



International Child
Development Initiatives

Toolkit on inclusive community based ECEC

TOY FOR INCLUSION - ACCESS FOR ALL



FOR INCLUSION

toys to share play to care

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

At the beginning of 2021, International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI) conducted a research study (Kernan and Cortellesi, 2021) for the project **'TOY for Inclusion – Access for All'** supported by the **Kahane Foundation** and implemented by the Slovak NGO **Škola Doktorán**. The study comprised:

- A **policy analysis** regarding the current situation of inclusion of children with special education needs (SEN) in Slovakian Education.
- A **consultation** with:
 - ✓ parents of children with disabilities
 - ✓ children with disabilities
 - ✓ practitioners in Spišský Hrhov and Rošovce via focus group discussions.
- A **review and revision of the stakeholder mapping and local needs analysis** already conducted in 2019 in Spišský Hrhov and Rošovce with a focus on the inclusion of children with special needs.

The rationale for the research was to ensure strategic alignment of the project activities with current national, regional and EU policy regarding the inclusion of children with SEN. It was also meant to identify key recommendations that would inform the development of this Toolkit and support inclusive non-formal education in Spišský Hrhov and Rošovce, by enhancing the already prominent role of the local Play Hub and its staff.



The study highlighted the ability of the staff to communicating complex information in a simple way with children and families, and their expertise to use play as a learning tool, making the Play Hub in Rošovce a catalyst for positive transformation in the village and its services. This has the potential to lead to a smoother transition between the informal environment of the home and community and the formal environment of the school, whilst subsequently increasing cooperation and partnership between families and educational institutions.

The key recommendations that emerged from the research study are:

- * **Special needs teachers and assistants** must work alongside regular teachers in inclusive schools and ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) centres/kindergartens.
- * ECEC centres need to be **child-centred** and should facilitate and promote every child's curiosity, autonomy, and talents.
- * The role that the Play Hub already plays in **sharing information** about child development, parenting, health, nutrition, and education should be further strengthened and supported to bring up issues gradually and informally such as **sexuality, healthy pregnancy and childbirth and how disability can be linked to family planning and prenatal care** in the community.
- * **Stronger and more structured cooperation** should be built between the school and the Play Hub, nurturing trust and awareness of the importance of non-formal education to develop stronger links between home, Play Hub and school.
- * **Early detection of special needs and adequate support** (including awareness raising) should be offered to parents, without stigma. A collaborative partnership between school and the other services in the community should be established. An out-reach programme which does not require parents to look for help, should be considered.
- * The establishment of **parents' support groups** (for mothers and fathers together, or separate mothers' and fathers' groups) which meet periodically to share their experiences and support each other in raising their children with disabilities can be very effective to raise awareness, share experiences and seek support.
- * **Municipalities** should support the Play Hubs by providing space, funding for materials and contribute to staffing costs of Play Hub employees.

The red thread that links all the above recommendations is a **triangular cooperation** between schools (and other formal services), the Play Hubs and children's homes. A stronger and more structured cooperation has to be built between the different parties. First, between schools and Play Hubs, to harness the trust created in the Play Hub, and the advantages of non-formal education. Secondly, cooperation should be strengthened between homes, Play Hubs, and schools, which will lead to better outcomes for children.

In this context, it would be possible to enact **strategies for early detection of special needs and provision of adequate support to parents**. For this to happen, it is necessary on the one hand to strengthen cooperation between school and other services for children and families in the community (health, education, social services), and to both, to establish a more collaborative partnership between school and families.

If successful on both levels, the actors involved should be able to develop an out-reach programme for families with young children, especially marginalised ones. Therefore, the required help, information, and support would reach families who need it.

The **Play Hub in Roškovce** is recognized by children and families of all backgrounds as a **safe space** and relationships between the Play Hub staff and the families are **built on trust and mutual respect**. The Play Hub is also **connecting different services and offering access to information and support to families** in the community. It is Therefore, the Play Hub can be considered as the perfect bridge between services (including schools) and families in the rolling out of a new extended **three-fold strategy: increased cooperation between services, improved cooperation between services and families and innovative playful learning** methodologies transferred from the Play Hub to the school and the home:

1. The Local Action Team responsible for the Play Hub in Roškovce is an established group of representatives from the different services in the community and can be a perfect platform to increase the level of mutual understanding and cooperation between different players. The first step towards the development of a new **collaboration protocol and policy** in Roškovce is a specific **capacity-building trajectory** on **inclusive education**, which would outline how services can collaborate to respond to the needs of all families and children.
2. Play Hub staff together with school staff should work together to **improve communication and interaction between school and families** and to encourage both parties to better understand each other's roles and perspectives. This could happen in an informal way, through **home visits** which would allow the teachers and Play Hub staff (in pairs) to gain insight into where and how children are growing up, get to know their environments better and allow parents to build a more direct and less formal relationship with the teacher.
3. The Play Hubs have more than 3 years of experience in designing and organising various non formal **playful learning** activities for children and families. This experience and expertise should **be transferred to schools and children's homes**, ensuring that all children, particularly those with special needs can benefit from **child-centred practices and environments**.

Who is this Toolkit for?

This Toolkit intends to provide the right amount of theoretical background, practical tips and ideas to the **trainers** of Škola Dokorán, to share with the **members of the Local Action Team (LAT)**¹ and the Play Hub staff in Roškovce. We see the LAT as the bridge

¹ Local Action Teams (LAT): These are a group composed by representatives of education, social and health services together with local authorities. these run activities at the Play Hub to promote cognitive and relational skills while encouraging inclusion and social integration of families of various ethnic backgrounds.

between schools, other services, non-formal educational spaces, homes and the community.

The contents of this Toolkit are applicable to **any non-formal ECEC setting**, that is interested in strengthening **intersectoral cooperation** between services and building **stronger connections between services and families**. The focus is on **prevention, early interventions** and **inclusive education**, with special attention to children with special needs and from minority groups. However, all activities proposed are designed to include children of all abilities and needs.

Even if the Play Hub is a non-formal education space, it plays an important role in inspiring formal education and encouraging children in their learning pathways. For this reason, the Toolkit also provides easy-to-use and easy-to-adapt materials that practitioners can use in educational settings. This Toolkit hopes to increase the access to materials with a **child-centred approach** for Play Hub staff and teachers.

How is the Toolkit organised?

The Toolkit is organised in three chapters to reflect the three-fold strategy outlined above.

1. **Chapter 1** introduces the concept of **playful learning**. It illustrates how to organise the physical environment and provides examples of **inclusive activities that connect children with different abilities and cultural backgrounds** with each other and with adults.
2. **Chapter 2 focuses on connecting home, school, and other services through home visits**. Through home visits, professionals from the Play Hub and the school can build trustworthy relationships with families, stimulate playful interactions at home, promote effective communication with services, inform parents on how to look for support and encourage prevention and early interventions.
3. **Chapter 3** emphasises **supporting parents through guided activities**. It illustrates how to organise parenting support groups (responsive parenting; child development; SRHR (Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights); how to engage fathers; how to support children's learning and development at home; and how to bring families and school closer together.
4. **Chapter 4** provides **guidelines for Play Hub staff to address cases of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect**. This was highlighted as a need of practitioners and can be useful in other non-formal ECEC settings.

Each chapter contains a short **theoretical introduction** of key concepts and methodologies and illustrates simple, **easy-to-use and adaptable activities** that LAT members and Play Hub staff can implement in cooperation with schools, families and services, and the community.

Chapter 1 – Playful learning for all children in formal and informal settings

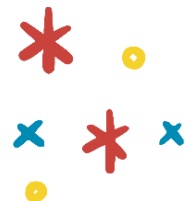
1.1 Play as a natural way of learning and the right to play for all children

Play is an **essential part of childhood** and **stimulates children’s psychosocial and cognitive development**. It is also a **right** as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 31). Children need play to grow, understand, socialise, and develop their own personality (Besio, 2018). Through play they are able to experiment, invent, make mistakes, exercise, joke, imitate, provoke, risk and pretend by creating a parallel world of which they benefit whenever they wish (Bateson, 1956). In summary, children learn to live and learn to think about life through play.

Inclusive education requires the use of varied strategies and techniques to ensure **equal participation of all children** to advance their development. Due to its nature and qualities, play forms a part of flexible, **child-centred and participatory/experiential educational strategies** for celebrating **diversity in education**.

According to the UNCRPD Article 30 (point 5 [d]), State parties are required to ‘ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and leisure [...] including those activities in the school system’. However, **children with disabilities may encounter barriers to play:**

- * **institutional barriers** (the importance of play is recognized by all in theory, but there’s a lack of active play promotion policies);
- * **social-cultural barriers** (play often occupies a secondary role when compared to educational or therapeutic activities, sometimes children with disabilities are ostracised or feel stigmatised); and
- * **physical barriers** (lack of accessible play spaces, toys, games).



Play happens everywhere: at home, in early years settings, in schools, in health care, in informal educational settings, such as the Play Hubs², and in the community. Therefore,

² Play Hubs are safe, informal, high-quality, Early Childhood Education and Care spaces where relationships between young children (0 to 10 years) and families from all backgrounds are built. They are inclusive spaces where children and adults of all ages meet, spend quality time together and play with each other; children can borrow toys and educational materials to bring home; parents, grandparents, and practitioners can informally learn and exchange information about child health, early learning, and development. Play-based activities are organised to support creativity, increase confidence, develop social, emotional and verbal skills and unlock each child’s potential. This helps children in their transition to formal

different strategies must be put in place to support play and playful learning in every environment, and they always have to consider the needs of all children, including those with special needs.

For many children, their school and other non-formal learning spaces are where the most social interaction and play occurs in their daily lives. For children with disabilities, these spaces can offer the opportunity to experience **inclusive play**, which increases feelings of **self-confidence** and allows children with disabilities to **socially interact, develop new skills and gain independence**.

1.2 What is learning through play or playful learning?

Learning through play is an enjoyable and appropriate way for children to transition from early childhood into their school years (Biordi & Gardner, 2014). Learning through play is described as **combining playful child-directed activity with adult support**, often through guided learning objectives. In other words, Playful Learning seeks to **engage the child's mind and curiosity** through creative and fun activities. Learning through play incorporates free or voluntary play, guided play, construction play, collaborative play, learning through games, physical play, digital play and more.

However, there is frequently a discrepancy between policy and practice regarding playful learning. For practitioners, it can be unclear which aspects of learning are underlined through play activities. Furthermore, the skills and competencies that playful learning aims to facilitate in children are not always clearly understood by practitioners. Play is linked to fostering foundational skills and knowledge for the **cognitive development** of children, including **supporting literacy, mathematics and sciences**. Furthermore, as an integrated practice, learning through play also supports children developing **emotional, physical, social, and creative skills**.

There is strong evidence supporting the positive impact of learning through play for children. Yet many education systems have reduced opportunities for playful learning and an increased emphasis on structured approaches to learning for school readiness and academic achievement (Jay & Knaus, 2018).

Playful experiences are the result of creativity, curiosity, sense of humour, pleasure and spontaneity, whereby children can enjoy themselves, while overcoming challenges at the same time – a dynamic known in psychology as “flow”. These intertwined feelings keep them focused and engaged in problem solving.

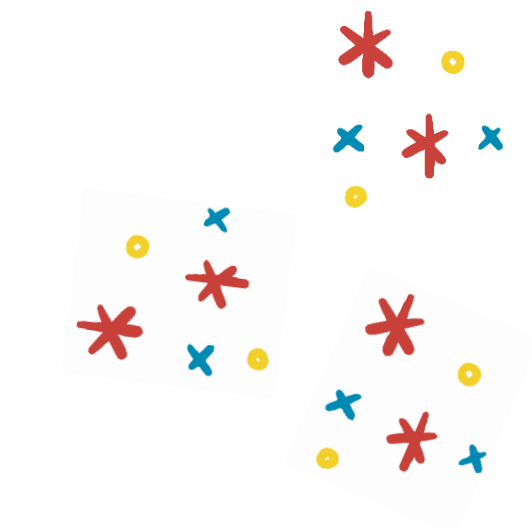
education. This is particularly relevant for families from Roma, migrant or socially disadvantaged backgrounds, to whom Play Hubs give extra attention. In fact, Play Hubs are a flexible solution that offers inclusive educational opportunities for all those children who are often excluded from formal educational services. For more information, visit: www.toy4inclusion.eu

Playful experiences are based on joy and intrinsic motivation, allowing children to invent, test and experience without fear of failure. Individuals in a playful mindset self-regulate their effort in order to achieve their goals, using as many attempts as necessary and progressing at their own pace — in other words, learning.

Playfulness contributes to learning which does not necessarily have to happen within the confines of formal schooling, but also in informal educational settings such as Play Hubs.

Educational practice needs to stress pedagogical mechanics of play and games, leveraging teaching and learning processes that involve and are meaningful to all children. Under this approach, activities would be based on clear and challenging learning goals; and individuals would learn incrementally and through iteration, combining hands-on experiences with immediate and ongoing feedback.

Therefore the challenge for educators, is to design comprehensive teaching practices that can create opportunities for children to boost their **agency, curiosity, and enjoyment**. This way, teaching would support meaningful learning and child well-being.



1.3. What does learning through play look like?

Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when learning through play is happening, research has identified three core indicators — **choice, wonder, and delight**. In recognition of the fact that learning through play is shaped by culture, we invite you to create a version that fits the needs (or language) of your educational setting.



Adapted from the International School of Billund – Pedagogy of Play³

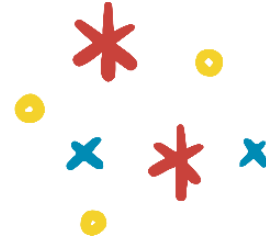
³ Indicators of Playful Learning: International School of Billund (2019). Developed by Pedagogy of Play at Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education. http://www.pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/ISB%20indicators_2-pager_color.pdf

1.4 What does a playful and inclusive learning environment look like?

A playful learning environment is a **safe place that fosters choice, wonder and delight**, enabling children to engage in deeper, more meaningful learning through play.

A **playful environment** incorporates:

- **access**
- **comfort**
- **agency (learners making decisions)**
- **flexibility**



Practitioners should observe and reflect on the On the playfulness of the environment in which they teach to see how they can make it more exciting for children with and without special needs.

Learning environments for children 0-10 years old should have the capacity to enable participation of **all children**. Here, 'participation' means **attending and being actively engaged** in activities and interaction.

'Engagement' means being actively involved in everyday activities and is the core of inclusion. It is closely related to learning and to the interaction between children and their social and physical environment. Examples of engagement are when:

- children play together with a common focus and take turns
- the peer group is actively focused on singing with the adult
- a child is absorbed in looking at a picture book
- children are immersed in play (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017).

In the design of a physical play environment, the accepted objective is to create an environment that is inviting and attractive for the children while catering to their differing abilities and needs. There are five significant characteristics of a play environment which supports this objective: **flexibility, shelter, centres of interest, natural features and atmosphere** (Casey, 2005). Further important features are sensory elements, accessibility, risk and challenge, and continuity between indoors and outdoors (Schulze C. et al, 2020).

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education published a [Self-Reflection Tool](#) (2017) aiming to improve settings' **inclusiveness**. It is based on an **ecosystem perspective**, in which children's experiences are seen as a function of proximal processes in the environment. Within this perspective, professionals and staff significantly influence children's engagement, learning and development. At the same time, peers in the setting, parents and family are part of the ecosystem around the child. They, as well as the physical environment, influence each child's engagement,

development, and learning. This tool, which could be used both by the school and the Play Hub, addresses the following **aspects of inclusion**:

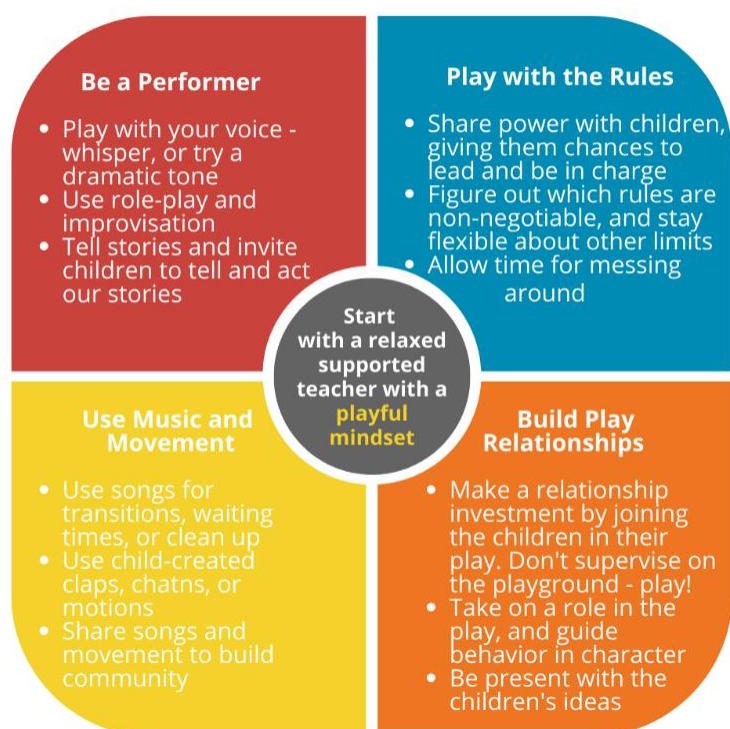
1. **Overall welcoming atmosphere**
2. **Inclusive social environment**
3. **Child-centred approach**
4. **Child-friendly physical environment**
5. **Materials for all children**
6. **Opportunities for communication for all**
7. **Inclusive teaching and learning environment**
8. **Family-friendly environment.**

1.5 Playful learning environment management

A playful learning environment is also determined and encouraged by the attitudes, behaviours and methods used by teachers during their classes. Of course, teaching and classroom management can't be playful at all times. Serious situations (injuries, teasing, etc.) call for serious responses and clear limits.

However, in this poster, also developed by Project Zero, the Lego Foundation and the International School of Billund, practitioners may find some inspiration for their playful learning environment management:

PLAYFUL Classroom management




Adapted from Playful classroom management developed by Kindergarten Study Group 2017-2018⁴

⁴ Source: <https://isbillund.com/academics/pedagogy-of-play/>

1.6 Play-based learning for children with special needs

Children with special needs tend to shy away from traditional learning methods, especially in remote learning environments, such as the ones imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the rigid structure that traditional learning methods impose, children with intellectual and developmental disabilities have a difficult time absorbing, retaining, and benefiting from a standard curriculum.



Play-based learning, however, creates a structure where learning (even in a remote environment) is more natural for children with disabilities. In fact, play allows all children, **regardless of their needs**, to **learn, discover skills at their own pace**, and choose which activities interest them.

Motivation is a key element to educating children with special needs, yet so many educators follow a behaviourist teaching model that is based on extrinsic or external rewards, such as good grades, stickers, or treats. This model is only effective for productivity in the short term, not to mention it can be extremely difficult to implement in a remote learning environment.

On the contrary, play-based learning allows children to move towards **intrinsic motivation**, which includes finding purpose and enjoyment in their work, establishing social connections, and improving long-term productivity and creativity. When implemented correctly, playful learning motivates children to push past struggles and failures, which allows them to turn “game over” moments into “play again” moments.

A **play-based curriculum** is a perfect place for children, with and without special needs. All children need to move around and need a lot of variety. That's exactly what a play-based curriculum allows children to do. It gives them a chance to pursue their own interests with their full body, with their full mind, the way these children learn best.

1.7 Playful and inclusive learning ideas

The following section provides some practical tips and ideas for schools and non-formal education and play spaces to plan with children of all ages and abilities, but especially for children with SEN (special education needs). Learning spaces have the material and adult support in place to be able to offer constructive and engaging activities which parents may not have. These ideas are all based on **play-based learning** principles and require a range of materials, however, they are simple to plan and most importantly fun and creative for children and practitioners:

Teaching Children Kindness

The impact of negative words on children's views of themselves, and their mental health and confidence can be severe. This is especially true for children who face criticism, anger or abuse at home from family members and parents. Therefore, it is vital that educational settings act as a place of "Put-ups" rather than "Put-Downs", where children are encouraged and learn to be kind to themselves and others.

Put-Ups Activity: Ask the children to give examples of both good and nice things to say to someone (Put-ups) and write their examples on the board. Then ask each child to buddy up with another and write three put-ups for their partner. This activity allows children to learn that giving positive affirmation to others is a good thing to do whilst building up their own self esteem.

Kindness Gardening activity: Bring in a small plant or draw a large plant on the board/paper. Then get the children to write examples of negative "put-downs", such as "you're annoying". Read these to the plant and make the plant drop its leaves/draw leaves falling off and ask the children to explain what they have witnessed. Then ask the children to write positive "Put-ups" that you could say to someone and shower those over the plant (like food/water). Then take a flower or draw a flower and place it amongst the leaves. This is an activity which shows that saying positive affirmations to others and yourself grows confidence and good things, whilst being mean causes the plant to wilt or slump. Explain to the children that their self-esteem and confidence is like the plant and that they are strong and healthy and more confident through realising their positive traits.

It is also important to teach children how to deal with negative attention (put-downs), showing them how to be resilient and confident children. For example, you could explain to children that put-downs are wrong, and that children's self-worth is not always associated with what others call them or think of them.

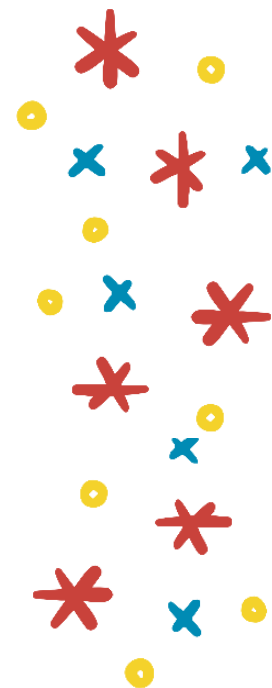
Inclusive Tips:

Inclusive learning spaces provide a learning environment that works for **all** children. A significant way in which this can be achieved is by learning a subject through multiple different ways or activities. For example, teaching storytelling in a group with differing learning disabilities may result in one child being able to engage in a writing exercise, whilst another is not able to do so. But if you don't do any writing exercise you may be denying one child their potential to grow that skill. Instead, it is advisable that practitioners still run the initial, potentially harder writing storytelling exercise. Then the next day focus on the same topic, storytelling, but allow children to make their own puppets - using cardboard recycles and paper - based upon who they want their story to be about i.e., princess, tiger, pirate. Then next time allow children to tell a story with you or in front of the group with their own puppet. Focussing on the same theme but through **multiple**

activities of different nature means that **all children can engage at a level that suits their abilities and pushes them to grow**, even if not all activities work perfectly for them. This means that children still learn together and at their skill level. Tip: When certain activities turn out to be too simple for the higher skilled children, encourage them to help other children who may be struggling, which will build up their interaction, communication, and encouragement between children.

Practitioners and Inclusive Strategies: PlanBee⁵, an online resource database for teachers, have outlined 12 rules for practitioners to follow in order to make their learning environments an inclusive space for both playful learning and more formal learning activities for children of all abilities. This resource can also be adapted and used in non-formal education and play spaces.

1. Define clear minimum standards for behaviour.
2. Enforce those standards consistently.
3. Deal with children who misbehave in a sensitive way.
4. Create opportunities to listen to all children.
5. Develop a 'scaffolded' approach to learning.
6. Be aware of the specific needs of every child in your class.
7. Provide support for them in ways which benefit ALL children in your class.
8. Create a calm, purposeful learning environment.
9. Clearly display timetables and key information.
10. Use pre-assessment to inform your planning.
11. Let children choose how to show what they have learned.
12. Don't compare the progress of one child to another; personal progress is key



Each rule in the above list is simplified, the full explanation for each rule and tips on how to practice them in the learning environment can be found at [this link](#).

1.8 Playful and inclusive learning ideas for the Play Hub

Engaging children in creative activities that are centred around having fun, but still engage children's creativity and cognitive abilities, is an important aspect of the Play Hubs. The safe space of the Play Hubs provides children with possibilities to relax and enjoy themselves, encouraging them to become more confident and willing to participate in activities. Furthermore, many children are accompanied by an older sibling or parent at

⁵Source: <https://planbee.com/>

the Play Hubs, thus making it a great space for inclusive playful learning activities as children can be easily supported by someone during the activity if they find it more difficult.

Musical Play

A great activity to improve cognitive ability, hand-eye coordination, creativity and confidence is making music. Anyone can make music with their hands or voices, regardless of ability. Furthermore, children with learning difficulties or behavioural difficulties often need activities which are highly engaging and dynamic to keep them attentive, but also to allow them to channel high levels of energy into a fun and structured game. This allows parents to celebrate their energy or enthusiasm through a task, which can help relieve tension for both parties.

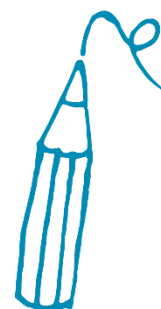


Instructions: Allow children to sit in a circle with a selection of drums or homemade instruments (pots and pans, rice shakers, wooden spoons) and allow children to choose their instrument. Then play musical games, first let them make their own music. Then play a rhythm and let the children repeat the rhythm back to you. Sing a popular song and let the children play/sing along. Then call out children and ask them to give three beats of 5 shakes. This incorporates number games and emotional expression through a playful learning lens. Making sure children stop playing at your instruction can also grow listening and obedience skills.

Children who struggle with motor skills can use their hands rather than spoons directly onto the drums. This activity's benefits include developing listening skills as children have to follow a beat or play along with other children. Furthermore, it improves manual abilities such as hand-eye coordination, rhythm and hand strength which can later be used for writing. The simplicity of this activity means that parents can also do it at home with their children using home materials.

Art Activities

Creative expression, joy and fun are things commonly provoked through art and artistic play. Children of any ability are able to create art, including children with physical or learning difficulties. Creating art also allows children to take something home. Seeing their creation on the walls will be encouraging to them and an easy way for parents to show that they are proud of their child, no matter what the art looks like. "Whereas the play hub has resources, this activity requires little material, making it inexpensive and easy to run many times for maximum benefit.



Instructions: Place bottles of squeeze paint on the table. Fold a large piece of paper in half for each child and let them squeeze lines of paint that snake over the page. Encourage them to choose colours and create squiggly patterns. Leave some white space between the lines of paint. Then fold the paper in half and show the children how to rub their hand across the surface, squishing the paint around into beautiful patterns. This is a messy activity and it's okay for children to play and get paint on their hands. Open the paper and see the beautiful designs that have been created! Additionally, after letting them dry, children can use a sharpie marker to draw butterfly wings over their creation to shape it more.

This activity is most suitable for young children. The squeezing involved will grow their motor skills and help strengthen their hand-eye coordination.

Tip: Use this activity during a father and child Play Hub activity afternoon (see Chapter 3), as it is a simple task which allows fathers and children to bond, be creative together and laugh whilst learning.

1.9 Inclusive playgrounds

The arena for inclusivity does not end in the classroom or in the Play Hub. Children with disabilities can find playgrounds overwhelming both physically and emotionally; many children with disabilities can struggle with sensory overload. The playground, full of shouting children, high intensity activity and constant movement can be overwhelming for children and cause anxiety. Therefore, it's important that both the school and the Play Hub invest in understanding how playgrounds can be a space of exclusivity and then how they can make it more inclusive to all children.

What is an inclusive playground? A well-designed, inclusive play environment enables all children to develop physically, socially, and emotionally. An inclusive playground addresses all levels of ability and goes beyond minimum accessibility requirements to

create play experiences that meet a variety of needs and interests, including physical, intellectual and learning disabilities.

The following section outlines some practical tips on making an inclusive playground.

Designing an inclusive playground does not need to be complicated, but it does require thought. It means thinking about what different children can access - what can a child engage with if they use a wheelchair, or if they have autism or get distracted easily? Can friends with and without disabilities play together?

Seven Principles of Universal Design to create an inclusive playground⁶

1. **Equitable Use.** The design is useful to people with diverse abilities.
2. **Flexibility in Use.** The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
3. **Simple and Intuitive Use.** Use of the design is easy to understand regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills and current concentration level.
4. **Perceptible Information.** The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.
5. **Tolerance for Error.** The design minimises hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.
6. **Low Physical Effort.** The design can be used efficiently and comfortably.
7. **Size and Space for Approach and Use.** Appropriate size and space are provided for approach, reach, manipulation and use regardless of the user's body size, posture or mobility.

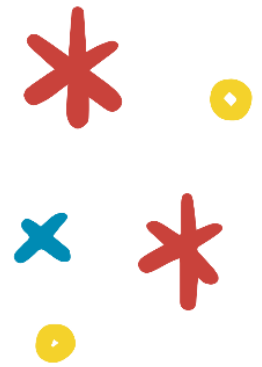
These are the different aspects you need to take into account when designing inclusive play, presented by Sensory Trust, a UK based charity⁷:

⁶ Adapted from: <https://www.playlsi.com/en/playground-design-ideas/inclusive-play/inclusive-play-commitment/>

⁷ Adapted from: <https://www.sensorytrust.org.uk/resources/guidance/inclusive-play>

Create a rich mix of play opportunities

- **Physical:** e.g. open space for running/wheeling, tree or logs for climbing and balance; a wall for ball games; open space for running/wheeling; markings for chalk games; play equipment for different physical challenges.
- **Creative:** e.g. quiet spaces with natural materials for making things; weeping trees and sensory domes for dens; story telling space; sensory plantings to support activities.
- **Social:** e.g. areas for chatting and reading; tables and chairs for card and board games; open spaces for group activities.



Engage the senses

All children benefit from an approach that engages all the senses so aim to maximise opportunities.

- Choose materials and activities that can be explored through all the senses - interesting textures, shapes, solidity, weight, pattern, colour and temperature.
- Heighten sensory stimuli in some areas, while reducing others to provide choices.
- Consider including things for children with sensory impairments, e.g. Things to explore through touch, sound and vibration, and visuals like reflected light or strong colours and contrast. Interest through sound and vibration.

Make different types of space

- Allow children to choose busier, more active areas or quieter areas.
- Consider boundaries to reduce the scope for children to wander, or for other security issues.
- Provide quiet space that serve as time-out for children who need it.
- Include shelter from inclement weather and strong sun, and seating.
- Zone for type of use and avoid segregation.

Make it accessible

- Children must be able to get to the play area so think about the whole journey, not just the space itself.
- Within the play area, aim for a surface that has good impact absorption but is relatively firm (avoiding deep loose materials for example).
- Consider widths, height and reach for different children, including scope to include wheelchair-adapted play facilities.
- With physical play, choose a range of physical options - some focused more on upper body motor skills, for example.
- Include options for wheelchair-users to fully engage with, ensure 'run-about' areas with options for wheelchairs.
- Consider accessible information by including symbols, Braille and pictorial images.

Do not forget parents and families

- Make sure there is seating and shelter nearby for parents, grandparents and caregivers.
- Consider potential disabilities by ensuring good access from the seating area into the play area into the play area so parents can support their children.
- Ensure disabled and non-disabled siblings can play together.

Learn and share

- Consulting with children and families - before and after you design something - is your best way of finding out what children want and how well your design has succeeded.
- Search for examples of inclusive play and use the good ideas you find. Then be sure to share the ideas so everyone can learn from each other.

Buddy System: For some children, the high activity level of the playground may leave them feeling overwhelmed and lost among other children who are playing. A simple improvement for these children can be a buddy system where children are paired with a playground buddy. This would be someone who can keep an eye out for them on the playground, include them in games or lead them to a calmer area if they become overwhelmed.



1.10 Connecting children with nature

The outdoors and natural spaces such as gardens are brilliant safe spaces for creativity and informal learning for children, especially children with disabilities. Allowing children to play in nature offers an opportunity for children to relax whilst still learning and developing **motor skills, communication skills and empathy** through games with others.

The **outdoors** is a **naturally inclusive environment** as there is something for each child to become interested in, e.g. butterflies, flowers, trees or wide-open fields. This allows all children to engage in an activity, whilst still being in the presence of others.

A benefit of nature-based play is that activities do not have to be over-planned or controlled; children's sense of curiosity and fun is enhanced when exploring outside environments and their imagination allows them to create games through simple activities, such as looking under logs for bugs or feeling the different textures in the garden. Expectations for achievements are lessened in outdoor play, as the goal is to have fun and be creative rather than to make academic progress. This makes nature play highly

inclusive, relaxing and a low stress environment for children, which in turn improves their academic learning ability.

Sensory-play should be the focus of playful activities in nature as the outdoors consists of hundreds of different textures, sounds and smells which children can explore using their imagination and senses. Simple games can be created to allow children to learn and explore their senses, such as 'smell five different plants' or make 'bark rubbings' using crayons on paper against different tree bark.

For children with SEN, such as autism or other learning difficulties, being outside offers an open and quiet space compared to enclosed spaces. Being allowed to explore nature offers an opportunity for them to be curious at their own pace and with their own aims or games in mind. Often children with SEN find it difficult to follow instructions or time-constrained activities, however counting bug games or finding different natural objects are simple playful-learning activities that are engaging.

Tip: Create a designated quiet zone in the garden/natural space for children with SEN. Whilst the outdoors can be calming, other children playing, and shouting can still be overwhelming for some children. Creating a quiet zone, maybe under a tree, allows children to still engage with nature and their imagination whilst not becoming overwhelmed by other activities. **Inclusivity** is all about creating options for all needs, **a quiet zone helps achieve an inclusive nature play space.**

A quiet zone also allows children to **acclimatise** to the outdoor space at their own pace, allowing them to transition to more high-intensity outdoor activities such as riding bikes or climbing when they feel ready to do so. This challenges children to broaden their horizons and life skills in a safe and respectful way.

Life Skills and Nature Play:

Nature Play is also a good setting for children to learn **life skills and general knowledge**. In nature plants grow and die, seasons change, and weather changes are unpredictable and exciting. By witnessing these natural changes children can learn to understand and cope with change. This is an important lesson for children to understand how life works, how their bodies grow and change and how they can relate and adapt to changes. For children with SEN change can be intimidating and unsettling, but by learning about growth and change through witnessing and playing in nature, children can comprehend and relate to it more easily, thus reducing related anxiety.

Children should be involved in creating or designing their outdoor space as this increases their sense of belonging in the space, making them better able to play, relax and learn. This is especially important for children with SEN as it gives them a sense of control and purpose in a free uncontrolled environment, allowing them to feel safe enough to engage through a feeling of familiarity or purpose.

Design could include deciding where to place the quiet area, choosing which tree to put the swing in or which seeds to sow where. These choices allow children to also develop their decision-making abilities while teaching them important life skills, such as teamwork and compromise as they consider each other's opinion and finally make a group decision.

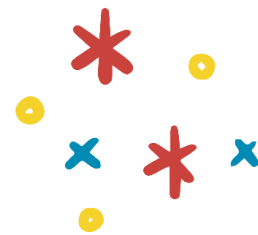
Playing outdoors helps develop **cognitive ability**, as games such as catch, tag and hide and seek encourage counting, hand eye coordination and without the stress of academic learning.

Outdoor play has also been connected with social benefits such as **reducing the stress, anxiety and depression** of children who are able to relax and be creative in nature. Children naturally love being outside and it is a stimulating environment for **imagination and communicative play**, which are beneficial to their mental health.

Play Hub Activity Suggestion:

List of games and activities that can be easily adapted for nature play:

- Finding different colour leaves
- Group Games: Hide and seek, Tag
- Counting trees, flowers, rocks etc.
- Ball games (catch, rounders, counting)
- Imagination play – provide simple dress up options such as hats, objects made from cardboard and toys and let children engage in fantasy play in nature e.g., pirates, fairies.
- Allow children to pick (small amounts) of foliage to create art from nature onto pieces of paper
- Bike riding
- Skipping rope games (very good for coordinated play and team play)
- Sandpit
- Tree swing



Importantly, outdoor activities also have risks, such as cuts, animal interaction and falls. Therefore, while nature play should mostly be guided by the children's imaginations, it is important that staff conduct risk assessments to remove more dangerous risks and always have adult supervision to observe nature play to ensure the safety of children as they learn and explore.


Life Skills Activity: Gardening and Inclusive Playful Learning

Children's curiosity and capacity for learning is often enhanced through a guided activity, a great example of playful and inclusive learning which teaches life skills in a fun way is through simple gardening.

Many studies have shown that participating in gardening can positively shape mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing of children as it is an effective way to help combat their behavioural issues, improve their self-esteem and understanding of change and growth.

Through the activity of digging soil, planting seeds and carefully learning how much water is needed, children learn in a fun way about healthy lifestyles, different types of needs and natural changes of plants. This, in turn, helps them to understand how their bodies grow and change, requiring different 'nutrients' to be healthy, such as food, water but also emotional needs such as affection and confidence. Gardening is also not an activity of immediacy, it teaches patience in a fun and fruitful way, showing children that not all activities need immediate effects. This can be paralleled to the fact that their learning development, or development of friendships and skills does not have to be immediate and teaches that some improvements can only be seen over time.

Gardening skills also teaches children a sense of responsibility in a stress-free environment. Learning about how to take care of plants, nurture them into good growth and celebrate them when they flower or grow reflects the importance of taking responsibility for something and seeing the reward from nurturing it. This also teaches children confidence, as they realise, they are capable of connecting with nature and producing good things, such as successfully growing flowers from seeds.



Play Hub Gardening activity and Tips: It is important for children to learn that they are not all the same and have different characteristics and skills yet are all precious and deserving of love. Encourage children to note down the differences of the plants they grow; different petal sizes, leaf shapes, colours and smells. Remind them that while they produce different flowers/herbs that all the plants are special in their own way, just as children are. This activity is especially important for children with SEN who may feel disconnected from other children, as it teaches them that just because they are different and have different qualities, they are still special and important.

This exercise is also important for children without SEN, as it helps teach them empathy and to not see other children with SEN as less able or strange, but instead to see that they have different qualities that make them special. This can increase inclusivity and understanding between the children, allowing for a healthier play, and learning environment.

Play Hub Gardening activity and Tips: When doing gardening activities with children it is important to explain how different needs of the plants, they are growing resemble some of their own needs. Ask children what would happen if they stop watering the plants. When children respond that they would wilt and stop growing - reflect upon how children also need food and water. Then, ask what would happen if the plants were stomped on. Parallel this negative situation with what happens when we say negative or mean things to other children and use this opportunity to teach children to encourage one another with nourish each other with kind words and positivity. Practitioners can use this exercise as a basis to teach about emotions and empathy.



There are also many studies which show that it is healthy for children's immune systems to engage in gardening activities which introduce them to different soils and natural materials which can help build up resistance to allergies and a stronger immune system.

Life Skills Activity: Animal Therapy for Children with Special Needs

An important aspect of nature play from a different perspective is **Animal Therapy**, which research shows is an important activity for the emotional and mental development of children, especially [children with SEN](#). Animal therapy is an alternative form of therapy which involves a child spending time playing, cuddling, talking to and teaching basic commands to an animal. These animal visits can be on an intermediate basis or involve several visits each week depending on the child and the resources available.

Children with SEN can struggle to express their emotions through words or actions, they also often feel excluded and struggle to interact with other children. Animals, on the other hand, are very accepting as they cannot judge humans for disabilities or limitations; this makes animals suitable therapy friends for children who feel isolated, who cannot speak or have other disabilities.

Animals can create a very calming and safe environment and often naturally seek comfort and affection from children. Hereby even simple actions, such as stroking an animal's fur or brushing their tail, can be comforting to a child. For children who struggle to relax with other children, animal therapy is a safe way for those children to be at ease and to build a bond with another living being. Animals enjoy giving kisses or snuggles and this can be a glimmer of affection and natural touch to a child who often finds touch too overwhelming.

Animal therapy is another source of sensory learning and provides a calm environment for children to grow their ability to understand and explore their senses, which is often overwhelming for children with SEN. The breathing of the animals, their movements and soft fur are all examples of senses that children can explore through spending time with

them, which helps them understand their own bodies and their ability to accept the sensory overload of the world around them with more resilience.

Teaching commands to an animal (such as sit, paw, roll over, stay) can also build upon a child's life skills such as confidence, discipline, listening skills and hand eye coordination.

Not all animal therapies have to be as structured and resource heavy. Animal therapy can consist of organised visits to a local farm or an animal sanctuary every now and then, where children can interact with animals, forget their stress and obstacles, and enjoy being in the animals' presence.

Even if animal therapy is done in an informal way, such as farm visits or animal visits, it is very important to make sure that the animal chosen for interaction is not aggressive or overly energetic. It is important for the physical and emotional safety of children that the chosen animals are calm and like to be touched, stroked, and played with. This is vital to avoid overstimulation, scaring or overwhelming situations for children. It is also important that calm animals are chosen to be played with and stroked as some children with disabilities might have underdeveloped motor skills and processing mechanisms, which may mean that they squeeze or stroke animals harder than expected. Horses and dogs are often chosen as therapy animals as they are easily trained and commonly calm and quiet to be around, meaning they are not too excitable for the use of therapy. Animal therapy does not require a trained therapist, however having an adult present who is trained in handling animals or at least very confident in animal behaviour and handling them is very important for the children's comfort and the animal's safety.

The environment in which animal therapy takes place might need to be modified to accommodate the child's unique limitations. The supervising adult can spend some time introducing your child to the animal upon initial contact, letting children get used to the idea of the animal and learn its behaviours. Children must be slowly allowed to adapt to the presence of animals so as to not overwhelm them.

Chapter 2 - Connecting home, non-formal educational settings, and other services

2.1 Home-based practice interventions for young children and their families⁸

Quality home visiting programmes help parents provide safe and supportive environments for their young children (aged 0 to 6). Specifically, they can inform the parents the importance of establishing healthy connections with their children while building loving, trusting and

"Every parent wants to give their best to support their child's development. Well trained, respectful, sensitive, and family centred Home Visitors can build on this motivation and contribute to strengthening parenting competencies and family resilience. By reaching out and including the most vulnerable populations in their services, Home Visitors can also contribute to making disadvantaged families more visible, facilitate the access to services, and thereby reduce equity gaps" (UNICEF/ISSA 2016)

supportive relationships. They can learn how to do that during their routine and everyday family activities. Home visiting programmes are also intended to reduce the stress parents and carers may experience in their parenting role – by providing a listening ear, calm reassurance, support and information. Over time, families and Home Visitors build strong relationships that lead to lasting benefits for the entire family.

Research shows that **home visits have many benefits**⁹:

- * Mothers and children are healthier and happier.
- * Children are better prepared for school and life.
- * Caregivers are more aware of safety and protection matters.
- * Families are more self-sufficient and have stronger networks.
- * Better overview and management of household finances.

⁸ Adapted from ICDI (2020) Home Visiting Toolkit. Resources to promote the healthy social and emotional development of children under 4. Leiden: ICDI. <https://icdi.nl/media/uploads/downloads/homevisitingtoolkit-icdi-part12-compressed.pdf>

⁹ Source: <https://childandfamilyresearch.utexas.edu/eci-home-visiting>

Home visits can be tailored to the specific needs of each family and every child, making them extremely individualised compared to group activities. For example, while a home visiting programme can have a well-defined curriculum that suggests that a set series of competencies are taught to all families, more individualised plans and activities can be offered to families with children with disabilities, based on the assessment of the home visitor and in collaboration with the family.

Home visiting programmes may have broad and varied goals, such as improving prenatal and perinatal health, nutrition, safety, and parenting. Other programs may have narrower goals, such as reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Program outcomes may focus on adults or on children; providers frequently cite multiple goals (e.g., improved child development, parent social-emotional support, parent education).

2.1.1 Basic principles of home visiting

Introduce families to each other, mobilise the community.

The main goal of home visits is to help create a support system for the families of the community. The best outcome is for the families to support each other in raising their children, allowing their children to learn through play making them ready to learn when they are of school age.

If families are aware of the importance of play for child development, they can arrange for their children to play together, while also supporting each other and sharing information about the importance of early play and stimulation.

A bridge to other services.

Home visitors provide information and support to parents of young children to address their individual needs. The families they serve often have many needs, and home visitors cannot address all of them. Therefore, referrals to other services in the community and further afield (such as those offering mental health services, childcare, and more) are vital for the health and well-being of the families that home visiting programmes serve.

Home visitors provide information about a range of other local services, acting as a bridge connecting the family to services

Promoting playful learning and parenting

Play comes naturally to babies and children. It is an amazing vehicle for learning and development that is grounded in everyday life processes. In all cultures in the world, children play alone or in groups while they explore their environment. Through play, they discover and test ideas while developing physical and mental skills. Play has a central role in learning and in preparing children for challenges later on in their childhood and into

adulthood. Children are always changing and learning new skills. Parents should recognize these changes and follow their child's lead.

As long as it's safe, struggling to do something is good for children's development. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC – Article 31) play is a "right." Play helps children to:

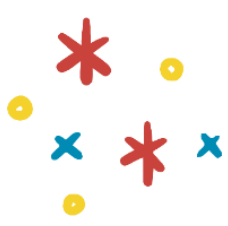
- * Develop their knowledge, experience, curiosity and confidence.
- * Learn by trying new things, asking questions and meeting challenges.
- * Develop the skill of language, thinking, planning, and decision making.
- * Strengthen the bond between family and peers.

The **role of parents and other caregivers** in children's play is:

- * Guide children and let them try.
- * Ask questions: 'What did you do?', 'What is it about?', 'How did you feel?', 'What happened?'
- * Let the child take lead on the activity.
- * Encourage them to find different ways to one solution.
- * Play with them.

When parents join their children in their world of play, focusing on connection and confidence, giggling and roughhousing, and following their child's lead, it is called **playful parenting**. Playfulness and laughter help caregivers stay in "upstairs brain" mode by lowering stress and diffusing anger. Play has been shown to enhance cognitive function in adults as well as kids! Therefore, when parents choose playful parenting, not only are they nurturing healthy connections in their child's brain, but parents' brains will reap the benefits as well.

Home visits can initiate, support, and enhance play and a playful parenting approach at home, by:

- 
- * **Guiding the parents** to play with their children.
 - * **Explaining** to parents **how their children learn when they play.**
 - * **Explaining how they can play with their child.**
 - * **Encouraging and motivating** them to get involved when the children are playing.

Roles and responsibilities of home visitors

The main role of a Home Visitor is to listen to and empower the families they work with. They need to form a trusting relationship with families and help them understand the importance of play, learning and safety for their children's development.

Confidentiality

Respecting families' confidentiality is an essential part of good care. Without the trust that confidentiality brings, parents might not seek care and advice, or they might not tell all the facts needed to provide a good home visit.

Confidentiality is an important responsibility of the Home Visitors. All the information about the families, such as directions to their house, names, ages as well as everything discussed with them needs to be kept confidential for the duration of the project, as well as after it ends. The organisation coordinating home visits is responsible for organising a system to keep all data and information safe.

Home Visitors will also be asked to sign the **Child Protection Policy** of the organisation coordinating the home visits.

Be positive!

Praise families for the things that they are doing well. Acknowledge mothers and fathers for their efforts and willingness to be good parents. Praise the good behaviour of their children.

Be curious and ask a lot of questions. Look people in the eye. Let parents talk about their children. Everyone wants the best for their child, keep that in mind. You are not there to teach "the right way" or preach on how to raise their children. You are there to support and empower families.

Principles of practice and basic attitude of home visitors

Tailor made help

No one person or one family is the same. That means that the support of the family needs to fit into and be adapted to the unique situation and context of the family. The care given to the family should therefore be flexible and determined by the specific needs of the clients.

Family orientation

Home based interventions involve all members of the family. The work is done from a systems approach. The help and support are connected to the environment of the family and take place at the home of the family. At home the Home Visitor has the opportunity to observe the functioning of the family and the interaction between the family members. He/she can provide direct feedback to the parents and the family members can practise new/preferred behaviour in their own context. If possible, the network surrounding the family can be used as an important resource for support.

Empowerment

The support focuses on reinforcing and strengthening competencies and skills of all members of the family. Parents are seen as experts in their own lives whereas the Home

Visitor is the professional expert. This means that the collaboration between the Home Visitor and the parent is one of dialogue and shared responsibility. This is called partnership.

Basic attitude of the Home Visitor

When working with families the attitude of the Home Visitor is the main tool to get the family members to change. The Home Visitor should understand, recognize and acknowledge that their visit might cause some unease with parents. It is good to explicitly show understanding to parents. Parents should feel that they are taken seriously and that their side of the story is being listened to and matters. If they feel that their weaknesses are understood, and their strengths are recognised they will feel much more comfortable and be more collaborative. The Home Visitor doesn't judge. It is important for all parents to be fully informed about every step of the interventions and that the expectations of the Home Visits are clear to them.

The basic attitude of the Home Visitor starts with behaving like a guest when entering the family home. The Home Visitor asks permission for everything he does (i.e., 'is it okay if I sit here?' etc.). By doing this the family will feel respected and will therefore be more willing to open up to the Home Visitor. When talking to family members it is very important for the Home Visitor to pay attention to the use of language; he/she should not use jargon or labels and make sure the family members understand what you are saying.

Support by the Home Visitor needs to focus on reinforcing and strengthening competencies. It also focuses on linking families to supportive family and community networks. If the focus is solely on the problems and the worries, the process will be very discouraging for both the Home Visitor as well as for the family members. The Home Visitor has to show confidence in the ability of the parents to take matters into their own hands. If the Home Visitor is able to show this confidence, parents themselves will also start to feel that it is possible.

Parents need support, not preaching

Parents are the child's first educator, and they want what's best for their child.

- Every individual, group, family and community has strengths. Identify, mobilise, and respect their resources, assets, wisdom and knowledge.
- All parents have hopes and dreams for their children, but families may differ in how they support their children.
- Ask families what they want for their children, their goals and dreams for them. Work with them to help them realise these goals and dreams. What social and life

skills do they deem important for their children to acquire? What knowledge should they possess to be successful as members of their own communities?

- Ask families how they help their children learn certain skills. What do family members know about how to help their children learn certain skills? What do family members know about how to help their children learn?
- Listen to families about what is important to them and together explore ways to help them achieve their goals. Make what is important to them important to you. Seek out their solutions, as well as provide new ideas to them. All those that support the child's development have equal status, value and responsibility.
- When families do not respond, do not assume that it is because they do not want to. Explore other ways to reach them. Every family is different and will have different ways of communicating, preferred times and places to meet, and their own interests and needs.

Mapping services in your community

As a Home Visitor it is very useful to be aware of the most common challenges in the community where you work (socio-economic status of families, enrolment in education, access to health services, employment rate, etc.), to be able to understand the needs of the families and respond to them appropriately.

Families with complex needs are often the least aware about what services they can use, where these are located, and how to access them. Also, they may not know what documents they need to present, including referral notes. This is one significant barrier that prevents many families from making use of services they are entitled to. To provide the necessary support to families, home visitors have to be well-informed about the type of services available and their scope, the eligibility criteria, and the referral pathways.

To do this, home visitors need to map the available services in the community they are working in i.e., all programmes and services for children, parents and families:

- * **Health services**
- * **Childcare**
- * **Pre-school**
- * **Social welfare**
- * **Child protection**
- * **Employment**
- * **Housing**
- * **Women's safe homes**



Once the home visitors have a clear mapping of all relevant services in their community, they should identify effective, individualised referral strategies for the families they work with. Home Visitors may decide to contact the service provider on behalf of a family (warm referrals), or even sometimes accompany families to service providers. Please note that home visitors may have to support parents in completing forms in situations where they don't read or write well.

It is also very useful to be involved in **cross-sectoral working groups active in the community** that meet regularly and share information on local cases and interventions (e.g., the Local Action Team). This will allow home visitors to have direct contact with all services and understand each other's strategies and procedures, while also providing more holistic support to families in need.

2.1.2 Outline of home visits, useful tools, and examples of playful learning activities to use during home visits

Detailed information about the structure of the first home visits and the follow-up visits, tools home visitors can use, and activities they can propose to families during the visits can be found at the following links:

- * [Home Visiting Toolkit. Resources to promote the healthy social and emotional development of children under](#) developed by ICDI.
- * [Supporting Families for Nurturing Care: Resource Modules for Home Visitors](#) developed by UNICEF ECARO and ISSA.
- * [Zero tot Tree Resource List](#)
- * [Assisting Families in Creating Play Environments for Children with Disabilities](#) developed by the Let's Play Project of the University of Buffalo
- * [Play ideas at home for parents and home visitors](#) developed by Inclusion Matter

2.2 Other ways to involve families in children's learning

Family engagement means that families and practitioners working in ECEC services and other learning and play spaces are all involved in the child's learning and development. There is a partnership between services and the family, and a connection to the community. Research shows that when families are engaged and involved with their children's learning, they are in a better position to support their child's development, leading to positive outcomes. Partnerships with families are key to supporting the best outcomes for children and families in the areas of social-emotional and cognitive language, as well as literacy, and physical well-being. When families feel supported, heard,

and integral to their child's "team" in a learning setting, they are more engaged in their child's learning and development. Research shows that when families are engaged in their children's learning, it supports better overall outcomes for children's school readiness. This partnership and engagement can translate to more supportive and open discussions when resources are requested, or when connecting families with services in the community.

Many principles described above in relation to home visits are also valid for building a partnership between services and families. The LAT and the Play Hub staff can play an important role in helping other services, like schools, to develop a better understanding and better relationships with families:

- **Learn about your community and the resources that are available.** Think about programmes, services, or resources that might benefit the families in your learning programme and offer this information to the parents.
- **Hold ongoing discussions with families about their child's overall development.** Provide resources to parents to help them learn about concrete ways to encourage children growth and wellness at home and in their community. Learn about local community health clinics, early intervention organisations, and early childhood mental health centres. Provide information to families about clinics or centres in their local area. Learn about the immediate contacts in the community to support families in crisis.
- **Learn about the strengths that families bring to your programme and engage families** based on the strengths and successes that they have with their child. Support families and have conversations with them to identify their strengths, and to connect those strengths to the interactions they have with their child. Build upon the parent's knowledge and skills. Offer resources or opportunities for families to connect with community organisations, like parent groups, parent diversity councils, or community action groups to share their knowledge and experiences.
- **Think about culture and language and respect diversity.** Educators who share information in a collaborative way show that they value their partners. Culturally and linguistically responsive educators strive to learn about and understand a family's culture. They value and strive to make children's learning and curricula, communication with children and families, and partnerships with families respectful, inclusive, and welcoming of each family's culture and language. Educators who actively learn about and seek understanding with the family are in a better position to help the family connect to services or resources. ECE (Early Childhood Education) professionals support families and children when they intentionally learn about a family's culture and language.
- **Following up with families** is an important step after a resource is requested by a family or offered by the practitioners. Sometimes, a family may not follow through with a concern. This could be because the family may not yet be

emotionally ready to hear or see the concern. Another reason may be that a family needs extra support to follow through with a contact, for example, a phone and quiet place to call the resource or organization. The relationship, support, and understanding the family receives from the practitioners are key to continued discussions with the family as they navigate concerns and explore resources.

2.2.3 Working with Families of Children with Special Needs

Communication is especially important when working with families with children with special needs. Some children will come to the Play Hub knowing they have special needs, and other families will learn that their child has a disability while in the Play Hub or later. Families may or may not receive support from services in the community. Regardless, **families can be overwhelmed by what feels like a constant flow of suggestions and appointments** to help their children learn and develop. These families may need more help supporting their children and may turn to practitioners for assistance with connecting to other services or agencies.

Regardless of how special education services are delivered, working with professionals from outside agencies helps things run smoothly for families and ensures that all the professionals and caregivers in a child's life are communicating. This lessens family stress by reducing the need for primary caregivers to act as the in-between messenger of important information.

Effective Practices

The first step to establishing strong relationships with families of children with special needs is to spend time discovering their wishes and concerns for their children, and to learn about the meaningful activities they participate in at home. Maintaining this communication throughout a child's participation in the Play Hub is essential. Ask questions to learn about strategies that work at home and consider using them in the Play Hub. Through interactions practitioners can build trust so that both staff and families feel comfortable sharing their child's strengths and concerns that they may have. For families already receiving support from other professionals, ongoing communication with both families and professionals is critical to maintain consistency between the Play Hub and home environments. When all the caregivers and professionals in a child's life are consistently using effective strategies to promote development and outcomes, children are more likely to benefit and learn new skills.

In the Play Hub's collaboration with families, it is important to acknowledge and respect families' strengths and unique backgrounds, while realizing their ability to make decisions that are right for them. This means that when a family's wishes and decisions are different from what practitioners would recommend, practitioners will respond to the family's decisions with respect.

Look at the following guidelines that reflect a **family-centred practice** that can be used in working with families of children with special needs:

- Recognizing the family as a constant in the child's life; caregivers and service systems may come and go.
- Facilitating collaboration between families and professionals.
- Honouring and respecting family diversity in all dimensions (cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, spiritual, and socioeconomic).
- Recognizing family strengths and the different approaches that families may use to cope.
- Sharing unbiased and honest information with family members on an ongoing basis.
- Encouraging family-to-family support and networking.
- Acknowledging and incorporating the developmental needs of the child and other family members into your practice.
- Designing and implementing services that are accessible, culturally and linguistically respectful and responsive, flexible, and based on family-identified needs.

Chapter 3 - Families and the Play Hubs: Supporting parents through guided activities

The importance of a community-based approach to creating a supportive and healthy environment for parents and children to develop has been outlined in the previous section. While other social actors are vital for child development, parents remain the primary caregivers who play the most essential role in shaping a child's life, especially regarding their early development (0-6). Parents influence their child's development through their beliefs and behaviours, both conscious and subconscious, which can have great positive or negative impacts on their children's development and well-being. Thus, the **triangular cooperation between schools (and other formal services), Play Hubs and children's homes** that the 'TOY for Inclusion – Access for All' project seeks to foster requires a specific focus on attitudes towards relationships and different parental styles within the home.

The following section outlines primarily the importance of responsive parenting, which seeks to build trust and healthy communication between children and parents. The benefits of responsive parenting are explained, including the importance of developing healthy communication for parents of children with disabilities. The importance of fathers' involvement in their children's healthy development through responsive parenting is also outlined. Furthermore, fathers' increasing role in responsive parenting is presented as one of the methods of reducing the negative effects of family tension, decreasing the likelihood of domestic violence and child abuse.

In this section, the emphasis is on Play Hubs. However, all activities and tips can be adapted and used in other settings.

3.1 Responsive Parenting

An essential foundation for children's healthy development is the presence of parents who are actively engaged in their child's life and who are committed to fostering positive interactions with their child. This parenting style **reflects a "love without condition" approach which embodies the practice of responsive parenting**. Children strongly desire moments of connection with their parents, e.g., a smile or a song. These seemingly simple actions can positively influence the psychological wellbeing of children, which includes emotional, cognitive and social dimensions. If parents are emotionally absent or impatient, their children cannot form the necessary positive connections with them. This

has negative effects on all aspects of children's overall wellbeing. This could make children feel disconnected and frustrated, leading to increased family tension, learning difficulties, and acts of deviance or lashing out. Instead, if parents are a reliable source of patience and willing interaction then children feel safe and secure to learn, relax and form positive bonds.

Responsive Parenting is built upon several principles:

- 
- * **Trust**
 - * **Engaged and proactive interaction**
 - * **Patience**
 - * **Grace (forgiveness)**
 - * **Communication**

Practising responsive parenting can lead to healthier family relations with less tension and frustration, which means less arguing, violence or hostility between family members. This safe and friendly environment does not have to be perfect at all times, but a general stability fostered by responsive parents will provide children the love and nurturing environment necessary for physical, emotional and educational growth.

This **safe and engaging environment** is vital for children with disabilities, whose upbringing is often more volatile and frustrating due to the cognitive or physical obstacles they face leaving parents feeling more tired and frustrated. For parents of children with disabilities children, learning about responsive parenting is built on patience, simple engaging activities and connections that can aid their ability to communicate with their child using different methods. This is important for alleviating tension, improving family relations, and fostering a safe environment where the child can improve their cognitive abilities without fear of shame or anger.

It is important to remind parents that creating a **bond of love** with their children does not happen automatically, it is a **process** that starts with responding to their child's physical and emotional needs.

The responsibility for children's well-being can seem overwhelming, but simple activities can aid a child in developing in these aforementioned areas. Below is a list of several simple activities that parents can do with their children that demonstrate their love and willingness to spend time together. All of these activities also help a child's cognitive development, which is vital to their ability to learn and for positive behaviour.

Furthermore, activities such as dancing, or painting helps a child express their emotions and release potential frustrations or excess energy which can often be the catalyst for tensions between children and their parents. By diffusing these tensions in a positive and fun way, both parents and their children will feel more relaxed.

Simple activities of responsive parenting for children 0-6:

- * Gentle physical contact: hugs, picking them up, smiles and soft touches to facilitate skin to skin contact.
- * Talking
- * Making kind facial expressions and be mindful of your body language when feeling negative emotions around your child
- * Singing lullabies
- * Telling stories
- * Talk about emotions
- * Counting
- * Dancing
- * Make belief play – expand and explore their imagination through play e.g. princess
- * Naming things around and learning colours together
- * Simple games such as peek a boo, hide and seek or I spy with my little eye

Some of these actions are focused on early child development (age 0-6), however they encompass the need for parents to show affection or attention to their children which should remain in an adapted form as the child gets older.

Activities for children over 6 can include:

- * Child storytelling
- * Reading together
- * Learning how to cook/bake together

Simple tasks that reflect a parent's desire to interact with their child helps build trust and a healthy sense of belonging in the family which in turn makes children feel more confident, assured and less likely to act out in aggression or frustration.

Importantly, **all of the above-mentioned simple activities can be used or adapted for children who with disabilities**. For parents of children with disabilities it may seem overwhelming to care for their overall well-being when they may have certain obstacles to development, however **the core principles of responsive parenting remain just as important and applicable for children with disabilities**. Patience, kindness and a willingness to interact even if activities have to be adapted or simplified are vital, and all parents can achieve these actions without fear of failing.



Suggestion 1 for the Play Hub:

The Play Hubs can support parents in discovering and practising responsive parenting by organising some of the above-mentioned activities in the Play Hub (also targeting specifically children with special needs and their parents). A follow-up reflection moment after the activity can help parents understand how they were encouraged to communicate and interact during the activity and what they can do to model the same behaviours at home.



Suggestion 2 for the Play Hub:

Create laminated cards with a list of simple activities that parents can do to positively interact with their child, using the list above as an example. The lyrics to a lullaby or bedtime story can be printed on the back to give parents inspiration, encouraging parents to make that activity a bedtime routine for their children. This will foster a loving environment and aid parents in knowing simple steps can help generate positive family relations.

Cards should be presented to parents during a workshop at the Play Hub and also introduced during home visits.



3.2 The need to positively motivate parents

Presenting the need for responsive parenting as a current flaw of certain parents will hinder the ability for parents to learn how to foster healthy relationships and subsequently damage their child's development.

Therefore, **it is very important that parents are motivated to care for their children's health and wellbeing rather than be criticised for potential inadequacies**. This is very important also for parents of children with special needs, who might feel ashamed of their children's behaviours or incapacity to perform tasks the same way other children do. Parents must not be made to feel inadequate by facilitators, but instead presented with an exciting opportunity to improve family relations. A method for motivating parents lies in one of the components of responsive parenting: the acknowledgment that **parents, too, have the right to play and relax**. In order for parents to feel comfortable telling stories, giving a hug or reading together with their children they must feel relaxed and able to do so. **The Play Hub itself should be an inviting and relaxing space for parents**, where they do not feel judged for how they interact but are instead met with gentle tips and advice on how to play and engage with their children.



Suggestion 3 for the Play Hub:

Many adult members of the Roma community have not had adequate education, whereby illiteracy rates are much higher than national averages, leaving parents often unable to engage in activities such as reading with their children. The Play Hub could offer simple literacy courses for parents to foster their ability to be responsive parents without leaving them feeling stressed or frustrated.



Suggestion 4 for the Play Hub:

It can be intimidating for parents to ask for help or to ask questions about caring for children, especially those with disabilities as they are scared that they will be stigmatised or branded as inadequate parents. There should be an anonymous question/help box at the Play Hub, in which parents are able to write questions about behaviours they feel are difficult or are struggling with. Answers could be discussed at bi-fortnightly meetings or support groups for parents. If possible, having a local trusted expert answer questions would aid parents in validating those answers and implementing the advice in their family life.



It is also important to recognize the stressful nature of many families' living situations. Poverty and lack of employment result in high tensions over economic provisions at home. Parents cannot be expected provide all the materials for activities with their children, nor should their everyday stresses be ignored. **Instead, the difficulty of responsive parenting should be openly discussed, and parents should be praised for their positive aspects of parenting.** Also, parents should be able to receive small materials such as crayons or access to the toy library in order to begin practising relational play with their children.

Importantly, for parents of children with disabilities, simple tasks can be challenging and produce obstacles regarding behavioural difficulties. These [tip sheets](#) help parents to plan to avoid potentially challenging behaviour, and provide tips on how to manage that behaviour if it occurs. Using these sheets to educate parents on how to manage behaviour will make them feel more in control.

3.3 The importance of father involvement in responsive parenting

The responsibility of raising children and ensuring their healthy development is a huge task for parents and can be emotionally and physically draining. The difficulty of parenting can often be exacerbated by patriarchal values of gender roles, which are deeply entrenched in the majority of world cultures. One example is the division of domestic

labour which is predominantly the woman's role, including childcare. This can result in over-exhausted mothers and fathers who have had fewer experiences with their children, often resulting in tense relationships and frustrations between a father and his child. Therefore, it is important that **both parents** are able to effectively care for and communicate with their child for both the parent and child's quality of life.

This section outlines the importance of aiding fathers to get involved in parenting by adopting responsive parenting principles, seeking to improve their gender equity with women in the domestic sphere and also to facilitate healthier child development, especially for children with disabilities. A large body of evidence confirms that fathers' active involvement in their child's upbringing is generally positive for children, women and other men (CARE, 2015).

CARE International Balkans (2015) have created a **three-step themed campaign to encourage men to become active responsive parents** and provided a format through which they can achieve this:

1. **Be Proud & Show It:** Men are often taught that their role is the provider, rather than emotionally available, caring and active father. Instead, men should be encouraged to be proud that they are aiming to be good fathers and that they want to be equally involved in their child's emotional and social welfare. Communities will learn that an involved father is a respected father if fathers are proud of their behaviour. Being a good father takes strength and is admirable.
2. **Just Play:** Being a parent comes with many responsibilities, many of which seem daunting. But, as section 2 of this toolkit outlines, learning through play is incredibly important to children's cognitive and emotional development whilst also aiding in greeting good bonds between father and child. Fathers are encouraged to not put pressure on themselves to always teach, but learn to enjoy playing with their children which will build their bond whilst providing creative stimulation for the child.
3. **Be Brave- Show Affection:** Gender roles often teach men that they must be stoic and unemotional. Furthermore, men are taught to avoid showing 'weakness' such as struggling with the responsibilities of parenthood or facing emotional difficulty. Instead, men should be encouraged to allow some of this 'weakness' to actually be seen as a strength of them trying their best to be a good fathers to their children. Fathers who are willing to show affection are especially important as children who have emotionally close relationships with their fathers are more likely to demonstrate empathy, confidence, and be connected with their peers resulting in better mental health.



Suggestion 5 for the Play Hub:

Print out the three themed campaigns by CARE and hand them out to fathers in the community, either those who attend the play hub and seminars hosted (see Suggestion 7) or to the general father population. It would be good to design a session that explains these three themes to fathers and encourages them to follow the three principles.



Suggestion 6 for the Play Hub:

The Play Hub could set up specific activity afternoons meant for fathers and their children. Activities could include learning how to plant plants together, painting together, doing simple colour and number problems, or making music on pots and pans/simple instruments. By facilitating a specific activity day each week for fathers and their children it will encourage fathers to be proactive in playful learning with their child, through this interaction they will create lines of healthy communication, experience joy together and have a chance to step out of classic gender roles to engage with their children. If fathers are reluctant to go to the Play Hub, similar activities could be facilitated during home visits



These father and child activities should be encouraged for fathers of very young children, as the first year of life is when the establishment of a secure attachment between infant and primary caregiver occurs best. For this bond of emotional communication to develop, the caregiver, in this case the father, must be psychologically and biologically attuned to the child's needs, emotions and mental state.

Fathers and Domestic Violence:

The focus of responsive parenting seeks to strengthen families and the bonds with their children for better communication and emotional welfare of both parents and children. Domestic abuse is an obstacle to healthy child development as children can become extremely anxious, struggle to form healthy boundaries, develop high levels of insecurity, anger issues, and difficulties with self-confidence. These consequences can negatively affect their ability to form good relationships, learn well and make safe choices. Domestic abuse includes aggression, physical violence, emotional abuse, manipulation, threatening behaviour and controlling behaviour that often escalates from a small habit such as shouting during an argument to a more serious behaviour such as physical assault due to an argument. It is important for the Play Hub to educate parents, especially fathers (see below) on the warning signs of domestic abuse and family tensions, and how they can use

responsive parenting techniques and awareness seminars to unlearn negative behaviour and learn positive parenting skills for the benefit of their children.

Importantly, for the Play Hubs to protect children from domestic violence the Play Hubs must first seek to help families reduce the high levels of domestic violence against women and wives within Roma communities:

“Where there is violence against women in a family, children are also at risk. It may be a slow transition, but eventually most children face similar ‘disciplinary action’ as their mothers in these households” (Colombini et. al., 2012).

Research conducted by Colombini et al (2012) examined how Slovakian Roma communities are deeply patriarchal. In a Slovakian Roma survey, 46% of Roma men stated that it was appropriate to ‘discipline their wives using violence’ if they disobeyed or disappointed them. This high figure of domestic abuse acceptance reflects difficulties in healthy child development, since children in homes where physical violence is used for discipline are more likely to develop anxiety, feelings of inferiority, self-harming behaviours, mistrust towards others, timidity, aggression, and to perpetrate violent practices on their own children when they grow up (the cycle of violence). All of these factors stunt a child’s overall well-being whilst also threatening their ability to be a positive member of the community or continue successfully in their education.

These negative impacts of domestic violence are true not only for children who face child abuse, but also for those who live in homes where violence against women is acceptable or practiced (children who witness domestic violence). Therefore, changing attitudes towards violence for the sake of children’s development also requires changing attitudes towards women, control and discipline.

Furthermore, according to a UN commissioned study conducted by Groce (2005), children with SEN and disabilities are often more exposed and susceptible to domestic violence than other children as their behaviours can be more difficult to understand, resulting in increased communication problems and frustrations between parents, which lead to violence and anger. Also, children with disabilities struggle to understand their own emotions and behaviours, leading to increased ‘misbehaviour’ or frustrated outbursts which parents can’t always understand or manage healthily, resulting in increased discipline or attempts at control. This can result in high tension households, where children are more vulnerable to child abuse.

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Suggestion 7 for the Play Hub:

Positive male role models are vital in tackling negative social practices or harmful culture. If possible, training a well-known and trusted Roma male from the community in the importance of eliminating domestic abuse both for their wives, their children and their own well-being and family happiness would aid in providing other Roma men a positive example of masculinity without the acceptance of domestic violence.

This trained Roma role model could host talks and Q&A's in an open and honest fashion, as an opportunity for men to not be judged for this issue but talk about it and implement positive new practices regarding their behaviour towards their wives and children when they face confrontation.

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Importantly, the link between poverty and domestic violence has been challenged by many studies, which reveal that domestic violence occurs regardless of socio-economic status, meaning that economic growth is not the answer to reducing domestic violence. Instead, it is vital to increase education and awareness about domestic violence. Therefore, it is important for the Play Hubs and staff to not take a “problem focused” approach, which is often used in child protection programs, but to **explore and encourage positive aspects and strengths** that family members see in each other or are acknowledged by other people or agencies. This is where the Play Hubs are vital access points for families to learn about positive parenting, such as playful learning, but to also safely tackle negative behaviours such as traits of domestic abuse masked as discipline.

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Idea for fathers:

The majority of domestic abuse, both physical and emotional can stem from fathers who themselves were abused as children. It is difficult to stop this cycle if fathers do not know what behaviours are damaging or dangerous to their child's development. Therefore, the Toy Hub should distribute laminated cards with lists of behaviours to avoid showing towards their children to men after they have attended the positive male role model seminars. These lists should include:

- Shouting or raised voices
- Name calling or swearing at children
- Aggressive body language – don't intimidate children through physical presence
- Don't use physical violence or intimidation
- Contradictory behaviour – stick to clear rules and don't practice hypocritical discipline
- Don't mock children for showing 'weakness' or expressing emotions
- Try not to be impatient
- Walk away if you feel like lashing out – verbal or physical



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3.4 Responsive parenting and children with disabilities

Children with disabilities, whether learning or physical, often have a hindered ability to perceive their surroundings including the attitude and behaviour of others (i.e., parents), leading to high levels of frustration or anxiety that often results in behavioural difficulties. Parents, who often lack understanding of healthy communication tactics, can easily become frustrated with their child's difficulty in communicating and turn to more aggressive parenting tactics, showing frustration or dismissal of the child's feelings. This results in tension for the whole family.



Suggestion 8 for the Play Hub:

Educating parents about the realities of disabilities and how to care for children with them, especially behavioural disabilities: parents are currently unequipped to provide emotional, social, physical and educational well-being to children with disabilities. An important component of this is education over what behaviours are linked to certain disabilities and how they are not merely issues of 'lack of discipline'.

These tip sheets clearly describe different disabilities, how to spot behaviours and signs and tips on how to manage those behaviours whilst helping the child develop healthily



Suggestion 9 for the Play Hub:

Increasing communication with children with disabilities through sensory and playful learning: Positive communication, patience and a shared joy are important things for a child's development which are fostered through sensory or playful learning. Children with disabilities can face anxiety when learning about the world around them as it can be more overwhelming for them. Therefore, playing with colours, sounds and shapes help children to learn about their abilities and the world in a structured and creative environment, whilst their parents learn about their child's capabilities and communication styles or needs. This double learning will slowly aid communication and love between the parent and child, growing patience and improving family relations/decreasing tension



Educational awareness about different kinds of disabilities, their effects upon children and what behaviour is often linked to them, is vital towards this process of improved communication and "love without conditions". The stigma against disabilities, especially learning ones, are strong in the Roma community (Colombini et al 2012). Studies in Slovakia have found that Roma parents often do not recognise behavioural difficulties as 'real disabilities'. Therefore, behavioural issues that stem from disorders such as ADHD or autism are seen as lack of discipline, resulting in stricter and more drastic measures of parenting that often result in physical discipline or verbal aggression. This fosters poor

communication, hindered cognitive development for the child and higher family tensions. Parents of children with disabilities are often under heavy strain, which also drives frustration and 'burnout'. This strain calls for two approaches which can both be facilitated through the Play Hub and its connections to local support services:

Regarding these approaches, **it is vital that the agency of the parents is honoured**. If parents are supposed to move forward and learn about or honour the agency and merit of their children with disabilities, then they themselves must be shown respect and have their agency and knowledge as parents respected. Roma communities have deep mistrust towards services due to discrimination, thus any experts or speakers who lead talks aimed at improving awareness and parenting practices must acknowledge the hard work and stress that parents face, but also respect their knowledge of their children's talents and difficulties. By doing so, different actors can work together to improve the development of their children rather than face tension or feel blamed for problems.

It must be noted that improving love and communication between parents and children, especially children with disabilities, through support and responsive parenting is a process and not a quick fix. Furthermore, studies have shown that **parents who feel supported achieve better outcomes for their children and are able to foster more positive family relations**, importantly they are also less likely to experience 'burnout' which is commonly faced by parents of children with disabilities. This process requires the support of the community including friends and more service-based support such as the Play Hub.

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Suggestion 10 for the Play Hub:

Parents of children with disabilities can often feel isolated and overwhelmed by the high levels of care and support that their children need. The Play Hub could create a paired system within parent support groups in which parents are connected to another parent who has children with similar needs. This could provide a means for parents to be emotionally supported whilst also encouraging each other in implementing responsive parenting techniques.

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3.5 Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights and links to healthy child development:

Access to adequate sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) education is intrinsically linked to healthy parents and subsequently physically and emotionally healthy children. The umbrella term SRHR includes themes which are essential for positive child development because of their links to gender equality and women's wellbeing, their impact on maternal, new-born, child, and adolescent health, and their roles in shaping

healthy family relations and safe spaces for children to grow up in without facing control or abuse.

Providing SRHR lessons and child health classes to parents in order to prioritise healthy child development and family relationships aligns with a **holistic approach** to stimulating healthy development for SEN children since it focuses on the child, their family and their everyday environment. This approach recognises the importance of non-formal and formal education to fulfil children’s rights to healthy development and their rights to learn. The Play Hub’s involvement with SRHR education will support this holistic approach by educating parents with the intention of increasing healthy family relations and physical health in order to prevent disabilities in children.

A significant focus of SRHR is the aim to protect women’s reproductive health and well-being, by eliminating preventable maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality, ensuring quality sexual and reproductive health services like access to contraception, and addressing sexually transmitted infections (STI) and cervical cancer. Importantly, violence against women and girls is also an SRHR priority which links to healthy child development since abuse, either as a child, woman or mother can have severe adverse effects on the individuals’ health and mental well-being. It can also create tense and anxious home environments for the whole family. The infographic below highlights several of the major themes of SRHR:



Source: www.youthcoalition.org

Family Planning and Child Development:

The majority of Roma families have several children. Combined with low levels of economic wealth, high levels of unemployment and impoverished conditions, this high birth rate in Roma communities contributes to high levels of family strain and unhealthy living conditions for children to grow up in.

Introducing education on **Family planning and supporting** this through providing access to resources such as contraceptives is an essential element to improving the **SRH rights of Roma women**, ultimately resulting in less strained families both economically and emotionally. However, increasing family planning measures is often made difficult by the deeply entrenched **patriarchal values** of many societies, according to Colombini et. al., (2012) especially in Roma society:

‘Many Roma women may not be able to choose a contraceptive method of their choice, or to negotiate for condom use with their partner, as they may be accused of infidelity or not wanting to bear children.’ Colombini et. al., (2012)

Even if women are provided the opportunity to gain access to family planning resources, their husband’s views on their sexual rights might remain an obstacle to their ability to use contraceptives. A Slovakian study found that **61% of Roma women did not use any contraceptive methods** which can result in the lack of ability for family planning. Large families can be a blessing; however, they can place a strain on resources and parents’ ability to prioritise **health and holistic child development**, especially with children with disabilities who need one to one care. Also, it is a fundamental right for women to be able to make choices over their bodies and reproductivity, supporting these rights through contraception education and access can aid women in becoming equal partners to their husbands.

The conservative society prioritises male education, ultimately encouraging men into employment and women into a domestic role. Therefore, Roma women are often less educated than Roma men which **limits their knowledge on health care, their bodies and their rights**. It also means that Roma women are typically less aware of their SRH rights such as consent, choice and contraception as:

1. They are often **not present in schools**, where sex education is delivered (albeit, not always to an adequate standard).
2. They have **higher rates of illiteracy** than men, so adverts, pamphlets, and information available from clinics, school or on social media are not always understandable for these women.

This lack of education makes it easier for men to control women’s choices regarding family planning and their bodies. Roma Women in Slovakia also have one of the highest abortion rates for any community. Whilst abortions are an SRH right, not all are performed in safe conditions and can have negative health impacts. Also abortion is not a suitable

alternative for contraception due to the trauma and shame many women face from undergoing them.

Furthermore, lack of or low levels of education also have significant impacts on women's experiences with pregnancy and their ability to administer pre-natal and post-natal care for their children. A study conducted in Slovakia found that **Roma women were twice as likely to have complications during pregnancy**, as well as premature births and low-weight babies. These complications can result in hindered child development and result in negative health effects for both the mother and the child.

Not all disabilities are preventable, and mothers should not be made to feel guilty for having a child with disabilities. However, **many disabilities are preventable** and providing in-depth SRHR and prenatal education will aid parents in understanding and preventing some complications such as: **fetal alcohol syndrome** (linked to maternal alcohol use in pregnancy); **miscarriage or premature birth** or **low birth weight** linked complications (linked to maternal smoking during pregnancy); neural tube defects such as **Spina Bifida** (linked to folic acid deficiency in pregnancy, maternal smoking and exposure to second-hand smoke) and **congenital hearing loss** (hearing loss present at birth). This hearing loss is linked to maternal infections during pregnancy, such as rubella or herpes simplex virus, premature birth, drug and alcohol use while pregnant or maternal diabetes.

Importantly, preventing disabilities through understanding and practising good SRH rights and prenatal care requires access to disposable income and access to adequate health services. Poverty hinders parent's abilities to access these assets, proper nutrition and good living conditions, while also being associated with higher rates of drug abuse. As noted by Ives & Lee (2018), all these issues, catalysed by poverty, may contribute to higher rates of cognitive and behavioural disabilities in both Roma and non-Roma children. The Roma community in Slovakia face adverse economic difficulties and therefore are more vulnerable to the negative effects of child development that poverty can stimulate.

Preventing disabilities through education and access to SRH resources requires early intervention; childcare for healthy development and the mother's health must start before and during pregnancy rather than at the end or after birth. This early prevention thus requires reliable and adequate access to SRH and **pre-natal classes** which teach women about things to avoid during pregnancy such as smoking, alcohol consumption, drug consumption and high-stress levels. Classes on prenatal health can also teach healthy habits for mothers such as dietary advice, small exercise, mindfulness, and stress reduction. For the Roma community, access to adequate health care and classes is difficult and often unavailable. Women do not often have the opportunity to speak to medical professionals about pregnancy or reproductive health concerns. Furthermore, if they do have access to healthcare, they often feel marginalised or

stigmatised by non-Roma health staff and face barriers in accessing information such as language and educational level barriers. Whilst the Play Hub cannot act as a replacement for health services, they can provide a **bridge between mothers/women and health information by hosting SRH and Prenatal health classes**. The trust between the Roma community and the Play Hub means that women will feel safe to speak about their SRHR concerns and accept the information provided by the trained staff of the Play Hub.



Suggestion for the Play Hub: Women-only SRHR lessons (by local trusted experts)

Organise women only meetings which are a safe space to discuss SRHR related issues such as contraception, husband's control over contraception, sexual health questions and pregnancy health. These sessions should start with very simple SRHR topics which are easy to understand and so women grow a feeling of safety before more serious topics, such as spousal abuse, are addressed. Single sex discussion groups are important so that participants feel comfortable discussing and sharing information about these culturally sensitive and often taboo topics.

SRHR classes for teenagers:

The Slovakia Roma community has a high rate of child marriage and young adult pregnancies. This makes it even more important that in-depth sex education and SRHR lessons are administered to young people. Investing in healthy mindsets regarding SRHR at a young age will increase the ability for those people to practise the skills and rights they have learnt.



Furthermore, the Roma community has conservative views of purity, whereby sex is not spoken about openly in homes and the importance of virginity results in young women getting married without ever having spoken about family planning, **consent**, or **contraception** options. For example, a study found that 36% of Roma women in Slovakia are married by the age of 16; **early marriage has significant impacts on the health of the mother and her child**. Also, women married at this young age are susceptible to abuse. The ICDI's 'TOY for Inclusion: Access to all' research report (2020) highlighted the need for good SRHR and prenatal education and protection of women's rights in the Slovakian Roma community. Educating the Roma community on women's rights and reproductive health needs is important for reducing the number of children with preventable disabilities and fostering healthy communities for children to grow up in.

It is important to remember that communities are often protective of their own values, especially marginalized communities, such as the Slovakian Roma community, who feel that they are stigmatised. Therefore, it is not constructive nor right to openly disapprove

of their practices regarding religion or marriage as it may further entrench feelings of marginalisation, mistrust or hostility. Changing mindsets regarding women's access to SRHR knowledge or their value is a slow process that requires prolonged exposure to education and awareness for both men and women.



**Suggestion for the Play Hub:
Men-only SRHR lessons (by local trusted experts)**

Start with simple SRHR lessons such as contraception and STD awareness. Classes on childcare and pre-natal care should also be available to men who want to support their partners.

It is vital in these men's sessions to start thinking about gender equality. For example, about equal roles in family planning – men should be taught that women using contraception is not a higher risk of cheating but will instead result in better family planning, reproductive health, and overall happiness for both partners.

Also, teaching men about domestic abuse and the impact it has on them, their wives and their children's emotional and physical well-being is paramount in these sessions. This must be done slowly using a role-model the men in the community respect.



A combined approach to Responsive Parenting:

In order for the 'TOY for Inclusion: Access for All' project to support families in creating **healthy family environments, to support inclusive education and to foster positive child development for children with and without special needs**, it is important to take a combined approach of home visits, teaching and facilitating responsive parenting and providing adequate SRHR education. If only one area is tackled, progress will be made but it will be limited. Instead, a holistic approach of combining these three factors allows for families to learn positive parenting skills whilst tackling some of the root issues such as misogyny and inadequate education. Doing so will help address related issues like domestic abuse and lack of interest in education.

One of the project's final goals is to make sure that the **most vulnerable families** increase their knowledge of responsive parenting, child development and playful learning, and at the same time develop a sense of trust towards services in their communities. Ultimately, all families should become regular visitors of local services (education, health, culture, social services) while these services also become more accessible and inclusive for them.

Chapter 4 – Domestic violence, child abuse and neglect: guidelines for Play Hub staff

Play Hubs aim to be a safe space for children and families to play and connect. However, they receive a variety of people facing different needs. In some cases, staff members can encounter women and children that are experiencing especially complicated circumstances. Domestic violence, child abuse, or neglect can be known to or suspected by Play Hub staff members. It is possible to prepare Play Hubs staff for this.

In this chapter we will provide staff with guidelines and support for addressing these issues. In order to do so, it addresses the following questions and steps.



1. HOW TO IDENTIFY DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT?

A set of **definitions** of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect are provided to properly identify types and signs of violence.

2. HOW TO PREPARE FOR CASES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT IN THE PLAY HUB?

To properly prepare for addressing these cases, a set of steps are presented. These include guidelines for Play Hubs to revise their own **safeguarding policies** and to create own **protocols** to specifically address the types of violence identified.

3. HOW TO RESPOND TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT CASES IN THE PLAY HUB?

Practical tips and **communication guidelines** are provided to talk to children and women who are victims of violence.

4.1. How to identify domestic violence, child abuse and neglect cases in the Play Hub?

Everyone has the right to feel safe in their family. However, family violence is a widespread social problem that disproportionately affects women and children. When there is violence against women in a family, children are also at risk.

It is important to state that no violence is justifiable. Any form of maltreatment - like domestic violence, child abuse and neglect - is a violation of the fundamental rights of any person, especially if it is a child. Being a victim of maltreatment has lifelong physical and mental health consequences for the individual as a child, adolescent, and adult. It can affect their confidence, abilities, development, relationships, and future parenting skills.

Even though violence against children and women is widespread, it can be preventable, and actions can be taken to minimize risks. It is important to consider that often the individuals committing violence against children and women are people that they trust the most. Most child abuse occurs within the family.

Understanding what domestic violence, child abuse, and neglect are and how to identify them is the first step toward dealing with them effectively. This chapter discusses several types of violence and how to identify them, as well as the risk and protective factors that can help us prevent them.

4.1.1. Definitions and signs of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect¹⁰

Domestic violence or abuse: a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic and psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone. Domestic abuse can happen to anyone across race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender. It can occur within a range of relationships including couples who are married, living together or dating. Domestic violence affects people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels.

Signs of Domestic Abuse (of a partner):

- Embarrass or make fun of the victim in front of friends or family
- Put down the accomplishments of the victim

¹⁰ Source: Dealing with Child Abuse. Available at:

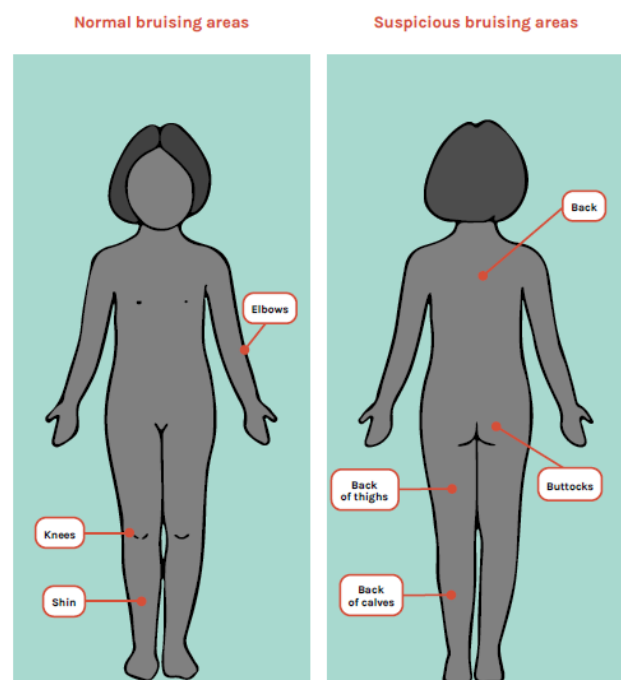
<https://www.socialserviceworkforce.org/system/files/resource/files/Child%20Abuse%20Handbook.pdf>

- Makes the victim feel like they are unable to make decisions
- Uses intimidation or threats to gain compliance
- Tell the victim that they are nothing without them
- Treat them roughly (grab, push, pinch, shove or hit)
- Call them several times a night or show up to make sure there where they said they would be
- Use drugs or alcohol as an excuse for saying hurtful things or abusing them
- Blames the victim for how they feel or act
- Pressure the victim sexually for things they aren't ready for or don't wish to do
- Makes the victim feel like there is "no way out" of the relationship
- Prevents the victim from doing things you want (for example, spending time with friends or family)
- Try to keep the person from leaving after a fight or leaves them somewhere after a fight to "teach them a lesson".

Child Physical Abuse: intentional use of physical force against a child that results in harm to the child 's health, survival, development or dignity.

Physical signs on the child:

- Bruises and wounds especially on the head, face, hands, back of thighs, back of calves, feet and buttocks (*see picture to distinguish normal from suspicious bruising areas*)
- Burns
- Fractures
- Dislocations
- Fading bruises or other marks noticeable after an abuse
- Delays in seeking medical attention



Child Sexual Abuse: involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. It includes **penetrative** (for example vaginal or anal sex) and **non-penetrative** acts (for example touching of breasts, smacking of buttocks, touching of private parts). It may also include **non-contact activities**, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of pornographic materials, watching sexual activities (in video houses and cinemas) or

encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways (for example encouraging children to expose sexual organs).

Physical signs on the child:

- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Wearing torn, stained or bloody underwear
- Pain, swelling or itching of genitals
- Bruises, cuts or bleeding on genitals or anal area
- Pain when urinating or defecating
- Discharge from the vagina or penis, or a sexually transmitted disease
- Starts to wet his/her underwear, after having already developed bladder control.

Emotional and Behavioural signs on the child:

- Withdrawal from play and social activities
- Sexual behavior, play or conversation inappropriate to the child's age
- Exhibits excessive or unusual touching of genitals
- Tells you that he/she has a secret he/she is not allowed to tell anyone
- Shows unusual dislike for a particular adult
- Reports sexual abuse

Child Emotional Abuse: persistent attacks on a child's sense of self. It can take the form of habitual humiliation, continuous shouting, the threat of doing harm or being driven out of the home, public shaming, constant criticism, name-calling, belittling, excessive teasing, ignoring a child, punishing normal social behaviours, exposure to domestic violence, rejection, or the constant reiteration that a child is stupid or bad and withholding praise and affection. Other emotionally abusive acts **include forced isolation, intimidation, discrimination, exploitation, unappreciative comments** used on a child, **terrorizing** or routinely **making unreasonable demands on a child** and not allowing children to join other children in play.

Emotional Signs on the child:

- Timidity and nervousness
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Sleep disturbances
- Physical complaints with no medical basis (headache, nausea, pain)
- Behaviour inappropriate to age (acting younger or older than their stage of development)
- Aggressive behaviour towards others
- Depression
- Developmental delay
- Low self-esteem and lack of confidence

- Anxious for attention
- Always blamed within the family

Child Neglect: failing to meet the child's basic needs for adequate supervision, food, clothing, shelter, safety, hygiene, medical care, education, love and affection and failure to use available resources to meet those needs.

Signs on the child:

- Child is underweight or small for their age, is always hungry, is not kept clean, is inappropriately dressed or does not receive needed medical care)
- Child seems apathetic and unresponsive with no apparent medical cause
- Child thrives away from home environment (not worried about returning home/ happy to be away from home)
- Child frequently absent from educational settings
- Child left with adults who are intoxicated or violent
- Child abandoned or left alone for excessive periods
- Inadequate supervision and monitoring
- Poor performance in educational settings and inappropriate behaviour at home
- Reports that there is no one at home to provide care

Online sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in a sexual activity through a digital platform, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. It can include: (1) Non-consensual sharing of sexual images and/or videos, (2) Exploitation, coercion and threats, (3) Sexualized bullying and (4) Unwanted sexualization. It is important to acknowledge that these four main types are often overlapping or experienced simultaneously. Experiences can also overlap with offline experiences of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, bullying, relationship abuse and stalking.

Signs on the child

- Child becomes a loner. Online violence survivors often take every opportunity to keep to themselves.
- Child suffers from mood swings
- Child shows signs of stress in situations that are not normally stressful.
- Child displays aggressive behaviour and/or symptoms of depression (lack of enthusiasm, chronic fatigue, psychosomatic responses)
- Child stops participating in social activities
- Child stops eating
- Child has self-harming behaviour
- Child changes friend group completely. This could be a sign that the perpetrator is someone close to them or that their feelings of self-worth have changed.

Child Trafficking is where children and young people are tricked, forced or persuaded to leave their homes and are moved to a place where they are exploited, forced to work or sold. Children can be trafficked for sexual exploitation, forced marriage, domestic slavery (cleaning, cooking or childcare), forced labour (for example in agriculture or factories), and committing crimes (for example moving drugs, begging or theft). These children experience multiple forms of abuse and neglect due to this situation, such as physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

Signs on the child

- Child is unsure about the country, city and town they are in
- Child has limited knowledge of the local language and where they live
- Child is reluctant to seek help or give personal details for fear of deportation
- Child has their travel or visa arranged by someone other than their family
- Child does not have (or has false) documentation, passport or identification documents
- Child does not appear to have a lot of knowledge of the accompanying adult, and does not have parental permission to travel with that adult
- Child appears uncomfortable in the presence of the accompanying adult or expresses signs of fear
- Child rarely leaves the home and does not appear to have freedom of movement and time for play
- Child spends a lot of time doing household chores
- Child is not registered in a school and health services

Risk aggravating factors

- **Poverty:** traffickers may promise families and their child that they will have a better future elsewhere, so children growing up in poverty are at higher risk of child trafficking
- **Low levels of education:** Children and families with low education may not have many employment options. Child trafficking can also result in forced labour in agriculture or manufacturing industries, which entails the child moving from their home to go to work.
- **The effects of war:** since human trafficking involves moving from one place to another, refugee, displaced and migrant children are at special risk of human trafficking

Forced Marriage is a marriage in which one or both parties have not personally expressed their full and free consent to the union and at least one of the parties is underage. It can be considered a harmful tradition.

Signs on the child

- Excessive parental restriction and lack of freedom of movement
- Child has older siblings that left education to marry early
- Child has attempted to run away from home or has other siblings that have tried
- Child expresses fear about an upcoming family celebration
- Child expresses fear to be taken out of education
- Child goes on a trip to visit family members but doesn't return
- Child exhibits sexualized behaviour or is dressed by their caregivers in a sexualized way.
- Child appears depressed, withdrawn or anxious. The self-esteem may deteriorate also

Risk aggravating factors:

- **Pregnancy:** family might force the child into marriage to cover up an unwanted pregnancy and for the child be born into a married couple.
- **Loss of virginity:** family might force the child into marriage since she is already sexually active and might lose their "good reputation"
- **Rape:** a child might be forced to marry their rapist
- **Coming out as LGBTQ+:** family might force a child into marriage to correct unwanted sexual orientation and/or cover up doubt about their sexual orientation
- **Family conflicts:** family might force the child into marriage to maintain the family's honour or long-standing commitments.
- **Religious views:** family might force the child into marriage to protect cultural and religious ideas
- **Financial issues:** family might force the child into marriage to ensure their finances through this bond
- **Family member with a disability:** family might force the child into marriage to provide a carer for a family member with a disability and to reduce the stigma around the disability

Child Labour is the engagement of children under 15 years of age in full-time employment or labor that deprives them also receiving an education.

Signs on the child:

- Child is visible in the community but does not attend school, the Play Hub or other activities
- Child displays poor performance, low attendance, disruptive behaviour, does not attend Play Hub or other educational activities
- Child complains about tiredness, aches, pain, and injures
- Child shows signs of drowsiness and exhaustion
- Caregivers don't disclose information or give contradictory information about the child (for example where the child goes to school or educational activities, where the child is staying, the child's schedule, etc.)

4.2. How to prepare for domestic violence, child abuse and neglect cases in the Play Hub?

4.2.1. Revise your safeguarding policies

First of all, Play Hub staff must be aware of and sign the Safeguarding or Child Protection Policy of each organization establishing the Play Hub. Child safeguarding is the responsibility that organizations have to make sure their staff, operations, and programmes do no harm to children and to take all reasonable measures to ensure that the risks of harm to children are minimized.

1. Make sure every staff member has had the chance to **read and ask questions** about the safeguarding policy
2. Make sure every staff member **has signed** the policy of the national TOY for Inclusion partner organization
3. Make sure that **safeguarding policies are updated**, and that all new members are informed

4.2.2. Create your own protocols

Create a Protocol for dealing with (suspected) cases of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect.

What is a protocol? A set of procedures and agreements to be followed, and a set of tools to assure the organization is dealing with the case in an effective way.

Why do we need a protocol?

- * To reduce re-victimization by reducing the times where the victim relives trauma
- * To help victims healing from trauma by encouraging the system to be responsive and accountable
- * To define the roles and responsibilities of staff
- * To establish standards
- * To strengthen relationships between services that can support victims
- * To inform and educate other members of the community on how to deal with cases of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect

How will a protocol improve the response?

- By defining a purpose
- By describing the roles and responsibilities
- By defining the steps to take
- By having concrete and practical procedures

An effective protocol should be:

- Realistic
- Connected to practice
- Easy to understand
- Inclusive
- Shared and owned by every member
- Reviewed and updated regularly

What a Protocol should (at least) include:

- Purpose/Mission statement
- Definitions
- Reporting procedures
- Time frames
- Responsibilities of staff

4.2.3. Steps to developing a protocol for the play hub

Step 1: Gather all participants

1

- ✓ Identify and invite all necessary participants. These can include Play Hub staff, Coordinators, professionals from other services, families who participate in the Play Hub, etc.
- ✓ Set a timeline for developing the protocol

Involving multiple participants can be more time-consuming but will result in a better protocol. For example, if professionals from other services are involved in the development of the protocol, there is less likelihood of disagreements occurring later in the process. Families can also give input on how they experience the services provided in the Play Hub and other services. And lastly, involving Play Hub staff will also ensure more knowledge and adherence to the procedures.

For this, doing a **Mapping of Services** (see Appendix) can be useful, since it helps us identify which services are involved in the support of children and families in the community.

Step 2: Develop a Purpose or Mission Statement

2

The purpose will be the foundation of the protocol and will clearly state what you value as an organization. Developing a purpose statement needs to consider the following questions: (1) *what is the goal of the Play Hub?*+ (2) *Why does the Play Hub need a protocol for dealing with (suspected) cases of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect?* Usually, a purpose statement is only one or two sentences.

Step 3: Definitions

3

Discuss and define the types of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect that the protocol will address. For this, use the definitions provided above as a guideline. Other types of violence and abuse, however, can also be added or removed, depending on the circumstances.

Step 4: Be aware of national laws and procedures

4

It is important to be aware of and to study each country's national regulations and laws to ensure the safety and protection of children, adults and staff working with children. The protocol needs to align with these regulations.

Step 5: Define procedures and timeframes

5

- ✓ Add a **clear description of the steps** to take for different case scenarios.
- ✓ Consider **how many times the team will meet up** to manage a case
- ✓ Develop **timeframes** for each step and different case scenarios

- ✓ Women and/or children have trusted the Play Hub staff to open up about their safety. Even if they have been referred to other services that will be able to respond to their needs, the Play Hub has become a part of the support network. Therefore, it is necessary to **schedule follow-up meetings** to know about the victim's safety and their child.
- Consider how **confidentiality** will be addressed. When reporting, staff must respect the rights and dignity of the child and family at all stages. They must recognize that discussion of sensitive information and release of information might have a negative and long-term impact on children and their families. This can lead to the child and the family being stigmatized in school and the community and it can put the child's and/or family's safety at risk. Staff involved with children have a duty to ensure that necessary measures are taken to ensure that the child is protected from any form of abuse, whether potential or actual.

Nevertheless, consider the following **guidelines**:

- It is not the role of the Play Hub staff to investigate the disclosure of abuse. Reassure the victim that there are people whose job it is to investigate and support them.

- Avoid disclosing information obtained in confidence without consent from the child and parent/caretaker unless it is necessary to ensure the protection of a child at risk.



IF THE CHILD IS THE VICTIM



- In the case of child abuse and neglect, the protection of a child is at risk, so staff members are obliged (by law) to report any (suspected) case of child abuse, regardless of the child or parent agreement.
- Contact the staff responsible for any child protection/domestic violence issue appointed at the Play Hub. This person should be able to support the staff in the process.
- Only contact parents and carers once you have advice and guidance from the staff responsible for any child protection/domestic violence issue. If there is certainty that parents are not involved in the abuse, consult with them prior to making a report to authorities.
- Inform the child about the process you must follow. Keep them informed about what you know, and what will follow.
- Make a report of the (suspected) child abuse or neglect to the police. While anonymous tips are always an option, identified reporting increases the likelihood of prosecuting the perpetrator.
- Ensure that the child is in a safe place. If there are concerns over the child's safety, discuss them explicitly with authorities once the report is made





IF THE WOMAN IS THE VICTIM



- In the case of domestic violence where a woman is a victim, the law can be different in each country. Not all countries have laws that make it mandatory for staff to report these cases.
- However, consider that in most cases where there is violence against women, it is very likely that a child is also at risk.
- Contact the staff responsible for any child protection/domestic violence issue appointed at the Play Hub. This person should be able to support the staff in the process.
- Keep the victim informed and involved in the decisions regarding the report of the abuse. Respect their right to make decisions about their life when they are ready. At the same time, inform them about their rights and the support available to them.
- Support the victim in making a report with the police.
- Help the women and their children to plan for their safety. The response to a woman or child at their first point of contact includes timely information provision, with a focus on safety.



Step 6: Define Roles for Play Hub Staff



The roles of staff members and other services in the case response, support, management and treatment should be outlined. This is a crucial part of the protocol.

The Local Action team needs to create **a clear understanding of the responsibilities and the limits of these responsibilities.**

- ✓ Play Hubs can **promote the development of positive, engaged parenting skills and a secure parent-child relationship.**
- ✓ They can also **connect families with other families and services in the local community.** Above all, Play Hubs staff can be there for the child and the family when they are facing difficult times.
- ✓ In the case of **(suspected) domestic violence, child abuse and neglect**, Play Hub staff have a crucial role in **supporting, accompanying, and referring** victims to other services.
- ✓ Appoint a staff to be responsible for any child protection/domestic violence issue and a communication protocol for the other staff to follow in case they suspect or become aware of cases of abuse.

Step 7: Identify services for referral

7

Do a **Mapping of services (see Appendix)**. It is useful to have a visual aid of services available to support children and families in their community, which can be part of the resources available to report cases of domestic violence, abuse or neglect.

The mapping of services can be updated several times to monitor changes in the relationship among different services or changes in the community. Once your service is in place, the mapping of services can be used to identify the type of relationship your Play Hub has with other services in the community.

RESOURCE LIST IN SLOVAKIA

Government Services in Slovakia

The Police

Tel (Toll-free): 158 or 112

Social and Legal Protection for Children has a free (tele)phone line which serves for reporting abuse of the social system and neglect of childcare.

Contact: Website: <https://www.upsvr.gov.sk>

Helpline: 0800 191 222

International Organizations

Child Helpline International provide free and confidential services for children and young people, where they can talk about anything they want, via phone, chat and other methods of communication

Contact Website: <https://childhelplineinternational.org/>

Tel: 116 111

UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency)

Tel: 0800 221 230 (from Slovak number) or +421 222 11 56 50 (non-Slovak number)

Email: svkbrprot@unhcr.org

Non-governmental services in Slovakia

Linka Detskej Istoty (Child Safety Line Slovakia) provide free and confidential services for children and young people in Slovakia via phone.

Contact Website: <http://www.lidi.sk/>
Tel: 116 111
Email: info@ldi.sk (general) or 116111@ldi.sk (Clients and victims)

Pomoc obetiam násilia (Help for Victims of Violence): counselling center for victims of violence

Contact: Website: <http://pomocobetiam.sk/>
Tel: National VICTIM HELP LINE: 0944 252 405
Email: linka@pomocobetiam.sk
Writing: OZ Pomoc obetiem násilia, Trhová 243/ 2, 91701 Trnava

Náruč: (Help for Children in Crisis) a civic association with the aim to provide help to abused and neglected children.

Contact: Website: <https://naruc.sk/>
Tel: 0948 578 053
Email: naruc@naruc.sk

Alliancia žien Slovenska (Alliance of Women in Slovakia): Provides crisis social and legal counselling (non-stop SOS line), psychological and legal assistance. It also deals with legislative aspects of violence against women.

Contact: Website: <https://alianciazien.wordpress.com/>

Counseling Center in Trencin Tel: 0907 242 778

Email: trencin.alianciazien@gmail.com

Counseling Center in Trnava Tel: 0948 388 152

Email: trnava.alianciazien1@gmail.com

National Non-Stop Crisis Line: Phone: 0903519550

Tel: +421(0)911 224 777

Email: fenestra@fenestra.sk

Helpline: +421(0)911 440 808

Email: stoptrafficking@charita.sk

Fenestra is an independent non-governmental organization that supports women and children who are victims of domestic violence and gender-based violence

Contact: Website: <https://fenestra.sk/en>

Charita (Caritas Slovakia) operates the **National Helpline for Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings.**

Contact: Website: <https://obchodsludmi.sk/>
Helpline Tel: 0800 800 818


4.3. How to respond to domestic violence, child abuse and neglect cases in the Play Hub?

4.3.1. Communication guidelines

Children and families that participate in the Play Hub often put staff members in a position of trust. Because of that, they can often disclose information that makes staff members suspect that domestic violence, child abuse or neglect may be happening. When talking to the person, be sensitive to their needs.

BE WELCOMING:

make it a welcoming space and make it easy



"It was such a relief to take the first step"

- **Be welcoming.** On entering the Play Hub, the physical environment and the atmosphere makes a clear statement of that welcomes the diverse group of ages and cultures.
- **Pick your time and place carefully.** Choose a space where the child is comfortable or ask them where they'd like to talk. Avoid talking in front of someone who may be causing harm.
- **Be aware of your tone.** If you start the conversation in a serious tone, you may scare the person, and they may be more likely to give you the answers they think you want to hear—rather than the truth.
- **Be relaxed and casual.** If the staff member appears anxious, the victim might withdraw. Try to make the conversation more casual. A non-threatening tone will help put the child at ease and ultimately provide you with more accurate information
- **Be neutral.** Express your concerns to the person in a neutral and objective manner
- **Avoid judgment and blame.** Avoid placing blame by using "I" questions and statements. Rather than beginning your conversation by saying, "You said something that made me worry..." consider starting your conversation with the word "I." For example: "I am concerned because I heard you say that you are not allowed to sleep in your bed by yourself."

BUILD TRUST:

Building trust means showing that you know each woman and each child is unique

"Speaking to them made me realise we were not alone"

- **Be a good listener.** Focus on listening and making the person feel heard.
- **Pay attention and express confidence** in the victim. This shows genuine concern for their wellbeing and safety.
- **Believe them,** listen to them.
- **Be patient.** Remember that this conversation may be very frightening for the child. Many perpetrators make threats about what will happen if someone finds out about the abuse. They may tell a child that they will be put into foster care or threaten them or their loved ones with physical violence.
- **Keep it private.** When taking information or seeking more information, staff should ensure privacy is maintained. The victim will most likely confide in a place where they feel safe.

COMMUNICATE:

Tell the person what will happen next

"Opening up to this person made me feel that I got some control back"

- **Reassure the victim.** Make sure that the person knows that they are not in trouble. Let them know that you are simply asking questions because you are concerned about them.
- **Talk to them.** Children and women who disclose information can feel anxious or vulnerable about what people think of them and what will happen next. Many victims also feel that they are not in control. Communicating to them about the process helps build trust and makes them feel like they have more agency than before.
- Tell them **what you know** (for example: that they are not in trouble, that you are there to help).
- Discuss with the person **what you think will happen** next and who will be involved (for example you will talk to other staff members, the police will be contacted, etc.)
- Help them **plan for their safety.** The response to a woman or child at their first point of contact includes timely information provision, with a focus on safety.
- **Respect their right** to make decisions about their life when they are ready.

Summary of Resources mentioned in this Toolkit

Pedagogy of Play: Indicators of Playful Learning

- * *Author: International School of Billund*
- * This resource explains the ISB Indicators, which are characterized by three overlapping categories—choice, wonder, and delight.

Self-Reflection Tool

- * *Author: European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education*
- * This self-reflection tool was developed for teachers and practitioners, to assess how inclusive their educational setting is.

Playful classroom management

- * *Author: Kindergarten Study Group*
- * In this site diverse resources are available to integrate play in different educational settings.

How to create an inclusive classroom: 12 tips for teachers

- * *Author: PlanBee*
- * This resource summarizes easy and accessible ways to turn the classroom more inclusive. These can be adapted to other educational settings too.

Home Visiting Toolkit. Resources to promote the healthy social and emotional development of children under

- * *Author: ICDI*
- * The aim of this Toolkit is to provide Home Visitors with the latest scientific evidence about child development, learning and well-being as well as practical advice and materials, which they can share with parents and carers.

Supporting Families for Nurturing Care: Resource Modules for Home Visitors

- * *Authors: Various contributors from UNICEF ECARO & ISSA*
- * Resource intended to better equip home visitors with the latest knowledge and tools to support and engage with the families of young children.

Zero to three Resource List

- * *Author: ZeroToThree*
- * This resource list includes a range of materials, such as policy briefs, fact sheets, websites and tools, to help stakeholders learn about evidence-based home visiting services

Challenging Behavior Tips

- * *Author: Head start center for Inclusion*
- * These tip sheets help parents to plan to avoid potential challenging behavior, and provide tips on how to manage that behavior if it occurs. Using these sheets to educate parents on how to manage behavior will make them feel more in control.

Inclusive Play

- * *Author: Sensory Trust*
- * Short and easy sheet that explains the importance of inclusive play and how to make it possible in different contexts.

Assisting Families in Creating Play Environments for Children with Disabilities

- * *Author: Let's Play Project, University of Buffalo*
- * This play guidebook is intended to assist individuals who provide early intervention services to children with disabilities and their parents in promoting play in children's lives.

Play ideas at home for parents and home visitors

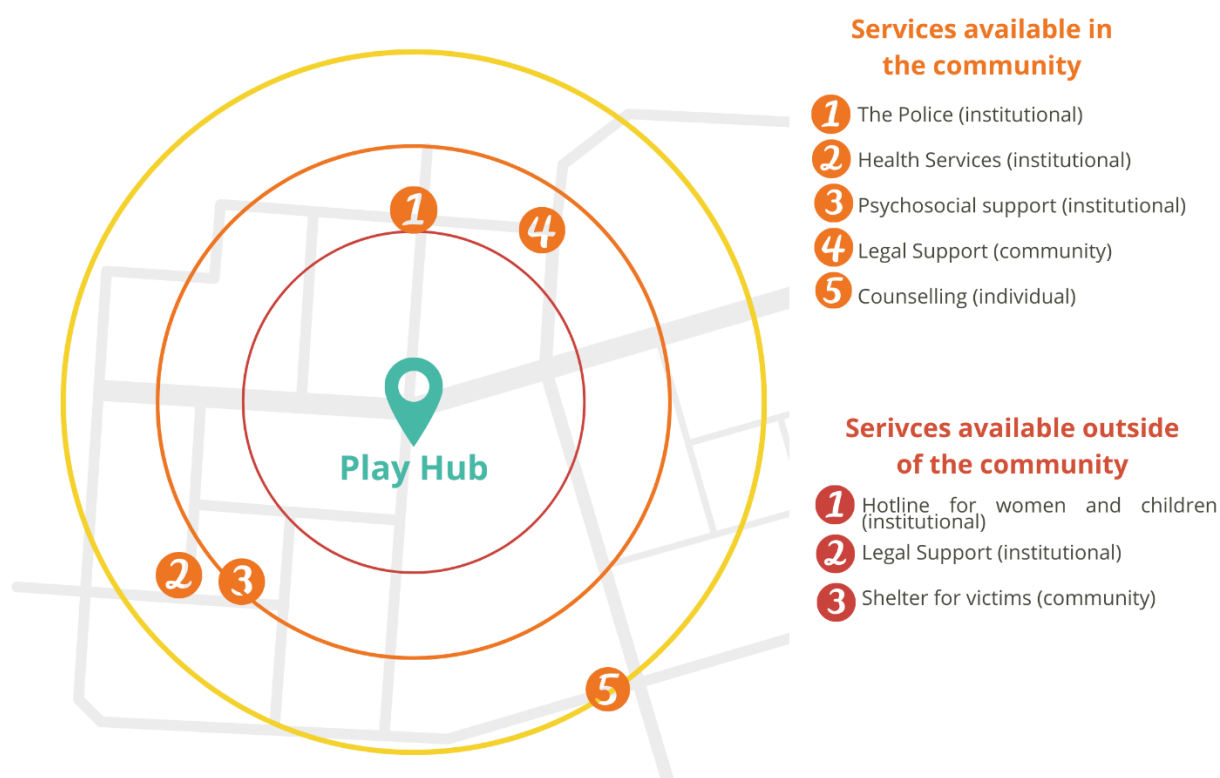
- * *Author: Inclusion Matter*
- * Are a set of resources for parents and home visitors intended to nurture play

Appendix

Template for the mapping of services

For the Mapping of Services, you can use this template, or adapt it to your own requirements. This should rather be a guideline but can be flexible to adapt to other services.

Example:



INSTRUCTIONS

The mapping of services can be updated several times to monitor changes in the relationship among different services or changes in the community. Once your service is in place, the mapping of services can be used to identify the type of relationship your Play Hub has with other services in the community.

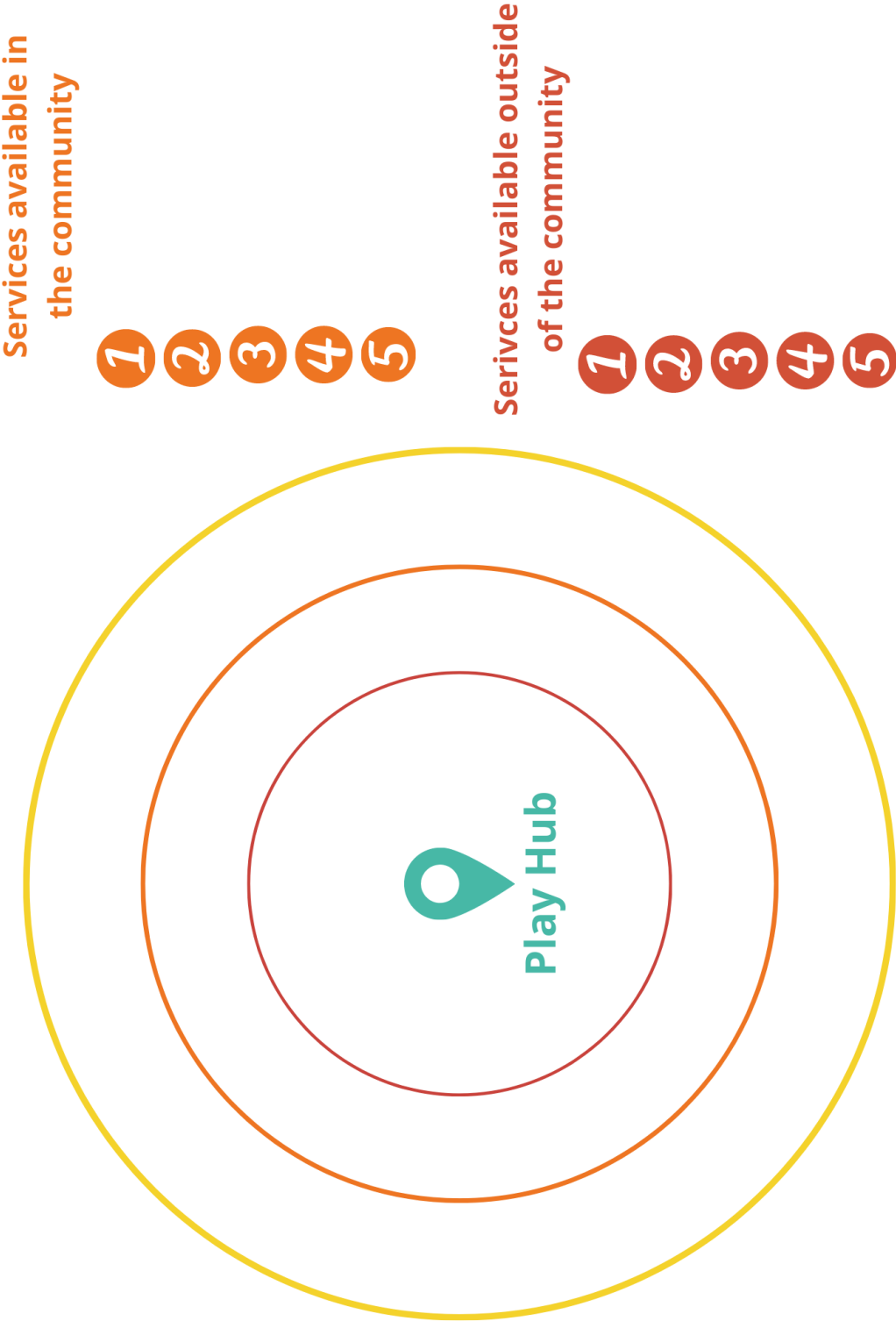
- I. **Step 1:** Draw a **map** of the services available in your community for children and families
- II. **Step 2:** In different colors mark who is in charge or who runs these services:
 1. **Individual service**
 2. **Community services**
 3. **Institutional services**

Note: Make sure to identify **services that are available for children and women who suffer domestic violence**. These should at least include:

4. The Police
5. Hotline for women and children
6. Health Services
7. Psychosocial support
8. Legal Support
9. Counselling

III. Step 3: Keep the list of services available updated: services provided can change over time. Keep these contacts up to date and add new ones or remove those who are not available anymore. Make sure that the Play Hub coordinator has access to the list

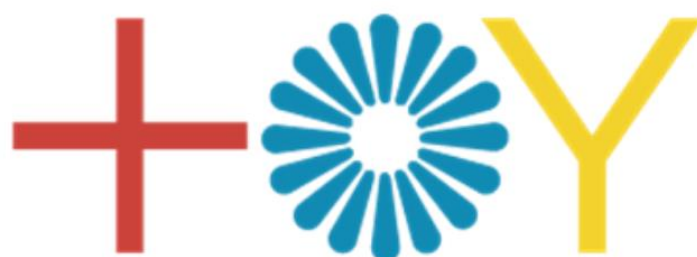
Template:



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