



The Healing Power of Being Outdoors

As Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings in Ireland welcome children and families coming from Ukraine, it is important to recognise the benefits of being outdoors for children's physical and emotional wellbeing.

Outdoor play in natural environments provides children with opportunities to release energy, express strong feelings and think more freely. Getting close to nature, breathing deeply and engaging in regulating activities outdoors can calm children and can help to relieve any stress or anxieties they may be feeling.

This resource offers guidance as to how best to use the outdoor environment of your ELC setting to support children coming from Ukraine who have experienced trauma and adversity.

Supporting Children Who Have Experienced Trauma

Traumatic stress in childhood can have lasting detrimental effects on a person's health, behaviour and life outcomes. When children experience a lot of stress, their stress response system can become easily activated, triggering a fight, flight or freeze survival response.

Your ELC setting is ideally suited to support healthy child development and to strengthen the capacity for resilience and recovery in children who have experienced trauma. The best way you can support children who are impacted by trauma is through a caring and responsive relationship.

Children who are feeling stressed, overwhelmed and dysregulated need your help to stay calm and regulated. You can support them to stay regulated by providing them with opportunities, activities and materials that will help them to either 'down' regulate and become calmer or 'up' regulate and become more alert, whichever is required at a particular time. These can be particularly impactful when offered outdoors.

Down-regulation activities, such as breathing deeply and listening to the sounds of nature, are best used when children are in a high-energy state, for example anxious, excited or angry. They aim to slow children down, regulate breathing and promote calmness. Up-regulation activities, such as jumping, climbing and swinging, are best used when children seem disengaged, withdrawn, sad or worried. These raise the child's energy through fun activities that increase their state of alertness.



How the Outdoors Can Help

In an ELC setting, it is essential that all children have access to the outdoors throughout the day. Children who play outside are less likely to be stressed and are better able to regulate their emotions, which impacts positively on their wellbeing. Free play outdoors enables children to develop self-confidence, independence and self-esteem. The inclusion of natural areas and features in the outdoor space further improves wellbeing and helps children feel calmer.

When they are outside, children have more freedom to shout, make noise and let off steam, and there is less reliance on their verbal skills. They have the space to be more expansive in their physical movements, which helps them gain agility and stamina, and develop coordination, balance and strength. Children can be messier outdoors, which encourages them to be more creative and to try things out and experiment, and they have more places to hide in and explore. When children are playing outdoors, they are also more likely to try new activities and engage with others, which will help children coming from Ukraine to settle in and develop friendships with their peers.

Children's ability to understand, as well as to control their feelings and emotions, increases from being outdoors as they relax and feel calm. Playing outside is also a natural way for children to be physically active and experience freedom of movement, which is positive for both their physical and emotional wellbeing.

Key Aspects to Consider

When considering what will best support a child who has experienced trauma in the outdoors, think about the space you currently have and the activities you provide.

- ◆ **Keep your outdoor environment well organised.** Children can feel overwhelmed in a cluttered and disorganised environment. A well-organised space can feel particularly safe and calming for children who have been living in chaotic circumstances.
- ◆ **Offer choices to children outdoors.** Children who have experienced trauma may feel they have little or no control over their lives. By ensuring the outdoor environment offers lots of opportunities for choice, you are supporting children to feel like they have some control of their lives.
- ◆ **Provide many opportunities for children to gain confidence and mastery** through their play. Children may be feeling unsure of themselves and their abilities, which will affect their confidence and competence. They may need a lot of support to explore the environment, challenge themselves and take appropriate risks.
- ◆ **High-energy activities** such as climbing, running and obstacles are important for the development of gross motor skills. They also help children to manage their emotions and energy levels, and reduce stress.
- ◆ **Low-energy activities** can be calming and less competitive for a child. Provide opportunities for simply strolling or sitting together in the outdoor space.



- ◆ **Heavy work activities** that require a lot of effort, such as pushing, pulling, lifting, carrying and weight bearing using their own body, can also be very calming for some children. Offer play opportunities such as digging in sand or muck, jumping games, carrying buckets of water/bags of sand, pushing a heavy toy pram and other activities that involve pulling, pushing, carrying and squeezing.
- ◆ **Adventure activities** such as den building and scavenger hunts promote communication skills, joint decision-making and teamwork.
- ◆ **Creative play opportunities** support emotional development by offering opportunities for children to try out new ideas, ways of thinking and problem solving. This might include playing musical instruments, painting, dress up, nursery rhymes and action songs, puppets, story-telling or dancing outdoors.
- ◆ **Story-making activities** enable the exploration of imaginary or real-life situations and allow children to embody and act out roles, such as role play and small world play. These can help children to make sense of events they have experienced.
- ◆ **Calm and safe spaces** offer children a chance to take a break away when they are feeling stressed or overwhelmed, or are not able to focus on activities or listen to others.

- ◆ **Practise outdoor relaxation and mindfulness exercises.** These can help to calm children's minds, promote self-regulation and support children to become more attuned to themselves and others.
- ◆ **Provide for a variety of sensory experiences,** as this will help children to engage in experiences that they find calming.
- ◆ **Connecting with nature** such as trees, plants, flowers, birds and insects can have a restorative impact on a child's emotional wellbeing.
- ◆ **Stay close.** Children who have experienced trauma will need the support of a caring and attuned adult to help them feel safe and secure.

When considering your outdoor area and activities, remember that environmental or sensory cues such as loud or sudden noises and/or movements, or the sound of an airplane flying overhead may trigger a traumatic response for a child. You will not be able to remove or avoid all environmental triggers but you should be aware of the potential impact of these and offer an appropriate response to help children feel safe and secure.

Useful resource

[Trauma and Young Children: Building Trauma Awareness in Early Learning and Care](#)



T: 01 453 0355

E: resources@barnardos.ie

W: www.barnardos.ie

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An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Oige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

