



The Early Learning and Care Environment

As Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings in Ireland welcome children and families coming from Ukraine, it is important to recognise the key role that the environment plays in children's wellbeing.

With careful consideration, the physical environment of an ELC setting can make a big difference to how all children feel in a space. It can help children to feel calm, safe and welcome, and play a key role in supporting children who have experienced trauma. Alternatively, the environment can have the opposite effect and trigger feelings of anxiety, fear and danger.

This resource highlights some key aspects of the environment to consider that will help to support children and families coming from Ukraine to feel safe and secure.

Reviewing the Environment

It is very likely that your environment is already set up to support children to feel safe and valued so they can learn and thrive. When reviewing your environment, however, it is important to consider the individual needs of each child. Children who have been impacted by trauma are constantly scanning their environment for threat. Within a typical ELC setting, many features can potentially trigger a stress response in children.

It is always important to plan spaces for children through the eyes of a child, with sensitivity to each child's individual experience. Consider what children will see, how they might feel, and the kinds of opportunities and experiences the space offers, paying particular attention to sensory experiences.

Potential Triggers

Children approach the world through all of their senses and a typical early learning and care environment is full of sensory experiences that, although they may not impact negatively on most children, can trigger stress responses in a child who has experienced trauma.

Sensory stimulation in the environment can carry associations with past traumatic experiences. Dimming the lights during rest time, for example, may be comforting for one child but may remind another of frightening times spent in a dark place. Young children with memories of loud, frightening noises, of bombs or tanks for example, might be triggered by loud noises such as a fire alarm.

By being more trauma aware, you can make adaptations to your environment to support children and their families to feel safe and secure and to prevent re-traumatisation.

Providing for Play

Play is a powerful tool for fostering children's resilience and helping them to recover from trauma. When children have experienced trauma, exploring their world, making choices and playing independently can be overwhelming and they will need the support of an attuned and responsive educator. Children may re-enact the trauma they have witnessed through their play or they may have difficulty playing with other children.

Play supports children's overall health, wellbeing and development, and can help children to make sense of their traumatic experiences.

Key Features of the Environment

Warm, welcoming and comfortable

- ◆ Create an entrance area that is warm and inviting for children and adults. Provide welcome signs and clear direction signage in the languages of the families, thoughtful features such as plants and flowers, and photos showing children engaged in fun activities.
- ◆ Provide space for families to meet their child's key person and support their child's transition into the setting.
- ◆ Provide a personalised cubby space and a coat hook for each child, labelled with their photo, where they can keep their own things safely and access them whenever they wish.
- ◆ Plan for all spaces in the setting to have a homelike and comfortable feel. Add photos of children's family members to create a feeling of familiarity and belonging.
- ◆ Support children's sense of identity and belonging by ensuring that the environment reflects familiar aspects of the children's lives and is representative of their community.
- ◆ Provide access at all times to healthy snacks and water, easy independent access to toilet facilities, and comfortable sleep space with adults nearby. These all help children to feel safe and secure by ensuring their basic needs are met with as little stress as possible.
- ◆ Ensure the layout of the room encourages the children to explore freely and safely, and to choose independently from a well-organised range of materials.
- ◆ Give children the choice as to where they would like to sit. Some children might feel more secure if they can sit somewhere where they can see what is going on around them.



Predictable

- ◆ Display a visual schedule of daily activities using photos to help children and families easily understand what happens on a typical day in the room.
- ◆ Keep changes to the space to a minimum until children are well settled unless changes are made by the children themselves.



Materials

- ◆ Offer plenty of materials that can be used in many different ways such as different sized and shaped blocks and a variety of 'loose parts' to give children choices.
- ◆ Provide materials that encourage children's physical activities such as balls, ride on toys, tunnels, large blocks, balance beams, containers and shovels. Create places to safely jump and climb.
- ◆ Include resources for heavy work activities that involve children pushing, pulling, lifting, carrying and weight bearing using their own body as these can be very regulating.
- ◆ Ensure children's access to materials that support imaginative and pretend play, and expressive arts (small world play, music, drawing, painting and dancing). This can help children to express their feelings and work through their fears.
- ◆ Provide sand, water, clay, playdough and other natural materials for sensory play as these can be calming and regulating.
- ◆ Gather books that help children see aspects of their life experiences reflected and that offer hope. Provide somewhere soft and quiet for the children to look through the books on their own or to sit comfortably with an adult to read.
- ◆ Include materials that promote children's social and emotional learning, including resources for dramatic or pretend play such as puppets and dolls, and resources for small world play including sand, water, clay and playdough and natural materials.
- ◆ Create calm, cosy spaces where children can go when they are feeling overwhelmed. Include objects that support regulation such as cushions, blankets, soft toys, mind jars and sensory materials.

All of the above materials can be offered both indoors and outdoors. Outdoor play in natural environments provides opportunities for children to find space to release energy, express strong feelings, breathe more deeply, think more freely and relieve stress, while natural elements such as trees and grass are familiar and calming.

Being more trauma aware will support you to make sure that your environment helps children to feel safe. Only when they feel safe are children able to explore their environment, build relationships and learn.

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 Óige
Department of Children, Equality,
Disability, Integration and Youth

