



RUSSIAN RED CROSS FAMILY CENTRES

Russian Red Cross

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Children participating in activities at a Russian Red Cross Family Centre
Photo credit: Russian Red Cross

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Photo description: Russian Red Cross staff and children in activities led by RRC Family Centres
Photo credit: Russian Red Cross

Background

The *Psychosocial Support for Children in Emergency* programme is a long-term, branch-based initiative launched by the Russian Red Cross (RRC) in June 2023 to support children affected by displacement, stress, and disrupted living conditions. Implemented across 25 regional branches, the programme offers structured, group-based psychosocial and psychoeducational sessions for children, complemented by informal learning and play-based activities. Sessions are facilitated by trained volunteers and branch coordinators, with parallel engagement of parents and caregivers to reinforce emotional well-being and strengthen family relationships.

The approach is inspired by Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) models, but was not set up as a temporary emergency response. Rather, it provides consistent, locally rooted support through existing RRC infrastructure.

The programme is implemented by regional RRC teams with support and coordination from RRC Headquarters. Volunteers, many of them students with backgrounds in pedagogy or social sciences, play a key role in facilitation. The initiative is part of the broader, long-standing Children Welfare Programme led by RRC since 1999, originally developed with support from the Norwegian Red Cross. For this specific intervention, both the Norwegian Red Cross and the IFRC Country Cluster Delegation for Russia and Belarus provided technical and financial assistance.

The programme was designed to respond to growing psychosocial needs among children in regions experiencing the impact of displacement, social disruption, and family stress. Many children had experienced loss of stability and weakened support systems. Building on over 20 years of RRC experience in working with children and families, the intervention aims to restore a sense of safety,

belonging, and emotional regulation. It leverages the RRC's trusted local presence and adapts global good practices to suit regional and community realities.

Who was Supported and How

The programme directly supported children affected by displacement and other emergency-related stressors, many of whom had experienced disruption in schooling, social isolation, or changes in their family environments.

Between June 2023 and August 2025, the programme reached approximately 83,165 children and 6,975 parents or caregivers through structured group sessions and family-based activities across 25 regional branches.

Children were engaged through structured psychosocial and psychoeducational sessions designed to promote emotional regulation, resilience, communication skills, and positive peer interaction. Sessions used a play-based approach and were tailored to be inclusive of diverse backgrounds, including children with disabilities, those from single-parent households, and children of various age groups. Whenever possible, age-appropriate groupings were applied to ensure relevance and comfort.

Activities were held in Family Centres hosted within existing RRC branch facilities. These spaces provided continuity, familiarity, and a trusted environment where children could feel safe, express themselves freely, and participate regularly. In addition to child-focused sessions, the programme incorporated caregiver engagement, recognising the vital role of family support in enhancing psychosocial outcomes. Parents and caregivers—many of whom faced stress due to displacement, unemployment, or caregiving responsibilities—were invited to join joint activities or parallel sessions focused on stress reduction, positive parenting, and family resilience.

A key strength of the programme was the mobilisation of volunteers, many of whom were students or young adults with an interest in social work, pedagogy, or child development. Volunteers received training on basic psychosocial support principles, the adapted CFS approach, child protection, and effective communication with children. Their participation was instrumental in facilitating sessions and creating an atmosphere of trust and playfulness.

Inclusion and safety were core principles throughout implementation. Special attention was paid to ensuring non-discriminatory access, respectful treatment, and confidentiality. While the programme did not directly target unaccompanied or separated minors, branches were advised to apply protection protocols and refer cases with more complex needs to specialised services when identified.

The overall approach was flexible, community-based, and grounded in the RRC's auxiliary role, enabling branches to adapt to local realities while maintaining key psychosocial support standards. Some branches also introduced context-specific elements, such as language support for refugee families, mobile outreach to temporary accommodation centres, or partnerships with local professionals (e.g. teachers, psychologists, speech therapists).

Successes

The project successfully launched and sustained Family Centres in ten key regional branches of the RRC, adapting the CFS model to the Russian context. These Centres became safe spaces for children to recover a sense of normalcy, express emotions, and build social skills. As a result, branches noted improved emotional wellbeing, higher levels of self-reflection, and increased social interaction among children — especially those regularly attending activities.

One of the project's most meaningful achievements was the increased involvement of parents and caregivers. In many branches, regular attendance led to growing trust and openness from families, enabling staff and volunteers to identify deeper psychosocial needs and provide more targeted support. In Rostov and Vologda, increased parental trust led to more referrals for deeper psychosocial assistance.

Volunteers played a central role across regions — many were students, particularly in pedagogy or psychology, who strengthened the project's reach and quality. Centres such as Pskov and Vologda reported stable volunteer engagement and strong collaboration with local professionals (e.g., psychologists, teachers, and speech therapists).

The project also facilitated the diversification of support approaches, offering services like language learning (Novgorod), inclusive sessions for displaced families and refugees from various countries (St. Petersburg), and outreach to temporary accommodation points (Voronezh, Rostov). Rules and behavioural norms developed in the Centres were reportedly carried into children's everyday lives — a clear marker of success in socialisation.

In institutional terms, the project increased the RRC's capacity, visibility, and credibility. It served as an entry point for attracting new partners and donors and has been recognised as a replicable model in future emergency contexts, positioning the Family Centre model as a rapid-response mechanism for child protection and psychosocial support.

Challenges and Difficulties

The programme faced several operational challenges that affected implementation across branches. One of the main issues was the limited availability of in-person training for volunteers and regional coordinators. Due to time constraints, budget limitations, and geographic dispersion, many team members had to rely on minimal preparation, which impacted their confidence and ability to deliver the methodology effectively.

Although materials were translated into Russian, they were not fully adapted to the national context. This created inconsistencies in how sessions were conducted, with some teams simplifying or adjusting content on their own. Branches applied the methodology with varying levels of fidelity, which made it harder to ensure quality and comparability across locations.

Engaging parents and caregivers also proved challenging. While participation increased over time in some branches, initial efforts to involve families were often met with reluctance. Reasons included competing priorities, lack of understanding of the benefits of psychosocial support, or limited trust. In addition, the adapted CFS approach did not provide concrete tools for caregiver engagement, leaving each branch to find its own way of involving families.

Lessons Learned

- 1- **Locally adapted psychosocial support models** can effectively address the emotional and social needs of children in emergency contexts, even when implemented across highly diverse regions.
- 2- **Child-friendly activities delivered in safe and inclusive environments contribute to positive behavioural change**, emotional stability, and improved communication among children. When Centres were regularly operational and staffed with trained, motivated volunteers, children began to adopt the routines, behavioural norms, and emotional tools learned in these spaces into their daily lives.
- 3- **Engaging parents and caregivers** as active participants in the process is important. Trust and interest from caregivers grew most in regions where activities were held frequently, and where space was created for informal dialogue or family involvement. This shows that strengthening family relationships is not a by-product of child-focused programming — it is a strategic opportunity for reinforcing protection, trust, and long-term resilience.
- 4- Innovation in engaging community professionals (e.g. speech therapists, special educators, psychiatrists), showing that a **multidisciplinary approach is both feasible and highly beneficial** in a psychosocial support context. However, this also highlighted that many branches would benefit from broader training — not only in child protection, but also in conflict resolution, community mobilisation, and adult-focused facilitation.
- 5- Challenges of uneven training access, material adaptation, and caregiver engagement showed that **methodologies must be flexible and accompanied by clear operational guidance**. Investing in the preparation of core teams of facilitators and coordinators with both technical skills and local insight is crucial for scaling similar initiatives in future emergencies.
- 6- Strong proof of concept: the **Family Centre model is a scalable**, modular, and trust-building intervention that can be adapted quickly and effectively to future crises involving children and families.