MAY–JULY 2026

REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 'SAFE SPACE' PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT PROGRAMME AT 'UNIK KIDS' IN BUCHA

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



DISCLAIMER

The 'Safe Space' programme was implemented on the initiative and with the support of the 'RESTART FOUNDATION' charitable organisation, in partnership with the 'Words Help' civil society organisation and the NaUKMA Mental Health Centre.

This document has been prepared for partners, donors and the 'Safe Space' programme team with the aim of providing an honest and transparent account of how the project was implemented at the 'UNIK KIDS' children's centre (Bucha) between May and July 2026. The report summarises the observations of the psychologist-mentor, supervisory findings, and feedback from children, parents, carers, the kindergarten management, and trainees.

To ensure confidentiality, the children's full names have been replaced with initials, and diagnoses and details that could identify a specific child are not included in the report.

The document covers the experiences of all parties involved in the programme: parents, kindergarten staff, the kindergarten management, and the specialists who directly delivered the sessions. They describe how participation in the programme has affected the children — helping them better understand and express their emotions, reducing their 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 include a low level of awareness amongst parents and carers regarding the age-specific characteristics of child development, children's reactions to stress, burnout amongst both parents and other adults, as well as elements of an authoritarian parenting style both within families and at 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' charitable organisation), and **Oksana Tunik** (project mentor).



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1. INTRODUCTION

Bucha is a town whose name has been forever etched into the annals of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and has become one of the most tragic symbols of widespread destruction and humanitarian catastrophe. The children with whom the 'Safe Space' programme team worked are growing up in a community that survived the 2022 occupation, during which 381 people were killed in the town[1]. More than 30 people remain in captivity on Russian territory to this day. However, despite the experience of the 2022 occupation and daily air raid alerts, Bucha continues to live, develop and look after the future of its children.

In some families, the parents are currently at the front; some of the children were born during the war and have never known any other kind of childhood.

After the de-occupation, the kindergarten itself was forced to completely reconstruct the building's architecture to construct and fit out a deep shelter within the existing kindergarten premises, where children could be hidden during shelling. This constant underlying tension affects the children's behaviour: increased aggression, difficulties with self-regulation, hyperactivity and high levels of anxiety — all of which were present throughout our work with the children, from the very first to the very last session. The project period also coincided with intensified Russian attacks using 'Shahed' drones, with up to 500 launched per night, the sound of which leaves the children no chance of a peaceful night's sleep.



Bucha after de-occupation[2].

[1] https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/c3w13v8z6z1o

[2] https://suspilne.media/kyiv/363270-ii-foto-obletili-usi-media-u-kova-pokazali-ak-vidbudovuut-vulicu-v-buci/

One of the programme's most powerful moments occurred during a session on anger, when one of the boys drew a fence splattered with blood and signed it with his own name. This is not an isolated example. For the children of Bucha, the war is not a news story, a page in a textbook or a chronicle of the past. The war has become an alien part of their inner landscape — an experience that has entered their lives against their will. They are forced to live with this imposed experience every day, even when they are playing, laughing or acting up. That is precisely why the 'Safe Space' programme is not merely a series of psychoeducational support sessions, but a response to a child's fundamental need for stability, emotional containment and a safe adult nearby, when the outside world has already robbed them of that stability once.



Evacuation. Source — © Associated Press



**Evacuation from Irpin-Bucha, source: Photo: Aris Messinis / AFP / Lehtikuva*

2. INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The 'Safe Space' programme, developed by the NaUKMA Centre for Mental Health, is a comprehensive psychosocial initiative aimed at increasing children's resilience to stress, supporting their emotional well-being and developing self-regulation skills in a wartime environment. Between **May** 2026 and **July 2026** inclusive, the programme was implemented at the 'UNIK KIDS' children's centre in Bucha by the charitable organisation 'RESTART FOUNDATION' and the NGO 'Words Help'.

The centre's director and teaching staff were motivated and expressed their willingness to cooperate. The idea of implementing the 'Safe Space' programme at the 'UNIK KIDS' Centre did not arise by chance, but thanks to the personal experience of its director. The centre's director had been an intern during the programme's implementation at the 'Mriy-Diy' kindergarten in 2025, as detailed in the 'RESTART FOUNDATION' charity's report on that facility. Inspired by her colleagues' results, the director set herself the goal of replicating this success and creating a similarly safe environment for the children at her centre. And as soon as the project presented an opportunity to run the programme in Bucha, we did so immediately. Ms Yulia expressed her willingness to take part in the programme as a trainee, supported by a mentor and supervised by a supervisor, which enabled her to lead the group independently from the very beginning; at the end of her traineeship, she will receive trainer certification.

A distinctive feature of the programme at this kindergarten was its delivery in an intensive format — twice a week. At the first meeting and during the mentor's in-depth observation, we identified the key needs of the children and kindergarten staff. For the children, this involved addressing anxiety, fears and aggression, which were causing challenging behaviour; for the staff, it involved high levels of burnout and difficulties in managing the children's emotional reactions.

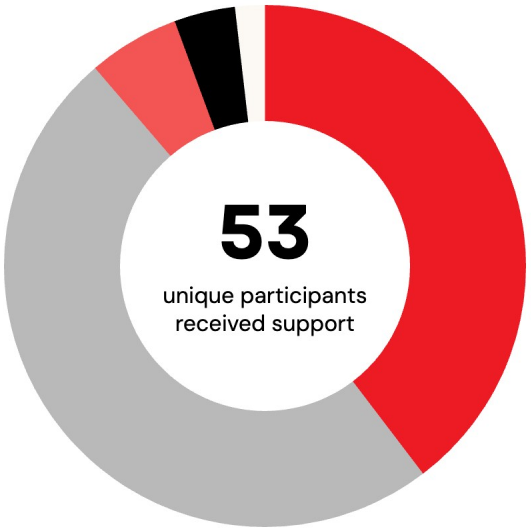
A team of five specialists was involved in implementing the programme:

- supervisor — Oksana Zaleska;
- mentor — Oksana Tunik;
- 3 trainees — Svitlana Kulbabenko, Oleksandra Mangusheva, Yulia Yarchevska.

The programme involved the following participants:

Coverage of the “Safe Space” Programme – UNIK KIDS Kindergarten, Bucha

Number of unique participants who received support through the programme



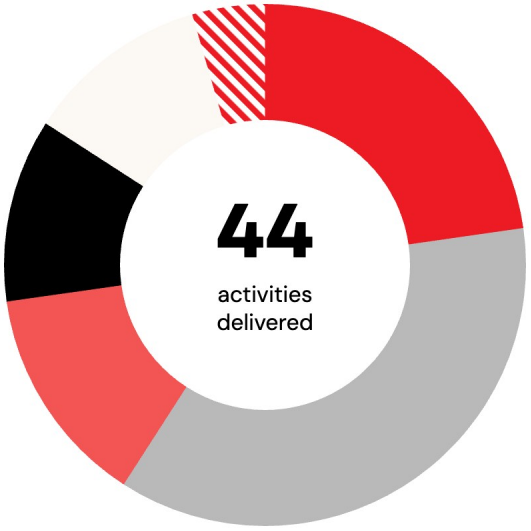
COVERAGE CATEGORIES

Children	**21**	39.6%
Parents	**26**	49.1%
Educators	**3**	5.7%
Other trainees	**2**	3.8%
Kindergarten Head / trainee	**1**	1.9%

There were 3 trainees: 2 additional participants plus the Kindergarten Head, who was also a trainee. Total: 53 unique participants.

Work with Children and Parents – UNIK KIDS Kindergarten, Bucha

Number of activities delivered within the programme



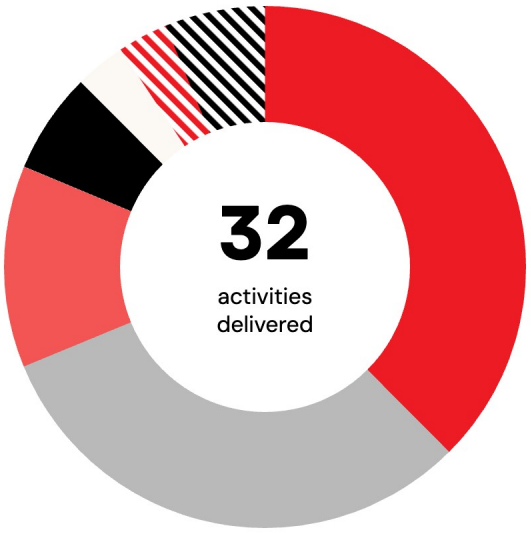
ACTIVITY CATEGORIES

Group sessions with children	**10**	22.7%
Individual meetings with parents	**16**	36.4%
Observations	**6**	13.6%
Group meetings with parents	**5**	11.4%
Referrals of children for individual specialised support	**5**	11.4%
Referrals of parents for specialised psychological support	**2**	4.5%

A total of 76 activities were delivered in the kindergarten

Professional Support – UNIK KIDS Kindergarten, Bucha

Number of professional support activities



SUPPORT CATEGORIES

Supervision sessions for trainees during placement	**12**	37.5%
Mentor discussions	**10**	31.2%
Group resource and methodology meetings with educators	**4**	12.5%
Supervision sessions for mentors	**2**	6.2%
Supervisory and organisational meetings with kindergarten management	**1**	3.1%
Certification of trainees as programme trainers	**1**	3.1%
Certification of trainees as participants recommended to deliver the programme under supervision	**2**	6.2%

A total of 76 activities were delivered in the kindergarten

3. PREPARATORY STAGE

A request to implement the programme was received from the head of UNIK KIDS on 29 April 2026. Before the programme began, the mentor-psychologist held an introductory meeting with the supervisor and the head of the centre, as well as three familiarisation visits (totalling six hours of observation), to assess the kindergarten's readiness to take part in the programme, as well as the needs of the children and the team.

The kindergarten has a small but well-adapted children's area with play areas, an all-weather canopy and a fully equipped shelter; each child has their own water bottle. At the same time, the indoor space proved rather stuffy, leading to recommendations regarding ventilation and fluid intake, which the kindergarten's management heeded immediately.

The team of kindergarten teachers demonstrated a high level of professional expertise, attentiveness to the group, and tolerance for children's varying paces; however, they also showed signs of exhaustion from working without an assistant and managing full, quite complex groups in terms of their psycho-emotional dynamics. At the same time, in situations involving disciplinary issues and conflicts, the kindergarten teachers tended to rely on familiar, but not always effective tools — appealing to parental displeasure ('Mum will be upset', 'I'll ring Dad') or the threat, familiar to the children, of cancelling treats and expectations ('then we'll cancel the end-of-year party') — rather than working directly with the child's emotions. This was not interpreted as indifference — on the contrary, the teachers proved to be very attached to their groups and acted in their usual way more because of a lack of other tools than because of a reluctance to change. It was precisely this conclusion that formed the basis for further psychoeducational work with the team.

4. PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTATION: GROUP WORK WITH THE CHILDREN

Each of the three groups, comprising seven children each, progressed at their own pace and through their own processes — from wariness and boundary testing in the first sessions to deeper contact with their emotions towards the end of the cycle. The underlying logic was the same for all groups: topic by topic (joy, sadness, fear, anger, calm), the children were given the language and tools to express what had previously been experienced only through their bodies and behaviour.

THE FIRST GROUP



The group started off cautiously: one girl needed more time to formulate her thoughts than those around her usually allowed her, which initially caused frustration for both the adults and the child herself. She kept her distance not only emotionally but also physically and allowed herself to sit in the circle only from the third session onwards. By the end, this difference in pace had become a strength; the group no longer needed to 'keep up'; they had learnt to wait for one another. A telling moment came when one of the boys, who previously could not even last five minutes in the circle and needed breaks, distractions and a few laps around the room, calmly sat on the assistant's lap and, for the first time, was able to talk about his state of mind in a coherent and conscious manner. Another boy, for whom a tantrum had previously almost always resulted in physical harm to another, was able not only to put his anger into words, but also to express it without hurting anyone — simply by overturning chairs. One child, a boy, who at the start of the programme communicated only through his carer, in the final sessions deliberately sat a considerable distance away from her, spoke for himself, and allowed himself to show joy and interest within the group, although previously he had only allowed himself to display aggression. He expressed all his emotions very creatively and approached each activity thoughtfully; whilst we might have started with drawings of abandoned houses and blood-stained fences, we ended up with captivating stories about walks in the rain, which he adores doing with his mum.

THE SECOND GROUP

The noisiest and most energetic group (mostly very spirited boys): shouting, arguments, fights, biting. At the same time, this group was the most grateful for simple physical regulation techniques. A symbolic moment came during the session on calmness, when we worked with slime: the group, which had never been quiet before, simply froze for ten minutes and played intently with the material. In the same group, a girl dealing with unresolved grief—who at first spoke of her deceased loved ones as if they were still alive—gradually began to distinguish between when she was talking about the present and when she was talking about her loss, to integrate her grief and to share her feelings about it with the group. In addition, one boy, who suffered from very high anxiety and low self-esteem, and who referred to himself throughout the group as 'a bit of a dimwit' and 'a piece of rubbish', by the seventh session was performing a solo breakdance routine in front of the group; and at the final session, boldly and confidently climbed onto a stool to be more visible as he told his mum about his good qualities.

There was also an extraordinary moment during the session on sadness, when the children were building a den, just as they had with the slime — all the fighting, competition and protests fell silent. In a cosy atmosphere, the children shared moments that were important and personal to them, and shared this space together. 'Inside the "shelter" was such a heartfelt, incredibly poignant and "quiet" space whilst the children were sharing their sad stories that I wanted to stop time,' noted trainee Oleksandra, who led the group.



THE THIRD GROUP



This was the most challenging group in terms of composition and dynamics: high levels of anxiety, several children requiring constant supervision, and one child exhibiting very complex, at times dangerous behaviour (rule-breaking, physical aggression towards peers and adults, self-harm and self-injurious behaviour). As a result, one child required individual support. From the fifth session onwards, we introduced personalised tutoring for her and a system of proactive attention, before tension could escalate into an outburst. The results were noticeable: by the end of the programme, the child's behaviour at kindergarten had stabilised significantly; the girl allowed herself to engage with difficult emotions and learnt to cope with positive attention, whilst another girl, who had long imitated this child, was able to 'distance herself' and became noticeably more relaxed, independent and active. This child's parents were very active in the sessions for parents; they realised the full seriousness of the problem and their role in shaping the child's challenging behaviour, and agreed to individual sessions at the NaUKMA Mental Health Centre, which offers hope for a lasting positive effect and a reduction in the child's distress.

Reflections from the trainee who led the group on the work and dynamics of the process: 'As I delved deeper into the process of interacting with the children, I felt myself delving into my own childhood experiences, which up until that point had felt literally like a fear of children... My initial mistrust and fears gradually began to give way to openness to new experiences and acceptance, and this is only the beginning.'

At the end of the programme, several children were identified as requiring individualised specialist support. As part of the individual feedback process, five families were advised to seek free individual support at the NaUKMA Mental Health Centre. At least one child exhibited persistent patterns indicating attachment disorders and a need for assessment by a child psychiatrist and systematic work with the family. In another case, both the mother and the child were advised to work on managing anxiety; sleep disturbances and heightened aggression in relationships were identified. Individual support was also recommended for one child to aid their psycho-emotional development, as they were noticeably lagging behind their peers.

5. WORK WITH TEACHING STAFF



In parallel with the children's groups, four psychoeducational resource sessions were held with the teachers and the headteacher.

The first session focused on professional burnout — the team analysed its causes and symptoms, practised relying on their 'inner defender' rather than self-criticism, and identified their own 'energy drainers'.

The second session focused on tools for replenishing energy reserves, which are absolutely vital for teachers working eight-hour shifts with pre-school children amid constant air-raid alerts.

The third and fourth sessions shifted the focus to managing children's challenging behaviour: from understanding its causes, symptoms, and underlying needs to a specific algorithm for managing such behaviour and skills for containing and validating children's emotions. The results of the work were already evident whilst the programme was underway — one of the kindergarten teachers, who at the start of the programme had been inclined to exercise excessive control over the group's space, by the middle of the cycle — following a gentle and brief reminder before a session about her role — was intervening less in the children's responses and creative expressions, and was letting go of control. Another teacher rediscovered an old hobby and stepped up her own therapy, which had a very positive effect on her emotional state. The teachers also became noticeably more confident and calm when dealing with children exhibiting challenging behaviour, as they had a better understanding of its nature.

5.1 FEEDBACK FROM TEACHERS

According to the survey results, the teachers unanimously note the programme's positive impact: the children have become more open, are better able to recognise and name their emotions, and the group's overall emotional atmosphere has improved. Relationships between teachers and children have also strengthened — there is a greater desire to spend time together, and the number of conflicts has not increased. Among the children's achievements, teachers particularly highlight increased openness and self-regulation skills. All teachers whose groups took part in the programme are keen to run it again and describe the experience as interesting, useful and informative.



AN OPEN REVIEW BY NATALIA YURIIVNA, A KINDERGARTEN TEACHER:

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Safe Space team for their work.

It was all very interesting, meaningful and, most importantly, useful. We were able not only to hear a lot of information, but also to rethink it and see some things from a completely different angle.

I particularly enjoyed the warm atmosphere, the comfortable interaction and the practical exercises, which helped me to better understand myself, my own children and their emotions and reactions.

After working with the Safe Space, I was left with lots of positive thoughts and a desire to continue working on myself. Thank you for your professionalism, support and the opportunity to learn more about myself and the children 🌿

AN OPEN REVIEW BY SVITLANA SAKHNENKO, A KINDERGARTEN TEACHER:

'After the open (safe) space session, my pupil Sasha started talking about how he was feeling. He started to be more open and to assert his boundaries (which isn't always easy, hahaha). I really liked that there were sessions for parents and even sessions together with the children. Sasha still carries the bracelet we made with him as a good-luck charm and a reminder of those positive emotions.'



6. WORKING WITH PARENTS

As part of the programme, three meetings with parents were also held — an introductory presentation of the project, a resource workshop and a final joint meeting with the children.

At the start, some parents were anxious about the very idea of the programme. The situation changed significantly once they were introduced to the findings of the Dunedin Longitudinal Study: a child's ability to regulate their emotions and recover from stress — rather than grades or obedience — is the key predictor of their future well-being. For many parents, this proved to be an unexpected and motivating argument.



At the second meeting, during an exercise on recognising emotions, it became clear that most parents could identify only two or three basic emotions — and this discovery proved just as valuable for the adults as the programme was for the children: it revealed just how many of their own unmet needs (for acceptance, belonging and recognition) the parents themselves carry within them. The session ended with tears, candid accounts of their own pain and anxieties, and a willingness to continue the exercises at home.

The final session brought children and parents together in a shared game. Most pairs 'thawed' as they connected with one another — warm, supportive and trusting moments prevailed. At the same time, there were also more challenging moments: one mother reacted to a minor domestic incident (spilt fruit juice) with a series of disparaging remarks unrelated to the situation; another mother remained cold and distant throughout the session. These observations formed the basis for recommendations regarding individual support for specific families.

6.1 PARENTS' FEEDBACK ON THE PROGRAMME

Mum I.: 'The psychologists keenly observed the particularities of my son's mental state (in particular, issues regarding self-esteem) and found the right approach. The parallel work with parents (lectures and individual meetings) was also a huge plus. I would like to sincerely thank our UNIK kindergarten and the team of psychologists for the incredible "Safe Space" initiative. The development of emotional intelligence in children is an area that is often not given enough attention, even though it forms the basis for personality development.'

Mum D.: 'The sessions were very interesting, both for the children and for the parents; they help the children in every way to find balance and understand their emotions.'

Mum M.: 'I think she's become a bit better at managing negative emotions; it's easier for her now. She's started saying straight out, "I don't like that, don't do that." That didn't happen before.'

Mum I.: 'My child attended the sessions with great enjoyment and interest; there was no resistance or reluctance to go to the sessions. As everything took place in a playful and comfortable atmosphere, my son saw it as an interesting and positive adventure. He always looked forward to the new sessions in high spirits.'

AN OPEN REVIEW BY NATALIA PRYSYAZHNYUK, DANA'S MUM:

'Both I, as a mum, and Dana were left with nothing but positive impressions and emotions from the "Safe Space" programme. The atmosphere was incredibly warm and comfortable. The project's psychologists are particular favourites of mine ❤️. Thank you for such a wonderful and useful initiative, both for children and for parents!'



The photo shows the mum with Dana during a group session.



AN OPEN REVIEW BY KATERYNA CHERKAS, DMYTRO'S MUM:

We'd like to express our sincere thanks for the 'Safe Space' programme and the brilliant work the psychologists have done with the children and parents.

The sessions were interesting and useful, and helped the children to better understand themselves and others, as well as their own feelings, and to learn how to express them safely. The sessions for parents were also very valuable — we received lots of practical advice and support, reconsidered our views on certain situations, and gained a better understanding of the children's emotions.

Thank you for your care, professionalism and commitment. Projects like this are truly VERY important, as they help children grow up confident, happy and safe. THANK YOU!!!

7. WORKING WITH THE TRAINEES

Three trainees – Oleksandra Mangusheva, Yulia Yarchevska and Svitlana Kulbabenko – progressed from outside observers and assistants to independently leading sessions in the final phase of the programme. This transition took place gradually and in a coordinated manner during weekly mentoring discussions and supervision sessions with the supervisor. This process was not linear. One of the trainees described how, during the first sessions, she felt a sense of anxiety—which she could not explain—and even fear of a particular child; it was only during supervision that she was able to recognise that this was a response to her own childhood experiences, rather than a reaction to a real threat. By the end of the programme, that same fear had transformed into calm confidence when setting boundaries with that child. For another trainee, the greatest challenge was taking on the role of personal tutor to a child with challenging behaviour and accepting her own imperfections within a very energetic group, which prevented her from carrying out her plans exactly as intended. Despite the difficulty, it was precisely this experience that provided the greatest personal growth and confidence for their future work. Supervision and mentoring sessions provided a strong support system and a safe space where the trainees could express feelings of tiredness, confusion, guilt, or frustration without fear of judgement, and receive either direct advice or support in developing their own understanding of the process.

7.1 TRAINEES' FEEDBACK

Svitlana Kulbabenko: 'I am grateful to the participants of the "Safe Space" project for every moment and interaction. This project has created a positive dynamic both for most of the children and for me: I now feel a sense of strength, warmth and resourcefulness. I sincerely hope that the project will grow to such a scale that all children have access to this knowledge.'





Oleksandra Mangusheva: 'Overall, the "Safe Space" project has been a wonderful opportunity for me to try my hand at group work with children as a psychologist; it has opened up prospects for personal and professional growth and given me incredibly genuine and vivid emotions. I am very grateful to the project and for the opportunity to take part in it. At first, I was somewhat daunted and even a little overwhelmed by the group's energy, but then I realised that learning happens best in such an atmosphere and that this is where I am developing as a professional.'

8. FEEDBACK FROM YULIA YARCHEVSKA, HEADTEACHER OF THE KINDERGARTEN:

'I realised just how right the decision was to run the programme at our kindergarten. Oksana is a mentor sent from heaven; she has a keen sense of the mood of those around her, reacts promptly, and knows how to teach smoothly and professionally. We received very useful information and practical experience; in monetary terms, it's priceless. Everyone benefited – parents, children, teachers and myself personally. Now we need to take all this in and channel it into positive energy – for ourselves, the children, the parents and the teachers. The whole project deserves a 10 out of 10; the timing, content, teaching of the children and training of the trainees were all spot on. I am grateful for this invaluable experience and, above all, for this meaningful work, which covered so much and sowed so much in the soil. After the project ended, I felt a touch of sadness and relief that it had come to a close and that everything had gone well. In truth, this was not the end — it was the beginning of something new, a conscious and desired journey towards new knowledge. Thank you so very much.'



9. GENERAL CONCLUSION

Over the course of a month and a half, the 'Safe Space' programme evolved from a tentative introduction to deep, trusting collaboration among all three children's groups, parents, carers, and the team of trainees. The children received support and safe ways to express and process their emotions; the parents gained a support network and new tools that enable them to recognise the hidden needs underlying their child's undesirable behaviour, and also learnt more about how a child's psyche works, what helps to support them, and what does not. The teachers learnt about the nature of professional burnout, ways to maintain their own resilience, and strategies for managing and observing children with challenging behaviour; they also learnt healthy ways to respond to conflict and disciplinary issues. The trainee teachers gained experience in managing group dynamics, the constructive chaos typical of children, and their own emotional reactions, all under the guidance of reliable supervision.

The most important systemic conclusion: in a community that continues to live with the consequences of war, children's 'challenging behaviour' almost always manifests as body language where words are not yet available. The programme demonstrated that, even within a limited timeframe, it is possible to significantly change these dynamics, build children's resilience and reduce their anxiety, provided that work is carried out simultaneously with the child, the adults close to them (parents and carers), and the support system surrounding both.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Run the 'Safe Space' programme again at UNIK KIDS in the next academic cycle, taking into account the experience gained.

2. Create a permanent 'balance restoration corner' in the groups: sand or pebbles, water, a candle, anti-stress toys, and modelling clay.

3. Continue psychoeducational work with carers to teach them effective ways to manage challenging behaviour.

4. For children with a high need for individual attention, introduce personalised tutoring support at an early stage, rather than as a reaction to a crisis or as a way to schedule exclusive time with a teacher.

5. Continue to support families even after the programme has ended: brief follow-up meetings with parents 2–3 months later will help consolidate these changes.