



25 years for
Early Childhood
Development



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Integrating Psychological First Aid and trauma-informed practices into early childhood systems

From Lessons Learned to a Call for Action

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1. Closing a critical workforce competence gap

Across the globe young children today face diverse traumas that significantly impact their development, mental health, and well-being. Many endure conflict, displacement, natural disasters, and the effects of climate change, often compounded by poverty, instability, and limited access to education and healthcare. Refugee and migrant children face separation from parents and chronic stress during uncertain journeys.

In their homes, children may experience domestic violence, neglect, or abuse, which disrupt their sense of safety and trust. Discrimination, bullying, and social exclusion weigh heavily on mental health, particularly for marginalized groups like Roma children or those in foster care. Health crises, such as chronic illness and the aftermath of COVID-19, have further heightened insecurity and disconnection, leaving lasting emotional scars.

However, supportive relationships with stable, caring adults are a powerful shield and buffer against trauma, helping children cope with toxic stress and build resilience. Timely interventions, mental health support, and nurturing, inclusive communities restore a sense of safety and connection both for parents/caregivers and children. By fostering trauma-informed systems that address adversity and prioritize children's well-being, we can provide young children with the strong foundation they need to grow, learn, and thrive.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and other ECD services are essential in mitigating the impact of early childhood trauma. However, many early childhood professionals and practitioners lack the training to recognize and respond to trauma in children and families effectively. Additionally, they often face significant challenges in managing their own stress and preventing burnout, underscoring the urgent need for professional development and systemic support in this critical area.

This brief, developed under the [Early Childhood Workforce Initiative](#), with the support from Regional Networks Fund, explores the potential that the integration the [Foundational Training on Psychological First Aid \(PFA\) and trauma-informed practices for young children and their caregivers](#) into pre-service training and continuous professional development of ECD workforce may have for driving system level changes in countries across the ISSA network. It illustrates the impact of these efforts on building a resilient workforce, supporting vulnerable groups such as refugee, migrant and Roma children and families. Embedding trauma-informed practices and self-care within the core of early childhood development frameworks is key to navigating the complexities of a poly-crisis world.



2. Foundational Training on Psychological First Aid (PFA) and trauma-informed practices for young children and their caregivers

The [International Step by Step Association \(ISSA\)](#) leverages decades of expertise in supporting children and parents facing adversity, including marginalized Roma communities and migrant families in Greece and Germany. This work has led to the development of widely recognized resources, such as the [Let's Play Activity Cards for healing and learning](#), [Building Bridges, Bridging the Gap guidebook](#) available in multiple languages, including Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Russian, Polish, Slovak, Czech, and Hungarian, and the [ECD Activity Cards](#) created in collaboration with UNICEF ECARO to support early childhood development in crises (accessible in Bulgarian, English, Romanian, Russian, and Ukrainian).

Building on its extensive expertise and driven by the urgent needs arising from the Ukraine crises, ISSA took a decisive step in 2022 to address the growing challenges faced by young children and their caregivers in Ukraine and receiving countries. In collaboration with ISSA member, Amna and with War Child, and with support from national and international partners, ISSA spearheaded the development of [the Foundational Training on Psychological First Aid \(PFA\) and trauma-informed practices for young children and their caregivers](#).

The *Foundational Training on Psychological First Aid (PFA) and trauma-informed practices for young children and their caregivers* was created to fill the existing gaps and to equip early childhood professionals with the skills and knowledge needed to support children and families affected by trauma, promoting resilience, and emphasizing self-care for practitioners. It is a Training of Trainers (ToT) program designed for experienced professionals in the early childhood development field. It targets trainers from diverse educational backgrounds and sectors, including early childhood education, health, and social services.

Impact of the PFA training in the ISSA network (2022–2024 +)

- PFA training and resource package created and translated into **12 languages** including Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Russian, Polish, Slovak, Czech, Hungarian, Slovenian, Montenegrin, Kazah, and Croatian.
- More than **200 master trainers** from more than **30 organizations from 21 countries** (22 of them are ISSA Members) trained.
- Reached **14. 300 professionals and practitioners**.
- **Accredited in several countries** where accreditation systems exist and included in in-service training offer in countries without official accreditation systems.
- Elements of the program integrated in pre-service training in 3 countries.
- **18.000 young children and 10.000 parents** benefited from PFA.
- Training inspired development of additional resources to support parents and children.

Trauma-informed practices recognize the pervasive effects of trauma on both individuals and systems, promoting a compassionate, supportive approach that prioritizes emotional safety and healing. PFA, a vital component in this context, offers immediate, scalable support to those affected, addressing acute stress while laying the groundwork for long-term resilience. The often-overlooked need for professionals to manage both their own mental health and the emotional needs of children and caregivers highlights the urgency for systemic solutions, with research increasingly showing a direct link between professional well-being and the quality of services and support they provide.

The PFA training adopts a dual approach, providing early childhood development professionals with practical tools to address psychological trauma in children and caregivers, while also equipping them with strategies to safeguard their own well-being. This focus is vital, as ECD professionals are at high risk of burnout from workload and secondary trauma encountered in challenging and high-stress environments.

The ToT consists of three building blocks, and can be delivered in person and online, through the cascade model. It is very flexible, allowing trainers to tailor content, format, and duration to the specific needs of their target groups.



Building Block 1

Key concepts and guiding principles



Building Block 2

Working with distressed children and caregivers



Building Block 3

Managing stress in professionals



The PFA training has demonstrated its broad applicability across diverse contexts. Its adaptable content brings valuable support to professionals, children, and families facing adversities and trauma of various kinds. For example, in Hungary, it has been effectively used with professionals working in vulnerable Roma communities, showcasing its versatility in addressing a wide range of challenges.

According to PFA trainers and trainees, for training to be successful and effective it is important to take into account that:

1. Training must be accompanied by continuous follow-up support and mentorship on national and regional level.

This is relevant particularly for trainers coming from high-stress environments. Building learning communities and platforms for collaboration, peer support, sharing and resilience building is a guarantee that learning will continue and burn out in professionals prevented.

“Meetings with colleagues are like going to the seashore after not having the opportunity to see the sea for a long while. They are moments when I can reconnect with myself and that belongs only to me.”

PFA training participant

2. Building resilience and wellbeing of the workforce need to be part of one's professional development.

Trainers and professionals need a supportive and nurturing environment to thrive and provide children and families with the best services. Thus, Building Block 3 of the PFA was recognized by professionals as extremely worthwhile, in general.

“The PFA training is a journey that requires courage to be lived and to be shared with others. Self-care has always been a taboo in the society we live in. The training reminded us how important our psychological well-being was especially being professionals who take care of others. ISSA trainers taught us that we needed to dare to take care of ourselves. And that was amazingly powerful!”

PFA training participant

“Supporting the well-being of ECD professionals is just as crucial as caring for the children. If the ECD workforce is not adequately supported, we risk losing those who are vital to the healthy development of the next generation.”

PFA training participant

3. Interventions solely on the level of individual professionals are not sufficient and sustainable

Implementation of the PFA training on the level of preschool institution is needed, so that all professionals and practitioners have a shared understanding of the problems they may encounter, and that can support each other. For example, in Kazakhstan, the kindergartens that took part in the PFA training decided to make it available to all the ECEC teachers in their regions.

3. Utilizing the PFA for opening the doors to long-term change within the ECD system

The successful rollout of PFA training across countries marks a significant step toward building a competent and resilient early childhood workforce but underscores the need for systemic change in the sector. Training initiatives provide immediate benefits to professionals, children, and caregivers, but true impact requires embedding new knowledge, skills and practices into the foundations of the early childhood system. This includes integrating trauma-informed care, psychological first aid, and self-care into every stage of professional development—in pre-service, and continuous professional development.



Accreditation, which is the formal recognition by an authoritative body that a program meets established standards of quality and effectiveness, might be a key driver of this change, ensuring that mental health and well-being (including self-care) become a recognized component and integral part of educational and professional pathways of the early childhood workforce. Accredited training not only elevates education and care standards but also supports ECD professionals' mental health and well-being, preventing burnout and ensuring workforce retention.

4. Lessons learned from ISSA Members that implemented PFA

Over the past year, ISSA members have worked to integrate Psychological First Aid (PFA) training into professional development systems across various countries. Their experiences highlight key lessons on embedding PFA in pre- and in-service training, securing accreditation, adapting content to local contexts, and fostering a ripple effect that extends the training's reach beyond its initial audience.

"Our work goes beyond education; it is about healing and providing a sense of safety to the most vulnerable. The PFA training has been instrumental in empowering our professionals to not only educate but also support the emotional recovery of affected children and their caregivers, while also caring for themselves."

PFA training participant

Early integration of PFA and mental health and wellbeing topics into pre-service training ensures long-term impact:

This approach highlights the importance of including PFA-related content at the earliest stages of professional development to establish foundational skills for all practitioners. Incorporating specialized training on PFA and resilience of the workforce into pre-service education equips future professionals with essential knowledge and skills from the outset, fostering a strong foundation for high-quality practice. Early exposure ensures that best practices become ingrained in professional routines, reducing the need for corrective training later. By embedding key competencies at the pre-service level, institutions create a workforce that is better prepared to meet newly emerged challenges.

- In *Kazakhstan*, ISSA member *School for All* made significant strides by integrating PFA content into pre-service training for early childhood educators, resulting in its adoption by seven Teacher training Institutes for pre- and in-service training as part of the major course "Innovations in ECE" and "Innovations in Primary Education".

- In *Montenegro*, elements of the PFA training were integrated in two study programs at the Faculty of Philosophy: Preschool Education and Pedagogy. Under the leadership of the ISSA member *Pedagogical Center*, during the summer semester of academic year 2023-2024, 1506 students became familiar with the basic concepts of Trauma informed practices, Psychological First Aid and early childhood workforce's self-care.

Accreditation is crucial for sustainability

Accreditation is crucial for integrating PFA training into professional frameworks, ensuring its recognition, consistency, and widespread adoption. It provides formal validation, reinforcing the importance of embedding relevant knowledge and skills within national education standards. This process strengthens the credibility of training, facilitates institutional buy-in, and supports long-term sustainability within professional development systems.

- In *Slovenia*, the *Step by Step Centre for Quality Education at the Educational Research Institute* accredited the program, which is now recognised by the Ministry of Education as an in-service program for early childhood professionals.



Local adaptation enhances effectiveness

Adapting training to the local context enhances its relevance, accessibility, and impact. A one-size-fits-all approach often fails to account for cultural, linguistic, and systemic differences that shape how training is received and applied. All ISSA members delivering PFA training adapted its format and content to reflect local values, policies, and challenges, and to resonate more with participants, increasing engagement and ownership. Members subsequently reported that local adaptation also strengthened sustainability by embedding training within existing structures, making it a lasting and meaningful investment in professional development.

- In *Montenegro*, ISSA member *Pedagogical Centre* adapted PFA training to suit local contexts, reaching university students and preschool teachers in remote areas.

The “domino effect” expands the reach

The PFA training was initially developed for early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals, but it had a ripple effect, benefiting a broader network of professionals and stakeholders. Preschool teachers who gained new knowledge and skills, shared insights with colleagues, influencing practices beyond the initial target audience. As trained professionals implement new approaches in their work, others in their



ecosystem—whether educators, health workers, social service providers, or policymakers—begin to adopt and integrate these practices as well.

- In *Bulgaria, For Our Children Foundation* focused on regions with many Ukrainian refugees. The training has led participants to train their peers, creating a multiplier effect across the ECD community. This approach demonstrates that empowering professionals to train others and share meaningful practices can significantly broaden the impact, increasing coverage without extensive additional resources.

Addressing specific needs builds stronger community ties

The adaptable content can be applied to different settings and can produce powerful results.

- In *Croatia*, PFA training was adapted to address the needs of Roma children living in challenging conditions. ISSA member *Open Academy Step by Step* incorporated the training into professional development activities, helping practitioners build stronger connections with Roma families. By sensitively addressing unique challenges, this approach helped reduce burnout and foster sustainable supportive care for vulnerable groups.
- In *Bulgaria, For Our Children Foundation*, provided training for the Regional Centres for Support of Inclusive Education, to support professionals working with children with special needs.

5. Call to Action: From Training to Transformation - Embedding Mental Health and Well-being in Early Childhood Systems

As we work toward strengthening early childhood development (ECD) systems, integrating Psychological First Aid (PFA) training into professional development must be a priority. A resilient, well-equipped workforce is essential to ensuring that children and families receive the support they need. The experiences from ISSA members across multiple countries demonstrate the power of systemic integration, accreditation, and adaptation in making mental health and well-being (including self-care) a key component of professional practice.

Secure Accreditation and Institutionalization

We call on education authorities and training institutions to formally recognize and integrate PFA, trauma-informed practices, self-care and resilience of the workforce into professional qualification pathways.

Integrate PFA into Pre-Service Education

We urge teacher training institutions and universities to integrate PFA content into their curricula, ensuring that every new educator and caregiver is prepared from the start.



Prioritize Child, Family and Professional Well-Being

The well-being of children and caregivers is inseparable. When early childhood professionals are equipped with tools to manage their own stress and trauma, they are better positioned to provide responsive, high-quality care.

We urge training providers and policymakers to embed this dual focus in all professional development efforts.

Adapt Training to Local Contexts for Maximum Impact

One-size-fits-all approaches fail to address the unique needs of different communities. We encourage organizations and training institutions to customize PFA content to reflect local realities, ensuring its accessibility and relevance for all professionals.

Leverage Peer Learning to Expand Reach

The domino effect of training highlights the power of peer-to-peer learning. When professionals share knowledge, they multiply the impact and build a network of support. ISSA organised a regional learning community which represented a meaningful occasion for the exchange of experiences, lessons learned, challenges and successes between trainers who had the chance to roll out the training at the country level and those who were still in the planning phase. We call on organizations and training institutions to promote mentorship, knowledge-sharing, and community-based training models that empower professionals to train and support one another.

6. A Collective Commitment to System-level Change

The ISSA network’s efforts demonstrate that prioritizing PFA and resilience-building is not just about supporting individual professionals — it is about transforming the entire early childhood system. When PFA is institutionalized, it elevates the standard of trauma-informed care, embeds mental health and well-being, self-care and peer support in professional culture, and creates a stronger, more adaptable workforce capable of addressing the evolving needs of young children and their families.

However, PFA training is just one piece of the puzzle. To create a truly resilient early childhood workforce, we must commit to continuous learning, institutional collaboration, and policy innovation. Now is the time to act. **We call on governments, education institutions, funders, and training providers to join us in officially recognising mental health and well-being as an essential component of the preparation and professional development for ECD professionals worldwide.**

By taking action today, we ensure that every child—regardless of their circumstances—has access to safe, nurturing, and trauma-informed care. Let’s work together to sustain an ECD workforce that is protected, taken care of and ready for the challenges of today and the uncertainties of tomorrow.

"A resilient workforce is not just trained for today’s challenges; it is prepared for tomorrow’s unknowns. Systemic change ensures that this preparation is ongoing, embedded, and supported at every level."

PFA training participant





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