



CHILD PROTECTION AT NATIONAL ARRIVAL CENTRE FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES

Norwegian Red Cross

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Artwork on the arms of children participating in Norwegian Red Cross activities at the National Arrival Centre.
Photo credit: Norwegian Red Cross.

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Photo description: Norwegian Red Cross volunteer at National Arrival Centre.
Photo credit: Norwegian Red Cross.

Background

Following the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, the National Arrival Centre was opened in Råde, Norway by the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security to ensure preparedness in the event of increased arrivals. It also aimed to establish more efficient processing of asylum applications by carrying out several steps of the asylum process in one place. The centre consists of a large indoor hall where tents of 40 beds each function as a temporary home for asylum seekers. Though the maximum stay is 21 days, some stay longer due to the capacity of the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration to process applications. As of 2025, the centre is the only arrival centre in Norway.

Approximately 90 % of asylum seekers who arrive in Norway, pass through the National Arrival Centre for registration and identity check before continuing the asylum process at ordinary asylum reception centres all over Norway. Many of the migrants who come through the National Arrival Centre are children. They are largely dependent on their parents' mental health, as well as their ability to provide care and engage in

activities. Studies show that staying in a reception centre as well as enduring cramped living conditions, isolation and passivity, increase the risk of mental health problems¹.

The Norwegian Red Cross (hereafter referred to as NorCross) continuously works to provide children with psychosocial support, meaningful activities and ensure that their basic needs are met. This is made possible with the help of close partnerships with the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration and the reception centre operator LINK. The aim is to make the waiting time at the National Arrival Centre as meaningful as possible. The activities aim to be a safe space and a respite from everyday life and provide more active leisure. In addition, the activities help in the process towards inclusion and integration in Norway through social interactions between different nationalities and local volunteers, and through introducing the Norwegian language.

Who was Supported and How

The activities are open to all children under the age of 18 that are staying at the National Arrival Centre. This does not include unaccompanied child asylum seekers as they stay at a specialized centre. With a capacity of 850 people, the number of people at the National Arrival Centre constantly varies due to ever-changing migration trends. These trends also affect the constellation of nationalities present at any given time. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the largest group of refugees and asylum seekers entering Norway has been Ukrainian. Other large groups arrive from Syria, followed by Afghanistan, Colombia, Eritrea, and Turkey, respectively². The large number of Colombian asylum seekers illustrate a general increase in asylum seekers from Latin America. Regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and language, all children are welcome to participate in the activities organized by NorCross.

With access to a designated children's room as well as a small outdoor area, NorCross employees and volunteers offer activities that include arts and crafts, role play, games, and sports. In addition, seasonal activities are also arranged, such as gingerbread baking, Christmas gift-giving, Easter bunny-visit, and ice cream-distribution during the summer months. NorCross also receives donations from companies to hand out to residents, and it cooperates with the local community in bringing in external partners like choirs, artists, dancers, and clowns. In total, NorCross provides activities on average 3 to 4 times a week throughout the year. In 2024, NorCross reached approximately 5,000 children through child-play activities.

Through this focus on inclusion and active leisure, activities are an important part of psychosocial well-being. Asylum seekers talk about a daily life marked by anxiety, uncertainty, and a feeling of helplessness. Many have also fled from war and conflict and are affected by this. The activities can therefore act as a respite from daily worries and as safe spaces where the children can simply be children. Beyond this, the activities also have an indirect impact on the children's families as the parents get the opportunity to attend meetings, take a breather, and manage other responsibilities. In other words, children activities provide psychosocial support for entire families in their journey as asylum seekers and refugees in Norway.

Successes

NorCross has achieved a number of successes through its psychosocial support programme with children at the National Arrival Centre.

- Since 2015, NorCross has built a stable program and become the largest humanitarian actor present at the centre. With almost daily presence of volunteers and employees, NorCross provides

¹ Lauritsen, K. (2012). *Små barn i asylmottak*. In: M. Valenta og B. Berg, red. *Asylsøker – i velferdsstatens venterom*: 167–180. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

² The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (2025). *Data derived from: Asylsøknader etter statsborgerskap og måned (2025)*. <https://www.udi.no/statistikk-og-analyse/statistikk/asylsoknader-etter-statsborgerskap-og-maned-2025/>

a significant number of activities for children, as well as other groups. In addition to NorCross activities, the reception centre operator and other organizations like Save the Children also provide activities. NorCross cooperates closely with the former on coordinating the activity schedule.

- NorCross has developed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration. The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration are required to facilitate access for NGOs to increase activities at their reception centres and the National Arrival Centre. Without their permission and confidence NorCross would not be able to continue with its initiatives at the centre. This has also enabled NorCross to be present through major migration waves like the influx of refugees from Ukraine.
- The psychosocial support activities provided by NorCross contribute to better mental health as they stimulate active leisure, facilitate social relationships, and create positive experiences and memories.
- For many, the presence of NorCross feels reassuring and safe as they've often come across and trust Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies throughout their journey. By being present from the moment asylum seekers arrive in Norway and later at other asylum reception centres and in local communities, NorCross can create a sense of predictability and safety for children in quite unpredictable and insecure situations.

Challenges and Difficulties

In its delivery of services for children, NorCross has experienced a number of challenges.

- NorCross has often experienced that children attend the activities without a parent or guardian. However, NorCross activities are not intended to act as a kindergarten. Children under the age of six need to be accompanied by a parent or guardian. This is due to NorCross not having information about where their parents are in case of an emergency. It has therefore been important to maintain a good dialog and close relationship with the reception center operator, who can help locate the parents and ensure rules are followed. The children's room is also fitted with large windows facing the tents, allowing the parents to stay close by without being in the same room.
- Children are a heterogenous group, ranging from the age of 1 to 17, which means that they all have different wants and needs. It has therefore been challenging to create activities that appeal to all children. An important part of NorCross' activities is to tailor the activities to the specific group of children who participate, taking into consideration their age, the size of the group, and their wishes. With several volunteers present at the same time, this sometimes involves splitting the group into smaller sub-groups to achieve meaningful activities for all children.
- Most of the time, NorCross volunteers do not share a language with the children at the National Arrival Centre. This can make communication challenging. This is especially relevant when communicating rules and directions across cultural understandings, and in relation to younger children. Body language is therefore an essential form of communication. However, play often does not require a shared language; presence and engagement is key.

Lessons Learned

- 1- **Less is often more.** In order to make a meaningful impact on children there is not always the need for large, well-planned or resource-demanding activities. It is often the smallest acts that have the greatest effect: to sit next to each other and read a book, play with playdough, listen, and give your attention. We have learned that you don't need to think big to be able to make a difference.
- 2- The importance of **adapting activities to the age of the children** participating. Children are different and will therefore have different wants and needs when it comes to activities. Being able to adapt activities according to the number of children, their age and age difference, and what they ask for themselves has been of great value. NorCross is there for children, and their wishes are therefore important in shaping initiatives at the National Arrival Centre. NorCross aims to make the waiting time as enjoyable and meaningful as possible for children by giving them the opportunity to have a say in how they spend their time.
- 3- Spending time **building good partnerships is essential** for NorCross' access to the National Arrival Centre. Good relationships create trust and openness, which allows NorCross to operate more freely and be more creative in the activities it provides.