



Save the Children

# ENCOUNTERING REFUGEE FAMILIES AND PARENTING SUPPORT

WONDERFUL USRA – A GUIDE FOR PROFESSIONALS

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# 1 Background and goal of the guide

This guide is aimed at professionals and experts who work with families with a refugee background and need more information and tips to support working with children and parents.

The guide includes a background theory section that provides brief information about parenting as refugees and the idea of positive parenting. This section is based on, among other things, the available literature, research data as well as studies and reports published by the Save the Children organisation.

In addition, the guide has a practical section that offers tips for reaching out to and encountering families. This section is strongly based on the practical work carried out in Save the Children's Usra – Family in Finland (Usra – Perheenä Suomessa) project (2021–2024), the experiences gathered from it and the expertise of the project employees.

The Wonderful Usra (Ihana Usra) group activity model and the family club model that were developed in the project are described at the end of this guide and thereby we are also offering them for other actors to use.

## USRA AND SAVE THE CHILDREN'S REFUGEE WORK

**Usra – Family in Finland** Save the Children's refugee work supports the fulfilment of the rights of the child among children with refugee backgrounds. In Finland, this work is part of the organisation's development activities, and it includes work where children and families are encountered as well as advocacy work. The aim of the work is to reduce violence against children in particular, such as neglect and disciplinary violence. The activities also strengthen the inclusion of children.

The goal of the Usra activities is to support positive upbringing and parenting skills, family unity and well-being among families with a refugee background in Finland. The target group for the activities is families with a refugee background who are in a particularly vulnerable position, such as asylum seekers, families who have recently arrived in Finland or undocumented families who have difficulties seeking official services and support.

The Usra work is based on the work of the Save the Children organisation among families with children as

well as children with refugee backgrounds in Finland and internationally. The development work for Usra has utilised the Safe Families model of the international Save the Children organisation and the Parenting on the Move model produced by the Save the Children Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub. Some Finnish parenting support models were also consulted during the development work, such as the *Parenting in Finland* pilot group of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare and the *Perhe yhtenäiseksi* ('Make families whole') working model of the Oulu immigrant services.

The development of the activities started with an extensive needs assessment and reaching out to families through more open group activities. At the same time, a more closed group activity model suitable for the target group was developed based on the existing models and piloted in 2022–2023 with Arabic-speaking families. This created the *Wonderful Usra* working model which we talk about in this guide.

Partners and networks in Finland as well as Save the Children's advocacy and programme work networks in Europe have played a central role in all the work.

The project's partners have included, among others, the Finnish Immigration Service, the Finnish Red Cross, the immigrant services of the City of Vantaa, the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare THL, the Al Amal day centre for the undocumented run by the Helsinki Deaconess Foundation, the Hilma Support Centre for Immigrants with Disabilities, the Oulu reception centre, the Vantaa reception centre, Turvapaikanhakijoiden tuki ry – Support for asylum seekers and the community house Meltsi for children and families run by the We Foundation. We want to thank these partners for their valuable contribution to the development and implementation of the activities.

Many thanks to all the families we have encountered during the project. Without them, the project would not have been possible. Thank you for participating, for the shared moments and for learning from each other. Thank you for your trust!



“

**Everyone participated together and we stood on the same 'bridge of parenthood'.**

– A parent who participated in the Wonderful Usra group

Image: iStock.com / Michael Jung



## **2** Refugees and parenting

## Families with a refugee background often have many stress factors that affect parenting and fulfilling the task of raising children.

Such factors may include, for example, challenges related to immigration, uncertainty due to cultural differences in parenting practices, traumatic background experiences, the parent's own difficult childhood experiences as well as parenting practices passed down from one generation to the next that are harmful to the child.

The families also have many strengths which can be related to, for example, the shared experience of survival and the heightened importance of parenthood in the family's exceptional situation.

### CHILDREN IN FAMILIES WITH A REFUGEE BACKGROUND

The share of children among people who have become refugees is significant internationally. About 40 per cent of all refugees in the world are minors. On average, about a quarter of the applicants for international protection who have come to Finland are children, a large proportion of whom arrive in Finland with their family members.<sup>1</sup>

The number of children arriving in Finland as refugees with their families has varied from a few hundred to a little over a thousand every year in the last ten years. Exceptions were the year 2015, when up to 4,600 children came to Finland with their families, and the years 2022–2023, when, in addition to asylum seekers, more than 66,000 applicants for temporary protection arrived in Finland as a result of the war in Ukraine, including approximately 18,500 children. Most of these children also arrived with their family members. A total of approximately 70 per cent of the children who applied for international protection in Finland between 2015 and 2023 were under the age of 13.<sup>2</sup>

Although forced migration often affects the whole family, it is very common that only some of the family leaves due to various reasons. Also in Finland, among families with a refugee background, there is a significant number of single-parent families as well as families where the children or some of the children are in a different country than their guardian. Every year, some children from families with a refugee background arrive in Finland also through family reunifi-

cation.<sup>3</sup> However, family reunification as a process is often difficult, slow and expensive; it is frequently impossible for the family in practice.

The status of children with a refugee background in states is governed by, among other things, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its four general principles: the child's right to life and development, non-discrimination, involving the child in decision-making that concerns them and the consideration of the child's best interests. The status of children seeking asylum is also determined by the UN Refugee Convention, which has, however, been criticised for its lack of child sensitivity. For this reason, it has been suggested that the Refugee Convention should be interpreted in parallel with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>4</sup> In studies and publications about refugees, when talking about children, they very often refer to children on the move without a guardian, who are children in an extremely vulnerable position. International conventions, however, also apply equally to children travelling with their guardians and families.



### IMPACT OF FORCED MIGRATION ON THE FAMILY

Being forced to leave one's home and native country often involves a surrounding crisis, such as a violent conflict or a natural disaster. A person who is granted asylum in another country has also experienced some kind of personal persecution and violence or the

threat of violence. Children and parents who have experienced forced migration almost always have difficult or even traumatic background experiences. They are also classified as particularly vulnerable persons. Vulnerability usually refers to groups that are socially or economically in a weaker position than the majority population and whose human rights protection requires special attention.<sup>5</sup> People with a more general immigrant background are often also included in vulnerable groups.<sup>6</sup> However, of all immigrant groups, those with a refugee background are often seen as the most vulnerable because they are affected by several simultaneous risk factors.<sup>7</sup>

The lives of children and parents with a refugee background always involve a degree of sadness and having to give something up. Families lose their homes, children's schooling is interrupted and parents' social position often changes radically. In terms of a child's psychological well-being as a refugee, the possible death of a parent, an unstable environment, lack of support from the family, a parent's psychological symptoms and excessive dependence on the child or the destruction of their home community can be particularly stressful.<sup>8</sup> Many of the families who have experienced forced migration live in poverty and may not have access to decent housing, shelter, health-care or security.<sup>9</sup> Some children and parents experience violence not only in their country of origin but also during their flight. This can include psychological, physical, economic and sexual violence.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, traumatic experiences can arise even after arriving in the destination country. In these cases, the reason can be, for example, a longer period of uncertainty about residence status or traumatic experiences being constantly recounted by the loved ones who were left behind. According to research, children with a foreign background also have more experiences of school bullying as well as other psychological and physical violence than average.<sup>11</sup>

At the very least, moving to a new country inevitably causes some kind of stress. A culturally foreign environment, to which the family members may be adapting to at different paces, affects functioning as a family and the family's well-being. Families with a refugee background may have a limited support network in the new country and their trust in external aid providers may be weak and, therefore, the families are often left on their own. Conflicts may also arise between spouses due to refugee status and the new cultural environment, which are then reflected in the functioning as a family.<sup>12</sup>

Traumatic or stressful experiences affect both children and parents. In the case of a child, for example, constant fear takes up resources that the child should have available for their growth and development.<sup>13</sup> Children's experiences of violence and bullying are

seen to be linked to a possible weaker dialogical connection with their parents.<sup>14</sup>

In adults, trauma symptoms have been found to be linked to, among other things, the use of stricter parenting practices. Traumatic experiences may cause overprotective reactions in parents. Some parents, on the other hand, have a hard time seeing the child's needs and reacting to them in the way the child requires due to their own psychological unwellness. The parent may be unable to take care of the family's affairs, in which case the child may have to be responsible for more of the family's affairs than their skills and resources would be sufficient for.<sup>15</sup> It is also typical that the child does not always express their worries and distress to the parents because the child does not want to burden them even more. The child can easily see and sense the stressed state of the parent, due to which the child may want to hide their own feelings in order to save the parent from additional stress.

Families who have experienced forced migration have had to cope with unprecedented adversity. Because of this, it can be observed that many families with a refugee background have also developed a lot of coping mechanisms and resilience. The importance of family and parenting may also be particularly great, as family is for many the only permanent thing in their current situation. In other words, in the case of parents and families with a refugee background, the need for support is not always related to being a parent, but rather functioning as a family may be one of the few things that the family does well in their otherwise new and often difficult situation.

Research has shown that the family plays a key emotionally protective role in the different phases of being a refugee. In crisis situations, adults are the most important sources of physical and emotional security for a child. Children who have experienced living as a refugee with their families have been found to have fewer psychological symptoms and have been found to be more adaptive than children who have been refugees alone.<sup>16</sup>

## PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AND TRAUMA AWARENESS

When working with families with a refugee background, you encounter children or parents who have experienced various traumatic events in their lives.

**Psychological trauma** can be the result of an event, series of events or circumstances that an individual perceives as physically or psychologically dangerous or life-threatening. Not everyone who has experienced traumatic events necessarily suffers from trauma-related psychological symptoms. However, traumatic

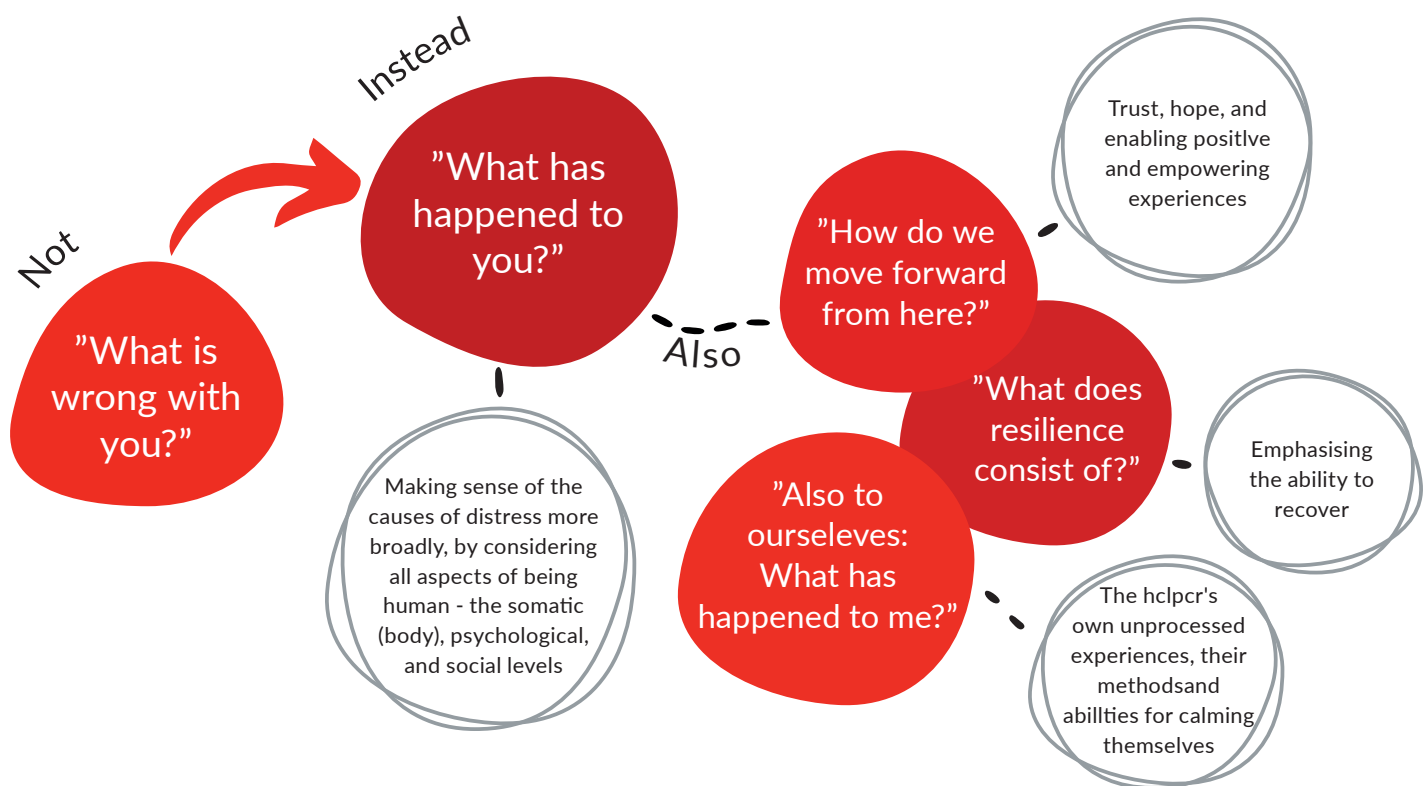


experiences can cause psychological stress that manifests itself in many ways.<sup>17</sup>

Three main groups of symptoms can be distinguished in the range of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder: recurring flashbacks and mental images or dreams of the traumatic event, intense anxiety and the physical symptoms that follow. The person may try to avoid anything that reminds them of the traumatic event, such as conversations, activities and places, and push the memories out of their consciousness. The person may isolate themselves, their ability to experience and express their feelings may decrease and their outlook on the future may become narrower. Traumatic memories and mental images may also cause them to be constantly on their guard. This can lead to difficulty in sleeping and concentrating as well as irritability or nervousness, for example.<sup>18</sup>

**Trauma awareness** means understanding and being aware of the effects of trauma on an individual. Trauma awareness does not require going through or processing the individual's trauma experiences.<sup>19</sup>

**The trauma-informed approach** aims to stabilise the individual's everyday life and strengthen their resources.<sup>20</sup> In addition to trauma awareness, the approach includes understanding the importance of resilience and restorative experiences. The approach does not focus on what is wrong with the person but rather on thinking about how it would be possible for them to move on from what happened as well as on those things that affect and promote their ability to cope. The approach also takes into account the helper's own experiences and means of calming down.<sup>21</sup>



A trauma-aware professional can work to stabilise the family's everyday life, for example, by creating a safe framework for working together. Predictability and consistency create security for both children and adults. This is also enhanced by having an awareness of what will happen and when. The facilities used for activities with families should be comfortable and child-friendly. It is also preferable to always use the same facilities for recurring activities. When using an interpreter, it would be good to have the same tried and tested interpreter available for the entire time of working together.<sup>22</sup>

If a family member has clear symptoms of trauma, it is good to think together with the parent or child about

ways to anticipate how to act in these situations. It can be challenging for someone who has faced traumatic experiences to process certain events related to the past. If at all possible, it is good to, for example, ask the participants how they feel about working methods which are oriented to the past, if you are planning to use such methods. Parents and children should be told that they do not have to process or talk about things that they do not want to talk about or that are difficult for them. It is also important, if necessary, to guide people to seek support for processing the traumatic experiences.<sup>23</sup>

## CULTURALLY DIFFERENT PARENTING

Parenting is a culturally structured activity. Culture affects, among other things, the family structure, which for many people arriving from third countries can be very different compared to the traditional family structure of Finnish culture. Finland is individual-focused, while for many immigrants, a community-based family culture is more common, where the family includes not only the parents and their children, but also other relatives and possibly non-related members of the immediate community.<sup>24</sup>

When moving to another country, the parenting practices may raise a lot of questions and confusion, and they may be in conflict with the practices the family is accustomed to. The assumed ideals of parenting are to some extent culture-specific.

For example, in the Finnish school world, it has been observed that rules and certain types of discipline are stricter among particular families with immigrant backgrounds. At the same time, however, immigrant families also experience challenges in the discipline they are accustomed to when others in the children's immediate circle have different rules, which their children now also appeal to.<sup>25</sup>

A different parenting culture is not in itself the reason for parents' or children's special need for support.<sup>26</sup> However, a different culture and difficulties in adapting to the expectations of the new culture can cause a parent to feel inferior and incompetent as a parent. The parenting practices in Finland are Western-oriented, and the possible different parenting practices of families with a refugee background may be perceived as problematic in some contexts.<sup>27</sup>

Differing timelines for the integration of the family members can also affect the parenting experience. A parent who has moved from another country carries with them methods of upbringing that are tied to the culture of their own family and community. A child who is born or grows up in Finland learns from their surroundings the Finnish ways of functioning as a family as well, which may be foreign or sometimes even contradict the ways their own family is accustomed to.

However, in general, parenting is a special and important task for every parent. It involves a lot of expectations held by both the parent themselves and the surrounding society, and parents usually have a need to be defined as a good parent in the eyes of their own community and the authorities.<sup>28</sup>

## SUPPORTING PARENTING

Every child deserves a safe environment to grow up in and an adult who supports the child's growth. No parent should be left alone with parenting and the worries that come with it. In families with a refugee

background, treading the line between the parenting practices of two cultures is challenging. In this case, parenting support provided by professionals is necessary. It is essential to consider the family as a whole.

The goal of supporting parenting is to secure the healthy growth and development of the child. Parenting support comes in many forms. It can be implemented, for example, through influencing the community, in a group format or on a family-specific basis.<sup>29</sup> Parenting support can also include working individually with the parent. The parent may have weak support networks in Finland and the family's relatives, loved ones and community have often been left behind in the country of origin, in which case the support offered by professionals can play an even greater role as the parent or parents raise children on their own.

One form of parenting support is sharing information with families. Among other things, psychoeducation can be used to provide information and skills about being and functioning as a parent. At best, this information increases the parent's ability to observe their own actions as a parent. One important goal of parenting-related psychoeducation can be, for example, increasing the parent's faith in their own abilities as a parent.<sup>30</sup>

Parenting cannot be supported with just one learned method or model. Every parent and family has their own needs and there is no one correct way to raise children. When working with parents, it is good to try to ensure that the employee does not place themselves above the parent in giving instructions and saying what is the right way to act towards the child. Having an appreciative and respectful attitude towards the family is essential in all the work done.<sup>31</sup>

When supporting parenting, it is good to consider a solution-oriented perspective where parents are encouraged to focus on the moments and things that are going well instead of problems.<sup>32</sup> In addition to various support needs, it is important for the employee to learn to recognise the parent's strengths as well as things that the parent and the family manage well. The key is to actively highlight these things to the parents and children, thereby strengthening the family's own agency and sense of capability.

Immigrant parents usually benefit from parenting support and the opportunity to discuss the topics of parenthood and child-rearing in the new country. Most often, families consider it necessary to use an interpreter and communicate in their native language. Encountering families individually and professionals' interest in understanding the parents' thinking are also important in encounter work. A culturally sensitive approach and building trust between professionals and families are essential.<sup>33</sup>





# **3** Positive parenting

The work of the international Save the Children organisation is guided by the protection of children and the joint operating models developed to promote it.

One of these operating models is the Safe Families model developed to support non-violent parenting. It promotes a positive parenting approach and is also the basis for the parenting support activities for families with a refugee background implemented in Finland.

Positive parenting is a broad topic, and this guide discusses themes that have been seen as particularly important for the families with a refugee background participating in Save the Children's activities in Finland. The topics have been discussed in groups supporting positive parenting in the organisation's Usra – Family in Finland project in 2022–2024.

By familiarising yourself with the themes, you will receive information about positive parenting and how to promote positive parenting when working with families with a refugee background. This section of the guide provides a brief introduction to positive parenting. Themes 2–5 belonging to positive parenting will be explained in more detail later in chapter 5, which describes the Wonderful Usra model.

### Themes of positive parenting in the Usra project:

1. Information about positive parenting
2. Strengths of the child and parent
3. Needs and rights of the child
4. Many kinds of emotions
5. Well-being of the parent and the child

### INFORMATION ABOUT POSITIVE PARENTING

Positive parenting has numerous positive effects on a child's growth and development. Similarly, positive parenting has a positive effect on the relationships between the parent and the entire family and their well-being.

Positive parenting may be a foreign concept to many parents with a refugee background, despite

the parent probably implementing things related to it in their everyday life. In the activities carried out by Save the Children, it has been deemed necessary to explain the trend of positive parenting to parents.

The goal of positive parenting is to strengthen the relationship between the parent and child. Positive interaction between the parent and child, solving problems with the child and understanding development at different ages are key for positive parenting. It is important for the child that the parent has the ability to see the child as an individual with rights and valuable views.<sup>34</sup>

In positive parenting, the parent's behaviour and parenting practices should be based on the child's best interests. A parent has numerous important tasks in a child's life, such as caring for, protecting, showing love, setting boundaries, gently guiding, setting an example for the child and promoting the child's well-being. The attachment between parent and child, experiencing a sense of security and strengthening the child's self-esteem all contribute to the child's healthy development as well.

### POSITIVE UPBRINGING

Positive parenting is underpinned by the trend of positive upbringing (positiivinen kasvatus). Positive upbringing is a child-oriented and adult-led parenting method where upbringing is based on the connection between the child and the parent. Its essence lies in encountering the child with empathy. The parent's skills in well-being are at the centre of positive upbringing.<sup>35</sup>





In addition, the following aspects are also seen as important in positive upbringing:<sup>36</sup>

- Secure attachment
- Seeing the good in the child
- Boundaries and love
- Solution-oriented ways of intervening in the child's unwanted behaviour
- Compassionate attitude towards mistakes and teaching self-compassion to the child
- Emotional skills of the parent and child

### FROM FEAR-BASED PARENTING TOWARDS POSITIVE PARENTING

Being a parent is not just wonderful and rewarding; it can also be challenging. Parenting can become more challenging when it is combined with an uncertain life situation, stress and lack of information.

A child challenges their parents in many ways. There may also be situations where the parent acts in ways that are not good for the child's development or the relationships between the family members. These can include various challenging circumstances where the parent tries to stop the child's unwanted

behaviour as quickly and straightforwardly as possible. At such times, the parent's patience and emotional regulation skills may be tested. The methods and solutions used by the parent in these situations are not always good for the child. The solutions can be short-sighted, in which case they do not always lead to lasting effects.

Uncertainty and making mistakes are part of being a parent. Nevertheless, there are things and actions that are not allowed for the healthy development of the child. There is no doubt that a child can be made to act the way you want by force, intimidation, threats, embarrassment or the use of violence, for example. Such methods scar the child in ways that can be seen well into adulthood. Fear-based parenting has a negative effect on a child's learning and mental health. The child's connection with the parent also deteriorates.<sup>37</sup> If a parent has experienced this kind of parenting in their own childhood, it may happen that the parent uses the same harmful parenting practices for their own child. This is referred to as intergenerational reproduction of harmful parenting practices.



Image: iStock.com / FatCamera

For the child, upbringing should be based on the connection between the parent and child, constructive interaction, guiding with love and empathetic leadership.<sup>38</sup> The relationship between a child and a parent is also affected by the emotions experienced by the child and parent, their emotional regulation skills as well as means of calming down. A child often needs support from their parent in this regard. When dealing with families, it would be good to try to support the emotional skills of not only the children but also the parents. This will make it easier for the parent to understand the reasons behind the child's behaviour and emotions even in challenging situations.

## RESILIENCE

Positive parenting does not mean that there are no adversities at all or that you should not feel emotions that are difficult to process. You also grow and learn from adversity. It is important for a child that parents help the child face and deal with adversities. Adversities can also be overcome in a better way when there is sufficient resilience. For children, resilience is strongly linked to coping with difficult emotions. Re-

silience is seen as the ability to bounce back from adversity as well as the ability to grow through difficulties.<sup>39</sup>

75 per cent of children have the appropriate resources to cope with the majority of life's ordinary adversities. A child having a close relationship with a caring adult can be considered a key factor for the child overcoming adversity. For example, children can better survive war if they are not separated from their parents. However, resilience has its limits. When exposed to extremely difficult life events, such as war or torture, no child is resilient until they reach safety.<sup>40</sup>

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are considered harmful to the child and they can have long-term and varied consequences. ACEs can be caused by, for example, an individual, the family or society. Alongside ACEs are PCEs (Positive Childhood Experiences), which mean positive, protective experiences during childhood. Positive childhood experiences have been found to be strongly linked to well-being in adulthood, and they mitigate the impact of adverse experiences. It has also been established that a lack of positive experiences is even more damaging than ACEs.<sup>41</sup>



# **4** Encountering families



## REACHING OUT TO FAMILIES AND BUILDING TRUST

When starting new activities, efforts must be made to reach the target group. Reaching out has often been found to be challenging when targeting vulnerable immigrant families.

At the onset, families with a refugee background may lack trust. This can be due to, for example, previous bad experiences with various actors either in Finland or elsewhere. For instance, the family may have previously encountered actors in a position of power who are prejudiced, who have racist attitudes or who are unable to deal with a person with a different language or cultural background, all of which may have been reflected in the behaviour or manner of speaking of the actor in question. In many countries, for example, the authorities can be perceived as intimidating and abusers of their power.

Cooperation with the families and communities will not succeed without trust. Building trust usually takes time.

One reason for the lack of trust is the fear of child protection and the children being taken into care, which has further increased in recent years. This fear landed in Finland from the neighbouring Sweden, where the situation was further fuelled by deliberate disinformation.<sup>42</sup> Families of Muslim and Arab background were particularly affected.

Fear can be an obstacle to seeking services. Examples of this given by the families in the activities of the Usra project include, among others, refusing home help services even when there was a great need for them, the family refusing support offered by the school for a child with special needs, reluctance to join friend activities for fear that a volunteer will

come to visit one day or fear related to a home visit being suggested by a nurse at the child health clinic.

In terms of building trust, it is important to connect with the families and their communities. Connecting with the families is best achieved if you already have networks in the community and are a familiar person among the families. Community in this context refers to, for example, a specific language and cultural group. Language and cultural knowledge are essential for building trust and a connection. When possible, you can, for example, hire people who are either themselves members of the targeted language and cultural communities or who know the communities in question rather well in order to carry out the activities.

If you do not have your own direct contacts with the family communities, reaching out can also take place through partners that already have a connection with the targeted families or who work on similar activities. For example, organisations representing different language and cultural communities can be of help in establishing a connection. In this case, initial networking is essential.

You can greatly influence the families' willingness to participate by your own approach and by thinking carefully about what you have to offer to the families. It is important to also inform the families as to what participation in the offered activities requires of them. To begin with, it is important to build trust with the parents of the family, in particular. Through the parents, it is possible to also reach the children of the family and gain their trust.

It has been found that 'hearing it through the grapevine' also works well in minority language groups. Gaining a good reputation in the community affects people's willingness to participate and contact the organiser of the activities in the future.



## Examples from the Usra project for reaching out to families

In the Usra project, the building of trust started right at the beginning of the project, taking into account that the target group is in a vulnerable position. In this regard, clarifying to the families that Save the Children is not a public authority was particularly important because distrust towards the authorities was high for many of the families.

At the beginning of the project, meetings took place with numerous actors and pop-up events were organised with some partners, including at the Puhos shopping centre in eastern Helsinki, the Vantaa reception centre and the day centre for the undocumented of the Helsinki Deaconess Foundation. The purpose of the events was to simultaneously introduce the project, organise fun shared activities for children and parents as well as to get to know the families. We connected with several families through these kinds of low-threshold activities. The threshold for encountering was made lower by organising events in places where families usually visited or spent a lot of time as well as by offering easy and fun activities aimed at families with no registration required. The events were advertised in Arabic and Finnish through the communication channels of the project employees and partners.

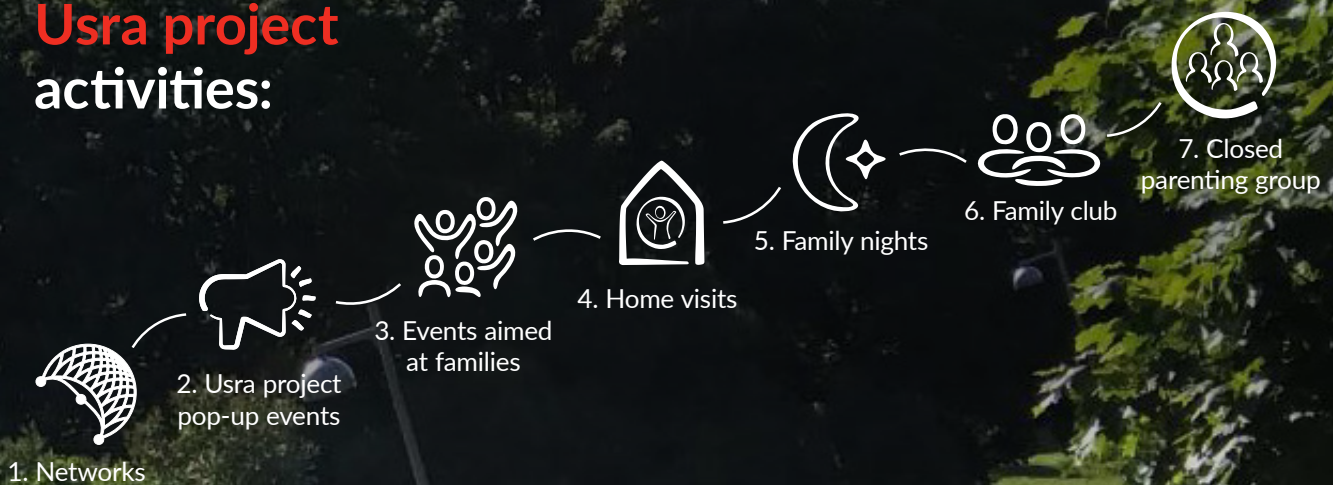
Other group activities being started, such as family clubs or parenting and children's groups, were advertised at the events. Advertisements were distributed directly to the families also through partners. When planning activities carried out in the reception centre environment, an Arabic-speaking project employee, together with an employee of the reception centre, called all the Arabic-speaking families to whom the activities could be offered.

Once trust started to develop, the families began to talk about their personal matters as well as ask for advice and opinions on matters other than those related to the content of the project. This is why it was decided to offer individual guidance along with the other activities. However, this service was not advertised externally; instead, the guidance started out on the initiative and based on the needs of the families.

In the Usra project, individual guidance meant that, at a parent's request, an employee would arrange a separate appointment for the parent or the family to deal with something related to the family situation, such as a child's school matters or service coordination. Service coordination means referring a person to other service providers. The families encountered during the project had many needs and, therefore, guidance was limited in the project to matters related to family life.

Reaching out to families, building trust and offering low-threshold activities and support were all seen as a good means of getting participants into the project's more closed and goal-oriented parenting groups.

## Usra project activities:



### Observations from the Usra project on the importance of low-threshold activities

Getting parents to participate in various closed parenting groups is sometimes very challenging and enough time should be allowed to reach the participants. Some parents have many kinds of fears and thresholds related to this, and so efforts have been made to lower them in the Usra project.

Not all immigrant parents are automatically in need of support in terms of their parenting skills. However, there is a general need for peer support and access to information and, therefore, it has been good to implement activities that support parenting in different ways. In the Usra project, one well-tried method has been to offer weekly low-threshold family club activities where parenting themes are covered in a lighter way. Family nights and excursions were also organised regularly in the project, reaching a large number of families. Child-friendly destinations were chosen for the excursions to give the families an opportunity to participate and engage in activities together.

The project found that, by initially participating in lower-threshold activities, the threshold to participate in closed parenting and children's groups became lower. The families who then participated in the closed groups committed themselves to the sessions very well. Some of the parents have pointed out that, in the beginning, it was also important to gain trust in the employees, after which the threshold for participation became lower.

## ENCOUNTERING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The way of encounter is of great importance when working with families with a refugee background. When meeting with the families, it is important to clearly indicate who the organisers of the activities are, why they are there and what the goal of the meeting is.

Listening is also important. An employee being genuinely interested in the family's affairs may have a great impact on how the family experiences the encounter. In the best case, by being respectful and warm, you can make good contact with the families right away in the first meeting.

The employee's ways of working and interaction can also be of great importance to the children's sense of security and the building of trust. Many children with a refugee background have had traumatic experiences, and so it is a good thing to be aware of and to always take into account when interacting with them. Positive interaction, creating an accepting and safe atmosphere, taking individual needs into account and seeing the good in every child are particularly important skills when working with children. The sensitive encountering of a child also includes that the activity is voluntary for the child. In this case, the employee is tasked with respecting and taking into account the child's needs even when the child does not want to participate in joint activities.

## CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

The more you deal with diversity, the better you learn to understand it.

However, cultural sensitivity is different from cultural knowledge, which means general knowledge about a specific culture.

In a professional context, cultural sensitivity refers to the culturally respectful social interaction skills of professionals as well as appreciative verbal and non-verbal encounters. Cultural sensitivity includes communication between a professional and client in a manner that involves the right of each party to express their culture and be accepted and heard in this context. Culturally sensitive services do not mean, for example, providing services separately for every target group; instead, they mean services flexible to the needs of diverse clients.<sup>43</sup>

Cultural sensitivity refers to the willingness, ability and sensitivity required to understand people from different backgrounds. A culturally sensitive encounter involves awareness of your own cultural background and possible prejudices. This means, among other things, being aware of your own cultural starting points and the positive or negative prejudices that

can affect your encounter with a person from another culture. When talking about cultural sensitivity or multiculturalism, it is important to avoid an interpretation in which one's own culture is seen as the only correct and normal one.<sup>44</sup>

When reflecting on your own prejudices, encountering people from different backgrounds is a good way to examine them. In order to prevent misunderstandings, you should try to avoid making assumptions. Regardless of their cultural background, each person is an individual with their own personal needs and habits. The best way to learn from others is when you encounter other people. This is the case when we talk about two-way integration. It is also important to note what we all have in common instead of focusing on seeing the differences.

A culturally sensitive approach is also important when working with children with a refugee background. Showing interest in the child's family life and culture as well as being interested in the child's thoughts, for example, can be of great importance in terms of the child feeling that they have been seen and heard.<sup>45</sup> This also reinforces to the child that their own culture, language or religion are just as important as the culture, language or religion of the majority population.

### Premises for cultural sensitivity in client work:

- ✓ Respect diversity
- ✓ Consider the client's life experiences and strengths
- ✓ Reflect on the significance of your own cultural background on you and your attitudes
- ✓ Be open and patient
- ✓ Show interest in different cultures
- ✓ Be flexible
- ✓ Ask the client about their customs, values and culture instead of making assumptions and generalisations
- ✓ Find the courage to encounter the client as an individual rather than as a representative of a specific culture
- ✓ Consider individual needs in services
- ✓ Make use of cultural interpreters where possible

Source: Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare:  
Cultural competence and cultural sensitivity

## EASY LANGUAGE, PLAIN LANGUAGE AND AUGMENTATIVE COMMUNICATION

In everyday speech, the term easy language is often used to mean plain language that is easy to understand. *Plain language* is understandable standard language that does not contain special vocabulary.<sup>46</sup> Plain language does not have as many criteria as easy language, and it can be used, for example, when speaking, in brochures and on websites when you want to express something more clearly and comprehensibly.

Easy language is a form of language that is easier to understand. In easy language, the language is made simpler in terms of content, vocabulary and structure. It is intended for people who have difficulty reading or understanding standard language.<sup>47</sup> The use of easy language lowers the participation threshold for those who do not have strong skills in, for example, the Finnish language. Easy language helps the people who need it in obtaining information, reading, understanding, expressing their own thoughts and views as well as participating in activities. Consequently, easy language is called accessible language. You can speak and write in easy language with the help of the guidelines for easy language.<sup>48</sup>

### Easy language checklist:

- ✓ Use common and familiar vocabulary when speaking. Remember to explain foreign words and emphasise core words.
- ✓ Use short phrases and favour colloquial structures.
- ✓ Talk about one thing at a time.
- ✓ If the topic is new or abstract, give concrete examples.
- ✓ If there is a point that causes difficulties, this is often more easily resolved by discussing and asking questions, rather than by lecturing on the matter.
- ✓ Start the conversation on something that the other person already knows about.
- ✓ Speak calmly, but avoid slowing your speech down to the point of being unnatural. Remember to punctuate your speech.
- ✓ If a word causes difficulty, ensure to repeat it. If repetition does not help, use periphrasis.
- ✓ Adjust the language to suit the age and level of development of the person you are conversing with.

Source: Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare: *Selkokieli* ('Easy language')

The language skills of children and parents with a refugee background can vary a lot depending on, for example, how long they have lived in the country or whether the parents have had sufficient access to language courses. In activities aimed at families, it is important to ensure that the group participants understand, either through easy language, model or picture support, what the purpose of the group session is and what the group is doing.

Various augmentative communication and action-based methods, interpretation and the use of plain language are good ways to promote everyone's opportunities to understand, be understood and express themselves. When there is no common language, these means can be used to ensure that the activities organised for families are accessible and meaningful for the participants. The use of action-based and creative methods is suitable for working with families, and their importance becomes emphasised even more if several different languages are used in the group or if the language skills of a parent or child are just developing. Action-based methods and creativity can be implemented through play, movement, art and working with pictures, for example. Collecting feedback with the help of pictures, drawings or movement, for example, also works well in different contexts.

Pictures and picture communication can be used alongside speech and non-verbal communication. The pictures should be clear and easy for the child or parent to interpret. In addition to printed pictures, you can use, for example, pictures cut out from magazines, photos, drawings and various picture cards. For instance, various free image banks have pictures for working with children and parents.<sup>49</sup>

When there is no common language, gestures, facial expressions and body language are a natural way to communicate. Using sign-supported speech can be useful if the instructor has this skill. Practical showing, such as through movement and action, supports communication. Pointing at things is also one of the early ways to be understood.

In addition, there are many free language translator applications today that can be used in situations that require translation. You can also use the voice feature of some translation applications to communicate with children, for example. This does not require the ability to write.

## Considering language in the group activities of the **Usra project**

The activities of the Usra project were mainly aimed at Arabic-speaking families. Some had already lived in Finland for a longer time and some had just moved to the country. Limiting the activities to children and parents who speak Arabic made it possible for them to be carried out in two languages. Finnish- and Arabic-speaking project employees were responsible for the implementation of the groups.

Plainer Finnish was used in the children's groups, and the Arabic-speaking employees made it possible to use Arabic as a support language. Leading the group and the children's participation were facilitated by the children, especially those who had only recently moved to the country, being able to communicate and be understood in their own native language. Action-based and creative methods, the use of pictures as well as repetitions related to the structure of the activities made it easier for the children to participate.

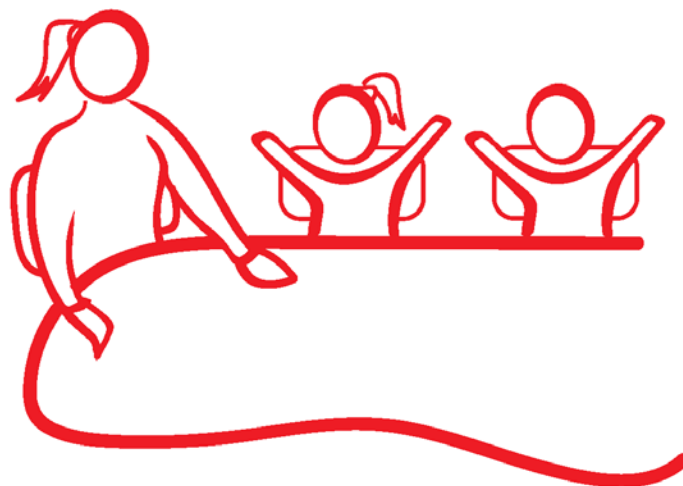
The parents' group activities were carried out in Arabic, but Finnish language was used alongside it, with many of the participants also wanting to strengthen their Finnish. Therefore, efforts were made to take into account the Finnish language skills of the group participants as well. In addition to easy Finnish, picture support was occasionally used in the group sessions.

### INVOLVEMENT AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSION

**Inclusion** is defined as an experience of belonging to a group and the child having opportunities to influence matters that are important to them.

**Participation**, in turn, is used to describe actions that children can take, such as ways of taking part and expressing their opinions.

**Involvement** means offering various opportunities for being involved. Inclusion is examined as opportunities for influence as well as being involved and as an experience of inclusion.<sup>50</sup>



According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child has a right to inclusion. The convention creates a strong foundation for every child's right to express their own views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. The child shall also be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child.<sup>51</sup>

As an employee, it is good to think about how to observe the rights of the child in activities or when encountering a child as well as how the activities can promote the fulfilment of the rights of the child. At least the following four principles must be considered in all activities:

1. Every child is equal and will be treated as such. No one may be discriminated against and no one may be bullied.
2. Every child has the right to a good life. The child can be themselves and enjoy life, and the adult supports the child's development.
3. It is the adults' job to find out what children are thinking. It is important to ask the child's opinion and the child should be listened to, taken seriously and considered.
4. The child's best interests must be the primary consideration in decisions and plans affecting children. The decisions should be justified to children. When assessing the child's best interests, the views of the child must be taken into account.

Source: Save the Children Finland: *Katsele palveluita lapsen silmin* ('Looking at services through the eyes of a child') workbook

The implementation of involvement and especially the inclusion of children is a key goal in the activities of Save the Children. Listening to children allows us to do things differently, strengthen well-tried operating methods as well as develop things and activities to better meet the needs and interests of children. By involving children and parents, it is possible not only to enable participation, but also to offer experiences of inclusion to children and parents.

The life situation of the family can affect the willingness and ability to participate in many different ways. When encountering families, it is important to listen to the families' own wishes and views on, among other things, how the participation of the families in the organised activities can be best achieved.

Participation is one way to experience inclusion. Being able to influence matters that concern you is an essential part of social participation and attachment to the community.<sup>52</sup> When planning activities aimed at families, it is important to listen to the children's and parents' own development proposals or other wishes. Listening to and implementing these where possible means that participants are likely to commit to the activities.



When dealing with children and developing activities aimed at children, it is important to regularly ask for their thoughts, ideas and feedback. When working with children, it is good to pay special attention to every child having the opportunity to be seen and heard, regardless of their language skills.

The inclusion of children can be promoted in numerous ways. For the employee it requires learning and gaining insights from children as well as being surprised by them. This is underpinned by the perspective of positive recognition, where important tools for the employee include open-mindedness and striving to reach the child's experiences, needs and wishes openly. When encountering a child with an attitude of positive recognition, we get to know the child and the child's world without prejudice, acknowledge things that are important to the child and support the child in matters that increase the child's experience of success and appreciation. When working with children, it is good to stop and think about how you listen to children as an employee, which operating methods have been found to be good and which things make it challenging for children to be heard.<sup>53</sup>

In order to understand a child's needs, actions, experiences and thoughts, it is good to take enough time to get to know the child and the child's world. This will make it easier to reach as well as to realise something new and meaningful as an employee. With children, you can test new ideas at a low threshold. Play and throwing yourself into something are allowed when brainstorming and experimenting. It is important to not get locked into a certain way of operating, even if it seems

to you to be the only right way. When developing and evaluating activities aimed at children, it is good to consider what happens in the activities through the eyes of a child. Employees also have the important task of acting as messengers for the children's ideas, i.e. passing on the thoughts of the children.

### Supporting questions for child-centred work

- ✓ Does the child feel welcome?
- ✓ Is the child being considered, seen and heard?
- ✓ Does the child feel that they are well-liked and important?
- ✓ Can the child act in a way that is natural for them?
- ✓ Does the child understand what is happening?
- ✓ What moods can the child sense?
- ✓ What things are concretely happening to the child?
- ✓ Does the child have the opportunity to influence things?

Source: Save the Children Finland: *Katsele palveluita lapsen silmin* ('Looking at services through the eyes of a child') workbook

## Inclusion befitting children

- ★ There are numerous things in a child's life that are meaningful to them and that also have an impact on the child's experience of inclusion.
- ★ For a child, belonging to a group means that they can feel that they are well-liked and part of a community that is important to them. The employee is tasked with striving to make it possible for every child to have the opportunity to do fun things together with others.
- ★ It is important for a child to be able to be themselves. When working with children, it is good to get to know them. The child's support and care needs, strengths and resources will then also be better revealed. As an employee, it is important to act in such a way that each child feels that they are good as who they are, regardless of their life experiences and individual characteristics.
- ★ A child needs love and care from their parents. The child should be able to experience caring and nurture also in the activities and services where the child spends their time. Every employee who encounters children has the opportunity to influence these experiences.
- ★ By taking note of the things that are individual about and important to children, you can support children's opportunities for participation and influence. Significant experiences of inclusion come about in everyday situations, and so a child's inclusion and opportunities for influence should be especially well nurtured in the communities and services related to the child's everyday life.

Source: Save the Children Finland: *Lapsilta opittua* ('Lessons learned from children') website



## Examples of the inclusion of children and parents in the Usra project

In the Usra project, the inclusion of children and parents was promoted in many different ways. The family clubs and children's groups implemented in the project took shape based on the children's thoughts, ideas, interests and feedback. The parents' wish for family-oriented activities organised in the evenings was also taken into account, resulting in family nights.

Family nights were organised approximately once a month for a year. Family nights were event-style gatherings with a programme for children and parents. If they wanted, the children and parents could also take on responsibilities in organising events or family nights. This also strengthened the experience of participation and inclusion of the children and parents.

After the events, feedback was collected from the participants. With the children, for example, a large piece of cardboard was used, on which they could write, draw or choose from pictures things they liked or did not like about the events or activities they would like to see in the future. There was also a feedback notebook in which the children wrote and drew their wishes. A feedback notebook was used for the adults as well, with one of the organisers writing in it, if necessary, on behalf of those parents who did not have the ability to read and write or whose threshold for writing independently was high.

When developing all the activities of the project, it was seen as important to listen to the children and parents as well as give them opportunities to influence the development of the activities aimed at families. The project promoted children's opportunities to express themselves and their opinions as well as created opportunities for families to participate in activities at a low threshold. The information and observations obtained from the feedback were utilised in the development and implementation of the activities. The children's experience of inclusion was also promoted through interviews with the children where the children could have their voices heard about family life and other matters that are important to them.





# **5** Wonderful Usra group model

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***I noticed that our family is special. Parents don't always notice what children notice. Now I look at things from a child's perspective.***

- A parent who participated in the Wonderful Usra group

This section of the guide describes the Wonderful Usra group model developed in the Usra – Family in Finland project, which consists of five sessions of the parenting and children's groups.

The word usra means family in Arabic. The group name represents a positive way of functioning as a family and the idea of positive parenting, which the project has tried to increase among families with a refugee background.

This five-session model is designed for more long-term work, and its goal is to bring about positive effects in the life of the child and the parent in a more goal-oriented way than individual meetings would. The model can also be adjusted. You can pick individual sessions from the material or choose sections that can be used in, for example, open group activities. Either the children's or the parents' group can also be implemented as such without the other group. However, the Wonderful Usra group model works best when used as a whole.

The themes selected for the model do not include everything that positive parenting consists of. It also does not include all the topics that the parents have brought up during the project. However, in the development of the model, an effort has been made to take into account the themes through which positive parenting can be promoted that emerged from the families participating in the Usra project. The children who participated in the activities have also been able to influence the development of the children's group activity model. They have been actively asked for ideas and feedback, and the children's group model has been developed on that basis.

### GOAL OF THE GROUP

The goal of the **parents' group** is to increase the knowledge related to positive parenting, thereby strengthening the well-being of the whole family and the children's right to a good and safe life. The goal is also to strengthen the parents' emotional skills as well as their sense of capability and seeing the good in the child and in themselves as parents. The topics are handled sensitively, taking into account the families' life situations and experiences. The parenting group is aimed at all parents who are interested in parenting topics.

Parent-to-parent peer support is seen as important in this model of parenting support. Peer support can strengthen a parent's experience that they are not alone with the things they are thinking about or their experiences. Sometimes it can be easier to approach a low-threshold actor through which you can obtain support in the form of peer support. Joint activities and doing things together often promote the emergence of trust, and they are important forms of support when integrating into a new society. Participating in activities increases the feeling of belonging to a group, community and society. The positive experiences that come about through peer activities can also increase trust towards other people and the service system.<sup>54</sup>

The goal of the **children's group** is to offer children activities that promote well-being, where children have the opportunity to learn about their own strengths, the rights of the child as well as emotions and well-being. The children get to express themselves and their thoughts and, at the same time, the children's experience of inclusion is increased and they learn the Finnish language and skills for working in a group.

Similar themes are discussed in the children's groups as in the parents' group, but with a greater emphasis on action-based and creative methods whereby the topics are dealt with in ways characteristic of children, such as through play, movement and art. The content of the children's group sessions is designed for children between 5 and 10 years old.

## FEEDBACK FROM THE PILOT GROUPS

“ (I have learned) how to give more space for children to express their opinions and share their feelings. My patience has also increased.”

- A parent who participated in the Wonderful Usra group

Save the Children piloted the Wonderful Usra group activity model in two different groups during 2023. A total of ten Arabic-speaking parents and twenty children aged 3 to 11 participated in the groups.

Before the start of the group activities, an initial survey was conducted by phone for each parent registered in the group. The following questions were asked in the initial survey: Have you participated in a parenting group before? How did you find this group? Why do you want to participate in the group? Do you know what you are good at as a parent? Do you know what your child is good at and what kind of good character traits they have? Have you heard of positive upbringing?

Almost all of the respondents felt that they knew what they were good at as a parent and what their children were good at. A few of the participants also estimated that they know what positive upbringing is. Most of the families joined the activities through the regular low-threshold group activities of the Usra project. A few parents had found their way into the activities through advertisements they had seen in other channels.

Correspondingly, after the five group sessions, the parents who participated were given a final survey by phone. The following questions were asked in the final survey: Have you learned something new? Have you learned new ways of working with children? How has participating in the group benefitted you? What has your child said about the group? Is there anything else you want to share or give feedback on?

The feedback given by the parents emphasised the group's impact in terms of peer support, paying more attention to the child's needs and an increased understanding of their own and the children's reactions in different situations. All the parents who participated in the group felt that they had benefitted from participating.

“ I got confirmation that the way I act with children is right and good, and I noticed it better now. I also learned that emotions and mood can manifest as physical symptoms.”

- A parent who participated in the Wonderful Usra group

“ It was great to see how well the children learned and absorbed things, e.g. when the employee talked to them about children's rights. You could see the children developing and when we went home, the children eagerly told their father what they had done and what information they had gained.”

- A parent who participated in the Wonderful Usra group

“ I now encourage the children to play. The children were baffled by this at first.”

- A parent who participated in the Wonderful Usra group

## FEEDBACK FROM THE CHILDREN AND THE PROJECT EMPLOYEES' OBSERVATIONS

The children who participated in the groups were happy to take part in the sessions and were generally enthusiastically involved in the activities. Action-based and creative activities using examples and picture support work particularly well with children. Some of the children also benefitted from interpretation and the repetitive structure of the group sessions.

The large age range of the children was challenging sometimes. In the case of the younger children, it was considered particularly important to take into account sufficient adult support and age-appropriate activities as well as to partially separate the activities according to the children's needs.

It was seen as important for the children that the instructors have the ability to warmly interact with the children as well as create a positive and accepting atmosphere in the group. Listening to the children's thoughts and giving them positive feedback was perceived as important and rewarding.

The children felt it was important that there was a wide range of activities in the group. The children gave feedback and expressed their wishes for the group's activities. These were considered in the development of the group model. The joint games and crafts were well liked and many felt that they had learned new things in the group. In the sessions, the children learned about, for example, their own strengths, the rights of the child, emotions and things that make you feel good. It can also be considered an important observation that the children's group was perceived as a meaningful place because you could meet new friends there.

“ Today, we learned about the rights of the child and what a child needs. I've heard about these things at school and a little at home too. I also learn Finnish here. Planting a flower was a new thing. It was nice to think about dreams. Emotions were nice. I liked it. I learned how to play ball and do tricks. I liked eating pizza.”

- Thoughts of children who participated in the Wonderful Usra group

“ I have made a lot of friends here. Apart from school, this is the only place I can come to play with my friends.”

- A child who participated in the Wonderful Usra group and has lived in Finland for 8 months

As the sessions progressed, most of the children expressed their thoughts and feelings surprisingly openly. This could have been influenced, in part, by the fact that the instructors already knew some of the children from the other activities of the Usra project. It was also more natural for the children to express themselves, verbally and in other ways, between activities and play. In addition, it was observed in the groups that the children brought up the importance of their own family and doing things together in many ways.

“*I'm happy when I play. I'm happy with my family. I'm afraid of flying and monsters. I don't like that dad won't give me a new ball. I was sad when we couldn't celebrate Eid together with our relatives because they are not here.*”

- Thoughts of children who participated in the Wonderful Usra group

During the group sessions, it was found that it is good to allow enough time for the children's trust in the other children and adults in the group to grow stronger. This also makes it easier for them to express themselves.

“*The children were enthusiastically involved in all the activities this time. It was particularly nice to note how everyone wanted to name, draw or show at least a few things that they feel they are good at. Many of the children shared their thoughts with the instructors and the other children more openly during this session.*”

- Observations from an instructor of the Wonderful Usra group regarding a session

The children wished for more frequent sessions and for them not to come to an end. Mood meters were heavily used as the children showed the various emotions they felt about the group ending.

“*When will this be held again? Could this take place already next week or maybe tomorrow evening? It's much more fun here than in daycare. I'll be sad when this ends. It would be nice if this group would continue. Can we keep on going?*”

- Thoughts of children who participated in the Wonderful Usra group

The children's thoughts confirm that, after group sessions, it would be good to try to ensure that the connection between the children and the families is not lost immediately after the group ends. After the group, some other activities in which the families can participate should be offered. In the case of the Usra project, some of the children and families participated in the family nights, family club, youth group

meetings and events offered by the project. Reunions of the children's and parents' groups were also organised for the families to meet with each other.

## PREPARATIONS FOR THE GROUPS

The desired group size should be defined before reaching out to families. If a children's group is to be organised alongside a parenting group, the parents' group should be kept fairly small. This prevents the children's group from growing too large. In the Usra project, fewer than ten children were considered as a good number of participants for the children's group. In a smaller group, it is easier to meet the individual needs of the children and ensure that each child is seen and heard.

Once the families have been reached, the parents should be contacted before the start of the group to explain the implementation and themes of the groups. At this point, the parents can also tell the employee about their child and the child's possible support needs. Before the group, the instructors can send the children a video greeting or a letter, telling them about the children's group and welcoming the child and the parent to the group.

When planning a group, it is good to pay attention to the facilities. The facilities reserved for the parents' and children's groups should be separate but close to each other. The parenting group should be held in a quiet place where the parents can talk without fear that someone outside the group will hear the conversations. Accessibility and child-friendliness, among other things, should be considered with regard to the facilities. The space should be one that is suitable or can be adapted for use by children. In the Usra project, the children's groups were implemented in indoor facilities where the children could play, move and do art. If desired, the group can also be held outside. In that case, it is necessary to take into account matters related to safety.

In order to enable the participation of both parents and children, if necessary, children under 5 years of age should also be allowed to join, especially if it is difficult for the family to take part without a small child coming along. You can make an effort to organise, for example, separate childcare for younger children. The content of the children's group sessions can also be modified to be age-appropriate for younger children, and the activities can be carried out in small groups. With small children, it is good to allow enough time for free play as well. With infants, on the other hand, it is better for them to be with their own parent in the parents' group.

## GROUP INSTRUCTORS AND THEIR DUTIES

There should be two project employees leading the parenting group. In the Usra project, the model was implemented for one language group, which allowed the parents' group to be led by a planner and an hourly employee with Arabic language skills working in the project. However, this is not always possible, in which case the alternative is to conduct the group in easy language and with the help of interpretation. You should then reserve a little more time for the sessions or shorten the programme.

The children's group should have two to three employees, taking into account the size and age distribution of the group as well as the children's individual needs. As a general guideline, the more small children or children in need of support there are in the group, the more adults are needed.

The group instructors have many different duties. In addition to tasks related to leading the group, the duties include advertising the group, receiving registrations and collecting feedback. In the Usra project, each parent was given an initial survey before participation in the group. After the end of the group, a personal final survey was conducted to collect feedback and information about participation in the group and its effects on parenting.

Since the parents' group was not large, it was possi-

ble to contact each parent by phone after registration and in connection with the surveys. Therefore, the ability to read and write was not important in terms of access to information.

The instructors should agree on the division of labour and make good preparations for the sessions. It is the instructors' job to ensure that the sessions keep to the schedule and that each participant is able to participate in the group in a way that is comfortable for them. Sometimes an instructor is also needed to get the discussions and activities back on track. Leading and participating in the group goes smoother with rules agreed on in the group. Each group creates rules that suit the group and its activities. However, when agreeing on the rules together with the group, it is always good to highlight the importance of mutual trust and a safe atmosphere.

After the sessions, the instructors should unpack the group session together. When doing so, it is important to bring up not only the successes, but also any issues that you are still thinking about. For example, if an instructor has concerns about a parent or a child, it is good to deal with this together. There may sometimes be situations where you need to refer a parent or a child to the further support they need. It is also good to have enough time after the group for exchanging thoughts and experiences without any rush so that you avoid taking these home with you.

### Background information on the themes for the instructor

The programme of the parenting group contains information related to the themes for the instructor. The compiled information can be found on the start pages for the sessions (sessions 2–5). It serves as good background information that can be used, for example, when introducing the topics.

### Videos about positive parenting

The Usra project has produced a video series about positive parenting in Arabic and Finnish. The videos feature professionals, children and parents. The videos go over the same themes as the sessions. The videos serve as good introductions and conversation starters. The videos may be used and shared freely with families.



## PARENTING GROUP SESSIONS

The parenting group comprises five sessions with a duration of approximately 2.5 hours. The sessions have been held every other week, but they can also be held weekly. The duration and implementation of the sessions can be modified to suit the needs of the group.

The sessions consist of positive parenting themes, guided discussion, small group work, action-based exercises and a joint ending with the children.

### Themes of the parenting group sessions:

1. Getting to know each other p. 32
2. Me and my family p. 33
3. What does a child need? p. 36
4. The many emotions of parenthood p. 40
5. Well-being of the parent and the family p. 44



### Symbols of the parenting group sessions:

In the descriptions of the sessions, the following symbols are used to describe the content of the group activities.



#### Welcome to the group!

This section includes a snack and free play for the children.



#### Opening

The opening part includes introductions, how everybody is doing, group rules, possible getting-to-know-you and team building exercises, introducing the day's theme and going over any homework given previously.



#### Video

The videos produced in the Usra project follow the themes of the group. They serve as introductions to the day's themes.



#### Discussion and action-based part

This section includes a discussion based on the theme and an action-based part with the parents under the guidance of the instructor. The section's background information can be used as an introduction to and support for the discussion.



#### Homework

At the end of sessions 1-4, the parents are given a small homework assignment.



#### Feedback time

Collecting the parents' feedback and feelings about the group session. A mood meter can be used for this purpose. What stuck in their mind about the session?



#### Together time of the children and parents

During the together time of the children and the parents, the parents are informed about what the children have been doing in the group. Either a joint game played previously in the children's group or some other game suitable for the situation is then played together. Finally, the session is concluded with a jointly selected ending. When leaving, the participants can use a mood meter to show how they felt about the group session.



#### What you need to bring

A list of things that you as an instructor need to implement the session.



## Session 1: Getting to know each other

The goal of this session is to explain the group as well as for the group to get to know each other, do things together and get to know the facilities. Exceptionally, the children and parents are mostly together in the first session.



### Welcome to the group!

Includes a joint snack for the children and parents and free play for the children each time.



### Opening

**Joint opening:** A joint getting-to-know-you game for the children and parents. Mood meters are then made for the children and parents to use. An example of a getting-to-know-you game and instructions for making a mood meter can be found in the children's group material. After making the mood meters, the parents move to another space and the children continue with their own activities.

**Opening for the parents:** Explaining who the group is aimed at and what the purpose of the group is. Discussing the meaning of positive parenting, how it is understood and how it manifests. Discussing the importance of the relationship between a child and a parent and how to strengthen it. Presenting the themes and schedule of all the group sessions and creating the rules for the group together. Agreeing on a shared communication channel. Going over the themes of the children's group.



### Video

Watching video 1: Videosarja vanhemille ('A video series for parents').



### Discussion and action-based part

1. What do you see as good in your own parenting? An opportunity is given to share your thoughts with the group.
2. Statements about parenting. Statements are chosen and each parent picks whether to answer yes or no. This can also be done by using yes/no or red/green cards or by moving around in the space. The group pauses for a moment to discuss each statement.

Example statements:

- A good parent is always happy in front of their child.
- Showing too much love and praise is not good for the child.
- The child must be allowed to make decisions on their own affairs.
- I am a perfect parent.
- Being a parent is easy.



### Homework

Bring a picture or an object that is important to your family with you to the next session. The instructors can also bring a picture or an object with them.



### Feedback time

See the explanation of symbols.



### Together time of the children and parents

See the explanation of symbols.



### What you need to bring:

- Printed themes and schedule of the group sessions • Rules • Filming and photo permit for photographing the children • Video • Laminated mood meters and supplies
- Statements





## Session 2: Me and my family

The goal of this session is to explain positive parenting. The participants learn to recognise what they are like as a parent as well as to name and verbalise their own, the child's and the family's strengths.

### Ground information for the instructor

#### Seeing the good

The foundation of a child's self-esteem is loving and close relationships with safe adults. A child needs plenty of positive encouragement and praise from their parents. Recognising and paying attention to the child's successes supports the child's positive self-image and self-esteem. Good self-esteem increases the child's resilience, making it easier for the child to overcome adversity. It also supports the child's independence and ability to cope with assigned tasks on their own. Self-esteem helps you respect yourself and others as well as build good and lasting relationships.<sup>55</sup>

The goal of seeing the good is a cycle of positive things in the family. This means trying to see and increase those things and situations that work well. It is good for parents to learn to recognise their own strengths and successes as a parent. Seeing the good has a positive effect on a parent's self-esteem and sense of capability as a parent.

Those who work with families have an important task of encouraging parents to recognise their own and their child's strengths as well as things that work well in the family's everyday life. Instead of problem-centred thinking, the approach should be solution-oriented and focused on seeing the good.

#### Towards positive interaction

The interaction between parent and child can at times stray into a negative cycle where more attention is paid to situations that are not going well. This can have a negative effect on the interaction between the child and parent. The parent's own exhaustion, traumatic experiences and feelings of hopelessness can sometimes be behind this as well.

Not all parents have first-hand experiences of receiving positive feedback or attention, which can also have an effect on the way they act. However, the parent's task is to be an adult who takes responsibility for their own way of being and acting with the child. More often than not, a more positive attitude towards the child will start to show as positive changes in the child's behaviour as well.<sup>56</sup>

The development of positive interaction requires that the parent and child have discussions and spend time together. Seeing the good, giving and receiving positive feedback, giving individual attention and more shared moments have a positive effect on the whole family's interaction.<sup>57</sup>





## Welcome to the group!



## Opening

Going over the homework assignment: "Talk about the picture or object you brought. Why is it important to your family?"



## Video

Watching video 2: Minä ja perheeni ('Me and my family')



## Discussion and action-based part

### Positive parenting

Discussing positive parenting: What things come to mind when you think of positive parenting and what it is?

Examples of positive parenting to support the discussion:

- Showing love
- Seeing the good in the child, the family and yourself
- The many emotions of parenthood as well as the emotional skills of children and parents
- Good enough parenting
- Positive methods for upbringing and strengthening the relationship between child and parent
- Impact of positive parenting on the child's development, growth and future

Pictures suitable for the themes are then displayed to spark thoughts around the topic, and positive parenting is discussed with the help of the pictures. For the session, you can freely choose pictures that portray, for example, warmth and love, doing things together, encouragement, emotions, boundaries, listening and being present

### Exercise: Me as a parent

Questions:

- Which parent or what kind of parent do you admire? Why? Discuss in pairs.
- What good do you see in yourself as a parent? Close your eyes and think about it for a moment.
- How do you want your child to remember you when they are an adult? Think about it for a moment and then unpack it all with the group.

### Seeing the good in the family

Discussing why the topic is important and what it means. The parents can give examples of what seeing the good means to them.

Examples to support the discussion:

- Seeing the good, giving praise and respect in the family
- Positive communication between family members
- Putting things that are going well into words and saying them out loud to the children and your partner
- Seeing the good and giving positive attention in different situations instead of bad things and negative attention
- Impact of fatigue, stress and a difficult life situation on it being harder to notice good things
- A decrease in negative behaviour as more positive attention is given



## Seeing the good in your child

Introducing the topic: In terms of a child's development, it is important that the parents see the good in the child and recognise the child's strengths. Such strengths may be, for example, things that the child knows and is good at as well as the character traits that are needed for these things. Seeing the good in the child also means being proud of the child as who they are and not only through their skills and successful performance. A child is good just the way they are and every parent can be proud of their child. A parent seeing and paying attention to the good in their child increases the child's self-esteem and self-knowledge.

Exercise: The parents make a 'flower of strengths' for their child or children. The parent can choose to make a flower for one child or to include the strengths of several children on the flower petals. The flowers can be prepared for the parents in advance or they can draw and cut the flowers themselves. The child's strengths are written or drawn on the flower petals: What is your child good at? What good character traits does your child have? Discuss children's strengths while making the flowers.



### Homework

Joint dreaming time for the parent and child. What do you dream about? What fantasy creature would you like to be? What superpowers would you have?



### Feedback time



### Together time of the children and parents

In addition to the recurring programme, the parents give the flowers of strengths they made to their children.



### What you need to bring:

Pictures of positive parenting • Video • Question cards • Flower templates  
• Coloured pencils • Homework assignment • Mood meters



## Session 3: Needs and rights of the child

The goal of this session is to discuss children's rights and the role of parents in relation to the rights of the child. Discussing the importance of listening to children's opinions and listening to the child in matters concerning the family and their own life. Also discussing what a child needs from their parent.

### Background information for the instructor

#### A child's needs

A child has many different needs. It is important for the parent to learn to recognise them and meet the needs that are important and necessary for the child's development. The rights of the child are also in part related to the various needs of a child, the meeting of which secures a good life for the child. A child needs, for example, care, love, security and boundaries from their parent. Being seen and heard are also basic needs of a child, and taking these into account is one important task in being a parent.

#### Security and love

A child should be mentally and physically safe and feel that they are loved. A child should also be able to grow up in an environment and atmosphere where the child does not have to be afraid. For a child, it is important that they can be themselves with the parent as well as express their feelings and thoughts without fear.<sup>58</sup>

A child needs love and the experience of being loved and cared for from their parent. A child should receive clearly more attention based on love from their parent than negative attention.

The warmth and love shown by a parent increases a child's self-esteem, self-respect, sociability, emotional regulation and ability to take others into consideration.<sup>59</sup> Love and showing love increases the parent's sense of connection with the child, which strengthens the secure attachment between the child and parent. The sense of connection is also supported by the parent being present and able to create experiences of security and being seen for the child. In adversity, the parent's job is to be the person the child can rely on and a source of security and comfort for the child.<sup>60</sup>

#### Positive parenting and boundaries

Positive parenting does not mean an absence of boundaries or that the child decides everything. Giving responsibility too early can cause fear and stress for the child and lead to inability to cope with everyday tasks. A child may put themselves in danger mentally or physically if an adult does not set sufficient boundaries for them. The boundaries should be concrete, understandable, consistent and age-appropriate for the child. A child needs boundaries set by an adult which give the child the feeling that they are safe and cared for.<sup>61</sup>

The child learns the skills needed in life together with the parent. It is important for the child to also learn to use the knowledge and skills learned together and not act only out of fear of punishment or the hope of reward, for example. Setting appropriate boundaries and sticking to them with consistency gives the child security and confidence.<sup>62</sup>

From the child's perspective, it is important that the child is listened to and respected and that they are included in establishing routines or resolving conflict situations. However, it is the adult's job to make the final decision and take responsibility. It is essential for the adult to be able to justify to the child why a boundary set for the child exists.<sup>63</sup>



### About the challenges of setting boundaries

In a difficult life situation, setting boundaries can be challenging. When under stress, some parents may tighten the boundaries or find it difficult to tolerate deviations from them. Other parents, in turn, may not have the resources to set adequate boundaries for the child or to stick to them consistently.

The reason behind strict or excessive boundaries can sometimes be the parent's concern for the child's safety. A child's sense of security does not usually increase with constant prohibitions, but rather the world can seem scary and threatening. Excessive demands and punishments set by a parent may lead to the child growing distant from their parent.<sup>64</sup>

Parents often ask professionals for support in setting boundaries. It is possible to give general guidelines, but it is good to remember that the boundaries can be different for each family and child and that they can be influenced by, for example, the child's age and the family's life situation, values and customs.<sup>65</sup>



Image: iStock.com / F. Camera



## Welcome to the group!



## Opening



## Video

Watching video 3: Mitä lapsi tarvitsee? ('What does a child need?')



## Discussion and action-based part

Introduction to the topic:

- A parent has many different duties and roles. A parent also has various rights and needs. A child has different rights and needs at different ages. The parent has an important task of learning to recognise the child's needs, thereby also learning to understand why the child behaves the way they do.
- A child needs love, security, boundaries, positive attention and time spent together from their parent, among other things.
- Children have various rights. Children's human rights are protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. 196 countries have signed the convention. The convention has been in force in Finland since 1991.

Parents have given feedback that, in Finland, there is a lot of talk about the rights of the child, but less so about the parent's rights. For this reason, the exercise relates to the rights of parents, even though the focus of the session is on children's rights.

Exercise: Writing down on paper a top 5 of parents' rights: The participants are divided into smaller groups and given some time to come up with five rights of a parent. The results are then put on display and the groups can present them to each other.

### What does a child need from their parent?

Among other things, a child needs love, security and boundaries from their parent. Introducing these three topics:

- **Love:** The importance of attention and love for a child's development is great. There are many ways to show love. Showing positive attention and love should be seen more than showing negative attention.
- **Security:** A child must feel safe. The parent is responsible for this. A child has the right to a safe home and safe parents.
- **Boundaries:** Setting boundaries is also love. Rules and boundaries agreed together support the child's development and help the child understand cause-and-effect relationships.



### Group exercise

#### Group 1: Love

- How did your parents show you care and love during your childhood? What words, actions or gestures did they use?
- How do you show your child care and love? What words, actions or gestures do you use?

#### Group 2: Security

- What constitutes a safe childhood?
- What should children be protected from?
- How does the need for protection change as the child grows up?

#### Group 3: Boundaries

- What does the child get to decide and what does the parent get to decide?
- What kind of boundaries and rules do you set for your own children?
- What kind of consequences do you impose on your own children?

Unpacking the exercise together: What things came up in each group?



### Homework

Joint discussion at home about the rights of the child and human rights.  
Discuss together why the rights of the child and human rights are important.



### Feedback time



### Together time of the children and parents



### What you need to bring:

Rules • Video • Question cards • Paper • Pens • Mood meters



## Session 4: The many emotions of parenthood

The goal of this session is to recognise and verbalise your own and the child's emotions. The goal is also the acceptance of a wide range of emotions in your own and the child's behaviour. Going over a parent's emotional states and emotional regulation as well as a parent's behaviour and solutions in challenging parenting situations.

### Background information for the instructor

#### Many kinds of emotions

In being a parent, you come across many kinds of emotions. Parents usually feel an abundance of joy, love and gratitude towards their children, but parenthood also involves emotions that can be difficult to process. Irritation, anger, insecurity, loneliness, anger, frustration and disappointment are all familiar feelings for many parents. Such feelings are also part of being a parent and are completely allowed and normal.<sup>66</sup>

All parents face situations where their child behaves in an unpleasant manner. What matters is how the parent views and reacts to their own and the child's emotions in the challenging situations. There can be a variety of reasons behind the emotions. The child's behaviour may lead to the parent feeling irritated. In many situations, however, there is a reason behind the child's behaviour. On the other hand, the parent's irritation in these situations may be increased by some other underlying issue, such as being busy, various worries or a stressful life situation. Parents may also experience insecurity and uncertainty in a difficult life situation. There may be sleep problems, illness and constant changes in the family. All of these cause stress and can also affect emotions and emotional regulation, for example, in challenging situations with the child.

Many parents feel inadequate. This can be due to, for example, self-demandingness, pressure from others or the fact that the parents have never been allowed to feel that they are enough. Feelings of inadequacy are often passed down from one generation to the next. In some situations, it would be good to try to break this generational chain for the well-being of the parent and the child.<sup>67</sup> For example, by making it possible for a parent to talk about their own childhood, you can bring harmful intergenerational themes to light and think about how to thwart them.

#### Supporting emotional skills

One key to supporting a child's emotional skills is strengthening the parent's emotional skills. Recognising, working through and accepting all kinds of emotions is important. For example, when a parent is able to calm themselves down, they are then also better able to convey security to the child. On the other hand, if the adult is stressed, this is easily reflected in the child. By their own actions and example, the parent can prevent challenging situations from escalating and support the child in calming down.<sup>68</sup>

If the parent has challenges with their own emotional skills, confronting the child's emotions can be challenging as well. In this case, it can be difficult to tolerate the child's tantrums, crying and disappointment. In these situations, the parent may try to interrupt or quickly pass over the child's emotion. It is good to point out to parents that they should trust that the child's emotions, even those perceived as challenging, will pass in time when the child is offered support and security in the situation. It is important for the child to receive approval and support for all their emotions from the parent. The parent's task is to stop to consider what the child is communicating with their behaviour. What is behind, for example, their anger or irritation?<sup>69</sup>





### Making many kinds of emotions visible

Parents also have a need to be seen and heard as a parent with many kinds of emotions. It is important to identify what kind of support a parent might need in different situations to support their own emotional work. A professional's job is to create a safe and accepting atmosphere for the parent to have the courage to express their emotions more easily. Sharing emotions and talking with a reliable professional or other parents often helps the parent to understand their own feelings as well. It helps the parent to accept that parenthood involves many kinds of emotions that are important to learn to recognise, process and regulate.

## 4. The many emotions of parenthood



Image: iStock.com / Taitelijan Jäsenminki



### Welcome to the group!



### Opening



### Video

Watching video 4: Vanhemmuuden monenlaiset tunteet ('The many emotions of parenthood')



### Discussion and action-based part

Introduction to the topic: Parenthood involves many kinds of emotions and feeling all the emotions is allowed. What matters is how the parent views and reacts to their own and the child's emotions. The parent's own example has a great impact on the ways the child shows and processes different emotions.

- What different emotions are involved in being a parent? Naming emotions verbally and with the help of pictures. The instructors supplement the different emotions, if needed.
- Line of emotions: Emotion pictures are placed in a line on the floor. The parents are asked to recall a moment with their child from the previous few days. It can be a nice or a challenging moment. Each parent goes to the picture that they think best represents the emotion they experienced in that moment. The exercise can also be done sitting down and talking.



#### Things that affect emotional states

- Question: What things can affect your emotional states? Talk about the topic for a while in pairs or in a small group, and then unpack the exercise together. Examples of things that affect emotions: tiredness, hunger, worry, pain, stress, trauma.

#### Challenging situations with a child and resolving them through more positive options

Introduction to the topic: There are many challenging situations with a child where the child may, for example, throw a tantrum. In challenging situations, all parents also experience emotions that are difficult to process. In these situations, the parent's reactions and solutions are not always the best for the child. It is important that the parent also learns to recognise and regulate their own emotions in challenging situations.



#### Questions:

- What examples of challenging situations where their own emotions and patience are also tested can the parents think of?
- What can you do in challenging situations with the child?
- Watching the video published by the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters: *Punishment is not part of a safe childhood*

English: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7P6ZNNVgrU>

Arabic: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhK3\\_ZYbgsY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhK3_ZYbgsY)

#### Game time

Play an emotion game. The emotion game can be printed out for the families to take home. Various emotion games with pictures are available, for example, on the Vii-toitettu Rakkaus website.<sup>70</sup>



#### Homework

Joint game time for parent and child at home (e.g. cards, dice, memory games, board games). The parents and children can also make their own cards or board game at home.



#### Feedback time



#### Together time of the children and parents



#### What you need to bring:

Video • Emotion pictures • Question cards • Video by the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters • Emotional skills game



## Session 5: Well-being of the parent and the child

Discussing the importance of taking care of your own well-being, the impact of the parent's well-being on the child's well-being, things that promote and reduce your own and the family's well-being as well as the impact of stress on well-being. Considering what parents need to feel well.

### Background information for the instructor

Well-being can be discussed with families, for example, from the perspective of how well-being and taking care of it are reflected in the everyday lives of parents and children. Well-being should then be explained through the importance of various factors, such as daily routine, rest, nutrition, hobbies, relationships and emotions.

Stress makes parenting a challenge. Immigration and parenthood in a new country are always straining and stressful experiences. In a stressful life situation, parents do not always have sufficient resources to take care of their own or the child's well-being. In terms of the child's well-being, however, it would be particularly important that the parent can take care of not only the child's well-being but also their own coping. Self-care skills are important in order to cope better as a parent to your child as well.<sup>71</sup> Deficiencies in a parent's well-being can be seen very quickly as increased ill-being of the children and the family as well.

There is variation in the resources available to people and moving to a new country can be experienced in different ways. Immigration can also bring many things that support well-being into the lives of families, such as better opportunities for the children to go to school and a safer living environment. Family and community support is perceived as a factor that increases well-being even in a challenging life situation. Mental health is seen as a key part of overall health and well-being. Lifestyle is also considered to be important for well-being.

Significant stress factors experienced by families who have moved to a new country include discrimination, racism, loneliness and a lack of social networks. Those who have arrived as refugees may have experienced shocking and even traumatising things. Well-being can be reduced by being apart from family members and, for example, difficulties in achieving family reunification. The unfamiliarity of the service system and difficulties in obtaining services when they are needed are often considered stress factors as well. In addition, other stress factors may include, among others:

- difficulties in finding work or learning the language;
- differing timelines for the integration of children and parents;
- changes in family dynamics;
- possible differences in childcare and family life;
- uncertainty about the future; and
- concern for the relatives left behind and the situation in one's country of origin.<sup>72</sup>

Poor support networks can lead to parents becoming exhausted. Life between two cultures can also be confusing and overwhelming. Parents may be left alone too much regarding their questions and challenges related to upbringing. Numerous immigration-related issues that increase uncertainty can add to the exhaustion. Sometimes the ill-being of the whole family can also be increased by harmful parenting methods passed down from one generation to the next, which can, for example, rely too much on criticising the child, discipline and punishment. In this case, it is especially important for professionals to identify and address the parenting practices that are harmful to a child's well-being and for the parents to receive information and support on positive parenting methods.



## Welcome to the group!



## Opening



## Video

Watching video 5: Vanhemman ja perheen hyvinvointi ('Well-being of the parent and the family')



## Discussion and action-based part

Introduction to the topic: It is good to take care of your own well-being and coping. The well-being of the parent has an impact on the well-being of the child as well. Many things influence well-being. The Hand of Mental Health poster is handed out to the parents<sup>73</sup> and you go over it in broad outline. If one of the parts of the hand is unbalanced or deficient, this usually has a reducing effect on your well-being.

Consider the following statements in terms of yourself during the week: (finger up/down)

- Thumb: I have gotten enough sleep
- Index finger: I have eaten healthy snacks
- Middle finger: I have been able to share my feelings and thoughts with my loved ones
- Ring finger: I have moved in a way that makes me feel good
- Little finger: I have experienced excitement and joy in my free time

## Things that promote and reduce your own and the family's well-being

Questions:

- What brings you or your family joy and resources?
- What things reduce your own or your family's well-being?

## Stress

Introduction to the topic: All people experience stress in some situations or stages of life. There can be many reasons behind it, such as being busy, tiredness, illness, news, money worries or an otherwise challenging life situation. There are also many situations with a child that cause stress for the parent. Stress impacts your well-being, coping and parenting.

Question: What daily things or situations with children cause you stress?

## Making a briefcase of well-being

The parents are given briefcase templates made of paper. Briefcases of well-being are made as a group effort. In small groups, the parents can write or draw on the briefcase things they feel they need to cope well. You can also use pictures in the exercise. The parents then present the finished briefcases of well-being.



## Feedback time



## Together time of the children and parents

In addition to the recurring ending, closing words, certificates, acknowledgements and small gifts for the parents and children



## What you need to bring:

Video • Question cards • Hand of Mental Health hand-outs • Statements • Briefcase of well-being templates • Coloured pencils • Certificates • Small gifts for the parents and children

## CHILDREN'S GROUP SESSIONS

The children's group model includes five sessions which should be held every other week or once a week. The duration of the sessions has been 2.5 hours in the Wonderful Usra activities. You can also define the duration to suit your group. The children's group meets at the same time as the parents' group.

In the children's group session, it is good to repeat basically the same structure each time. Many children benefit from repetition and going over the content of the sessions in chronological order with the help of pictures.

### Themes of the children's group sessions

1. Getting to know each other p. 47
2. Seeing the good & recognising my strengths p. 49
3. The rights of the child p. 50
4. Many kinds of emotions p. 52
5. Well-being p.53



## Symbols of the children's group sessions

In the descriptions of the sessions, the following symbols are used to describe the content of the group activities:



### Welcome to the group!

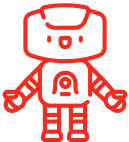
This section includes a snack and free play. If the parenting group is at the same time, the parents also participate in this part.



### Opening circle

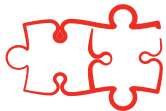
The children's opening circle starts with a greeting from the group mascot. In the circle, through play, you see who is present, explain with pictures what you will be doing today and go over the rules of the group. At the end of the circle, you can have a circle of encouragement or some other starting game.

*Circle of encouragement: You form a circle and each child goes around the outside of the circle in their turn. They are free to choose how they move. The other children encourage the child going around the circle by clapping or in another agreed way. Participation is voluntary and this can also be done with a friend or an instructor.*



### Play time

Includes various games related to the day's theme. These are explained in the description of each session. The children's understanding of the session's theme and even difficult topics is increased through play.



### Crafts

Includes various crafts related to the day's theme. These are explained in more detail in the description of the session.



### Treat and feedback time

Treat time can take place, for example, on a picnic blanket. The children are asked for feedback at the same time. In addition to talking, you can use pictures and action-based method to collect feedback, if necessary. What was fun today? What was not fun? What stuck in your mind about this session? Would you like to come again? At the same time, the instructor gives positive feedback to the children.



### Together time of the children and parents

During the together time of the children and the parents, the parents are informed about what the children have been doing in the group. Either a joint game played previously in the children's group or some other game suitable for the situation is then played together. Finally, the session is concluded with a jointly selected ending. When leaving, the participants can use a mood meter to show how they felt about the group session.



### What you need to bring

A list of things that you as an instructor need to implement the session.



## Session 1: Getting to know each other

This session involves getting to know the children, the parents and the facilities through getting-to-know-you games and activities. You listen to the children's wishes and create the rules.



### Welcome to the group!

In addition to eating and play, the first session involves getting to know the space.



### Opening circle

In the first session, the opening circle is carried out with the parents and the children together. The instructors introduce themselves and the group mascot, who will also be participating in all of the children's group sessions going forward. The mascot is passed around the circle from one player to the next. The person holding the mascot in their hand says their own name. The parents and children can say their own name and who is in their family. You come up with a name for the group mascot. Music can be added to the game. The instructors talk about the group and the day's programme.



"Hi!

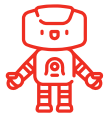
*I'm Sim-Sim and this is my child Si-Si! We are the mascots of the wonderful Usra group. The kids really like us. We are involved in everything the kids do and Si-Si and I have found that it's easy for the kids to tell us what they think. Some children may be a bit nervous in the new group and that's when we next to them with our long legs!"*



### Crafts

**Mood meters:** The parents and the children make mood meters together. Thread and a bead are added to the already laminated mood meter template. An explanation of what a mood meter is and its use is given, and it is then practised. The parents move to another space and the children continue with crafts.

**Decorating a crown or a badge** and writing your name on the crown or badge.



### Play time

**Getting-to-know-you game:** In a circle, you take turns to roll a ball to a friend. The objective is to say your name and your favourite game or activity. During the second round, the objective is to try to remember the friend's name.

**Statue game:** You move to music in different ways, for example, as animals. Pictures of animals can be used to augment speech. When the music stops, you freeze like a statue. When the music plays, the game continues. No child is eliminated in this game.

**Creating rules for the group together:** What is a good group like? What is allowed in the group? What is not allowed in the group? Pictures are used, if necessary.

**Asking about the children's wishes:** What would you like to do or play? What do you not like to do or play? Children can draw or tell their wishes with the help of pictures.



### Treat and feedback time



### Together time of the children and parents

The parents are informed about what the children have been doing in the group, and a joint game played previously or some other game suitable for the situation is then played. This time, a way of ending is chosen for the group, which will also be used in the subsequent sessions. When leaving, the participants can use a mood meter to show how they felt about this group session. The children may take their mood meters home with them; the instructor's mood meter can be used in the group during the subsequent sessions.



### What you need to bring:

Food to be served • Group mascot • Pictures of the day's activities • Laminated mood meters, thread, beads, markers • Crown supplies: Cardboard crowns, stickers, decorations, coloured pencils, stapler • Badges, decorations, coloured pencils • Sitting pads • Ball • Paper and pen for the rules • Speaker and music for the statue game • Picnic blanket and treats • Supplies for collecting feedback • Mood meter





## Session 2: Seeing the good & recognising my strengths

The goal of this session is to strengthen the child's self-esteem and ability to identify their own interests, skills and strengths.

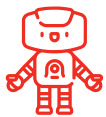


### Welcome to the group!



### Opening circle

### Play time



**Follow the Hero game:** One of the players is chosen as the hero. You can ask the child what kind of hero they want to play. The other children are to follow the hero and imitate all of their moves and antics. If they want, every player can take their turn to be the hero. The hero can, for example, clap their hands, go around obstacles, jump around, fly or do some funny hero trick.

**Game chosen by the children:** One of the games suggested by the children is chosen.

### Crafts



**Option 1:** Decorating a hero mask with decorations chosen by the child.

Questions for the child: What things, activities and games are you good at? The child or the instructor writes these things on the other side of the mask.

**Option 2:** Flower or star of strengths

You colour and decorate a flower or a star made of cardboard. The child is asked about what things, activities and games they feel they are good at. In the case of younger children, it can be easier to ask about the games and activities they like, for example. The child can write or draw these things on the petals of the flower or the points of the star. The instructor will help with the writing, if needed.



### Treat and feedback time



### Together time of the children and parents

In addition to the recurring activities, the parents give the flower or star of strengths they made in the group to their child.



### What you need to bring:

Food to be served • Sitting pads • Group mascot • Pictures of the day's activities • Rules • Masks, decoration supplies, coloured pencils, scissors • Flower and star cardboards, decorations, pictures • Coloured pencils • Pictures • Picnic blanket and treats • Supplies for collecting feedback • Mood meter



## Session 3: The rights of the child

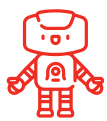
Learning to recognise your own needs and wishes as well as the rights of the child.  
Strengthening the children's experience of being seen and heard.



### Welcome to the group!



### Opening circle



### Play time

**I have the right to a home – Bird's nest game:** Place, for example, hula hoops on the floor to represent bird's nests. Music is played and you move around the space like birds. When the music stops, each child can fly into one nest. The number of hoops is reduced one by one. The game is continued until there are one or two hoops left, depending on how big the group is. A discussion is had with the children about how important it is that everyone has a safe home to live in.

### Briefcase of children's rights

- First, you have a talk about the rights of the child: Have you heard about the rights of the child? What are they? Briefly explaining what the rights of the child are and talking about what a child needs for a good life.
- Briefcase exercise: Look for hidden pictures or objects about the rights of the child in the space. For example, something that portrays food, clothing, school, play, a hospital, an adult, rest, safety or love.
- The pictures or objects found in the space are brought into the group mascot's bag. Think together which rights of the child they represent.
- Questions for the children: What other rights of the child do you know? Are the rights of the child realised for all children? If not, why?
- With younger children, the game can be adapted such that the children can play with the objects found. The adult's task is to listen and observe the game. The adult can also take part in the game, taking into account, however, that they do not lead the game in the direction they want. Taking age and language skills into account, the children can be asked questions in natural situations, allowing the children to verbalise the game.





## Crafts

### Option 1: Planting a flower

You decorate pots suitable for planting a flower. The child can add soil and flower seeds into the pot. The child can also water the flower.

Questions: What does a flower need to grow well? Illustrating children's needs by growing a flower – water, warmth, care. What else does a child need for a good life?



### Option 2: Jar of children's rights

You decorate jars. The child can draw or write on pieces of paper things that the child thinks they need for a good life. The pieces of paper are put in the jar. Pictures chosen by the child can also be added to the jar.



### Option 3: Jar of dreams

You decorate a jar. Questions for the children: What dreams or wishes do you have? What do you want to do when you grow up? The child can draw or write their own dreams and wishes and add them to the jar.



## Treat and feedback time



## Together time of the children and parents



## What you need to bring:

Sitting pads • Group mascot • Pictures of the day's activities • Rules \* Hola hoops • Music and speaker • Briefcase of children's rights or a bag with pictures and objects about the rights of the child • Glass jars or paper cups • Decorations for the jars • Soil, flower seeds and a watering can for flower planting • Small pieces of paper, coloured pencils and pictures for making the jars • Picnic blanket and treats • Supplies for collecting feedback • Mood meter



## Session 4: Many kinds of emotions

Harjoitellaan tunteiden tunnistamista, sanoittamista ja ilmaisia toiminnallisten ja luovien tekemisten avulla.



### Welcome to the group!



### Opening circle



### Play time

**Looking for emotion pictures:** Emotion pictures are hidden in the space. Look for the hidden emotion pictures and bring them to the centre of the opening circle. The emotions in the pictures are named and you have a talk about the kinds of situations in which someone can experience these emotions. If it is difficult for the child to name feelings verbally, they can also be expressed with facial expressions and body movements.

**Game of emotions:** Four to five emotion pictures are chosen and placed on the floor in different parts of the room. The children move around the room to music. When the music stops, the instructor calls out an emotion, such as joy, sadness, fear or anger. Separate pictures of these emotions can also be used to augment speech. The children's task is to run to the emotion picture in question and express the emotion with body language.

**Game of emotions with music and body language:** The children move to music in the space. The instructor chooses one emotion picture at a time and raises it. The children's task is to express this emotional state with their body and facial expressions; the emotion is then named. You can also choose the music so that it represents the emotions in question.



### Crafts

**Option 1:** You paint and decorate a stone. You can paint any emotion on the stone, using the colours you want. The child can present their own emotion tone and you then have a talk about emotions.

**Option 2:** The contours of the child's body are drawn on a large piece of paper. In which parts of the body do you feel different emotions? These emotions are coloured in the picture, using the chosen colours. Emotions can also be named in the artwork using various emotion pictures.



### Treat and feedback time



### Together time of the children and parents



### What you need to bring:

Sitting pads • Group mascot • Pictures of the day's activities • Rules • Emotion pictures, adhesive putty • Stones, painting supplies and decorations • Large paper for drawing the body, tape, coloured pencils, emotion pictures, glue • Picnic blanket and treats • Supplies for collecting feedback \* Mood meter





## Session 5: Well-being

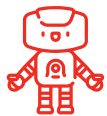
Identifying and naming things in the child's life that bring them joy and make them feel good. Games requested by the children and games they liked during previous sessions are chosen for this group session. Ending the group.



### Welcome to the group!



### Opening circle



### Play time

A game requested by the children or one of the games from previous sessions is chosen.

### The feel-good backpack

The children are presented with the feel-good backpack and told that there are things in the backpack that generally make children and adults feel good. The children can take pictures related to well-being from inside the backpack (e.g. sleep, food, exercise, play, love, family, friends). Alternatively, the children can look for hidden pictures about feeling good in the space, after which the pictures are brought into the backpack and named.

Questions: What other things for feeling good can you come up with for the backpack? What makes you feel good? What do you need to cope well? The things suggested by the child are written down or drawn and added to the backpack.



### Crafts

**The feel-good tree:** The outlines of the child's both hands are drawn on coloured paper. The hands are then cut out and glued on a large piece of paper with a tree trunk on it. The hands represent the branches of the tree. A picture of the mother's or father's hand can be added to the tree if the parents have made one in their own group. The child is asked to write or draw things and activities that make them feel good on the tree or on the other side of the paper.



### Treat and feedback time

In addition to the usual feedback time, the children's thoughts and development suggestions for the group are collected on this last session. The feedback can also be collected in an action-based way, such as by using statements or moving along a line.



### Together time of the children and parents

The feel-good trees are presented to the parents. A game requested by the children is then played. Ending the group: Acknowledgements, certificates and gifts for the children. Joint ending. When leaving, the participants are asked how they feel using a mood meter.



### What you need to bring:

- Snack supplies • Sitting pads • Group mascot • Pictures of the day's activities
- Rules • Feel-good backpack: a backpack, pictures about feeling good, paper and pens
- Feel-good tree: Large pieces of cardboard, tree trunks, coloured paper, scissors, glue, coloured pencils • Picnic blanket and treats • Supplies for collecting feedback
- Certificates and gifts for the children • Mood meter



# **6** Family club model

## In the Usra – Family in Finland project, family clubs were implemented for Arabic-speaking families in 2022–2024.

In the Usra – Family in Finland project, family clubs were implemented for Arabic-speaking families in 2022–2024. The families were encountered about once a week at the We Foundation’s community house Meltsi, which is a meeting place for children and their families located in Mellunmäki, Helsinki. In addition, a family club was held for six months at the Vantaa reception centre in cooperation with the centre’s crisis and family employees.

As an organisation, Save the Children Finland has previously developed family club activities, for example, at the Perheentalo community house in Joensuu, where the activities were carried out in 2018–2020 as part of the Yhdessä lasten tueksi (‘Together to support children’) project. At that time, the goal of the multicultural family club’s activities was to support the integration of families who had moved to Finland and to strengthen positive parenting.<sup>74</sup>

### OPEN GROUP ACTIVITIES FOR FAMILIES

The Usra project’s family club has constituted open and low-threshold club activities for children and parents. The goal has been to offer activities that support positive parenting and family well-being for families with a refugee background.

The family club’s activities have reached vulnerable and hard-to-reach families with a refugee background, such as asylum seekers as well as parents and children who are undocumented or in the early stages of integration. Families who have lived longer in Finland have also participated in the family club. This has made it possible for families in the early stages of integration to receive valuable peer support from those who have been living in Finland for a longer time.

The thresholds for participating in the activities have been made lower by there being no registration for the family club, the club being free of charge and it being possible to participate in the activities according to one’s own schedule and life situation. Limiting the activities to Arabic-speaking families has also lowered many parents’ threshold to participate in the activities. Finnish and Arabic have been used in the family club. Two Usra project employees, one of whom has Arabic language skills, have acted as instructors. With regard to the Finnish language, efforts have been made to use easy language. The use of Arabic or interpretation has been particularly nec-

essary in discussions aimed at the parents. The aim has been to implement the action-based activities so as to not emphasise verbal communication and instead to focus on an action-based approach and doing things together

### STRUCTURE OF THE FAMILY CLUB SESSIONS

The family club has been implemented once a week, with the duration of the session being two hours. The aim has been to keep the structure of the group sessions fairly similar:

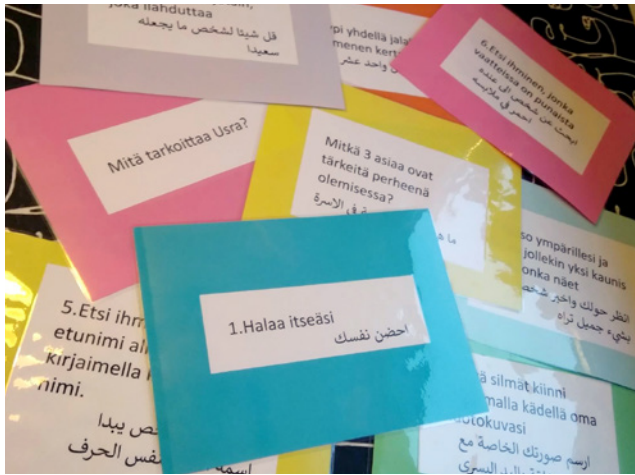
- **A joint breakfast**, during which programme is organised to support free discussion, getting to know each other and team building.
- **The day’s theme** on the agreed topic, either aimed at the parents or as joint action-based activities with the children and the parents. During the discussions, there has been free or guided play and activities for the children to engage in.
- **Action-based activities for the children and the parents as well as a joint ending:** The aim has been to end the family club sessions with joint action-based time for the children and the parents. Guided joint games and regularly organised family yoga have been particularly popular with the families.



## FAMILY CLUB THEMES

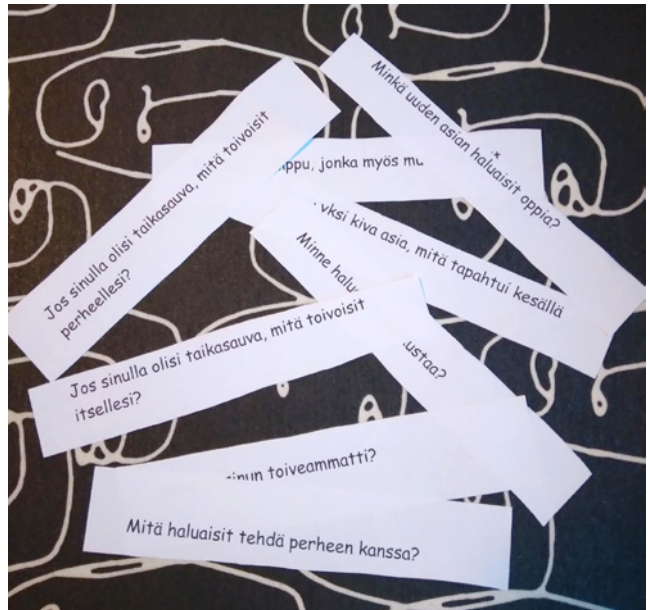
The goal of the themes selected for the family club has been to strengthen positive parenting and doing things together as a family. The themes take into account the needs and wishes of the families participating in the activities. The content has taken shape during the project through cooperation between the project employees and the families.

The family club's main themes have been ones related to family life, positive parenting, the child's needs, emotions and well-being. These themes have been addressed through discussion, action-based methods as well as joint activities aimed at the parents and children, such as crafts, movement, games and play. For example, various picture and question cards as well as videos have been used to support the themes. In addition to informative and action-based activities, the importance of peer support between parents has been emphasised.



In the family club, the parents have received information about the development of a child and functioning as a family in Finland. The group has discussed, for example, the importance of play for a child's development, digital safety, a child's multilingualism and supporting their language skills as well as the rights of the child. The families have also received information about services for families. Various holidays have been celebrated in the family club and the themes of, for example, the Children's Rights Week, the Week of Inclusion and the Week Against Racism have been taken into consideration.

The parents have also learned the Finnish language in the group. Alongside the other activities, they have practised, for example, introducing themselves, everyday Finnish and naming clothing, food, body parts, colours and family vocabulary. They have also received tips for learning the Finnish language and learned the language through games and play. Learning the language has been supported by the use of pictures and Finnish-language question cards.



The family clubs have had visitors to tell the parents about their activities. The aim of these presentations has been to offer the families support and opportunities to participate in the activities of other actors. The visitors have included, among others, the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (MLL), the Hilma Support Centre for Immigrants with Disabilities as well as the associations Familia and IFTIN-SEURA.





## CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY CLUB

The sessions of the Meltsi family club have mainly been attended by children under school age with their parents. Preschoolers have also participated in the family club, but the majority of the children have been babies and toddlers who are still at home with their parents. For some of the children, the family club has been the first place outside of the home where they have had the opportunity to play and engage in activities with other children.

The activities of the family club have valued free and guided play, which have been used to strengthen, in addition to the child's play and friendship skills, many other areas of the child's development. Here are some examples of the children's games and activities:

- Exercise games, such as ball games, climbing, running games, play parachute games, obstacle courses
- Manual skills, such as crafting, drawing, painting, modelling, jewellery making, building games, pastry decorating
- Music
- Animal play, playing with cars, train sets, playing house
- Playing games
- Picture books
- Guided games
- Family yoga and fairytale or musical massage
- Joint play and activity sessions with parents

## GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER AND TEAM BUILDING

One of the important goals of the family club has been to create opportunities for families to get to know each other and thereby expand their social networks in Finland. Sufficient time has also been taken for the participants to get to know each other. Getting to know each other and team building have been supported by action-based activities, getting-to-know-you and team building games, joint breakfasts, rounds of asking everybody how they are doing as well as the use of pictures and question cards. Allocating enough time for free discussion has also been seen as meaningful. In the family club, it has also been felt to be important that the families who come to the activities are encountered individually and with warmth.



## JOINT ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN AND PARENTS

The family club has strengthened the relationship between the parents and the children and them doing things together. Some of the activities have been guided, with the parents and children participating together. The aim has also been to end the sessions with joint action-based time for the children and the parents.

Here are some examples of well-liked joint games and activities:

- Guided games: mirror, colour, musical chairs, follow-the-leader, rob the nest, who is afraid of the octopus, statue game, colour touch, banana tag, fruit salad, duck duck goose, relay games. In the games, the aim is to have as clear and few rules as possible, to lead by example and to use picture support.
- Dance and music time
- Crafts and art time
- Games like Alias, Uno, memory games, Twister, Tower, Kimble, emotion game
- Family yoga and fairytale massage

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## Encountering refugee families and parenting support

### Wonderful Usra – a guide for professionals

The guide is aimed at professionals who work with families with a refugee background. The guide provides information on the impact of being a refugee on parenting and the idea of positive parenting as well as tips for reaching out to and encountering families. In addition, the guide contains a description of the Wonderful Usra group activity model.

The Wonderful Usra group activity model is used to strengthen families working together, positive parenting as well as the safe and good growth of the child. The model takes into account the special features of working with families with a refugee background in a vulnerable position. The model includes sessions for parents and children alike.

Usra – Family in Finland is a three-year project of Save the Children Finland carried out in 2021–2024 as part of the organisation's refugee work.

*“The group has increased my self-awareness as well as positive thinking towards myself and children.”*

- A parent who participated in the Wonderful Usra group

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