun; they happily recalled the games and photos from the sessions, and talked at home about their meetings with the psychologists. For example, one mother writes that her child *"always spoke happily about the session with the psychologist"*, whilst another notes that her daughter *"looked through the photos from the sessions with delight, recalling that they had played games with the psychologists and had had fun"*. In another instance, a child stated directly that they *had "played in an interesting way"*. For most children, the sessions did not provoke resistance and were perceived naturally, as a game or a space for pleasant interaction. At the same time, one review noted that the child *"wasn't very interested"*, which points to varying levels of engagement among children and highlights the need to take into account individual characteristics, age, the format of the sessions and group dynamics.

Some parents describe noticeable positive changes in their children's condition and behaviour. The most frequently mentioned changes include reduced anxiety, improved sleep, better emotional regulation, less fixation on the topic of war, and more open and warm communication. In one review, a mother writes that her child *"stopped repeating words about the war, the enemy, and drones"*, *"became calmer and sleeps better"*. *"Better sleep and better emotional regulation"* were also noted separately. In some cases, parents noticed signs of improved emotional awareness: the child was able to name their state, for example, saying *"I feel anxious"* or *"I'm angry"* and expressing this in an appropriate way. Such changes are not always described as dramatic or unequivocally linked solely to the programme, but they do indicate an increase in the child's ability to recognise and express their own feelings.

At the same time, some parents did not notice any significant changes or were unsure to what extent these were specifically linked to the sessions. This applies primarily to cases where the child did not attend all sessions or parents were unable to participate in the parent-focused sessions. Several questionnaires explicitly state: *'did not notice any significant changes'*, *'difficult to answer'*, *'difficult to perceive a specific impact'*. Such restraint in the responses is important, as it demonstrates not only a positive attitude towards the programme but also a realistic perception of its effects.

A separate important finding is that some parents note positive changes in their relationships with their children. The feedback includes comments about greater warmth, openness and closeness in communication. One mother notes: *"Our relationship has become warmer and more open"*, whilst another writes that her relationship with her daughter *"is becoming closer"*, and the child herself *"shows understanding more often instead of stubbornness"*. Some parents also noted that they apply 'Safe Space' practices at home, such as expressing gratitude, recalling pleasant moments, drawing together, or talking about the day. This suggests that for some families, the programme has become not only a source of support for the child but also a catalyst for more attentive emotional connection within the family.

Overall, parental feedback indicates a high subjective value of the programme. The most important aspects for parents were a safe, supportive atmosphere, a playful approach to working with children, the opportunity to talk about emotions, and practical benefits for the adults themselves. In some children, parents noticed improvements in emotional state, sleep, and emotional regulation, as well as a reduction in stress related to the topic of war. At the same time, some responses were more reserved, indicating varying levels of family engagement and differing degrees of change. Taken together, the feedback suggests that the programme was perceived by parents as useful, relevant and psychologically supportive, and that its value extended beyond individual sessions to include the quality of parent-child interaction and the emotional atmosphere within the family.

Feedback from Veronika Vitaliivna Kolodyuk (no photo) *"I enjoyed taking part in the games with my child. The information during the lecture was useful. After the programme, my son stopped repeating words about war, the enemy, drones and so on. He has become calmer, sleeps better, and is better at managing his emotions. Our relationship with him has become warmer and more open. I would like to take part in the project again. I realised that it is important to share your feelings in order to feel safe. I realised that it is possible to plan for the future and dream under any circumstances, as well as to remain sensitive to loved ones and attentive to one's own emotions and feelings."*

INTERACTION WITH TRAINEES

There were two interns at the 'Mriy-Diy' nursery: Iraida Mukhina, the nursery's psychologist, and Yulia Yartchevska, a psychology student on her master's degree. Iraida Mukhina already had experience of an internship with another mentor, so we expected her to provide support and greater involvement in terms of project administration, as other managers at the centre were only involved to a limited extent.

Both trainees gained experience observing sessions and assisting the mentor during them. Iraida conducted sessions independently. It is worth noting that a stable group of trainees did not establish itself immediately: there was a period at the start when another trainee, a tutor from the institution, took part; she had expressed a desire to join, but found it difficult to accept the programme's rules: she exercised too much control and assessed the children and their work, which directly affected their safety. She did not agree to the mentor's suggestion to act as an observer rather than lead the sessions and withdrew from the project. After that, the process stabilised, and Yulia and Iraida continued the internship.

An important component of their training was the mentoring discussions, during which the trainees learnt to analyse group dynamics and the children's behaviour, and reflected on their actions during the sessions. The meetings focused on:

- implementing the programme within the nursery setting (coordinating timetables, conditions and roles, and resolving administrative challenges);
- stress caused by a lack of time and resources;
- documentation and reporting;
- training in observation (what exactly to record and how, the difference between observing/assisting/leading a session, how psychological sessions differ from pedagogical ones, providing feedback to teachers);
- reflecting on children's and groups' behaviour: sensory sensitivity, aggression, impulsivity, concentration difficulties;
- focus on working with parents (training, analysing behaviour as a 'language of needs', routines, supporting self-regulation);
- preparing sessions;
- resolving conflicts within the team

The trainees then continued their training through supervision sessions, for which they prepared challenging questions and brought complex emotions: exhaustion, anxiety, fear, confusion, anger and despair, as well as a sense of helplessness. During supervision sessions, these feelings were addressed and contained; the supervision group sought solutions and theoretical explanations for processes occurring both in the children's groups and within the adult team. We devoted a significant portion of the supervision sessions to addressing conflicts within the team. We also spent a great deal of time adapting the programme for one of the groups, which required more attention, additional play materials and greater resources for containment. During the reporting period, **19 supervision sessions** were held, which accompanied the implementation of the programme at the facility and supported the specialists in their work with the children's groups.

The supervision process enabled us not only to identify these conflicts in a timely manner but also to gradually outline ways to resolve them. To this end, individual and joint supervision meetings were held, roles and boundaries of responsibility were clarified, specialists were supported in difficult situations, some issues were escalated to management, and clearer lesson plans were developed for groups where rapport with the children was developing more slowly. Tools that engage children through play, curiosity, respect for their pace, use of favourite topics, and safe interaction—rather than coercion—proved particularly effective. This helped reduce tension within the groups, increase children’s engagement, and support the specialists in maintaining their professional resilience even in challenging conditions. The centre’s psychologist, Iraida Mukhina, continues to receive weekly supervision on psychological work at the centre as part of the project.

FEEDBACK FROM TRAINEE YULIA YARTCHEVSKA



Yulia Yartchevska's feedback and reflective essay indicate that participating in the programme was a positive, professionally meaningful and deeply meaningful experience for her. Her integration into the work of the new nursery was accompanied more by interest, openness and an inner readiness to engage than by anxiety or resistance. The trainee emphasises that her expectations of the placement were generally met, and the project itself provided an opportunity not only to be present in the group process but also to gain a deeper understanding of the connection between a child's emotional state, their behaviour and the quality of adult support. At the same time, she notes that contact with the school's administration and teaching staff was limited, whereas interaction within the team and participation in supervision sessions became the main source of support, learning and professional reflection for her.

In her work with children, the trainee particularly emphasises the importance of observation, flexibility and the ability to take into account the different needs of groups.

She noted that a more structured organisation of activities had a positive impact on the children's behaviour, and that the combination of rules and freedom created conditions in which a child could gradually learn to follow rules, interact with others and remain in touch with their own feelings. Although her role remained largely observational, the trainee felt the value of an attentive and consistent adult presence. Of particular significance to her was the experience of establishing contact with a child who was at the session without their parents: it was through shared activities and consistent interaction that trust was gradually built. In her view, this confirmed that even a limited but reliable adult presence can be of great support to a child.

One of the trainee's most important observations was that experiences of trauma—both related to the war and to a lack of parental attention, emotional presence and contact—were clearly evident in the group process. She notes that these manifestations were not overlooked, but became the subject of joint discussion and supervisory reflection. It was precisely supervision, theoretical meetings and collective discussion that helped to better identify the hidden aspects of the children's experiences and find sensitive ways to respond. Symbolic and safe forms of expression played an important role in the work, particularly drawing, collage, play, the use of slime, and other practices that provided opportunities for children to express complex emotions in ways that were acceptable to them.

Alongside her positive assessment of the experience, the trainee candidly describes the difficulties. Among the strengths, she highlights the programme's concept itself, the supervisory support, the opportunity to observe real changes in the children's behaviour, and the value of an emotionally oriented approach. At the same time, the feedback notes a lack of coordination between the project team and the institution, occasional tensions in interactions between adult participants in the process, as well as her own experience of the limitations of her professional role, as she was unable to lead the group independently due to the mentor's restrictions. This aspect was emotionally significant for her, although she acknowledged it was justified given the need for stability in the process. In her interactions with parents, there was also a sense of tension and mistrust regarding her competence, which likely reinforced her cautious, observant stance.

Overall, the trainee views the programme as much broader than simply a series of sessions with children. In her view, it is a space that teaches not only the child but also the adult — to be attentive to emotions, to better understand one's own state, not to reduce parenting solely to control, but to become a support and guide for the child. She emphasises that she is already applying the knowledge gained to her own practice, particularly the ability to better calm children, talk to them about their feelings, listen more attentively, and leave room for individual expression. Thus, participation in the programme has become an important resource for the trainee's professional development, and the programme itself emerges as a valuable format for supporting children, parents and professionals, with the potential for wider implementation in educational institutions.



FEEDBACK FROM TEACHER

ZORYANA MYKHAILOVA

Despite limited involvement, a teacher from one of the groups felt the positive impact of the programme, which she had already observed through the children. The teacher's feedback indicates a generally positive perception of the programme and its practical value in daily work with children. She notes that she has applied the skills acquired during her participation in the programme in her work and is ready to continue using them in the future. The teacher would also recommend the programme to other educators and does not rule out participating again in the future if she feels the need to do so. She found the programme easy to understand; it largely aligned with her personal values and, in her opinion, provided useful knowledge and skills for carrying out her day-to-day professional tasks.

She highlighted communication with the psychologist as a particularly valuable aspect, which points to the importance not only of the programme's content but also of the very opportunity for professional support and interaction.

Feedback from the teacher: "I can see that the children's participation in the programme has had a positive impact on their emotional state: the children have become more confident and have also started to trust one another more. This indicates an improvement in the emotional atmosphere within the group and a growing sense of security in the children's interactions. At the same time, our relationship with them has remained as good as it was; I haven't noticed any significant changes. However, I consider the programme to be useful, relevant and practically significant for both me and the children in the group. I believe that I will be able to incorporate elements of Safe Space into my sessions with the children on my own."



GENERAL CONCLUSION

The implementation of the 'Safe Space' programme in the kindergarten 'Mriy-Diy' confirmed that systematic psychosocial support for pre-school children in wartime is relevant, in demand and capable of delivering tangible results even within a complex organisational context. Positive trends were observed in three nursery groups: the children gradually became better at adhering to the group's structure, participated more actively in joint activities, expressed their feelings more often in symbolic form, and relied more on adults and the group for support.

At the same time, the experience of implementing the project showed that the programme's effectiveness depends not only on the quality of direct work with children, but also on the institution's organisational readiness, alignment of values, consistent participation of educators, the presence of administrative coordination, and clear communication with parents. Despite the limited involvement of some adult participants, difficulties with coordination and tensions in interactions, the programme was successfully implemented to a reasonably high standard thanks to the team's work, supervisory support and flexible adaptation to the institution's actual conditions.

Thus, the project can be assessed as substantively effective for children, beneficial for some parents and professionally meaningful for trainees, as well as an important source of organisational insights for future implementations. The experience gained demonstrated not only the viability of the 'Safe Space' model, but also the need for clearer procedures for launching the programme, selecting partner institutions and training all adult participants in the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Based on the challenges identified during the implementation of this project, the team has strengthened the preparatory and organisational components of future roll-outs:

- **A project launch algorithm has been developed.** Before work begins, a step-by-step sequence of actions is determined: assessing the institution's readiness, agreeing on roles and responsibilities, coordinating the schedule, communication channels, resource provision and the procedure for interacting with the administration, educators and parents.
- **Trainee preparation has been strengthened.** The preparatory stage for trainees has become more thorough and includes a clearer definition of the trainee's role, the principles of non-directive group facilitation, the boundaries of responsibility, and skills in observation, assistance, and professional communication with adult participants throughout the process.
- **Selection of kindergartens based on value-based criteria has been introduced.** To participate in the project, an additional assessment is conducted to determine the extent to which the institution's approaches align with the 'Safe Space' philosophy, particularly regarding respect for the child's agency, the importance of free play, emotional development, and readiness for collaborative interaction.
- **An introductory questionnaire has been prepared.** At the initial stage, institutions complete an introductory questionnaire, which helps to assess administrative capacity, team motivation, the availability of basic conditions for programme implementation, communication practices with parents, and potential risks associated with programme implementation.