



# CHILD FRIENDLY SPACES IN RECEPTION CENTRES



**Pelastakaa Lapset - Rädda Barnen**  
Save the Children

**Supporting asylum-seeking children and  
their families in Finland**

REPORT MAY 2017

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Cover photo: Eveliina Viitanen, Save the Children

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# Foreword

In autumn 2015 the whole of Europe got to know about the situation of people escaping conflict and crisis from countries in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa. Also in Finland, in the far corner of Europe, refugee crises, asylum seekers and children on the move became common knowledge. Despite awakening the fear of foreigners, people began to ask, How can I help?

In September 2015, when we heard that unaccompanied children were on their way through Sweden and Russia to Finland without any proper clothes and without any knowledge of where to go or how to register here, we very spontaneously started to act at the central office of Save the Children Finland in Helsinki. We went to railway stations with our Save the Children (SC) signs and guided children and families on their way to the police station and to reception centres. The first temporary SC Child Friendly Space (CFS) was a tent in the courtyard of Pasila police station (Helsinki Police) where the families and children could get some clothes and help from volunteers. Very soon the officials in Finland organized the registration and first help for the incomers.

Domestic child protection services have been and still are a very active part of our organization, and thus we were well prepared to set up new ways of helping asylum-seeking children and families. At the end of 2015 we started a group home in Oulu, in Northern Finland, for 20 unaccompanied minors who were under 16 years old and another unit in Espoo, in Southern Finland, for 40 children aged 16–17. The work of these units is based on our experience in providing high-quality residential care. We also provided support persons and play activities for asylum-seeking children in some of the reception centres.

In the beginning we found that the Finnish pilot project had to be a modified version of the international model. The advice and consultation given by our humanitarian specialists from international work was crucial. We also needed good contacts with the locals. In the first CFSs we had very active Save the Children local associations. Their contribution to the start was remarkable. In every location the local volunteers were very active and their training, motivation and constant support was needed to get this model to work.

In this report we would like to relate to you some of the experiences we have had in this pilot project. In our next project we aim at a more complete Finnish model of the CFS. Hopefully this report gives you a short description or some glimpses of the journey we have made with our new acquaintances. We learnt a lot and received very good feedback from all parties: children, parents, volunteers, workers, co-workers, authorities and our financing organisation, SCUK. I would like to thank you all, because you and your participation made this happen.

The best aspect of this project was finding a good way to help children and families in a very stressful situation. It was meaningful to work together with them and to encounter challenges and meet people from many countries with their different stories, experiences, fears and hopes. I am sure we started a new way to work in our domestic programme and we are continuing with this work in a new project.

Helsinki 18.3.2017  
Kaisa Tervonen-Arnkil  
Development Manager

# Summary and main observations

The Child Friendly Spaces (CFSs) project was seen as a pilot project by Save the Children Finland. It was the first time that Save the Children Finland utilized an intervention in a Finnish context that is usually implemented in the countries in which the humanitarian emergency has occurred.

The concept and objectives of the CFSs turned out to be very adaptable to a high income and well-functioning country such as Finland. The need for basic services, safety, care, daily structure and meaningful action for children escaping life- and health-threatening circumstances are the same irrespective of the surrounding environment. After a long journey and hardships encountered in the countries of origin, on their journey and in the destination country, it is important to both secure the children, so they feel safe, and provide support for their parents. The ability to identify and direct children with special needs to appropriate services is also important.

Although not to be compared to the experiences of the past, there are still challenges that the child refugees and their parents face after arriving at their destination. The children and parents have shown various signs of distress and other symptoms influenced by their past experiences. The ongoing struggle and hardship in their home countries and the constant worry about family members and friends add to their stress. In addition, long waiting times in reception centres, uncertainty about the future regarding the outcome of the asylum process and shifts from one centre to another are examples of the difficulties the families face and have to deal with, with limited support. Currently many families seeking asylum in Finland receive a negative asylum decision. For the children and parents receiving this unwanted outcome means they need to reorientate to their future, no matter how hopeless this may seem. Some families do not see returning to their country of origin as a valid option.

During the project we have witnessed the consequences of negative asylum decisions on children and their parents. For example, there have been parents who withdraw and do



Photo: William Rivera, Save the Children

not take care of themselves anymore. Some of the parents have very openly talked about their suicidal thoughts. This can have serious effects on children. One mother stopped coming to the CFS after a negative decision. She had previously been very active and engaged in the CFS. She had smiled a lot and enjoyed the activities. All this changed over one night. When her son was asked about the situation, the small boy answered: "My mum just sleeps all the time."

We noticed that due to the constant uncertainty in the lives of children and their parents, the objectives of the CFSs project – improving the coping mechanisms and resilience of asylum-seeking children and improving the parent's skills in providing a safe and nurturing environment for their children – was not so easy to achieve. It appeared difficult to adapt the objectives to a situation where the children and their parents, who had already suffered much, lived under circumstances which did not enable their recovery. Through the third objective of the project – advocating for the rights and wellbeing of the asylum-seeking children – we also wanted to address these issues.

We were able to witness many positive changes in the behaviour and psychosocial wellbeing of children. When attending CFSs, some children who were withdrawn and did not want to play with other children started making contact and engaging socially with other children. Children who in the beginning behaved aggressively learnt more constructive ways to control their emotional reactions and behaviour.

Even though during the pilot project there was no possibility to systematically support the parents in improving their skills of positive parenting, it has still been one of the biggest achievements of the CFSs project in Finland. It was observed that the CFSs had a positive impact on parents who learned child-friendly ways to handle difficult situations with their children. As one father put it: "I observe what happens in a difficult situation, for instance when a child starts behaving aggressively or has difficulties in concentrating. I step aside and watch what the volunteers do and then I try to repeat the same myself."

# 1. The European refugee crisis in Finland

In 2015 and 2016, continued conflict, entrenched poverty and human rights violations drove more than 1.3 million people from their homes in the Middle East and Africa in order to seek safety in Europe. The vast majority of these people were from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Almost one third of them were children.

Many of the people had made a long journey and lost relatives, friends and family members on their way. Many families also started their journey with only some members of their family, hoping for reunification after finding a safe place to stay.

*“We had to leave Iraq because we were hurt and threatened a lot. The escape route was in the forest, and my hand got broken. I miss my mother.” [Dima]  
”And I miss my father.” [Maryam]*

– Dima,\* 9, and Maryam,\* 10, who became friends during their stay in one of the reception centres in Finland

*“Dima has suffered. She was very weak. There was no food or drinking water on the journey. You can survive without food but not without water.”*

– Dima’s\* father

## SAVE THE CHILDREN – HELPING CHILDREN IN EMERGENCIES

Save the Children is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) that operates in more than 100 countries over the world to improve children’s lives. Our vision is a world where every child has the right to live, to be protected, to develop and to participate. Our mission is to improve the way children are treated and to immediately and permanently improve children’s lives.

Save the Children has been responding to emergencies around the world for over 90 years and is currently one of the world’s biggest humanitarian agencies for children.

In any crisis, children are always the most vulnerable. In its humanitarian work Save the Children makes sure that children affected by floods, famines, earthquakes, disease outbreaks and armed conflict get life-saving medical aid, shelter, food and water. The organization concentrates on the needs of a child, safeguards children and helps reunite separated

families. We also help children recover from crises by providing emotional support and safe places to learn and play.

In 2015 Save the Children established a major emergency operation to respond to the child refugee and migrant crisis. Save the Children built a comprehensive humanitarian response spanning from the countries of origin, along the journey, all the way to the countries of destination. This included establishing operations in countries where there had previously been no need for such work. Save the Children Finland participated in this operation by launching CFSs in different locations across Finland, responding to the needs of asylum-seeking children who had arrived with their families to the country.

In autumn 2015 Finland was also facing a new situation. From the usual level of 3000–4000 asylum seekers per year, in 2015 Finland received 32 477 asylum seekers, of whom most arrived during the last five months of the year. Approximately one fourth of the asylum seekers were children, of whom more than 3000 were unaccompanied and separated minors.

Unlike many other European countries, in Finland it was quite clear that these people were not moving on but came to seek asylum from Finland. They were planning to stay.

*“Our life was in danger in Iraq. But the journey with two small children was dangerous too. The children have seen the waves of the sea and walked in the forests during the night. We slept on the streets. The journey affected Asad the most. He has asked a lot of questions about it, and he is still afraid of water.”*

– The father of 6-year-old Asad\* who travelled with his family across the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe

*“Human rights and the rights of the child are respected here. For us it seems like the finest place on earth.”*

– Ali, father of three small children, arrived with his family to Finland in autumn 2015





## ACCOMPANIED ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN IN FINLAND

During the last two years (2015–2016) more than 9000 children have sought asylum in Finland. More than 5000 of these children arrived with their families or other caregivers, such as other adult relatives.

While all the unaccompanied minors are accommodated in special under-age units, accompanied children and their families are accommodated in adult units. According to Finnish law and the human rights treaties, the asylum-seeking children in Finland have the right to obtain the same health care and social services as Finnish children. The municipalities are also required to provide basic education for all children aged 7 to 16.

According to a study conducted by the National Institute for Health and Welfare in 2016, the access to municipal social and health care services by the asylum seekers is unequal. In some of the municipalities asylum-seekers did not have access to the services they were entitled to. In many of the municipalities there was a lack of clarity regarding the rights of various population groups to social and health care services. This was observed also through the work of Save the Children Finland. Many of the parents who

were interviewed were particularly concerned about their children's mental health and inadequate access to health care services.

In addition to difficulties in accessing social and health care services, parents were also concerned about the effects of the asylum process, which in many cases lasted more than a year. The lack of a "meaningful wait" was also seen as one of the biggest sources of frustration, stress and anxiety in a questionnaire carried out by the Finnish Immigration Services in the reception centres in 2016.

In many of the centres, the parents wished for more organized activities for their children. Save the Children observed that especially the children who were not within the mandatory education system and not going to school mainly stayed in their rooms with their parents with hardly any contact with Finnish society and other children. These children's opportunities to develop and learn were restricted. With the prolonged stay in the centre this was seen as a big risk regarding the healthy development and well-being of these children.

The Finnish Migration Service very quickly established new reception centres for the people arriving, including a special registration centre that was established in Tornio, on the Swedish border of Finland in Lapland. In some of the areas where the new reception centres were established, there was strong resistance and strong reactions from amongst the locals. There was a growing fear of the unknown and some of the centres were attacked. There were people gathering at the border crossings to demonstrate that the newcomers were not welcomed. Also many of the politicians and government decisions seemed to be concentrating on finding ways to stop the influx rather than on how to respond to the needs of asylum seekers.

At the same time, the number of Finnish people who were willing to help and to give their time and money to support the asylum seekers was unparalleled. Most of the NGOs responding to the crisis were struggling to organize work for the vast amount of volunteers who wanted to be part of the response. Many self-supporting voluntary groups were formed and there were many individuals who helped people in railway stations.

By the beginning of the year 2016 the number of reception centres was tenfold compared to the previous year. There were multiple different private actors working in the reception sector and providing facilities for reception. Some of these had more experience in providing services for adults and children arriving from unstable areas and from different backgrounds, some less. The established centres were very quickly inhabited, some over their capacity. Some of the families were first accommodated in shared rooms and the facilities were not always suitable for children, which increased the risk of maltreatment of children.

*“I am very worried about my children. In the reception centre the children are afraid of other residents and they are afraid of walking in the corridors of the centre. We cannot follow them everywhere, and they tell us that some of the other people staying here are intimidating and are shouting at them, sometimes even slapping them.”*

– Atallah,\* father of five children

The municipalities also had different ideas about the services they were obliged to provide for people arriving. Many municipalities and local people strongly resisted the establishment of reception centres in the first place.

*“Here the smallest children do not get to go to school or day care. For them it is important to have some variation in their days in the centre, something to wait for. Asad and her sister would like to attend the Child Friendly Space every day if it were possible. Especially when the winter comes and it is dark and cold outside.”*

– Father of 6-year-old Asad\*

During 2015–2016 the situation of the asylum seekers and their asylum process was constantly changing. The Finnish Government tightened their policies towards asylum seekers and refugees. The conditions under which asylum was admitted and the preconditions for family reunification were tightened. The process from registering as an asylum seeker to hearing and obtaining the final decision was taking much longer than before, in many cases more than a year. As a consequence the waiting time in the reception centres – or “camps” as many of the families referred to them – was also prolonged.

During the year 2016 many of the newly established reception centres were closed as the number of new asylum seekers arriving to Finland started to level off. Now many municipalities were protesting against the closure of the centres. Also the attitudes of the local people had changed to being more positive in many places.

The asylum processes and the long waiting times were characterized by constant change and a high level of uncertainty amongst the asylum seekers. This change included many families being moved from one centre to another, with all the familiar surroundings (school, hobbies, friends and reception centre staff) being changed at once, adding to the level of stress of the parents and also affected the reactions and behaviour of the children. The burden of the families, who were already facing many difficulties, became even bigger as concern about the future and fear of the future grew.



Photo: Eveliina Viitanen, Save the Children

## 2. The response by Save the Children Finland

*“It is nice here in Finland, when nothing bad happens and you don’t have to be afraid. The nicest things are all the beautiful things. And everything here is beautiful.”*

– Maryam,\* 10, from Iraq

To address the needs of asylum-seeking children, Save the Children Finland started to work through both a child protection approach and strong advocacy work. In autumn 2015 the organization established two units for unaccompanied minors that were funded by the Finnish Immigration Service. With private funding and funding from Save the Children United Kingdom, Save the Children Finland established four CFSs in Finnish

### CHILD FRIENDLY SPACES AS AN EMERGENCY INTERVENTION

The CFS is one of Save the Children’s emergency interventions that is used in emergency and crisis situations all over the world. It is an approach to protect children from physical harm and provide psychosocial support for children in emergencies.

In every emergency there are threats to the safety and wellbeing of children. This is why child protection objectives are often seen as an important explicit component of humanitarian preparedness and response. CFSs are included in the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action that were developed in 2011–2012 by child protection practitioners, humanitarians, academics and policy makers from all over the world. Through these standards different aid practitioners have been able to establish common principles for their work, to improve the accountability and the quality of child protection, and to enable better advocacy and communication on child protection risks in emergency and crisis situations.

There are two objectives defined for CFSs that are the most common. One is to offer children opportunities to develop, learn, play and strengthen resiliency after the emergency or during a protracted emergency. The other is to identify and find ways to respond to particular threats to all children or specific groups of children, such as those with particular vulnerabilities.

The first objective builds upon the observations from the field that suggest that children cope psychologically better if there is structure and routine that allows them to regain a sense of normalcy despite the changes around them. CFSs are places that can help reduce the range of distressing effects of a crisis on children and can help children establish a sense of security and build self-esteem.

CFS activities are designed to build on children’s natural and evolving coping capacities and proactively involve children in the selection of activities to ensure that the activities are relevant to children. They can also help minimize the disruption to the learning and development opportunities that schooling provides.

The CFS is also seen as one of the main child protection strategies through which specific child protection concerns can be addressed during and after an emergency. It can support the detection and referral of children and caregivers who need specific services, such as mental health services. They also provide opportunities for parents and caregivers to be actively involved, share information and increase their own self-confidence in being able to protect and care for children.

reception centres: three in the Finnish Red Cross managed reception centres in Lahti, Kitee and Kemijärvi and one in the state-owned reception centre in Oulu.

The CFSs project was initially part of Save the Children's international humanitarian response to the European refugee crisis. Having a domestic humanitarian response with funding from another Save the Children member organization was a new approach for Save the Children Finland and required some adaptation. In the planning phase and during the establishment of the CFSs the domestic and international programmes of Save the Children Finland worked together to combine the know-how of international humanitarian work and domestic child protection work into one functional entity.

In order to provide aid to the children and families arriving, Save the Children also started to cooperate and work with different stakeholders such as the Finnish Red Cross, the Finnish Immigration Service, reception centres, and different schools and academies. Save the Children's local associations' roles were crucial in initiating and developing cooperation at a local level and in the establishment and running of the CFSs. There were plenty of volunteers who were quickly trained to run the activities. After the first info meetings organized for families staying in the reception centres, the CFSs started to operate – the first, in Lahti, went into operation December 2015. The others were opened in Oulu and Kemijärvi at the end of March and the fourth in Kitee opened at the beginning of April 2016.

## THE LOCAL ASSOCIATIONS OF SAVE THE CHILDREN FINLAND

"I want to share my experience regarding this civil action work which has given me and tens of others so much joy here in Oulu. The Child Friendly Space concept is fantastic. It was very wise to bring this model to Finland." – The Chair of the Save the Children local association in Oulu

Save the Children Finland's local associations represent Save the Children in their local areas and promote the common objectives of the organization through voluntary activities. The local associations can also act as rapid support channels in their localities.

Besides supporting the asylum-seeking children through the CFSs project in Oulu, Kemijärvi, Lahti and Kitee, Save the Children's local associations support local children to attend school and have hobbies, they hold events for children and families, and they carry out local advocacy work. These activities reached over 23 000 children and young people in Finland during the year 2016.

## 2.1 CFSs in the Finnish context

The international definition of CFSs has guided and set the framework for the four CFSs established in Finland. The concept was adapted to the environment in which it had not been previously implemented and the project was seen as a pilot, even though there was a background support coming from other Save the Children member organizations that already had experience in the establishment of CFSs.

The project was run in three reception centres operated by the Finnish Red Cross and in one reception centre operated by the Government of Finland. At the beginning of the project Save the Children Finland and the Finnish Red Cross signed a mutual agreement on the establishment of the CFSs in the Red Cross operated facilities. In this way a strong basis for cooperation was created. The Finnish Red Cross being the biggest NGO assisting the government in responding to the reception needs of the newly

arrived asylum seekers, the agreement enabled Save the Children to start operating in different parts of Finland. A similar agreement was also signed with the state-operated reception centre in Oulu.

### 2.1.1 Lahti – the location of the first CFS in Finland

The CFS pilot started at the beginning of December 2015 in Hennala, Lahti. At the time there were more than 500 asylum-seeking adults and children staying in the reception centre established by the Finnish Red Cross in an old garrison. Save the Children's local association in Lahti was active from the beginning of the project. It helped the central office in finding volunteers, renovating rooms suitable for the space in one of the buildings in the area and in starting the actual activities. For the first two months the activities were run entirely by the association and trained volunteers. During the first month, the CFS was struggling to have enough volunteers to run the activities due to the great number of children coming to the space.

As a solution, the local association of Save the Children in Lahti started to cooperate with local universities of applied sciences and vocational schools, and offered the students an opportunity to work as trainees or do part of their studies through the CFS. The students were able to bring much content and ideas to the activities in the CFS and made the voluntary-based work more stable and secure. From the end of January onwards Save the Children was also able to hire coordinators to plan and run the activities and locally coordinate the voluntary work in each CFS.

In January 2016, there were activities organized for children aged 0–13 five days a week for two hours per day in Hennala. As most of the children who arrived in Finland with their families were from Iraq, the children living in the reception centre mainly spoke Arabic. To better understand the needs and ideas of the children, Save the Children started to also train volunteers from amongst the asylum seekers staying in the centre. Besides making the communication with the children and their parents in CFS easier, the participatory approach was also seen as a good way to ease the long wait in the centre: the asylum-seeking adults were given an opportunity to help children who were sharing their experiences and were living under the same conditions as they were.

*“I understand and have knowledge of both western and Iraqi culture. It is especially good when working with children and families who do not know any other language besides their own.”*

*– Mawj, CFS volunteer from Iraq*

At the beginning of the project the main challenges identified by the volunteers working in the CFS were the children arriving to the CFS without appropriate clothing despite the extremely cold weather and children not arriving on time as the daily routines were not clear or did not exist and the parents were not waking up early enough in the morning to bring their children to the space. Through close cooperation with the reception centre the challenges were addressed by organizing informative events for parents and encouraging them to come to the CFS. The Finnish Red Cross also started organizing language courses for parents during Save the Children's activities, located in a room next to the CFS, and slowly routines started to form and the children started to arrive on time. At its best there were 90 children registered and participating in the CFS activities in Hennala.



Photo: Eveliina Viitanen, Save the Children

At the end of March 2016, most of the families were suddenly moved to two other reception centres in nearby municipalities, Kärkölä and Nastola, and the need for CFS activities in Hennala rapidly decreased. The volunteers demonstrated their commitment by offering to continue volunteering in new locations. However, two months later it was realized that the workload was too great for the volunteers who had agreed to travel to new locations. Save the Children decided to continue to run the CFS with the few children who stayed in Hennala over the summer of 2016, after which the first CFS was closed at the beginning of September.

There continued to be a great need for CFS activities in Nastola, where most of the families had been moved to, and Save the Children decided to establish a new CFS at the Nastola reception centre. Now the challenge was to find new volunteers who would live closer to the reception centre. Save the Children was able to train a couple of new volunteers from amongst the locals and the asylum seekers staying in the centre. They started to run activities once a week for children aged 7–12. The CFS in Nastola was in operation from October 2016 to January 2017. The reception centre was scheduled to be closed by the end of March 2017 and the families started to move to other centres, so the need for a CFS diminished greatly after the end of 2016.

### **2.1.2 Oulu – a permanent transit centre**

The second CFS was established in Oulu, Northern Ostrobothnia, where the government has been running a permanent transit centre for more than 25 years. In this centre there is long experience in the reception of asylum seekers and clear and tested practices for working with both adults and children. Nevertheless, the situation during

the end of the year 2015 – with ten times the number of people arriving to Finland compared to previous years – the Oulu reception centre was also filled over its capacity. As more children were arriving than before, the reception centre welcomed the idea of a CFS which would provide the families with more support and help create routines and build resilience.

In Oulu the first trainings for the volunteers were organized in December 2015 and January 2016. The space for the CFS was painted and furnished by the reception centre, the local coordinator and the volunteers and the first activities were carried out in March. The local association of Save the Children in Oulu was actively involved from the beginning in planning and establishing the CFS as well as in recruiting and supporting the volunteers.

The centre itself had a good understanding of the special needs of the children and their parents and well-established procedures to react to them. As with all CFSs established by Save the Children Finland, in Oulu the paid staff member and the volunteers of Save the Children were trained to observe and identify any children with specific needs. Here again the mutual respect, and close and good cooperation with the reception centre's professional staff was a key to success.

The local association of Save the Children in Oulu was also able to promote active cooperation with different educational institutions, such as the University of Oulu and Oulu University of Applied Sciences. Some of the students were already having their internships and planning to make their thesis in the CFS during spring 2016. From the autumn onwards the cooperation was made more coordinated by providing training for bigger groups of students who were attending and planning the activities in the CFS as part of their studies.

The special feature of the CFS in Oulu is the nature of the reception centre as a transit centre where most of the families only stay for a short time. The group of children is constantly changing as they move to other reception centres, and the ages, nationalities, languages and cultural backgrounds of the children vary. For this reason, the response has been constantly changing, depending on the needs of the children. Until the beginning of the year 2017 the activities were mainly provided for children under school age. As it was noted that there were also school-aged children who only stayed in the centre for a short time and were thus not able to start formal school, the CFS in Oulu started to plan a club for school-aged children with a specific focus on non-formal education. The club has now started and there is a coordinator and volunteers implementing the activities in the group. Save the Children Finland is also looking for ways to continue the work in the future with the Oulu reception centre.

### **2.1.3 The northernmost CFS – Kemijärvi, Lapland**

The northernmost city in Finland, Kemijärvi (which is located in Lapland around 900 kilometres north from Helsinki), also received a number of asylum seekers as the Finnish Red Cross established a reception centre in the proximity of the city centre. The local association of Save the Children in Kemijärvi is an active association and was immediately ready to act when the asylum-seeking families arrived. The association had already built up cooperation with the local reception centre run by the Finnish Red Cross and the facilities were ready for the CFS to be opened.

Being a small town, the number of trained volunteers was smaller compared to Lahti and Oulu. There was also no possibility to create similar educational partnerships with local schools or academies unlike the bigger towns. Still, the number of children living in the centre and attending the activities was significant: after nine months there were 49 children who had been registered in the CFS, and on Saturdays, when the school-aged children could also attend, there were sometimes almost 30 children attending the



activities. This was made possible through cooperation with another local project called Askel and an active group of volunteers who were very involved in regularly running the activities.

As the number of Finnish volunteers was relatively small, Save the Children also trained volunteers from amongst the clients living in the centre. These were men and women from various cultural backgrounds and with different language skills. Their attendance was seen important beyond the fact that they made it possible for the CFS to be open twice a week; they also provided a special linkage to the children with a similar ethnic background and language. For the volunteers who were asylum seekers themselves, being a volunteer offered a channel through which to meet Finnish people, to have meaningful things to do while waiting and to have some routines in their daily lives in the centre.

In November 2016, Kemijärvi reception centre was ordered to be closed by the end of March 2017. This strongly affected both the asylum seekers staying in the centre and the locals. While the resistance towards opening the reception centres had been strong in many municipalities in autumn 2015, it was now shown that the resistance towards closing the centre could be equally strong or even stronger. The officials and politicians in the town, the local people and the people staying in the reception centre and waiting for their asylum processes to be finalized made appeals and sent letters to the officials and decision makers in the Government of Finland requesting that they cancel the decision to close down the centre. The centre and the people who had been staying there for a long time, some for more than a year, had brought many positive things to this small northern town: there were more children in schools, more people willing to start a business or work in local businesses, more people using local services and more work for locals as well. The children and their parents had been creating friendships with each other and with locals. The integration into society and the community had already started.

*“I have lived here in Finland and in Kemijärvi for a year and two months. In January I will start to attend normal classes in normal school with Finnish students. I like Kemijärvi, I like the school, and I have friends here. I don't want to go anywhere else.”*

– 13-year old Farrah,\* who already spoke fluent Finnish

In spite of the resistance, the decision to close down the centre was not cancelled and many of the families had to move again. For children this was a big change as the now familiar surroundings were about to be left behind again. It was decided that the CFS would be kept open until the families moved in order to provide some routine for the children during their last months and weeks in Kemijärvi. The CFS volunteers tried their best to keep up a positive atmosphere so that the children would have some time off from worrying about their unknown future.

#### **2.1.4 Kitee – a CFS in the middle of the countryside**

The reception centre run by the Red Cross in Kitee accommodated plenty of families. By the time of the planning and building of the CFS there were 250 people living in the centre, of whom about 80 were children. Kitee itself is a small town with a population of around 11 000 people, located in Eastern Finland, in the North Karelia region. The reception centre had been established in the old premises of the Institute of Agriculture

in the countryside of Kitee. The first training for the volunteers was held in February, after which Save the Children started to build the actual space in one of the storerooms of the centre. The regional office of Save the Children in Joensuu had been contacted by a group of design students from Joensuu who were helping with the establishment of the CFS. The space was painted with stimulating colours and decorated with images of Finnish nature. There was a corner for nursing mothers and a bear-shaped blackboard that was placed near the floor level so that even the smallest children could draw on it.

The volunteers were different in all centres. In Kitee, the majority were older women who were farmers or who already had grandchildren of their own. The volunteers in Kitee were also very actively involved in planning and building the space. When the actual activities started at the beginning of April 2016, the children under school age and their parents were immediately ready to attend the CFS, and the children were eager to play and to have contact with the volunteers. The initial anxiety and hesitation of the volunteers in regard to their skills and ability to work with this kind of special and large group of children decreased as the volunteers got to know the children and quickly gained the trust and respect of the parents. This process was to be observed in all CFSs.

*“We all have our own strengths, different ways of being with children. And the children are open and sincere. Children are children, everywhere.”*

– Finnish volunteer in Kitee CFS

The close cooperation with the staff at the reception centre was crucial in making the running of the activities successful. Even though the number of trained volunteers was relatively small, the volunteers were very involved and committed to running the activities. Regular meetings were held with the contact person at the reception centre in order to exchange information, share worries about families and children, and to modify the activities when necessary. In the summer of 2016 a new group for pregnant women and mothers who had recently given birth was established. The number of these women was growing in the centre and they seemed to need special attention. The new support group enabled the women to meet each other and discuss the issues concerning them with the Finnish volunteers. Translation was provided on behalf of the reception centre. In autumn 2016 the focus of the group was shifted from a discussion group to an activity group where the mothers could meet and make clothes for their children for the winter with the help and guidance of the volunteers and the reception centre staff.

The participatory approach was implemented in Kitee in multiple ways with the help of the staff at the reception centre. From amongst the men staying in the centre the staff had been able to identify those who had skills in carpentry. This group of men was asked to build a doll's house for the children visiting the CFS as well as a playground in the yard of the centre. With these activities the adults of the centre were able to participate in the promotion of the wellbeing of the children.

Similar to other centres, in Kitee the tightened asylum policy of the Finnish government and the growing number of negative asylum decisions also affected the general atmosphere. Nonetheless, the Kitee reception centre is still open and the CFS is open two times per week. The big beautiful dollhouse decorates the CFS and feeds the imagination of the children staying and playing in the centre.

## 2.2 Advocating for the rights of the asylum-seeking children

During the response between 2015 to 2017 Save the Children Finland has been advocating strongly for the rights of the asylum-seeking children both on national and global levels. From the beginning of the response the organization has been promoting Save the Children's *Five-Point Action Plans* for Europe and for Finland that advocates for the rights of child refugees to survival and protection.

The focus of the advocacy has mainly been on:

- Finland taking more responsibility for supporting the asylum seekers' countries of origin to provide care for families and children who are escaping war, terror and other severe conditions
- ensuring safe routes for children and families to seek asylum in Europe
- making an assessment of best interest of the child an institutional part of the reception system where the best interests of the child should always be individually assessed and taken into consideration in making decisions that affect the child
- making family reunification possible as the family is the primary unit that provides protection and ensures the wellbeing of children on the move
- forced returns, which have a strong effect on children and parents who are not willing to return to their countries of origin
- increasing the Finnish refugee quotas
- advocating children's right to participation, in line with Article 12 in the UNCRC.

On a national level and in private meetings the focus has especially been on the arrival and registration of children, guardianship of the unaccompanied minors, the living arrangements and conditions in the reception centres, and the rights of the asylum-seeking children to health care, social services, education and a family.

The advocacy messages were developed through Save the Children's common international advocacy efforts and child rights situation analyses of the Finnish context (policy, law, practice, attitudes). However, at the very centre of all advocacy are the experiences of the children and youth arriving to Finland.

It was noticed that the asylum-seeking children have had very different experiences of how they have been treated by officials and local authorities at different stages of their asylum-seeking process, thus children are treated unequally depending on the skills and knowledge of the authorities and on their geographical location in the country. Although it is acknowledged that the needs of asylum-seeking children differ from those of adults, in many ways this is not reflected in the daily work with asylum-seeking children. Save the Children has been collecting experiences from children, parents and youth attending the CFSs, staying in the reception units for unaccompanied minors operated by Save the Children, and through a study that Save the Children conducted in 2016 on the experiences of unaccompanied minors in the reception system in Finland. The organization has been able to feed this first-hand experience from the grass-roots level into policy briefings, advocacy meetings and networks where the issue of the wellbeing of asylum-seeking children has been on the table.

Already in autumn 2015 Save the Children was able to set up a high level meeting with

the Ministry of the Interior of Finland that is responsible for preparing the legislation related to migration. There was close cooperation with the Finnish Immigration Service, which is an agency subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior. The agency makes decisions on matters related to immigration and refugee issues in Finland, including the reception of asylum seekers, interviews and decisions on asylum as well as deportation.

In 2016 the advocacy intensified as Save the Children Finland had multiple ministerial level meetings in different ministries and discussions with officials, parliamentarians and professionals. Save the Children initiated the joint advocacy of Finnish NGOs against the restrictions to family reunification and actively participated in other joint campaigns in Finland. In conclusion, child and family friendliness is included in the asylum policy of the current government, although more state effort needs to be addressed to systematically implement this child rights based approach.

At the same time, Save the Children Finland has participated in global forums, such as UNHCR-led field consultations in Berlin, where the aim was to strengthen policies and practices for unaccompanied minors. The organization also represented Finnish NGOs in Global Forum on Migration and Development in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where Save the Children participated as an official member of the government delegation of Finland. Advocacy has also been done towards the reception centres and the people working and staying in the centres. Raising the awareness of the rights of the asylum-seeking children and the challenges they face as refugees was seen as an important standpoint for promoting the rights of the child. In informative events and gatherings held in the reception centres, trainings for the volunteers and staff of the reception centres, as well as in various national and international working group meetings, Save the Children Finland has displayed this information.

### 3. Supporting child refugees and their parents through structured and guided activities

The four CFSs established by Save the Children Finland provided the asylum-seeking children with many opportunities to develop, learn, play and build resilience. The spaces are well-equipped with materials such as games, toys, clay, hobby crafts and costumes to support and enhance children's healthy development and wellbeing. Children who have attended the CFSs have welcomed the child-friendliness of the spaces and their equipment, which provide contrast to other spaces of the reception centres. A staff member in one reception centre described the CFS as "a paradise in an institution". Most of the spaces were decorated before the children started to attend the activities. The children have however contributed to the appearance of the spaces through their drawings, paintings, and other art and crafts which hang on the walls in the CFSs.

*"I am always waiting for Wednesdays because then we come to the Child Friendly Space. And it is so much fun here! We made those flowers there. And I made a wooden boy who is skiing."*

– Maryam,\* 10, who fluently explained everything in Finnish



Photo: William Rivera, Save the Children

Modelling clay is in favour with the children attending this CFS.

*“In this space you forget that you are in a reception centre. There are beautiful colours and decorations. The volunteers have good energy and presence. It has transformed the atmosphere.”*

– A staff member of a reception centre



Photo: Eveliina Viitanen, Save the Children

Painting provides the children with a way to express their thoughts and experiences and no words are needed.

There are different types of activities carried out in the CFSs in order to support children’s holistic development, including creative, imaginative, physical, communicative and manipulative activities. Children are encouraged to paint, draw, sing, dance and engage in different physical activities (such as football) as well as to read books and tell stories, make puzzles and use building blocks.

### **THE CHILDREN’S SPORT CLUB IN KEMIJÄRVI**

In Kemijärvi the asylum-seeking children have had the possibility to go to the local sport hall as part of the CFS activities. At the beginning, there were mainly boys attending but later girls also started to come and since then there have been both boys and girls of various ages attending. The children have enjoyed going to the sport hall very much but it has also been popular among the volunteers, some of whom are asylum seekers themselves. The sport club has enabled the asylum-seeking children to make contact with Finnish children. The sport club has had a very

positive impact on the asylum-seeking children, especially on the girls, many of whom had very limited experience of physical activities and they built trust and self-confidence through coming to the club and having the possibility to try out different activities not previously known to them.

The CFSs are well-equipped to ensure children's holistic development and learning.

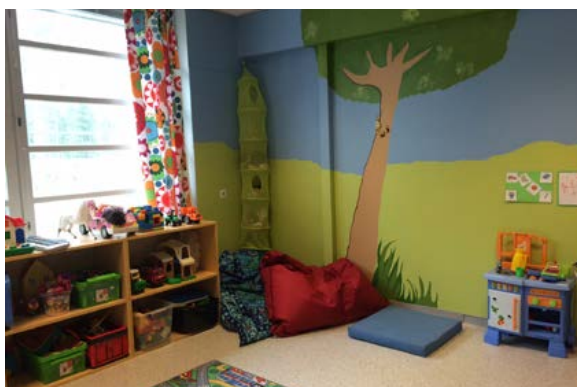


Photo: Kirsi Keinänen, Save the Children

The children who participated in the CFS activities were mainly under school age. At the beginning of the project this age group was estimated to be most in need of guided and structured activities based on the discussions with the reception centre staff and the parents, and due to the fact that the children under school age were staying in the reception centre as the older children attended school. In some locations the older children also had other activities organized by the reception centre.

The positive change in children who attended the CFS activities did not happen over one night. It was a process in which the children started to slowly trust the volunteers and other children and build their confidence, during which time their true character started to show. The volunteers' professionalism and ability to respond sensitively to the needs of the asylum-seeking children including being patient and supportive (even at difficult times) played an important role. Through their calm but firm behaviour the volunteers acted as good example both to children and their parents of how to act in a non-violent and child-friendly way, even in difficult situations. There were many volunteers who were part of the CFS from the start until the end of the project and who learnt to know the children and the parents well. The volunteers said that for them one of the best things in the project was being able to see the positive change in children during this time.

*“At the beginning some children were very aggressive, playing war games. But now they have calmed down, adapted. They show more trust and sense of security. And they are more used to playing in a group.”*

– CFS volunteer

There was also improvement in the behaviour and learning of those children who were social and engaged in activities with other children from early on. Volunteers and parents reported on children's improved social and interaction skills, and language skills, learning or mastering a new skill such as drawing, painting or a physical activity. The parents of smaller children (not attending school) reported that the children were using Finnish phrases. They associated these improvements with the children's attendance to the CFS as the children were not sensitized to Finnish language outside of the space. The children themselves enjoyed learning a new skill too.

*“All in all the CFS project has been stimulating and inspiring. The children would prefer not to leave the space. The development of the children's Finnish language skills has been amazing.”*

– CFS volunteer

## COLLABORATION WITH UNIVERSITIES AND VOCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Since the early phase of the CFSs project, there has been collaboration with universities and vocational institutions. Students have had a significant role not only in strengthening the volunteer resources but also in contributing to the content and activities of the CFSs. Voluntary work has been part of the student's study programmes, and they have earned course credits by attending CFS activities. In addition, the CFS has offered them an opportunity to gain practical experience.

In some institutions the students have been required to plan, conduct and evaluate an activity in the CFS relating to their studies. In Oulu, there has been with the students of Early Childhood Education and Logopedics from the University of Oulu, as well as with the students of social services from Oulu University of Applied Sciences and students of child and family work from Oulu Diakonia College. The students have designed activities which enhance the language learning and development skills of children, as well as non-verbal communication. An example of an activity that was popular amongst children was picking out an image from a sachet, saying what the image depicted and conducting a task relating to the image. The students also organized games which

support language learning and songs which include gestures.

The students involved in the CFSs have reported following changes in children's behaviour during the few months of their presence:

- The children got accustomed to guided action, and their ability to concentrate increased.
- The children's negotiation skills improved.
- Some children's Finnish vocabulary widened.
- The children's ability to understand the language has improved.
- The children's ability to engage in play for longer periods of time increased.
- The children's interaction skills developed.



### 3.1 Supporting parenting and enhancing positive parent–child interaction

*“Attending the CFS has been important, not only for my children but also for me. Before, back in Iraq, I didn’t have much time to spend with my children. Now it has been good to be here together with my sons, and I feel that they are safe here.”*

– Amal,\* a single mother of two children

During the project, in the four CFSs a positive change in the parent–child interaction and parenting practices was also seen. Although there was no systematic support for the parents in all CFSs, a positive change in the way the parents responded to their children’s actions, especially when these actions were negative, was observed. Some parents reported themselves that attending the CFS and observing the behaviour of the volunteers had helped them to get along better with their children, especially in challenging situations (such as when a child does not obey his or her parent). Some parents said that they had learnt new skills to calm down and comfort their children in times of distress. The parents also adopted other new behaviours and started to engage more in play and other activities with their children, which was not seen in the initial phase of the project but increased as the project proceeded.



## THE MOTHERS' GROUP IN KITEE

In spring 2016 there were many pregnant women in the Kitee reception centre, some of whom were giving birth for the first time and some who were from single-headed households. As the possibility to talk with a midwife or nurse was limited and concern over the coming births was great, Save the Children was asked to organize activities for pregnant women. As there were resources to respond to the need, the mothers' group was established with the aim of giving information about birth as well as providing peer support.

The group gathered 22 times and there were 12 female participants. The topics covered birth and the health of the child and the mother. The group allowed the women to bring up sensitive issues and difficulties they had. To release the stress of the women, different relaxation techniques were used. The mothers' group was a joint activity of the volunteers from the Save the Children Finland and the Finnish Red Cross.

### 3.2 Psychosocial support of the child refugees and their parents

Psychosocial support of children is at the centre of the CFSs concept and also played an important role in our project. Asylum-seeking children's psychosocial wellbeing was supported through selected activities including playing, drawing and music. Children were especially encouraged to join in activities with other children as this strengthens children's internal and external support systems and builds children's trust in themselves and in other children.

In addition to the activities in the CFS, a lot of attention has been paid to the ways in which the volunteers communicate and interact with the children and their parents alike. Save the Children promotes child participation, according to which the children should be heard and their views taken into consideration in decisions affecting children. In our project, the children have been heard in various ways during the project. After each CFS session, the children had the possibility to give feedback and they were also able to influence which activities are carried out in the CFS.

One of the ground rules in our project was that children are not forced to attend any activities they do not wish to attend. The children have the right to decide if, and how, they want to participate. Our volunteers are trained to observe, identify and take into account the needs of the children and to respond to these in a child-friendly and respectful manner, acknowledging that all children are different. We have tried to create a space where the children need not to do anything but be children and where they are allowed and encouraged to express themselves through play and activities. The children were enabled and encouraged to do what is most natural to them: to play.

It was noticed that when children are given a chance to play freely, they start expressing their thoughts and feelings spontaneously through selected activities. Our volunteers were trained to provide ways for children to express themselves, sometimes about difficult past experiences, through play, drawing or storytelling. Some children told about their journey over the Mediterranean, some played a game where they were cutting off the heads of dolls, and others drew soldiers and barbed wire fences. Examples vary but what is common is that each of these incidents had a specific meaning to that child. It was important that our volunteers were able to react in an appropriate manner, even though they were sometimes shocked about what the child was telling them, drawing or otherwise producing.

In Save the Children's basic training for volunteers, the volunteers are trained in the principles of psychological first aid (PFA). The importance of mutual and respectful communication with the children and the parents is also highlighted.

Towards the end of the project it was becoming more evident that the focus on psychosocial support, together with sensitivity towards the asylum-seeking children's needs and allowing the children to decide whether or not to participate, and, if so, in which ways they participate, has made the CFS so popular among the asylum-seeking children. This has also had an effect on achieving the positive change in the children despite the challenging life situation in which the asylum-seeking children and their parents are living.

### 3.3 Case management in CFSs

One of the two main objectives of CFSs is to identify and find ways to respond to particular threats to all children or specific groups of children, such as those with particular vulnerabilities. In order to identify those children with special needs and those who require special attention, there is a particular case management system used in CFSs by Save the Children Finland.

Case management in CFSs refers to the general child protection procedure and guidelines of Save the Children. According to the procedure, all volunteers and staff members

#### THE EVALUATION WORKSHOPS

In each CFS there was an evaluation workshop carried out by the project management and a trainee who was planning and conducting the activities in the workshops. All the workshops were held in November 2016 and they had different sessions for children, parents, the volunteers and the reception centre staff.

The objective of the workshops was to collect information on the effects of CFS activities on children, the challenges faced during the programme, and possibilities and ideas for improving the concept. When conducting the workshops it was very quickly noted that the workshops also functioned as a channel to get more general information on the challenges faced by the families living in the reception centres.

The children's activities were conducted as part of the normal activity of the CFS so the workshop itself was not something additional to the children but a fun and different way to play during their CFS time. The children attending the workshops were from 0 to 13 years old and they were asked to draw their favourite thing in the CFS. The children drew various different things that were not all related to the CFS. Thus it was finally not found to be a very functional way to collect information from children this small. In general it was noted that the children were happy to attend the CFS activities, and there is a mutual trust and warmth

between the volunteers, supervisors and the children.

For the parents there was a translated group meeting during which the children played in the CFS. The parents mainly hoped to have more CFS activities for their children. The general feeling amongst the parents was that the CFS had brought some valuable routine to their lives in the centres and that they had seen positive changes in their children during the project. Additionally the parents used this opportunity to tell more about their worries and wishes, such as the need for specific mental and physical health related support for their children and themselves, and the need for more information about what is happening around them in the centre.

In the workshops organized for the staff and the volunteers there were similar observations made as in the children's and parents' workshops. The positive change in the behaviour of the children was one of the changes noted. There were also challenges faced in the CFS that were mainly related to the worries of the adults that were reflected in the behaviour of the children.

are obliged to observe and report possible concerns regarding a child or children in the CFS. If a concern over a child's health or wellbeing arises, in each CFS there are reporting forms that are used to document the relevant details which help us to understand the situation and the specific concern better. The reporting form is only used for documenting the facts. Interpretation and personal opinions are not included. Concerns can also be orally raised.

A concern can relate to a change in a child's behaviour, such as when a previously happy and talkative child becomes quiet and withdrawn, or a child who keeps on behaving aggressively towards other children and refuses to follow the rules despite the denials.

The concern is forwarded to the supervisor of the CFS who then discusses the matter with Save the Children's advisors. The concern will also be forwarded to the relevant staff members at the reception centre. After this report it is the responsibility of the reception centre to estimate the situation with the child and the parents and to take the necessary actions. Save the Children will follow up the case by trying to ensure that the case has been furthered and actions taken. The parents are always included in the process of finding the best ways to support the child and the family, and very often the parents raise the concern themselves.

As the volunteers and the supervisors may not always have the language skills or other skills to discuss matters with the parent or parents, cooperation with the centre is crucial in case management of the CFSs. The centre has the possibility to organize a translated meeting with a social or health care professional for the family. The concerns should always be handled quickly and in a highly confidential matter so that the child or the family will not be at risk of more harm. In general, these kinds of cases have been rare.

There are also instructions on how to act if a volunteer or a staff member suspects that the child has been facing maltreatment or physical or sexual violence. According to Finnish law, these more severe cases always require that the person working with the child reports the case to the official child protection services of the municipality. In the CFS the official report is made in cooperation with the social worker of the reception centre.

## SECURITY AND CHILD SAFEGUARDING

The security of children and child safeguarding are the main considerations in all of Save the Children's work. In CFSs it shows in the way the space itself is built to be safe in every way for children of all ages. All the materials, equipment and toys are carefully selected for different age groups. In their training the volunteers are told how to behave in the case of an emergency, for example, where to call if there is an accident and where to take children in the case of a fire.

There are also certain rules, such as "wash your hands" and "no violence or teasing" that are taught for children and demonstrated in pictures on the wall. Additionally there are rules for parents, who are required to bring and take their children to and from the space so that there is no

possibility for their children to be taken away by the wrong person. Taking photographs is strictly forbidden in the space and when Save the Children's staff is collecting material for communication, the names of the children are always changed and the faces are never shown.

For volunteers and the staff the rules are strict as well. No single adult is allowed to stay alone with children; there should always be two adults in the presence of a child. This is to minimize the risk of maltreatment and abuse of children.

The volunteers are obliged to take good care of their hygiene, use rubber gloves if there is an accident and ensure that they have had the relevant vaccinations.



Photo: Eveliina Viitanen, Save the Children



Photo: Evelina Viitanen, Save the Children

## 4. Staff and volunteers

To a great extent the scope of the CFS project – such as the number of children, number of CFSs, funding and other resources available – has determined the staffing structure of the spaces. Save the Children's child protection policy requires that no staff member or volunteer can be left alone with a child at any time. There must be at least two adults in one CFS whenever it is open and there are children attending. The ratio of caregivers to children varies depending on the age of the children, since children of different ages need different levels of supervision.

So far there has mainly only been one paid staff member, a CFS supervisor, in each CFS. This has meant a high workload for one person who has had to manage several tasks and responsibilities. The four CFS supervisors have had the overall responsibility of implementing the activities in the CFSs and supervising the work of the volunteers. They have also been the liaison persons between practice in the field, the volunteers and the project team in the head office as well as the point of contact at the reception centres.

### MONITORING THE CFS

From the beginning of the project, there have been certain tools for monitoring used in the CFSs. One of them is a weekly report sent by each supervisor that tells how the activities of the week were implemented, how many children attended and if there was anything surprising that the supervisors would like to talk about. The reporting system also encouraged the supervisors to plan the activities for the next week.

The other tools for monitoring are the registers in each CFS where the staff and volunteers take notes on each child. The register system allows recording how many children have attended, if there are drop-outs or any special issues staff should be aware of (a special diet or a health issue) that may have some affect on the attendance of the child.

There are also regular Skype meetings between the head office of Save the Children Finland and the CFS supervisors. The purpose of these meetings has been to provide support and share experiences as well as to contribute to the overall project development and quality.

The project management makes regular monitoring visits to each CFS, where also the volunteers' experiences can be heard. By conducting interviews and by asking for feedback it has also been possible to hear the views of the children and the parents and to use the feedback to improve and change the activities of the space and the work done in it.

### 4.1 Volunteers

*“The enthusiasm and joy of the children feels like dashes of joy and warmth in my own heart.”*

– CFS volunteer

*“The commitment, adaptation, understanding and encouragement of the volunteers has been a key to the success of the project.”*

– Supervisor of the CFS

The volunteers played a crucial role in the CFSs project. At the same time, having a sufficient number of volunteers has been one of the greatest, if not the greatest, challenges of the project. Due to the high number of children attending the CFS activities in all four locations, the need for the volunteers has been great. This has caused challenges, especially in smaller municipalities such as Kemijärvi and Kitee. In Oulu the situation has been somewhat better as there has been collaboration with universities and vocational institutions from early on. However, in Oulu the activities have been organized at best four times a week. The demand for volunteers to run the activities has also respectively been great in Oulu.

Since September 2015, and from the start of the project, there have been a total of 221 volunteers trained, of whom 34 were trained in 2015 and 187 in 2016. Of all the volunteers trained, 24 have been clients in the reception centres and asylum seekers themselves. There were 86 volunteers trained in Lahti, 26 in Kitee, 26 in Kemijärvi and 83 in Oulu.

However, the large number of trained volunteers does not in itself explain the success of the project in improving children's psychosocial wellbeing. It has been more due to the quality of the voluntary work, which enabled the project to not only meet its goals but also helped in gaining the trust of the parents, the children and the reception centre staff. The volunteers have received trainings and guidance when needed as well as some economical support for vaccinations. The volunteers have been very committed and demonstrated a high level of professionalism from the beginning of the project.

The volunteers have given various reasons for why they want to be part of this type of voluntary work. The answers include an interest in different cultures and the wish to support asylum-seeking children and bring joy and positive things into their lives. The possibility to develop and learn new skills as well as to meet other volunteers was also mentioned. The reasons the volunteers have given have been similar irrespective of their background variables (such as the age, sex and geographical location of the volunteers).

*“In my opinion the CFS project has been well organized and it has been a joy to be part of this. I have learnt many new things.”*

– CFS volunteer

In the project becoming a volunteer has consisted of five phases. First, the interested candidates attend basic training which introduces the candidates to Save the Children and the CFSs concept, as well as to Save the Children's Child Safeguarding Policies and Procedures. There is also a session from the staff member of the reception centre providing an overview of the everyday life and families and children living at the centre. The candidates are also familiarized with the concept of PFA, which empowers them to learn about the common reactions of children in crisis situations and to respond in an appropriate manner in children's times of distress.

Second, the candidates commit themselves to Save the Children's policies and procedures and agree to have their criminal backgrounds checked by Save the Children. Third, they agree on having a personal phone interview with the Save the Children project staff, after which they are free to start working as volunteers. The phone interview was chosen as a method due to the long distances between the volunteers in the field and the staff at the central office who were conducting the interviews. The approved volunteers are continuously monitored, evaluated and guided by the supervisors, who manage the voluntary work at the grassroots level.



In the personal phone interview the candidates are asked about their experience of working with children, their personal motivation and interest in the project and their experience of voluntary work with refugee children. Candidates' attitudes and ability to work with children, as well as their ability to work in a team, are also evaluated in the interview. Also important are candidates' personal resources and ability to cope under stressful situations, as well as their personal experiences of trauma or loss which may affect their work as a volunteer. The suitability of the candidates is estimated on a case-by-case basis. All candidates must be at least 18 years old, and they cannot have conducted any type of offence against children.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID (PFA) FOR CHILDREN

Psychosocial support for asylum-seeking children has been the key focus and priority across our project. Knowing that the majority of the children attending the CFS activities have had various levels of traumatic experiences, we have trained our volunteers in PFA in order to empower them to recognize and respond to children's reactions and challenging behaviours.

PFA is an evidence-informed, modular approach to help children, adolescents, adults and families in the immediate aftermath of disaster and terrorism. PFA is designed to reduce the initial distress caused by traumatic events and to foster short- and long-term adaptive functioning and coping.

In our trainings for volunteers, we have used Save the Children's Psychological First Aid for Children training manual, which takes into account children's vulnerability and specific needs in and after an emergency or crisis situation. The training material includes tools for communication, reassurance and comfort for staff working directly with distressed children, and advice and guidance for staff working with parents and

primary caregivers as well as suggestions for ways to support a distressed child. The delivered key messages in the trainings have been that children's responses should always be seen as normal reactions to unusual situations and that in crisis situations children are the most vulnerable and thus need specific attention and support.

The volunteers have found the PFA part of the training useful, even though the asylum-seeking children participating in the CFS activities were no longer in the immediate aftermath of an emergency. The traumatic past experiences, together with the uncertainty of the future, impact heavily on children's wellbeing and behaviour and they may demonstrate the behaviour typical of those in acute crisis situations (including sleeping, eating and self-regulation problems). Our volunteers have also reported situations in which a child demonstrates the behaviour typical of a younger child, which shows that it is good that the volunteers have a basic understanding of child development and of the common crisis reactions in children of different developmental levels and ages.

***“In my opinion the project is good and much needed”***

– CFS volunteer



Photo: Eveliina Viitanen, Save the Children

# 5. Implications for future projects

## 5.1. The achievements of CFSs in Finland

The achievements of CFSs in Finland are the following:

- Positive changes observed in asylum-seeking children during CFS activities and the feedback received by the volunteers, parents and staff of the reception centre
- Positive change in parents' behaviour regarding learning more constructive ways to handle challenging situations with their children and learning to play with them
- The high number of skilled volunteers who were trained and then involved and engaged in CFS activities
- The interest and investment in the CFSs project from Save the Children's local branches and their active collaboration with the Head Office of Save the Children Finland
- The valuable experience gained by Save the Children Finland as an organization through working with the child refugees and their parents, and through the successful piloting of the international CFSs concept in a Finnish context, which has set the ground for further projects and actions targeted to child refugees and their families in Finland
- Observing and bringing forward the challenges faced by the asylum-seeking children and their families during the asylum process in Finland, as well as the advocacy made through the project
- Good collaboration with the external partner organizations at the different levels involved in the work with the asylum-seeking children and their families in Finland (the Finnish Immigration Service and Finnish Red Cross).

## 5.2. The challenges faced during the project

The challenges faced during the project were the following:

- The lack of a baseline study; there was no possibility to compare the positive impacts and observations made about the initial situation and the start of the project
- Asylum-seeking children and their parents stay in the reception centres for an unknown period of time, which challenges receiving information and trustable data about children's behaviour and difficulties
- Sometimes the rapid moving of the asylum-seeking children and their parents from one centre to another required flexibility from the volunteers as they needed to adapt their activities accordingly and be ready for rapid changes as well as repeating some things (the rules and regulations in the CFS) all over again
- The new and rapidly changing environment requires constant reaction and adaptation, both in programme design and in advocacy work

- The difficulty at times of keeping a sufficient level of volunteers due to high demand as a result of the high number of children attending the activities, combined with travelling long distances to some locations (Kitee, Kemijärvi)
- All CFS locations varied in several ways, which then required location-specific adaptations in addition to the Finnish context based adaptations
- The difficulty of making the initial estimations and longer-term plans for staffing and other project costs due to rapid changes in the project environment
- The project revealed new needs that the asylum-seeking children and their parents have and which needed attention but could not be responded to
- Children who are on the move and who have experienced multiple stressful events in their country of origin, on their journey and during their wait in Finland need special long-term support, but as their situation is constantly changing, providing this kind of support is challenging.

### 5.3. Lessons learned

The lessons learned are as follows:

- Carefully planned monitoring and constant development of the project and activities based on the learning during the project are crucial from the beginning of the project in order to answer to the needs of children in the most efficient and timely manner
- There needs to be sufficient resources allocated for hearing the children, their parents and volunteers during similar projects and programmes
- It is important to ensure child participation and engage children as much as possible from early on and in all phases of the project
- Developing and clarifying both the concept of psychosocial support and how to best support, as much as possible, the refugee children and their parents is needed
- Volunteers recruited from inside the community with similar language and cultural backgrounds are a significant resource when working with the asylum-seeking children, but at the same time they need special attention and support as they are part of a vulnerable group themselves
- Ensuring cultural sensitivity in all phases of the project is important, including during volunteer trainings and activities carried out in CFSs; information about child rearing practices in different countries would be useful in order to include it in the training package
- It is important to ensure sufficient staffing resources and to plan the activities based on the staff available
- Support for volunteers is important and can be done through enabling the attendance of trainings
- Regular meetings and information exchange, as well as peer support among supervisors, are important
- It is important to take care of staff wellbeing and provide regular support for the volunteers and the staff
- Close collaboration with local associations and branches is the key to success.

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\*Names changed to protect the identity

*“We had to leave Iraq because we were hurt and threatened a lot. The escape route was in the forest, and my hand got broken. I miss my mother.”*

– Dima\*, 9

*“Here the smallest children do not get to go to school or day care. For them it is important to have some variation in their days in the centre, something to wait for. Asad and her sister would like to attend the Child Friendly Space every day if it were possible. Especially when the winter comes and it is dark and cold outside.”*

– Father of 6-year-old Asad\*

*“It is nice here in Finland, when nothing bad happens and you don’t have to be afraid. The nicest things are all the beautiful things. And everything here is beautiful.”*

– Maryam,\* 10

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