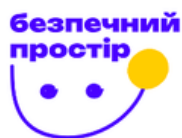


APRIL-JUNE 2026

REPORT ON THE “SAFE SPACE” PROGRAMME AT THE PRESCHOOL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION NO. 355 “YASOCHKA”

The project was implemented with the support of the Restart Foundation charity, in collaboration with the «Words Help» civil society organisation and the NaUKMA Mental Health Centre



RESTART
FOUNDATION



DISCLAIMER

This report was prepared as part of the «Safe Space» psychosocial support programme for pre-school children, which was implemented at Pre-school Educational Institution (Kindergarten) No. 355 «Yasochka.»

The initiative was carried out with the support of the Restart Foundation charity, in partnership with the «Words Help» NGO and the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA) Mental Health Centre.

The report presents the key findings from the programme's implementation at the Kindergarten, which took place in Kyiv from 1 April to 16 June 2026. The document covers the experiences of all parties involved in the programme: parents, Kindergarten staff, the Kindergarten'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 their levels of anxiety, and teaching them to regulate complex feelings, in particular 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 certain limitations, which have become familiar to them. These included a low level of awareness among parents and carers regarding the age-specific characteristics of child development and children's reactions to stress; exhaustion among both parents and other adults; and the prevalence of an authoritarian parenting style in both families and the institution.

The report also addresses the professional development of the trainees who took part 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 (Chief Executive of the Restart Foundation charity), Yevheniia Zavorotynska (project mentor) and Olena Tkachenko (project supervisor).



CONTENT

Disclaimer	2
Introduction	4
Programme information	5
Preparatory stage	7
Programme implementation: group work with children	7
Programme implementation: working with teachers	8
Educators' feedback on the programme	9
Working with parents	10
Parents' feedback about the programme	11
Interaction with trainees	11
Trainees' feedback on the programme	12
Feedback from the headteacher and teaching consultant	13
General conclusion	14



INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the project at State Pre-school Educational Institution No. 355 «Yasochka» in Kyiv was hampered by systematic rocket and drone attacks, which resulted in significant loss of life. Thanks to the solidarity of the project team and the Kindergarten's management, we were able to look after the children, their parents and the teaching staff; however, throughout the project, the instability and daytime drone attacks directly affected lessons and led to changes in the delivery of the programme.

For example, on several occasions whilst we were holding group sessions with the children, air raid alerts were sounded; there was a sustained drone attack on the city. In such cases, we had to abruptly interrupt the sessions and quickly move the children to the shelter. As the shelter was spacious enough, we were able to continue the session without having to reschedule it for another day. Unfortunately, not all pre-school education settings have this facility.

Another challenge we faced was organising a joint session for children and parents. This is the final and most important session, as the children look forward to it throughout the entire project. It is an opportunity for children and parents to deepen their bond, play, and get to know one another through play. It is not always easy for parents to attend this session, as most of them work. We plan it well in advance, and parents prepare for it early on — arranging with their employers to be absent from work on a specific day and at a specific time. On this occasion, the night before the final joint session, there were several rocket attacks that lasted from one o'clock in the morning until six o'clock. Consequently, a significant number of families were unable to attend the session due to physical and emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, some families had temporarily left the city or taken their children out of the city following warnings of heavy shelling.

Consequently, parents, children, educators and psychologists worked under conditions of constant threat of air strikes, regular air raid alerts and chronic sleep deprivation. Despite the extremely challenging circumstances, all project participants demonstrated a high level of commitment and resilience, working together to maintain a safe, supportive environment in which children could receive psychosocial support and feel emotionally secure.



¹ Russia has attacked Kyiv: 90 people have been injured and there have been fatalities
<https://suspline.media/kyiv/1320907-rosia-atakue-kiiv-e-rujnuvanna/>

INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The «Safe Space» programme, developed by the NAUKMA Centre for Mental Health, is a comprehensive psychosocial initiative aimed at improving children's resilience to stress, supporting their emotional well-being and developing self-regulation skills in a wartime environment. Between April 2026 and June 2026 inclusive, the programme was implemented at Kindergarten No. 355 «Yasochka» in Kyiv, in partnership with the Restart Foundation charity and the NGO «Words Help». This is the second state-run Kindergarten to take part in the project. The director and the educational consultant of the Kindergarten were motivated and expressed their willingness to cooperate. At the first meeting, they identified the need to work with the Kindergarten teachers, as well as issues of burnout and difficulties in managing the children's emotional reactions.

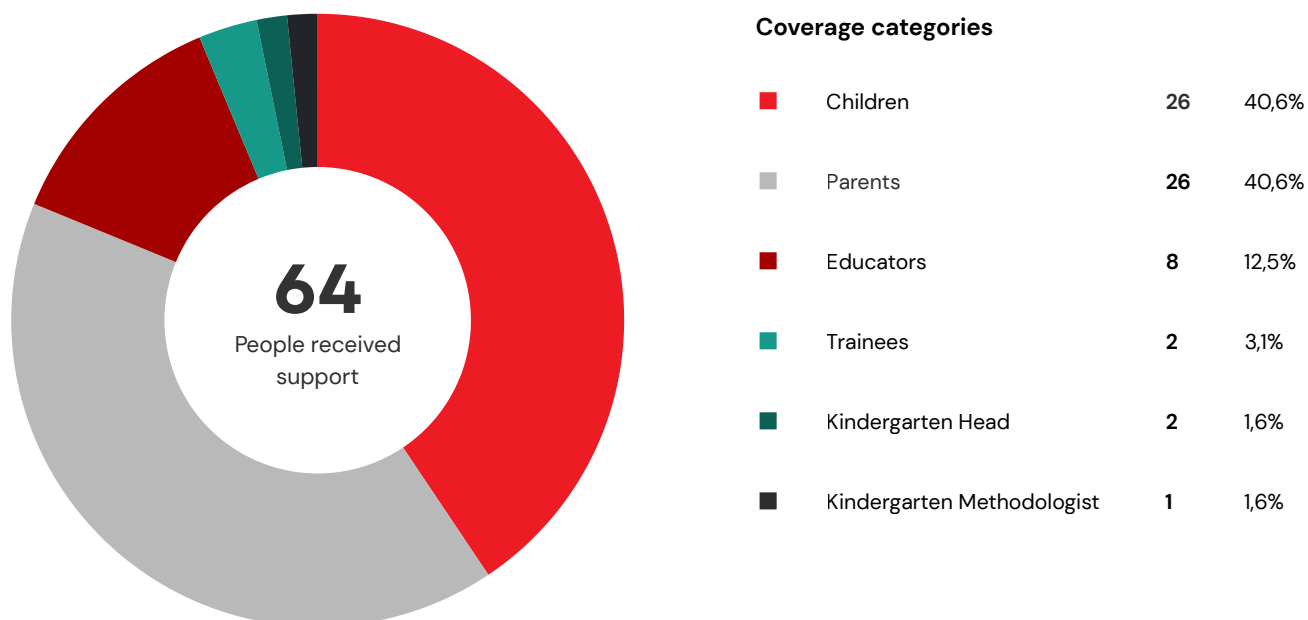
A team of 4 specialists was involved in the implementation of the program:

- supervisor — Olena Tkachenko
- mentor — Yevheniia Zavorotynska
- 2 trainees — Valeria Dovhoruk, Olena Kovalevska

The programme involved the following participants, in particular:

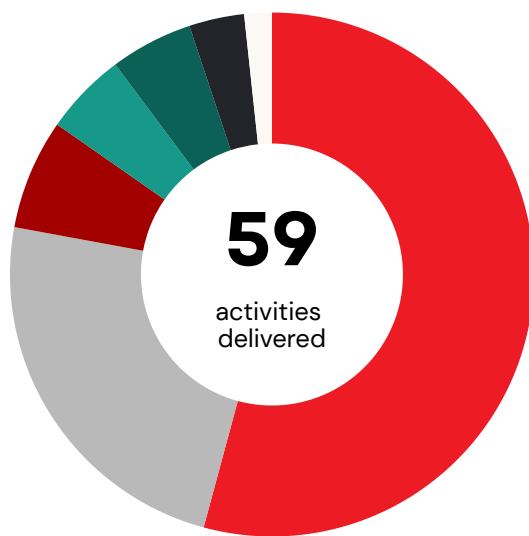
Coverage of the Safe Space Programmeme - Kindergarten No. 355

Number of people who received support through the programme



Work with Children and Parents - Kindergarten No. 355

Number of activities delivered through the programme

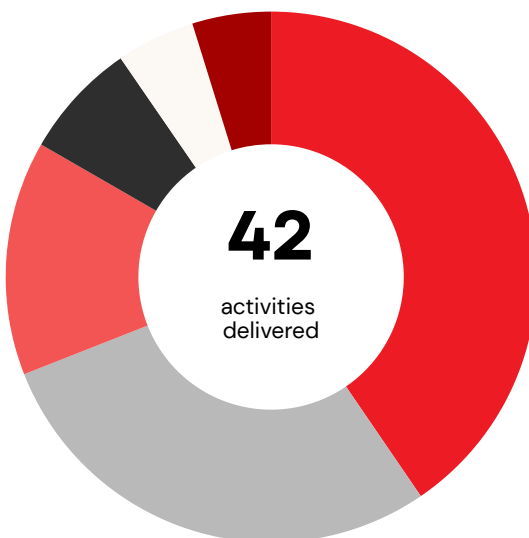


ACTIVITY CATEGORIES

■	Group classes with children	32	54.2%
■	Individual meetings with parents	14	23.7%
■	Referrals of children	4	6.8%
■	Group meetings with parents	3	5.1%
■	Observations of children	3	5.1%
■	Joint sessions for children and parents	2	3.4%
■	Referrals of parents	1	1.7%

Professional Support - Kindergarten No. 355

Number of professional support activities



SUPPORT CATEGORIES

■	Supervision sessions for trainees	17	40.5%
■	Mentoring discussions with trainees	12	28.6%
■	Resource and methodological meetings with educators	6	14.3%
■	Meetings with the administration	3	7.1%
■	Supervision sessions for educators	2	4.8%
■	Supervision sessions for mentors	2	4.8%

PREPARATORY STAGE

Before beginning work with the children, the team worked through all stages of the programme's implementation in detail and agreed with the management of the pre-school on expectations regarding cooperation. In particular, agreements were reached regarding the management's readiness to communicate actively with parents and teachers, as well as to ensure a safe and stable environment for the sessions.

In the initial survey, parents noted that children mainly react to the war with fear of loud noises, night-time shelling and air-raid sirens, requiring the closeness of an adult and a sense of security. Parents try to remain calm, although they themselves are experiencing anxiety and exhaustion; the greatest difficulties arise from children's questions about the causes of the war, the shelling and the return of loved ones. Families need support in helping their children cope, managing their own emotional state and discussing the war in an age-appropriate manner.

During the programme, Kyiv was regularly subjected to heavy rocket and drone attacks, both at night and during the day when sessions with the children were taking place. Thanks to the availability of a well-equipped shelter with sufficient space, participants were able to move quickly to the bomb shelter and continue the sessions without having to reschedule them for other days.

The only significant challenge during the project's implementation was the impact of the heavy night-time shelling on the night of 2 June. Due to physical and emotional exhaustion following the prolonged shelling, a significant number of children and parents were unable to take part in the planned final group session. In addition, some families had temporarily left the city following a warning of a massive attack, which also affected attendance at the final session.

PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION: GROUP WORK WITH CHILDREN

As part of the «Safe Space» programme, three therapeutic groups comprising 26 pre-school-aged children were formed at Pre-school Educational Establishment No. 355 «Yasochka.» The programme was delivered in the form of group psychosocial support and combined role-play, creative exercises, physical activities, the use of sensory materials, metaphorical imagery and techniques aimed at developing emotional awareness, self-regulation and skills for the safe expression of feelings.



Broadly speaking, the work with the children can be divided into three stages:

Initial stage. At the start of the programme, most children needed time to adapt to the new group format, the rules of interaction and the structure of the sessions. Some participants were shy about speaking up, became distracted, and had difficulty waiting for their turn, regulating their behaviour and concentrating. At the same time, the children showed an interest in the games and creative exercises on offer, which helped to gradually build trust in the facilitators and in the group process.

Main stage. Over the course of the programme, a sense of security and predictability gradually developed, which encouraged the children to engage more actively in all types of activities. The participants became more open in expressing their own thoughts, feelings and experiences, took part in discussions more frequently, and interacted willingly with their peers. Their skills in recognising and naming emotions improved; the children began to use safer ways of expressing anger more often and spoke about their fears, sadness and other complex feelings. At the same time, whilst exploring the theme of fear through role-play, their experiences of living in a war zone regularly came to the fore. In particular, some of the children acted out scenarios involving «shahids» and «ballistics», saying: «One, two, three — shahid launch», «One, two, three — ballistics launch». One of the boys shared his feelings: «I'm afraid a shahid will fly in; it might crush and kill someone, and people will be trapped under the rubble. » Such statements highlighted the relevance of wartime experiences for the children and the importance of providing them with a safe space to process these experiences symbolically.

Although some participants continued to require individual support in developing self-regulation, overall the number of constructive interactions, instances of mutual support and adherence to group rules gradually increased.

Final stage. By the end of the programme, most children felt confident and safe within the group, demonstrating greater initiative, emotional openness and a willingness to cooperate. The children were more attentive to each other's feelings, helped their peers more often, resolved minor conflicts more easily and enjoyed taking part in joint creative, physical and reflective activities. At the same time, their comments, drawings and the plots of their games continued to reflect their experiences of living in a war zone, confirming the importance of creating a safe space for processing difficult emotions. Overall, the dynamics of the groups demonstrated the development of emotional competence, improved social skills and a strengthened sense of psychological safety among the children.

WORKING WITH EDUCATORS

Work with the team of educators aimed to enhance their psychological competence, develop their own resources, and build practical skills to support children experiencing the effects of war. A total of 8 teachers took part in the training sessions. From the outset, participants demonstrated a high level of motivation to learn, actively asking questions about children's adaptation, responding to signs of stress, organising communication with parents, and supporting children with heightened emotional needs. Considerable attention was paid to developing the educators' personal resources through exercises using metaphorical cards, symbolic imagery and reflection on their own coping strategies. During the discussion on the topic of children's aggression, participants analysed real-life situations from their own practice, explored non-violent ways of responding, and sought ways to communicate effectively with parents regarding the development of children's skills in peaceful conflict resolution.

Some sessions were devoted to watching and discussing educational films on attachment and child development, which helped the educators gain a deeper understanding of the link between traumatic experiences and children's behavior. Participants actively related what they had seen to their own professional

experience, discussed complex cases of children's adjustment and jointly sought effective support strategies. An important component of the programme was the restoration of the educators' own emotional resources through playful activities, which allowed them to experience the joy of working together, take a temporary break from their professional workload, and strengthen mutual support within the team.

Despite the challenging security situation – including air raid alerts and heavy shelling during the programme – the participants continued their training, demonstrating their high level of commitment and professional responsibility.

At the end of the programme, the Kindergarten teachers noted that they had gained new practical tools for working with children, had developed a better understanding of the importance of their own psychological wellbeing and recovery, and were grateful for the knowledge they had acquired.



FEEDBACK FROM EDUCATORS

FEEDBACK FROM TEACHER OLENA ZAKOTA:

“THANK YOU to the team of psychologists from the «Safe Space» project for their hard work and collaboration at our Kindergarten ! It was quite an adventure: games, drawing, modelling, hide-and-seek, making dens, candles, and delving into the secret world of fears, joys and emotions. Thank you for being such a friendly team, for your tact, patience, UNDERSTANDING and support. It's brilliant when the psychologists' sincere hearts drew our children and us, the adult female teachers, into a fairy-tale world of feelings. We peered into the recesses of our own experiences and brought them to the surface. Thank you so much for the tips on working with the children and their families. These are little drops that open up a new journey into the deep and boundless, fascinating and fantastic world of feelings, emotions and managing them. This means joy, support and security for us in the here and now!»



WORKING WITH PARENTS

As part of our work with parents, five joint meetings were held: an introductory presentation of the programme; a training session on children's reactions to stress with parents of the middle group; a training session on children's reactions to stress with parents of the older group; and two final joint meetings with children and parents. Fourteen individual meetings were also held with families to provide feedback on their child's progress throughout the programme.

Work with parents began by familiarising them with the programme, its structure and objectives, which helped to build trust and foster a positive attitude towards their children's future participation in the sessions.

At the first training sessions, some parents appeared wary and weary; however, the atmosphere gradually became more comfortable, and participants became more open to discussing their own experiences and difficulties.

An important component of the sessions was exploring the parents' personal resources, their coping strategies and their awareness of the need to look after their own mental wellbeing as a prerequisite for effectively supporting their children. During the sessions, parents actively raised practical parenting issues, particularly regarding children's tantrums, fears, sleep disturbances, settling into Kindergarten, developing self-regulation and setting boundaries.

Particular attention was paid to discussing the impact of the war on the emotional well-being of children and adults, as well as ways to support children in situations of prolonged stress and danger. Some participants openly shared their own experiences related to regular night-time shelling, being forced to stay in shelters and chronic fatigue, which created an atmosphere of mutual support and helped normalise these experiences. Gradually, parents began to share their own experiences more actively, ask more questions, discuss the recommendations put forward and seek solutions that could be applied in everyday life.

During the final family sessions, despite their exhaustion following the heavy shelling, most families were happy to take part in group games and creative activities, which helped to strengthen the emotional bond between parents and children.

At the feedback sessions, parents noted that they were using some of the recommended tools at home, discussed positive changes in their children's behaviour, and sought further advice on current developmental issues.



PARENTS' FEEDBACK ON THE PROGRAMME



FEEDBACK FROM IRINA KURINNA, DIMA'S MOTHER:

We'd like to express our sincere thanks for the «Safe Space» sessions. We really enjoyed them, and the best proof of their value was that Dima always came home from Kindergarten in a good mood and would enthusiastically tell us all about what he'd learned in the sessions. It was clear that he found it interesting, felt at ease and enjoyed taking part. Thank you for the warm atmosphere, your attentive approach to the children and the important work you do. Classes like these really do help children to understand themselves and their emotions better, and to feel more confident.»

FEEDBACK FROM HANNA SUBELIANI, TIMOFEY'S MUM

«During a one-to-one conversation with the psychologist, we discussed all the questions that were on my mind. It was certainly interesting to get a professional opinion on my child's behavior and to find out how to handle different situations. It was also good to know whether I'm doing the right thing 🙌 Timofey enjoyed the sessions. It seems this was the only part of his time at Kindergarten that he talked about in any detail. Usually, when asked how his day went, what his mood was like, or what he liked or didn't like about the day, he would reply with a single word or say «I don't remember» or «I won't say.» There was a moment when he said, «Take me off the list, I don't want to go any more» — unfortunately, we never managed to find out why. But after that, he went without any objections. My son began to manage his emotions more effectively, particularly in terms of aggression triggered by certain behaviors or actions of other children. We'd built a play fort in every spare corner of the flat))) I'm really glad that the children were helped to understand their emotions, and that feelings, boundaries and moods were explained to them. I'd definitely like to do it again.»

INTERACTION WITH TRAINEES VALERIA DOVHORUK AND OLENA KOVALEVSKA

Throughout the programme, it was clear how the trainees' professional approach gradually changed. At the start, there was a lot of nervousness, uncertainty and questions about whether they were responding correctly to the children's behavior, when to intervene, and when it was better to give a child space to make their own choices. Step by step, they gained more confidence, composure and self-assurance. Their observations became more

insightful; they began to notice not only the children's behavior, but also the needs and feelings underlying that behavior.

During supervision sessions, a great deal of attention was paid to how to create a safe space for children where they can experience a range of emotions, to support a child through their experiences, not to rush to correct or calm them down, but to be there for them and help them cope with difficult feelings. Gradually, the trainees became more confident in leading the group, better at sensing its rhythm, managing the children's levels of excitement, adhering to the rules, whilst remaining sensitive to each child's individual characteristics. It was particularly rewarding to observe how not only the trainees themselves but also the groups of children were changing. The children grew to trust the facilitators more and more, spoke more openly about their feelings, interacted more easily with one another, and began not only to listen to others but also to truly hear one another. It is at moments like these that the importance of high-quality support for young psychologists becomes particularly evident.

The development of new professionals is not just about training an individual. It is an opportunity for even more children, parents and educators to have a psychologist by their side who knows how to be attentive, resilient, supportive and capable of creating a safe space even in times of constant uncertainty. This is precisely how a professional community is gradually formed, one that will be able to support Ukrainian families for many years to come. It is particularly heartening that, upon completing her placement, Olena will continue her training on the «Safe Space» programme for psychologists in pre-school education settings, whilst Valeria is keen to try her hand at the programme for schools as well. This means that this journey does not end with the award of a certificate. It continues through new knowledge, new experiences and the opportunity to support even more children, their parents and teachers.

FEEDBACK FROM TRAINEE OLENA KOVALEVSKA

«Taking part in the «Safe Space» project meant so much more to me than just training or work experience. It was a period of professional growth, new discoveries and genuine inspiration. It was here that I became even more convinced that psychology is the path I have chosen with all my heart.

Every meeting, every session, and every interaction with the children left me with warm feelings and invaluable experience. During my placement, I didn't just observe the work of professionals; I also had the opportunity to gradually get involved in running sessions, feeling the support of my mentors every step of the way. I was particularly moved by the children's genuine smiles, the trust in their eyes, and their eagerness to come back to the sessions. It is at moments like these that you realise just how important the profession of a psychologist is.

The training was extremely informative and practical.





I gained modern tools for working with children, learned to understand their emotions even better, and how to create an atmosphere of psychological safety, support, and acceptance. This knowledge is already a valuable foundation for my professional work and inspires me to constantly improve.

I would like to thank my mentors, Yevheniia and Olena, from the bottom of my heart for their professionalism, patience, support, and belief in each participant. Their openness, willingness to share their experience, and genuine desire to help made the training not only useful, but also truly warm and welcoming.

I am immensely grateful to the entire «Safe Space» project team for the opportunity to learn, grow and be part of this community. For me, this project has been an important step on my professional journey; it has given me confidence in my own abilities, new knowledge, inspiration and an even greater desire to work for the psychological wellbeing of children. It is projects like this that change not only professionals but also the future of children who need our support.»

FEEDBACK FROM THE HEADTEACHER AND TEACHING CONSULTANT



FEEDBACK FROM THE DIRECTOR IRYNA OLEKSANDRIVNA POCHEPTSOVA:

«The sessions of the «Safe Space» programme impressed us with their simplicity, depth and tangible results. For the children, this is an opportunity to learn, through safe play and creativity, how to overcome their fears, calm down and restore their emotional balance. Teachers were given a clear step-by-step guide on how to recognise trauma in a child in good time and protect their own mental health from burnout. For parents, these sessions helped to replenish their inner resources and provided practical guidance on supporting their little ones at home. Together, these three approaches created a reliable protective circle around the child during times of crisis. Such psychosocial support proved to be vital for our educational institution.»

FEEDBACK FROM METHODOLOGIST NATALIA TETEREVA:

The «Safe Space» programme sessions led by Ms Yevheniia served as a model of a professional and exceptionally gentle approach to restoring the mental health of children and adults. Through play-based and art-therapy sessions, the children learnt to recognise their emotions and manage their anxiety. Such sessions restore a sense of safety to the children. For the teachers, the course served as a reliable guide: it taught them to recognise psychological trauma in their pupils and protected the teachers themselves from burnout. For parents, these warm meetings helped them to replenish their own resources and provided clear tools for supporting their children at home. The programme's comprehensive approach has created a safe space that helps families adapt to life in extremely challenging circumstances. This is an important initiative for every modern educational institution.



GENERAL CONCLUSION

For most of the children who took part in the programme, the war has become part of their everyday lives. Night-time shelling, air raid sirens, shelters, their parents' anxiety and a constant sense of danger — this is the reality in which they are growing up. This was evident during the sessions too: the children spoke of their fear of loud noises, of rockets, and of monsters, which often became a way of expressing their complex emotions. After sleepless nights caused by heavy shelling, they would arrive at the Kindergarten exhausted and withdrawn, or, conversely, overly agitated. Despite this, they longed to play, to socialise, and to be close to an adult who could provide a sense of security.



This is precisely why the «Safe Space» programme is so important. It not only helps children talk about their feelings, but also restores their experience of safe relationships, play, togetherness and predictability — the very foundations of a child's healthy development, even in times of war. During the programme, it was clear how the children gradually began to trust adults more, talk more openly about their experiences, support one another and find safe ways to cope with fear, sadness, anger and joy.

An equally important part of the programme is the training of Ukrainian psychologists. Every trained specialist continues to work with children, their parents and teachers even after the programme has ended, thereby amplifying its impact.

Consequently, supporting one group of children leads to long-term changes across entire communities. It is precisely through this mentoring support that young psychologists gain not only knowledge of the methodology, but also the ability to create a space in which a child feels heard, accepted and protected.

It is particularly valuable that, following the completion of her placement, Olena will continue her training under the «Safe Space» programme for pre-school education settings; she has also secured a job at a Kindergarten and encouraged the Kindergarten to run the programme for its children. Valeria has expressed a desire to undergo training to work with the programme in schools. This means that the support made possible by the programme today will continue into the future, reaching new nurseries, schools, children, families and teachers.

The support from British partners and donors makes more than just individual sessions possible. It helps Ukrainian children retain their childhood in places where the war tries to take it away every day. It helps to nurture a generation of psychologists who will continue to be there for children during the most difficult moments of their lives. It helps kindergarten teachers develop professionally, so that children receive care and support every day from those around them.