

# **Beyond Play: Exploring the Benefits of Play Hubs for Ukrainian Refugee Families in Slovakia**



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## **Abstract**

Non-formal ECEC, specifically Play Hubs, have the potential to play a pivotal role in addressing service gaps for refugee families. The responsive and flexible nature of Play Hubs meets the immediate and evolving needs of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, providing safety, socialisation, education and recreation for children while offering rest for parents. This fosters trust- a fundamental ingredient for social ties- which refugees may otherwise be cautious ascribing. The Hubs promote social and emotional through the development of bonding, bridging, and linking ties. Ukrainian refugees can maintain connected to their home culture and increase comfort in their host culture. By enabling parents to provide normalcy for their children, Play Hubs can aid the re-settlement experience and integration of refugees in Slovakia.

## **Introduction**

Refugee parents face the distressing circumstances which forced them to leave home, followed by challenges of integrating into a foreign society. Together, these can become compounded traumas impacting their emotional availability to their young children (Jackson, 2006). This paper analyses Ukrainian refugee parents accessing non-formal early childhood education and care (ECEC) programmes known as 'Play Hubs'. It will argue how Play Hubs support positive parental mental health and emotional availability, which can mitigate the risk of maladaptive behaviours and emotional and behavioural disorders to children with early-childhood trauma (Fazel & Stein, 2002; Kertkes et al., 2009).

Since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, over 6.3 million Ukrainian refugees have fled, predominantly to neighbouring countries (UNHCR, 2024). In this period, 1.8 million Ukrainian refugees have crossed into Slovakia, 32% of whom are children (UNHCR, 2024). The increased mental health risks to refugees, compared to non-refugees is well documented (eg. Fazel et al., 2005; Hameed et al., 2018; Schlaudt et al., 2020). Parents' mental health is unique in its significance not only for themselves, but for the mental health of their children and overall family health (eg. Cummings, 1994; Dozio et al., 2020; Kamis, 2021). Even for children not exposed to distressing events, research

demonstrates trauma symptoms in refugee parents can be transmitted to non-traumatised children, if parents exhibit emotional unavailability (Van Ee et al., 2016). ECEC- particularly non-formal- is more flexible than mandatory education of older ages. Accessing this means education can be adapted to individual refugee children or families' needs. Of unique benefit for refugees, these settings also allow children, parents, carers and staff of both local and migrant backgrounds to gather.

Mounting literature denotes the protective capacity of ECEC for marginalised children and their families, specifically those of a refugee or asylum-seeking background (eg. Jackson 2011). However, often these very children are excluded from such services (Vandekerckhove & Aarssen, 2020). Data from 2023 shows only one third of Ukrainian children are enrolled in ECEC in their host countries (Baghdasaryan et al., 2023). An estimated 5,000 to 8,000 Ukrainian children are not integrated into the Slovak education system, although many access Ukrainian school curriculum online. This is partly due to supply-side barriers, including shortages in formal ECEC places, staff shortages, and language barriers (Ecorys 2023). Even when enrolment is available, parents may face barriers regarding bureaucratic or vaccination requirements; residency; separation anxiety; lack of trust in foreign services; fear of losing their own cultural identity; or uncertainty about returning to Ukraine (Ecorys, 2023). Research from other contexts has shown refugee families may also choose not to access ECEC services due to cost, limited local language skills, ethno-cultural discrimination, cultural divergence (their native culture being at odds with the host culture), or difficulties due to children's challenging behaviours following trauma (Lamb, 2020).

The 2024-25 academic year will see mandatory education in Slovakia extended to children with temporary protection status, however, the formal ECEC system struggles to withstand the pressures of increased demand (European Website on Integration, 2023a). Among the Slovak public, initially strong support for Ukrainian refugees has waned. Surveys indicate more Slovaks view Ukrainian arrivals with increasing negativity, many believing the influx strained Slovak public services and economy (European Website on Integration, 2023b; Hodson, 2024). A robust ECEC provision infrastructure is therefore useful for positively shaping Slovak perceptions of Ukrainians and facilitating integration. This can work

to mitigate negative sentiments towards vulnerable populations, such as refugees, seeking safety for themselves and their children.

Non-formal education settings provide an opportunity to fill the gap for children without access to formal education. LaBelle (1982) classifies non-formal education as “any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children” (p.161). By nature, non-formal ECEC is dynamic and has no set curriculum. Such settings emphasise play, community participation, building relationships as well as inclusivity and meeting community needs, specifically for those excluded from formal ECEC. Multi-generational non-formal ECEC make a good option for vulnerable families and their children – particularly refugees – mitigating potential separation anxiety, providing socialisation opportunities with local families, and supporting smoother transition to school. Parental struggles may be mitigated in this context, through access to social ties, social capital and social learning opportunities.

An innovative example of this is the initiative of ‘Play Hubs’ or ‘Play and Learning Hubs’ created by International Child Development Initiative (ICDI), a Dutch, Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO). The Hubs are community-based settings where children and carers attend together, emphasising including children from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds into ECEC, who may otherwise be excluded. Since the conflict in Ukraine and Europe’s refugee response, ICDI opened 10 new Hubs in Slovakia, with the financial support of UNICEF. The 14 Slovak Play Hubs are managed by local partner organisation, Škola Dokorán. They target locations with high numbers of refugees and lack of services, offering a centralised provision where families can not only play and socialise, but access specialised support (Cortellesi et al., 2023).

### **Non-formal ECEC: known benefits for parents**

Multi-generational non-formal ECEC groups provide a considerable opportunity for families from various backgrounds to meet and interact. For refugee families, this context allows them to meet the same families and staff on repeated occasions, build trust, practice the local language and share experiences and

information. Unlike school or childcare settings, parents can remain at the service for the duration of the session and play with their child or socialise with staff and parents, helping to alleviate separation anxieties and offering interpersonal interaction. Windizio (2015) describes that compared to their parents, second-generation migrants experience the advantage of growing up in the host country's institutions and building relationships with local peers, particularly in the school context. Co-attended ECEC allows this advantage to be extended to the parents or carers, by involving them directly in the educational context, together with other parents. Windizio (2015) described this concept as "intergenerational interdependence" for social network building whereby migrant parents build social capital through child-related channels.

Research demonstrates that creating social ties in a new country can be a gendered experience, particularly for mothers (Gambraro et al., 2021; Ryan, 2011). Migrant mothers' integration into the host country is typically related to whether she has access to childcare (Gambraro et al., 2021). This may be explainable by family obligations tending to fall to mothers, particularly when other supports are not available, compared to fathers who are more likely to be employed and access opportunities to build social, cultural and economic capital (De Maio et al., 2017). Mothers' social networking strategies are often different from men's – "more local, more child oriented... these localised networks can generate practical and emotional support" (Ryan, 2011, p.712). For this reason, refugee mothers' participation or involvement in ECEC services could help to reduce isolation. However, migrant mothers have described ties with parents from school as valuable for sharing activities or reciprocal favours, but not as emotional confidants (Ryan, 2011). Nonetheless, these contacts can also be 'crucial acquaintances', which although not friends, are important in facilitating the settlement process (Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019).

Other research has been conducted on 'Supported Play Groups', a non-formal ECEC service with specific focus on helping vulnerable families connect and fostering the parent-child relationship. Migrant parents resettled in Australia were found to have experienced ongoing emotional support and parenting support through participation in Play Groups, often describing the group as having become a 'family' (Jackson, 2006). Parents found various supports attending such Play Groups, including friendship and

social network support, peer support, emotional support, parenting role support and information and resource support, among others (Jackson, 2011). Mothers described Play Group as a safe space to be themselves, share common motherhood experiences and foster links to their local communities. Staff here also noted the importance of the parents being able to observe and learn from one another's interactions with their children (Jackson, 2011). Psychological theories of Social Support in Resilience identify social support (most importantly, emotional support) to be protective against trauma, increasing resilience (eg Rutter, 1987; Smith, 1999; Werner, 1995). This is particularly pertinent for refugee parents. After experiencing disrupted attachments and other traumas, refugees often experience impacts to attachment style (Morina et al., 2016) and reduced likelihood to trust in other people and institutions (Hall & Werner, 2022). Therefore, the Play Hub environment can help foster social networks and support for parents who have had to leave theirs behind and enables them to pass the benefits on to their children.

### **Social Capital Theory, Networks and Ties**

Academics often employ Social Capital Theory to explore the role of relationships as valuable assets in human life. Despite popularity, it has drawn criticism for being trendy and conceptually unclear (Fine, 2010). There is little consensus in the literature on what exactly constitutes social capital, with scholars sometimes conflating access to networks with the benefits derived from them (Ryan, 2011). Initially, Bourdieu (1980) and Coleman (1988) conceptualized social capital as belonging to the individual and their close connections, whereas later theorists like Putnam (2000) viewed it as a resource belonging to broader groups. Bourdieu also identified cultural and economic capital alongside social capital: cultural capital encompasses knowledge, skills, and behaviours indicative of cultural competence and social status (1973), while economic capital refers to material assets convertible into money, potentially institutionalized as property rights (1986). Increasingly, social capital is considered both an individual and collective good (Buys & Bow, 2002; Slangen et al., 2004) and individuals as able to exert power over some aspects of acquisition. Bourdieu argued all three forms of capital were interconnected with one another and with class inequalities, and that social and cultural capital could generate economic capital. For example, social networks may lead to employment opportunities or the ability to practice local

language, with language ability facilitating opportunities for social ties or employment. Shared language, culture and values are described as cultural capital shared by groups (Taylor, 2007), which may be disseminated during social interaction. Social capital is therefore a valuable asset to refugees. Migrant groups typically start out with less access to these capitals when arriving in their new country. However, along with being itself a valuable resource, constructing social capital can facilitate access to cultural and economic capital.

### **Social Ties: Bonding, Bridging & Linking; Strong & Weak**

Within social networks, Putnam (2000) distinguished between bonding ties: those with “people who are like me in some important way” and bridging ties: with “people who are unlike me in some important way” (p.22). Bonding ties are indeed valuable and influential for quality of life in refugees’ host country. These are important for maintaining culture and identity, providing emotional support, understanding and comfort in an unfamiliar place (Ager & Strang 2008), also significantly reducing the risk of depression (Beiser, 1993). In contrast, individual-scale bridging ties relate to relationships with others from outside one’s own group. For refugees, these may be local people. These ties also influence refugee quality of life and whether they feel welcome in a new place, with small acts of friendliness and inclusion reflecting positively on refugees’ perception of the host culture and their place within it (Ager & Strang 2008). Additionally, ‘linking ties’ have been described as those individuals have with institutions and organisations (governmental and not) who have some kind of power over them, therefore describing relationships to power and authority (Pittaway et al. 2009).

Thus whilst both bonding and bridging ties are instrumental to integration and quality of life in the host country, the former have been described as important for “getting by” and the latter for “getting ahead” (Putnam, 2000, p.23), by providing access to new information, resources and experiences beyond those available in one’s own social circle (Granovetter, 1983). The absence of bridging ties in social networks therefore has drawbacks. Language acquisition, a key aspect of cultural capital, often relies on connections with locals through bridging ties. Geographical and social clustering of migrants can inhibit this acquisition (Danzer & Yaman, 2016). While ethnic-specific social networks offer other valuable

resources, Portes (1998) argues they can be limiting, excluding their members from accessing broader societal information.

### **The present study**

The above has provided an overview of the role non-formal ECEC can play in filling service gaps for vulnerable families and communities. The protective factors of social capital, and associated forms of capital against the challenges of re-settlement for refugees have also been described. An exploration of if and how refugees access these forms of capital, as well as any other benefits, through non-formal ECEC will thus be beneficial to aiding refugee re-settlement and integration. The current research will seek to gain a better understanding of the role of Play Hubs for refugees settling in Slovakia. It will answer the principal research question: “What are the benefits to Ukrainian refugee families with young children accessing Play Hubs in Slovakia?” Sub research questions will include: “How does the non-formal nature of the Play Hubs foster a sense of safety for refugees?” and “How do newly arrived refugee parents build social capital through their (young) children and child and family focused services in the community, namely Play Hubs?”

This research ensures interdisciplinary by drawing upon theories from psychology, sociology, education, and public health. The underpinning framework of Social Capital theory integrates sociology and economics for a holistic perspective. Additionally, psychological theories of social support and resilience are combined with educational understandings of play-based learning and non-formal education to depict how improved parental mental health through cultural competence and social integration can improve experiences and outcomes for refugee families in Slovakia.

## **Method**

### **Research design**

The current research is a case study based on qualitative data, collected in two forms: semi-structured interviews completed in-person and open-ended questionnaires completed online using Qualtrics. A qualitative design was necessary to gain a personalised perspective of refugee experiences. Semi-structured interviews were selected to ensure predetermined discussion topics were explored, whilst



allowing the conversation to be directed by participants, based on what was relevant and important to them individually. Questionnaires were completed on a larger scale, following interviews, allowing parents to respond privately and anonymously. Information collected pertained to the benefits parents experienced by attending the Hubs, specifically in terms of social and cultural capital. Interview guide and questionnaire are attached in annex 1. Ethical approval for the study was granted by Utrecht University.

### **Participants and Data Collection**

In 2023, approximately 28% of adults and 34% of children who attend the Play Hubs in Slovakia were of a refugee background (Cortellesi et al., 2023). For the current research, participants were recruited in collaboration with Škola Dokorán and the Play Hubs, who reached out to Hub attendees. For confidentiality, pseudonyms are used to describe all participant and place names.

Three groups of participants participated in the study. The first group belonged to the target population: Ukrainian parents of young children (at least one below 10 years), who repeatedly attended the Hubs and were refugees in Slovakia (n=7). All participants from this group were mothers. The second group of participants consisted of employees of the Hubs (n=3) who were able to comment on general trends and observations. This group consisted of one staff member who had migrated to Slovakia from Ukraine voluntarily ten years prior, and two Slovak staff members.

These two groups of participants were interviewed during a field visit to Slovakia taking place in April 2024. Three Play & Learning Hubs were attended: Falošné Meno, Horské Miesto and Veľká škola, with interviews conducted at the latter two. These locations were selected due to their high proportions of refugee family attendance, as well as their differing settings, being located in a primary school and in a charity centre respectively.

The initial plan was to conduct individual interviews, however some participants advised they felt more comfortable being interviewed together, and requested focus groups with 2 participants instead, sometimes also with the presence of Play Hub staff. Their wishes were accommodated.

Finally, further data was collected from a third group, consisting of Ukrainian refugee parents with young children, who had attended any of the 14 Play Hubs across the country. This was collected via an anonymous online open-ended questionnaire (n=16). The survey link was circulated to the target group by staff, excluding parents who had already participated in in-person data collection. The questionnaire, information forms and consent forms were translated into Slovak and Ukrainian using the programme Deepl.

Interviews and focus groups lasted between approximately 25 and 50 minutes. Some participants were comfortable communicating in English. For others, live translation was provided by one of two Slovak members of staff working in schools where Play hubs took place, both English teachers.

### **Data management and analysis**

Interview and focus group audio was recorded for the purpose of transcription afterwards. The original language audio was additionally translated by turbo-scribe into English, allowing this translation to be compared to that of live interpreters. Participants were provided with informational letters for their keeping and informed consent was gained prior to beginning interviews. For anonymous questionnaire participants, information was provided via a screen and informed consent was gained prior to proceeding with the questionnaire. Transcriptions are safely stored on a protected server of Utrecht University. Data was then coded using software Nvivo 12, using inductive coding (coding tree attached in annex 2) forming the basis of the following Results & Discussion section.

### **Positionality**

The researcher's academic and professional background is in Psychology and Social Work. They have lived experience of voluntary migration, though not of being a refugee and do not identify as Ukrainian nor Slovak. Contextual understanding of the Play Hubs was gained through the researcher's internship at ICDI and five-day-long trip to Slovakia. Additionally, the author's positionality as in favour of such services to refugees; a previous intern of ICDI; and having attended non-formal ECEC Play Group themselves as a child, likely influences favourable interpretation of the results. Reflexivity was practiced with peer-debriefing throughout the data collection and interpretation processes. Positionality of

interpreters as staff members also is likely to influence favourable interpretation of data. Data was triangulated to account for these factors, including the opportunity for anonymous and open-ended responses in the questionnaire, plus multiple interpreters and translation methods.

## **Results & Discussion**

### **Main findings**

*“It’s not just about playing, but about socializing, meeting other people and sharing the information and feelings and everything.”* (Nina, Ukrainian mother)

Whilst most participants viewed the children as the primary beneficiaries of the Play Hubs, all participants also described benefits experienced by parents. These primarily stemmed from the trust that had been both ascribed to those of shared experiences (bonding ties), as well as earned through support during critical and formative periods confronted with members of other groups (bridging ties). Staff member Tamara described *“but in my opinion, it's not about children, but it's about mothers and parents. We try to make parents have a good feeling.*

The Play Hubs have been a place of safety, opportunity and learning for participants. The non-formal nature of the Hubs meant they were adaptable to families’ evolving needs, which could be met in the context of trusted peers.

Although Play Hub access is universal and not targeted specifically to any one group, Hubs visited exhibited cultural segregation. One Hub had only one consistent Slovak attendee, with remaining attendees being Ukrainian. Other Hubs were attended exclusively by Slovak families. This left fewer opportunities for bridging ties to be forged in the Play Hub environment, particularly the strong ties associated with repeated contact. Most often described were strong, bonding ties among Ukrainian mothers. However, very strong bridging ties with Slovak Play Hub staff members were also described by Ukrainians, translating into trust in the Hubs themselves, or linking ties. The acceptance of Slovak people, experienced through weak bridging ties or linking ties nonetheless played an important role in refugees’ experiences and sense of welcome.

Parents were happy to see their children able to access the social, recreational, cultural, linguistic and educational benefits of the Hubs. These opportunities for children were frequently cited as a reason for consistently returning to the Hubs and played a large role in this ‘benefit transfer’ to parents. Mothers were able to provide their children with normal, joyful childhood experiences that celebrated their culture without being overshadowed by the conflict. Ukrainian mother Mila described Hubs meeting various needs, advising *“here, [we] had immediately everything. [We] could socialize with peers, and also [we] could.. learn something, and [we] could play, and [we] could have a rest.”*

### **Flexibility of Non-formal ECEC**

This section will analyse the various, changing needs of refugee families and how the Play Hubs, as a non-formal ECEC provision, were able to adapt to satisfy these.

#### ***Meeting Immediate Needs***

The non-formal nature of the Play Hubs can be considered one of their most valuable aspects, allowing the service to adapt to the changing needs of the community. Notably, Ukrainian families attending these Hubs are refugees, not voluntary migrants. Where voluntary migrants have more preparation for migrating and typically do so to meet higher order needs, refugees migrate to fulfil more fundamental needs (Ramakrishnan et al., 2018). Some theories posit that for longer-term, psychological needs to be met, immediate survival-related needs must first be satisfied (Maslow, 1943). For refugees, this would mean space to consider emotional needs can only be created once access to safety and basic resources is no longer a concern. Naturally, the foremost concerns of refugee families upon arrival in Slovakia related to meeting these most basic needs, including food, shelter, clothing, personal security, health and essential hygiene. Parents described the role of Play Hubs in meeting these needs:

*“When [we] arrived, daughter was only 1.5 years old- she needed nappies, needed clothes and food and [we] got everything here. This play hub co-operates with charity next door very closely, send people to both places and they can play here but get food, clothes, any kind of administrative help next door- so it’s unique connection of Play Hub and material Hub next door.”* (Anna, mother)

Mother Nina also described "*[we] got a lot of information thanks to the great organisation because everything was arranged, they prepared several leaflets for [us], some basic information- doctors, hospitals and all the rest.*"

This also suggests the importance of the critical period following arrival in Slovakia in determining the composition of refugees' social networks going forward. Once immediate needs were met and as families gained more options regarding how to spend their time, many continued to return to the comfort of the Play Hubs to meet evolving, higher-order needs. The Hubs are therefore not just temporarily useful, but have long-term relevance and benefit.

### ***Childcare & After-School Care***

The Play Hubs were based on an inter-generational learning model where children and parents or relatives of older generations attend and play together. However, when visiting the Hubs it quickly became apparent they had adapted to meet different needs families were presenting with. Most fathers of these families were unable to leave Ukraine, usually leaving mothers the sole carers for their children and possibly without access to formal services. For mothers to be able to work, rest, or complete other tasks, the Hubs supported this need:

*Interviewer: "Is it like a childcare for younger children? "*

*Nina (mother): "Yes, that's it. When they finish [school], usually they finish at 12 or 1 p.m. and their parents have to work, they have to stay longer and work, so that's why they put them into this."*

*Interviewer: "Like after-school care?"*

*Nina: "Yes, after-school care."*

At Hubs visited, adapting to meet this need was seen as a natural and logical progression, despite being a departure from the original 'stay and play' services Hubs were intended as. Given they were raising children alone in a foreign country, mothers also welcomed the opportunity to have a rest and spend time among peers. When describing an excursion the children had been on with Play Hub staff, mother Kira advised this had been without parents, as "*mothers were tired so they had time to have conversation and coffee.*" Staff member Tamara advised:

*“One mother told us once, it was in the summer, that she is happy that she can drink tea... was really happy that she can have a rest and enjoy. She was even crying. She was really happy that she can enjoy to drink tea. It was a chance to relax, but still have a tea.”*

Ukrainian mothers whose family support system remained in Ukraine identify feeling overwhelmed with the burden of lone parenting compounded by anxieties for the safety of those left behind (European Website on Integration, 2024). The Hubs offer a comforting and understanding environment which can offer respite to these mothers, supporting their mental health and in turn that of their children. Mothers’ use of the Hubs as childcare was however not to the exclusion of children and parents playing together, particularly given the Hubs offered access to toys and books they would not have at home. Staff member Natasha advised: *“Very often they play together, the parents play with the kids. Lying on the carpet, sitting and playing together. They construct Lego, whatever.”*

Hesitation with trusting strangers to look after their children was another barrier for Ukrainian mothers accessing formal childcare or after-school care services. After experiencing disrupted attachments and other traumas, refugees often experience impacts to attachment style (Morina et al., 2016) and trust in other people and institutions (Hall & Werner, 2022). The centralisation of services afforded by the Play Hubs allowed for the existing trust built between Play Hub families and staff to be harnessed for multiple purposes. Interviewees advised:

*“if [I] need to leave, [we] trust each other and leave [my] daughter here with other parents. When [I] see doctor, [I] leave [my] daughter here. And sometimes [my] daughter spends here all day through from the morning till the evening without [my] attendance.. [I] trust people and [my] daughter feels well here.... When parents need to sort out some paperwork, documents, they leave children here. And even [my]self, [I] take care of other children. [I] stay here and watch them and help them....[I] feel unlimited trust... if [I] need to go anywhere, [I] would never leave [my] child anywhere else but in the play hub.” (Anna, mother)*

*“[parents] speak one to each other, exchange information, and children play at the same time. If they want more private conversation, they go outside, have coffee outside and speak to each other, because they know that the children are taken care of here.”* (Natasha, staff member)

Data shows parents continued consistently returning to the Play Hubs long after having satisfied physiological needs, seeking to meet different needs or priorities. The Hubs provided a safe environment where refugees were welcomed and supported in what was likely their most vulnerable time in Slovakia. The trusting relationships this created were able to be maintained, strengthened, and harnessed for other purposes, allowing for further support opportunities.

### ***Play-based Education Opportunities***

For families in which children were not immediately accepted into formal education when they first arrived in Slovakia, Play Hubs provided a learning environment. Mother Anna described attending the Play Hubs as a substitute for formal education: *“Before [my] daughter was accepted by the kindergarten, [we] spent here every day in the Play Hub....She was only accepted in kindergarten from January, [my] daughter, but always school year starts in September.”*

With no set curriculum to be followed, staff were at liberty to focus on the presenting needs (academic or otherwise) of families at that time. During school holidays, the focus was providing a play-based learning environment. Staff member Tamara advised *“We prepare a lot of workshops and children not bored here.”* Mother Nina advised *“They can borrow books for themselves and here they can borrow toys.”* Mother Kira advised: *“Last summer there were children coming here- they went everywhere, to zoos, nature, forest. Playhub organized the summer camp and they just brought children in the morning, left them and they went for trips every day to zoos, forests, nature with playhub staff.”*

Later, during the school year the Hubs shifted their focus to supporting the school curriculum with translation, Slovak lessons and homework help:

*“the first time was a practice Slovak language, doing homework with kids, social psychological help- a lot of toys, communication, playing with educational toys, a lot of teaching...but in September started children going to school, we prepare our program on play hubs ...a lot of workshop for kids, for*

*education, some activities, outdoor activities, indoor activities - with a ball, with paint, a lot for motor skills or coordination, a lot of translation Slovak and Ukrainian.*” (Tamara, staff member)

Describing what staff do with children in the Play Hubs, Ukrainian-speaking Slovak staff member, Sofia advised *"helping with homework, yeah, a lot, a lot- Ukrainian/Slovak... I teach a lot of Ukrainian children Slovak language, because they don't have opportunity to practice, didn't know anything."*

Slovak teachers have cited the language barrier as the greatest educational challenge for Ukrainian children, and the majority would welcome language support for these children (European Website on Integration, 2022). This need was identified and the Play Hubs mobilised to meet it. The play aspect was also particularly important given refugees had reduced access not only to formal education, but to play and recreational opportunities, compared to most Slovaks:

*"I think another reason is why [social ties with] Ukrainian parents, well the number of them prevailed, is that Slovak parents can play anywhere and can spend their free time as they wish, or maybe they have enough money to travel somewhere... [Ukrainian parents] didn't have any choice at the beginning."* (Jenny, staff member).

During the school holidays the Hubs offered a recreational space for children to socialise and play, fostering skills central to child development (Whitebread et al., 2012). Children could participate in age-appropriate activities and relish the joys of normal childhood. Later, when children's needs shifted to more academic, the Hubs evolved to match, addressing significant educational challenges and promoting cognitive development. Instead of mothers having to manage unmet learning needs in addition to their already considerable responsibilities, they had a reliable and familiar alternative to formal education, which was responsive to their needs. This reduces the burden on mothers, contributing to better mental health and emotional availability, fostering a stable and nurturing environment for children.

### ***Building Language Capital***

The absence of curriculum or a strict structure in the Play Hubs also afforded for educational aspects, specifically learning Slovak language, to be extended to parents if they wished. When asked about who



the Slovak classes run by Play Hub staff served, staff member Tamara advised *“for children because teaching here [at the school] and then if want parents or mothers some - no problem.”*

Despite hoping and intending to return to Ukraine in the future, parents were conscious of the value of speaking Slovak in bolstering their experience in Slovakia, both for themselves and their children.

Excluding one mother, every participant interviewed described language acquisition as a motivator for attending the Play Hubs, whether for mothers or their children. Hubs provided the opportunity to learn Slovak from Ukrainian-speaking (native or otherwise) staff members. Mother Kira described *“[we] have chance to speak and staff like [Ukrainian staff member] is helping [us] to master the language skills both Ukrainian and Slovak.”* Similarly, mother Sarah advised: *“[we] definitely want to go back home, but while [we] can't get back home, this is ideal space...and it's a perfect opportunity for children to improve language skills.”* Mother Anna advised: *“The lady next door from charity is teaching Slovak language to parents. Children have Slovak lessons with [Ukrainian staff member].”*

Understanding of the host country's language can be considered the most fundamental form of cultural capital, holding the key to establishing ties beyond one's ethnic circle (Temple, 2010). It consequently facilitates other forms of capital and is central to the integration process (Ager & Strang, 2008). However, the transition of this linguistic cultural capital into social capital is more complex. Previous research involving migrants (both voluntary and refugees) describes that whilst local language proficiency is crucial for mixing with locals, it alone is not sufficient for ensuring the desired level of mixing or integration (Temple, 2010). Nonetheless, the opportunities for capital acquisition it permits means enhanced integration prospects, facilitating a more fulfilling experience in Slovakia.

### ***Importance of Place***

Self-Determination theory describes three basic psychological needs to be fulfilled in order to be achieve and maintain wellbeing: autonomy (being in control of one's life), competence (being good at something) and relatedness (being connected with others) (Miller et al., 1988). Albers (2021, p.3) describes *“these basic needs are likely to be unsatisfied in the lives of many refugees, as they have lost control of their lives, are unable to use their skills in a job or hobby, and have lost their social networks.”*

Research by Sampson & Gifford (2009) describes the role of physical spaces in meeting these for refugees, through the process of place-making. One example is places of safety, which a number of mothers indicated the Play Hubs were to them. Mother Anna described *"a lot of other mothers told me there was a safe space for children, [we] started to come here, felt very well and welcome here, and kept coming."* Another survey respondent described *"My children have a great time and play in a beautiful place where they feel comfortable and safe, which is the most important thing for me as a mother."* Mother Nina identified: *"[I] can't wait to come back. It's just a place where you feel like peaceful, relaxed."* Mother Anna said *"it's a very warm place to [me], a very welcoming place... I feel here as at home."* Staff member Natasha also advised she considers *"visiting Play Hub for most of [the Ukrainians] as coming home."*

Staff member Tamara described this was a conscious decision and principal goal when creating the Play Hubs: *"So the first idea was to establish something for refugees from the Ukraine as a comfort zone. So that they could spend their free time actively and purposefully."* Other Staff member Sofia explained *"we make a lot of kids comfortable or help psychologically, we are smiling, kids see we are smiling, happy, good atmosphere."*

The sense of safety was considered a prerequisite for engagement, opening the pathway for accessing other benefits the Play Hubs could offer. One survey respondent explained *"It's such a safe place where you can be listened to and supported. And if the child is there, I have a little free time to do my own thing, go shopping or just relax."*

This can also be related to Sampson & Gifford's notion of 'places of relaxation' (2010) as restorative in refugees' re-settlement process, also indicated earlier by mothers being emotionally moved by the possibility of rest. Additionally, 'places of sociality' are where bonding and bridging social ties are constructed, also significant for restoring wellbeing for refugees. When describing the opportunity to build social ties, parents also referred to the importance of the Hubs providing a physical meeting space:

*"If [we] didn't come here, [we] live in different parts of [city] so [we] wouldn't have the chance to meet and speak together and play. During all the holidays [we] meet here only at play hub. It's the*

*only place for [us] to meet here... it's still cold to meet and interact outside, so this is an ideal place to meet.*” (Sarah, mother)

Similarly, mother Kira described *"[we] love to meet here, it's the right place for conversation, [we] even celebrate birthdays and holidays here together."* Mother Anna said *"it's even trouble for [me] over the weekend when the play hub is closed, [we] have nowhere to go. [we] want to come here, but it's closed."*

In terms of recovery from trauma, Sampson & Gifford (2010) additionally describe the importance of places without members of authority, such as libraries, in restoring a sense of security for refugees post-settlement. Again, the non-formal and flexible nature of the Play Hubs facilitates this. Staff member Natasha advised *"[the families] feel more free here than kindergarten. It's not that strict, it's very friendly, it's open."*

Sampson & Gifford's research (2010) identifies places like school principal offices or police stations tend to be avoided or uncomfortable to refugee children for this reason.

The Play Hubs offer parents a secure, reliable alternative for formal education or care services, where they can be comfortable their children are safe and their wellbeing is being promoted. Parents can offer their children a normal childhood experience, where the refugee experience unites but does not define them.

### **Social Capital: Bonding, Bridging & Linking Ties**

This section will analyse the relationship between Play Hubs and construction of social capital, and how other forms of capital follow by extension- in particular cultural capital in the form of language and cultural competence.

#### ***Bonding ties***

The predominant kind of social tie described during interviews was bonding ties among Ukrainians.

Bridging ties are usually seen as superior for 'getting ahead'- accessing new information, resources, and experiences (Granovetter, 1983). However, many of these benefits typically associated with bridging ties were found to instead originate from bonding ties in this sample. Parents and staff members repeatedly described instances of more recently arrived Ukrainians leaning on Ukrainians who had lived

in Slovakia for longer. Ties formed in the Play Hubs were described as their first point of contact for any information about navigating their new lives in Slovakia. Ukrainian mother Angela who had lived in Slovakia for two years described helping mothers who had arrived more recently, saying *“I helped someone, someone helped me. That's how it is, from all sides... [I] helped a lot of people to find a doctor, a general practitioner, and also for children.”*

Ager & Strang (2008) describe knowledge of local procedures, customs and facilities as an important form of cultural capital, informing life in the host country. Mothers used these connections to learn about bureaucratic processes in Slovakia, practise language and learn where to access services. The exchange of information was also described as evolving with the needs of the mothers, initially relating to essential services and later to more frivolous needs. When asked about what information the mothers exchange, staff member Natasha described: *“First of all, health care. Bank, post office. Everything they need. Lady style, you know. Getting nails done and everything.”*

This allowed mothers to exchange information tailored to their distinct needs, including Ukrainian-specific services. One mother described learning of the Play Hubs' existence in the first place from with another Ukrainian mother:

*“And one time, we went with my son to the playground and we met one Ukrainian woman. I asked her about Ukrainian books. Because... I didn't know where I may take Ukrainian books. And she said to me that here are children's Play Hub, for Ukrainian children”.* (Kira, mother)

Some mothers identified relating strongly to other Ukrainians due to their shared experiences, with mother Sarah describing the Play Hub attendees as *“kind of family relationship. It's not just a friend. If [we] need something, [we] call each other, support each other. It's more than friendship.”*

*“We are all in the same situation, so we always help each other, we always support each other...because [we] have no friends when [we] left [our] country and [we] found them here. [We] play together, trust each other, exchange information”.* (Kira, mother)

Bonding ties have been conceptualised as originating from ascribed trust and bridging ties from generalised (earned) trust (Van Staveren & Koringa, 2007). The process of fleeing ruptures social

connections, as refugees lose access to trusted loved ones, and conceptualisations of families are “nuclearized by resettlement” (Wachter & Gulbas, 2018, p.110). Refugee experiences often lead them to be more cautious when ascribing trust, and in turn social ties. Therefore, the familiarity and comfort provided by others who face similar challenges can be unifying. However, exactly what constituted a bonding characteristic differed between participants. Mothers generally identified the shared experiences of being Ukrainian and being refugees in Slovakia as what linked them, however the boundaries to this were quite fluid. Mother Mila described that even without the refugee experience they would have found a strong connection: *"[I] think that it would be the same in the Ukraine. Are connected with the same problems, [we] share the same problems, the same issues to speak about."*

Whilst bonding ties are typically conceptualised as those among homogenous groups, some mothers described they did not differentiate between relationships with Ukrainians and Slovaks, but instead saw motherhood, and their children’s stage of development, as their bonding trait, making them enough “like me in some important way” (Putnam, 2000, p.22). Mila described *"[our] children are the same age, so the topics of discussion is almost the same....[we] don't think the relationship between Slovak and Ukrainian parents are different."*

This may reflect the role of parenting and motherhood in their identity, being a primary focus of their lives in this period. What constitutes a ‘bonding’ trait may therefore differ based on whether participants define being Ukrainian, a refugee or being a mother as identities, or rather experiences. Leaning into any of these identities could also be beneficial to mothers in order to forge social connections the Play Hubs, by allowing them to find common ground with other parents. Among Ukrainians, participants also saw their decision as mothers to leave Ukraine for the safety of their children as a demonstration of shared values. When asked whether she would have been friends with these women if they were in Ukraine, Mila noted *"[I am] happy that [we] are here...this is the reason [we] came, because of children, to give them a better life. I think that we would find a common language in Ukraine with these parents."*

Broader still, when describing their Play Hub ‘family’, Ukrainian mothers included the staff- both Slovak and the Ukrainian staff member Natasha who had migrated to Slovakia voluntarily, years prior to the war. Natasha was seen as an important bridge between the Ukrainian community and Slovakia.

*“At the very beginning, they provide something like their personal information among women and then many of them know that [I] can help, [I] have a lot of contacts. And they use [my] daughter as an intermediate contact between other health specialists and ask [me] for help.”* (Natasha, Ukrainian staff member)

Mirroring trends in social ties, Ukrainians typically pursued Ukrainian-specific opportunities for cultural competence, reflecting again the involuntary nature of parents’ decision to leave Ukraine. Maintaining Ukrainian cultural competence and transmitting this to their children was a priority for many parents. In the hope of returning home to Ukraine, parents wished for their children to learn Ukrainian language, despite most of the parents themselves being from Russian speaking parts of the country. This was to prepare them to re-integrate into Ukraine and the Ukrainian school system, as some children did or would in the future follow Ukrainian school curriculum online:

*“Because [we] still expect and believe [we] come back home to Ukraine one day. So [we] want to keep the level of proficiency, you know, well. [The child] will be five years old, so [we] want to prepare them for the Ukrainian first class.”* (Kira, mother)

Mother Anna also described a *“[Ukrainian staff member] is helping with Ukrainian language to children. They have to speak Ukrainian at school.”*

The possibility or desire to return home has been shown to impact uptake of the host country’s language (Mogli & Papadopoulou, 2018), as well as willingness to invest in putting down roots socially (Temple, 2010). Parents viewed the Play Hubs as a space where they could preserve their language and cultural identity by socialising with other Ukrainians, exposing their children to Ukrainian language and maintaining cultural practices such as cooking traditional Ukrainian foods or listening to Ukrainian music. Natasha advised *“[I] organize very often discos with Ukrainian music and they dance. The parents and the kids as well.”* Mother Mila identified *“The advantage is that this is the only school that teaches*

*Ukrainian. [I] was really surprised and happy and satisfied that [my] children will be understood."* Kira described the importance of bonding ties among Ukrainian children, recounting "my son, he was very sad because all his friends stayed in Ukraine, and he cried every day. And then here we met a lot of Ukrainian children. And he was almost happy."

Post-migration experiences and struggles associated with resettlement have in some cases been identified as having greater influence over refugee mental health than pre-migration experiences or trauma (Fozdar, 2009). However, restored social attachments and support is linked with recovery for refugees (Ajdukovic et al., 2013). The opportunity provided by the Play Hubs to meet others of similar experience, or who display cultural sensitivity, can therefore act as protective to refugee mental health.

### ***Bridging ties***

Ukrainian interviewees did describe friendly activities shared with Slovak parents. Multiple parents spoke about exchanging cultural knowledge between Ukrainian and Slovak mothers. For example, Ukrainian mother Sarah advised: "*[we] taught Slovak [mothers] Ukrainian dishes.*"

However, Ukrainian mothers rarely described strong bonds with non-Ukrainians outside of the Play Hub staff. This was also reflected in the observations of staff member Tamara, who noted "*[at first they are] open for Ukrainians, then open for Slovaks. Think that's normal.*" Most refugee mothers interviewed indeed described shallow relationships with Slovak women, such as Sarah advising "*It's just very, very short conversations between [us], small talks, very shallow, very formal...they just simply answer they are good, they are very well, and [we] don't interact pretty much with Slovak mothers.*"

However, this was also described as due to a lack of opportunity, as the Play Hubs were more of a Ukrainian space, whereas Slovak parents had less of a need for them. Ukrainian mother Nina noted "*from the beginning it was difficult to find Slovak speaking people to talk to or build some relationships with Slovak people*"

Mothers identified the significance of Slovak language familiarity in constructing bridging social capital. Lack of Slovak language skill was cited as a barrier to building relationships with locals, mother Kira noted, particularly when they had the option to speak with Ukrainians instead: "*Because of language*

*barrier, [we] do not interact pretty much with Slovak women. [We] prefer to talk to Ukrainian women because [we] understand each-other."*

Slovak Play Hub staff member Tamara also observed that young Ukrainian children had the advantage of picking up Slovak language much faster, compared to adults, enabling them to mix and befriend local children more easily. This in turn led to parents mingling with the Slovak parents of these children, Tamara noting *"it follows for parents too, talking together because their children have friendship."*

Whilst children's social groups are often influenced by those of their parents, this relationship is also reversed so that children's friendships too shape their parents', known as 'intergenerational interdependence' (Windizio, 2015). For migrant parents, this can afford them access to the benefits enjoyed by their children, who have the advantage of growing up in the host country's institutions and building relationships with local peers. This way, parents too may gain access to 'local' groups or spaces. Nonetheless, despite most mothers describing generally weak relationships with Slovaks, they consistently identified feeling welcome in Slovakia, and the warm hospitality they received. They described being pleasantly surprised and grateful for this:

*"Slovak nation as a whole, [I] see it very close and similar to Ukrainians- they don't put any boundaries or walls between, they speak to [us], are open and ready to help all the time- with Ukrainian people generally... [we] are very grateful to Slovak people and especially to authorities... [we] are grateful for being here."* (Anna, mother)

Ager & Strang (2008) describe this itself be an important form of social capital, as despite a lack of strong ties, the weak relationships play a significant role in the post-settlement experience, by inducing the feelings of safety, security and welcome many refugees identified experiencing in Slovakia.

Consistently, the strongest cross-cultural bridging ties identified by refugees were between Ukrainian Play Hub attendees and Slovak staff members. Ukrainians saw the staff as part of their Play Hub family, as people who had provided them with significant support and crucial information during a critical time of their lives. Despite not being of the same experience, the staff members were collectively considered to be a part of this family. Mother Sarah described *"We are not like friends, we are like relatives... if we need*



*something, I call [other Ukrainian mother] or other ladies, [names of Play hub staff members] and so on. Like a family."*

*"And [Play Hub staff members] they are, I can say, our best friends because they support us. They help us with some information about schools or about children's gardens or about hospitals. Because this country is unknown for us. So it's good to have them here, so you are able to learn about the services and how things work here." (Kira, mother)*

Staff member Tamara recognised this, noting *"we met at the start of war- first people for them, strong point."* Survey respondents described: *"You can trust the girls who work in the playroom with everything"* and *"I trust our educators because they have taught us many things in 2 years"*.

Regarding herself and other Slovak colleague Sofia, Tamara also noted *"our advantage, was we know Ukrainian language, have no problem with languages, speak languages with mother."*

Van Staveren & Korringa (2007) describe bridging ties in terms of trust needing to be earned. The Play Hub staff members demonstrated their trustworthiness and dependability to the mothers by supporting them during a vulnerable time. The unique relationships between Ukrainian mothers and Slovak Play Hub staff also translates into a linking tie, as it relates to bridging ties between people and institutions that can offer access to some kind of resource. Such linking ties between refugees and organisations can facilitate integration by bridging the information and resource dissemination gaps.

### ***Bonding vs Bridging: The Role of Trauma***

Contrasting again with voluntary migrants, previous research (Temple, 2010) indicates Polish refugees to the UK post-World War II maintained ethnic-specific networks. They also identified more with their home culture than later, voluntary migrants, who integrated more and diversified their networks. These refugees also rated their language skills as poorer, despite longer residence. This is consistent with the experience of Ukrainian staff member Natasha who voluntarily migrated to Slovakia over ten years earlier, prior to the war:

*Natasha: "When [I] came here... didn't know any Ukrainians...now there are too many Ukrainians and they prefer searching for Ukrainian contacts and relationships."*

Interviewer: *“Because you didn't have the opportunity because they weren't here, or because you preferred to meet new people? “*

Natasha: *“Yes. There were only two Ukrainian women at the time...maybe there were some, but [I] didn't look for them.”*

Such preferences distinguish voluntary migrants from refugees, who are compelled to leave their homes in pursuit of safety, rather than a desire for a new home or life (Ramakrishnan, 2018). Voluntary migrants typically prepare more thoroughly for entering the host culture and make an autonomous decision to leave their own behind, to some extent (Ramakrishnan, 2018). Refugees may therefore find solace in the familiarity, ease and comfort associated with bonding ties, causing them to preference relationships with others of similar experience to maintain a link to their home culture. Additionally, waning support for Ukrainian refugees among Slovak public opinion (European Website on Integration, 2023b; Hodson, 2024) is also likely to influence to whom refugees entrust social ties, and the caution they may exercise.

Conversely, some Ukrainians saw their relationships with Slovaks as stronger than ties with other Ukrainians. One mother noted this was because what they had in common with other refugees were negative, traumatic experiences and thus conversations felt awkward, as though they are avoiding the topic:

*“It has become very sensitive, because some of the women here lost their husbands in the war, or some of them don't have them, they are something like locked inside them, they don't want to provide any personal information because of war- the Ukrainian mothers- because they were here left just with children, husbands were not allowed to leave Ukraine. So, it's very private and would say those relationships are quite cold because are connected to war. So no-one is willing to talk, or to describe, it's not as it used to be before war, it's much worse, between Ukrainian women....[we] don't speak about politics, about Ukraine, [we] are making other topics just to speak and not think bad about Ukraine...to avoid the issue of war, among [our]selves.”* (Anna, Ukrainian mother)

Anna described that speaking with Slovak friends provided the opportunity to discuss negative experiences, deeper or more personal topics without worrying about causing distress to the other party:

*"they don't have any traumas, they are still free-thinking, living in peace, so they are not stuck inside, they have no problem to describe anything, speak about privacy, but Ukrainian women do have problem to... Slovak women understand what is going on, but Ukrainian don't want to hear the bad news, anything, they are affected quite badly by the situation in homeland."*

Bunn et al. (2021) describe the paradoxical experiences of refugees and speaking about their trauma, whereby they may avoid describing experiences as not to burden family members, or other who have also been traumatised by the displacement experience. Ultimately, the opportunity to share their stories with trusted others who could understand and relate to them was freeing, but brought the challenge of reopening these emotional wounds and discussing difficult and painful topics that continue to impact them. Anna's experience reflects this, whereby daily interactions with other Ukrainians felt superficial. This is particularly given the conflict is ongoing and with many family members remaining in Ukraine, there is the constant risk of opening a painful discussion. This also reflects how trauma may cause avoidant attachment style in refugees (Morina et al., 2016) as well as a higher threshold for trusting others (Hall & Werner, 2022). The shared experiences of home or re-settlement often leads to refugees occupying similar spaces or sharing social circles. Whilst some may have encountered their 'found family' in fellow displaced Ukrainians, the strength and persistence of these ties cannot be assumed, particularly if all they have in common are negative experiences.

### ***Strengths, Limitations & Recommendations***

There are limitations to drawing conclusions about the impact of Play Hubs for Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia. First, although participants reported benefits experienced after attending the Play Hubs, without a control group the research's internal validity is difficult to assess. Mothers could also create social capital, and in turn other capitals, through other avenues such as school or work. This creates a challenge in attributing benefits such as sense of safety, Slovak language acquisition, cultural competence, or sense

of welcome and belonging in Slovakia to the Play Hubs, as with time these may have arisen to some extent regardless.

Second, the research is also limited by translation, inherently subjecting data to the interpretation of translators or programmes. Moreover, live translation was provided by Slovak employees of either the Play Hubs or Škola Dokorán. This may also have impacted participants' perceived freedom to describe the depth of their experiences candidly, particularly given the mothers' positions as refugees. Despite identifying feeling very comfortable in the Play Hub environment, with Slovak public support for Ukrainian refugees declining, mothers may have preferred to describe the positive aspects of their experiences in the Hubs and Slovakia.

Additionally, the sample were recruited by Škola Dokorán and Play Hub staff, possibly leading to selection bias whereby participants recruited were those with whom staff have a positive relationship, increasing their likelihood of reflecting positively upon the Play Hubs. However, these trusting relationships are also a strength, having contributed to the sense of comfort among interviewees, facilitating deeper discussion. This was also mitigated by anonymous data collection online.

The study's small sample size also impacts its external validity. However, a strength is that this was mitigated by gaining perspectives of both Play Hub attendees and staff, plus online data from additional Hubs. This provided the opportunity to gain insights into more generalised, overarching trends. Nonetheless, interview participants were sampled from just two of the fourteen Play Hubs in Slovakia, and the experience of a lone Ukrainian parent in a Slovak-majority Play Hub is likely to have been quite different.

Future research could thus examine refugee experiences across Hubs with varied attendee compositions. It would also be beneficial to examine more closely the role of the Slovak political climate in the bridging ties with Slovaks, how refugees ascribe trust based on this and how this impacts the re-settlement experience.

### ***Conclusion***

Non-formal ECEC, specifically Play Hubs, have the potential to play a pivotal role in addressing service gaps for refugee families. The responsive and flexible nature of Play Hubs meets the immediate and evolving needs of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, providing safety, socialisation, education and recreation for children while offering rest for parents. This fosters trust- a fundamental ingredient for social ties- which refugees may otherwise be cautious ascribing. The Hubs promote social and emotional through the development of bonding, bridging, and linking ties, although the benefits associated with these may be more complex than those typically suggested in the literature. The Hubs also allowed Ukrainian refugees to maintain connected to their home culture and increase confidence in their host culture. By enabling parents to provide normalcy for their children, Play Hubs can aid the re-settlement experience and integration of refugees in Slovakia.

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## **Annex 1: Interview Guide & Questionnaire Questions (English)**

### Interview themes- Play Hub Staff Members:

- Observations of the relationships between parents attending the Play Hubs
- Observations of relationships among refugee parents and between refugees and local parents.
- Own role in the lives of the parents generally. Role in the lives of the Ukrainian refugee parents.

The below will be the questions asked in the online open-ended written questionnaires. The semi-structured interviews will follow the same themes.

### Demographic information- Parents (questionnaire only):

Age (range)  
 Gender  
 Marital status  
 Children- number, age ranges  
 Employment status

### Questionnaire & Interview Questions- Parents:

- How did you end up attending the Play Hubs? What causes you to keep returning?
- In general, how would you describe your relationships with the people (staff & patrons) you have met at the Play Hubs?
- Regarding the people you have met at the Play Hubs, what kind of things could you trust them with? (example: babysitting, pet-sitting, carpooling, deeper conversations, confiding in them if you were struggling emotionally)
- In general, how would you describe the emotional support you have received that came from the Play Hubs?
- What is the greatest benefit you personally (not your child) gain from the Play Hubs? Why?
- Outside of your immediate family, which relationships or social connections are you most interested in fostering or maintaining in Slovakia? Why?
- Can you describe a time where you benefited from a relationship that was created from the Play Hubs?

## Annex 2: Coding Tree

