Play provision enhances the lives of children in refugee camps

This is the third in a series of editorials written by Alison Prowle and Janet Harvell from the Centre for Early Childhood, University of Worcester, UK, on their experiences in the Dunkirk Refugee Camp in France.

The global refugee crisis has affected children disproportionately, with almost half of all refugees being under the age of 18. This means that worldwide, one in every 20 children is a refugee. The majority of these children will spend some time in a refugee camp, and for many, their entire childhood will be spent in a camp’s challenging environment. In previous editorials, we have explored the implications of growing up in a refugee camp for children’s physical, social, emotional and cognitive development, and have also considered the challenges of parenting in refugee camps.

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states: ‘Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.’

Clearly, this is extremely challenging in the context of a refugee camp, where children’s access to all the UNCRC rights is severely curtailed. However, children can and do find opportunities to play and there is a growing recognition of the importance of play among the agencies that support families at the camps.

The International Play Association (IPA) has long been concerned about the play rights of children in difficult circumstances or challenging environments. In situations of crisis, the negative impacts on children (such as stress, hampered physical and emotional development, feelings of lack of control, loss of trust, etc.) steadily multiply if children lack everyday opportunities to play.

IPA has been working closely with colleagues from nine countries who are supporting children affected by conflict, natural and man-made disasters. Theresa Casey (President, International Play Association) says: ‘This collaboration has resulted in a Toolkit for staff teams and policy makers, which we hope will support in a practical way access to play for children in situations of crisis.’

Having access to welcoming places, enough time and the company of others to play with every day, is of great consequence to all children and young people. Adults can foster such environments for children. The Toolkit acknowledges that any interventions should acknowledge play’s characteristics and allow sufficient flexibility, challenge and security for children to play freely. Marianne Mannello from Play Wales identifies: ‘For children themselves, playing is one of the most important aspects of their lives; they value time, freedom and quality places to play. Ensuring that all children have periods of security and support to play even in the most difficult circumstances, contributes greatly to their immediate sense of wellbeing, whilst also providing a resource they can draw upon for the rest of their lives.’

One of our first impressions on arrival at the Dunkirk refugee camp was the ingenuity of children in creating play opportunities wherever they were and with whatever resources available. Two small children sat outside their shelter making pretend dinners from stones and weeds; a group of older children were making the most of the camp’s single landscape feature, a grassy slope, to perform stunts on a bike, whilst their siblings were using cardboard as a slide. Further into the camp, the Dunkirk Refugee Children’s Centre (DRCC) offered a warm, welcoming and flexible play space with a combination of planned activities and continuous provision designed to capture children’s imagination, enable self-expression, support integration, but most of all to enable children to have fun!

During our time at the Centre, we observed children drawing, painting and engaging in imaginary play, inventing games and negotiating their own rules, turn taking and enjoying sensory activities. There is compelling evidence to suggest that all of these experiences support children’s healthy development and wellbeing. Teacher and manager at DRCC, Freya White, explained how she had observed children using play to explore difficult experiences such as police raids: ‘It was upsetting to watch but important in helping the children to work through and make sense of such difficult experiences.’

Volunteers arrived at the camp, offering new experiences for the children. The Centre provided puppet sessions, drama, dance and mask making, allowing the children to express themselves, learn new skills and work together - all valuable life skills.

Whilst, quite rightly, there is an emphasis on securing other important rights for children in refugee camps (such as physical safety, education and health), neglecting children’s play needs will result in negative impacts. In valuing, nurturing and supporting the right to play, we provide positive experiences for children and support their holistic development, even in the adverse conditions of refugee camps. When we were at the Dunkirk Centre, just a look at the children’s excited and smiling faces showed us that, for one moment at least, they were happy and having fun. In the context of the challenges affecting their lives, the importance of this could not be over-estimated.