



# DEVELOPMENT CENTER FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AND IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS

**Hungarian Red Cross**

## CASE STUDY

Photo description: Hungarian Red Cross staff member working with child at Development Center  
Photo credit: Hungarian Red Cross

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Photo description: Hungarian Red Cross Development Center team  
Photo credit: Hungarian Red Cross

## Background

### Main features of the programme

The Developmental Center, structured similar to a child friendly space that is ongoing, was designed to provide stable, safe, and inclusive support for children in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County, with a special focus on Ukrainian refugee families and children with disabilities or special educational needs. The programme offered individually tailored developmental activities, structured play sessions, thematic workshops, sensory and physical exercise programmes, as well as parental guidance and community engagement opportunities. Its holistic approach aimed to support children's cognitive, emotional, and social development while strengthening parental involvement and family resilience. The programme was implemented in Nyíregyháza, initially in a temporary location and later in a permanent, purpose-equipped center that ensured child safety, accessibility, and a welcoming environment.

### Institutional context and partnerships

The programme was implemented by the Hungarian Red Cross, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County Branch, which has been actively supporting Ukrainian refugees since the outbreak of the humanitarian crisis in February 2022. As the county served as both a first point of arrival and a transit area for refugees, the branch developed strong, daily contact with displaced families. This close relationship allowed the organisation to continuously adapt its services to changing needs. The programme was delivered by trained staff and development professionals, including special education experts, within the National Society's institutional framework, ensuring professional quality, child protection, and sustainability.

### Cultural context and rationale

Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County became home to many Ukrainian refugee families who decided to settle long-term. While general humanitarian assistance was available, a significant service gap was identified in the professional support of children with disabilities and special needs in a foreign country. Cultural and language barriers, trauma, and limited access to specialised services increased the vulnerability of these children. In response, the programme was developed to create an inclusive, safe, and child-friendly developmental space that supports child protection, integration, and well-being. The initiative addressed both immediate developmental needs and longer-term resilience, ensuring that children and families could build stability and trust in their new environment.

## Who was Supported and How

The programme supported children aged 3–15 years and their families, with a special focus on Ukrainian children, including Transcarpathian Roma children. Particular attention was given to children with disabilities and those with learning, developmental, or integration difficulties, such as ADHD, ADD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, learning difficulties (SEN/SNI, BTMN), and other developmental delays. Parents and caregivers were also supported through counselling, guidance, and community-based activities.

Gender and diversity were addressed through a strong Protection, Gender, and Inclusion approach. All programme activities were designed to be safe, accessible, and inclusive, ensuring equal participation for girls and boys regardless of background, ethnicity, or abilities. Special consideration was given to children with special educational needs, creating an environment that respected diversity and promoted equal opportunities.

The programme delivered age-specific developmental sessions focusing on fine motor skills, speech development, memory, curiosity, and creative thinking. A safe and well-equipped playroom was established to support learning through play and to encourage social interaction. In addition, a craft activity enabled 14 children to create autumn decorations, fostering creativity, self-expression, and fine motor development.

One of the most professionally significant elements of the programme was the developmental sessions designed for children with special needs, including non-verbal children and those with low levels of cooperation. Addressing these challenges required tailored methods and individualized approaches. A highly qualified special education teacher was engaged to lead these sessions, ensuring professional quality and effective inclusion in the developmental process.

Parents and caregivers received counselling and practical advice from child development professionals, helping them better understand their children's needs and support their development at home. Community events were also organized to strengthen social connections and peer support among families.

To strengthen institutional capacity, a two-day professional workshop on Protection, Gender, and Inclusion (PGI) and Safeguarding was held in Nyíregyháza in mid-September 2025 with 18 participants. The training aimed to enhance staff members' theoretical and practical knowledge of PGI principles, child protection, and safeguarding responsibilities. The sessions included interactive discussions, practical exercises, and real-life scenarios, and participants showed strong commitment to applying these principles in their daily work.

Overall, the programme successfully supported children in vulnerable situations and their families through inclusive, child-centred, and gender-sensitive approaches, while also strengthening professional capacities to ensure safe, high-quality, and sustainable services.

## Successes

The programme achieved significant success in providing inclusive, high-quality developmental support for children with diverse needs, particularly Ukrainian refugee children and children with disabilities or special educational needs. Between June and October, 2025 the programme reached 89 children.

One of the key achievements was the implementation of individualised, person-centred developmental interventions, ensuring that each child received tailored support based on their abilities, challenges, and developmental stage. The principle of differentiation and individualisation was consistently applied, allowing complex habilitation and rehabilitation goals to be addressed effectively within a limited timeframe.

The developmental sessions covered a wide range of areas, including body awareness, spatial orientation, visual and auditory perception, fine and gross motor skills, cognitive development, communication, and

socio-emotional competencies. This comprehensive approach contributed to measurable progress in children's attention, cooperation, communication attempts, emotional regulation, and task engagement.

A major factor behind the programme's success was the strong cooperation with families. Personal contact with parents at the start of the intervention helped establish shared goals, realistic expectations, and trust. Families actively participated in consultations and welcomed educational guidance, which reinforced progress beyond the sessions themselves. Extending the intervention to the family level significantly increased its effectiveness.

The programme also succeeded in creating a safe, structured, and child-friendly environment, first in a temporary location and later in a permanent facility. Camps, workshops, craft activities, and community events strengthened children's social skills, creativity, and sense of belonging, while also promoting community cohesion.

Capacity-building activities further enhanced programme quality. The two-day PGI and Safeguarding workshop strengthened staff and volunteer competencies, ensuring that all activities adhered to Protection, Gender, and Inclusion principles.

Overall, the programme was successful due to its child-centred methodology, professional expertise, strong family engagement, flexible implementation, and continuous attention to safeguarding and inclusion.

## Challenges and Difficulties

The programme faced several challenges that required adaptive planning and flexible implementation. One of the main difficulties was the short duration of individual developmental interventions, typically lasting only 2–4 months. While this timeframe was sufficient to achieve short-term and general special education goals, it limited the possibility of delivering complementary therapies or deeper, long-term rehabilitation. To address this, the team focused on intensive, well-structured sessions with clearly defined priorities, ensuring that available time was used effectively.

Another challenge was the absence of multidisciplinary team-based interventions. Due to time and resource constraints, collaboration with additional rehabilitation professionals—such as speech therapists, physiotherapists, or sensory integration specialists—could not be fully implemented. This was particularly relevant for children with severe and multiple disabilities, as well as in areas such as gross motor development, speech therapy, and complex sensorimotor interventions. Despite this limitation, the special education teacher applied integrated methods to partially compensate for these gaps.

Logistical challenges also affected programme delivery. Activities initially took place in a rented temporary facility, limiting continuity and predictability. At the same time, equipment procurement and preparation for the permanent property were ongoing, requiring careful coordination. After acquiring the permanent facility, renovation work—including flooring, painting, and safety adjustments—created additional time constraints, especially due to ventilation requirements after floor varnishing.

Scheduling individual sessions became more difficult once the school year started, as children attended full-day education, requiring flexible coordination with families.

These challenges were overcome through strong teamwork, flexible scheduling, and continuous communication with families. The experience strengthened the team's capacity to manage complex operational and safeguarding issues. Ultimately, the challenges contributed to valuable learning outcomes and resulted in a fully functional, sustainable Development Center, providing a strong foundation for future programmes.

## Lessons Learned

1. **Individualised, person-centred developmental interventions ensured that each child received tailored support** based on their abilities, challenges, and developmental stage. The principle of differentiation and individualisation was consistently applied, allowing complex habilitation and rehabilitation goals to be addressed effectively within a limited timeframe.
2. **Building trust is critical** to successful implementation. The Development Center project created a safe and encouraging environment where children could learn, grow, and express themselves with confidence.
3. **Inclusion of parents is essential.** As the primary caregivers of children in vulnerable situations, including children with disabilities, parents have a foundational role in applying learning when back at home, providing feedback to Development Center personnel on how to improve programming, and to act as advocates for the program.
4. **Partnerships with skilled local professionals** allows for children to access enhanced services in timely and efficient ways. Building in time to form partnerships and to have time to deliver professional services is important to plan from the start.
5. **Flexible scheduling for activities is crucial**, especially during the school-year. Scheduling is strengthened when there is coordination with parents and school administrators.