



What Works Guide

ECEC Play Hubs - a first step towards integration

In search for innovative responses
to discrimination of Romani children and communities

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This publication was funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020) and the Open Society Foundations (OSF). The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the partners of the project and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union or OSF.

Daniel, S., Trikic, Z., Cortellesi G., and Kernan, M. (2018) What Works Guide: ECEC Play Hubs - a first step towards integration, Leiden: TOY for Inclusion

Graphic design by Alberto De Nicola

"I have never felt so welcomed and respected before" – Ana Dirdova, Romani mother of six, Spišský Hrhov, Slovakia.

Purpose of the guide

This guide documents the promising practices of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Play Hubs, which **support integration of Roma at local level**. The practices and the accompanying recommendations are based on the evidence from the TOY for Inclusion project¹ piloted in seven countries (see box below). The guide is designed for practitioners and local authorities. It will assist them in the **implementation of community-based ECEC services for Romani and other children to improve social cohesion**. The guide also informs local, national and EU level policy-makers about how to use **social and economic solidarity between cultures and generations to promote desegregation and inclusion**. Recommendations presented in the guide complement one another and are most effective when implemented simultaneously. Together the practices and recommendations provide clear guidelines for a systemic approach and sustainable local solutions in both policy and in practice.

The TOY for Inclusion project is co-financed by European Union and Open Society Foundations under the coordination of International Child Development Initiatives – ICDI (Netherlands). Other project partners are the International Step-by-Step Association – ISSA (Netherlands) and six national Romani Early Years Networks: Educational Research Institute – ERI (REYN Slovenia), Open Academy Step by Step – OASS (REYN Croatia), Wide Open School – WOS (REYN Slovakia), Centre for Innovation in the Early Years – VBJK (REYN Belgium), Associazione 21 Luglio (REYN Italy) Partners Hungary Foundation (REYN Hungary), and Centre for Education Initiatives – CEI (Latvia)

¹ The project, TOY for Inclusion: Community-based Early Childhood and Care for Romani Children (2017-2019, <http://www.toy4inclusion.eu>) was established to address educational segregation and social exclusion of young Romani children in seven European countries.



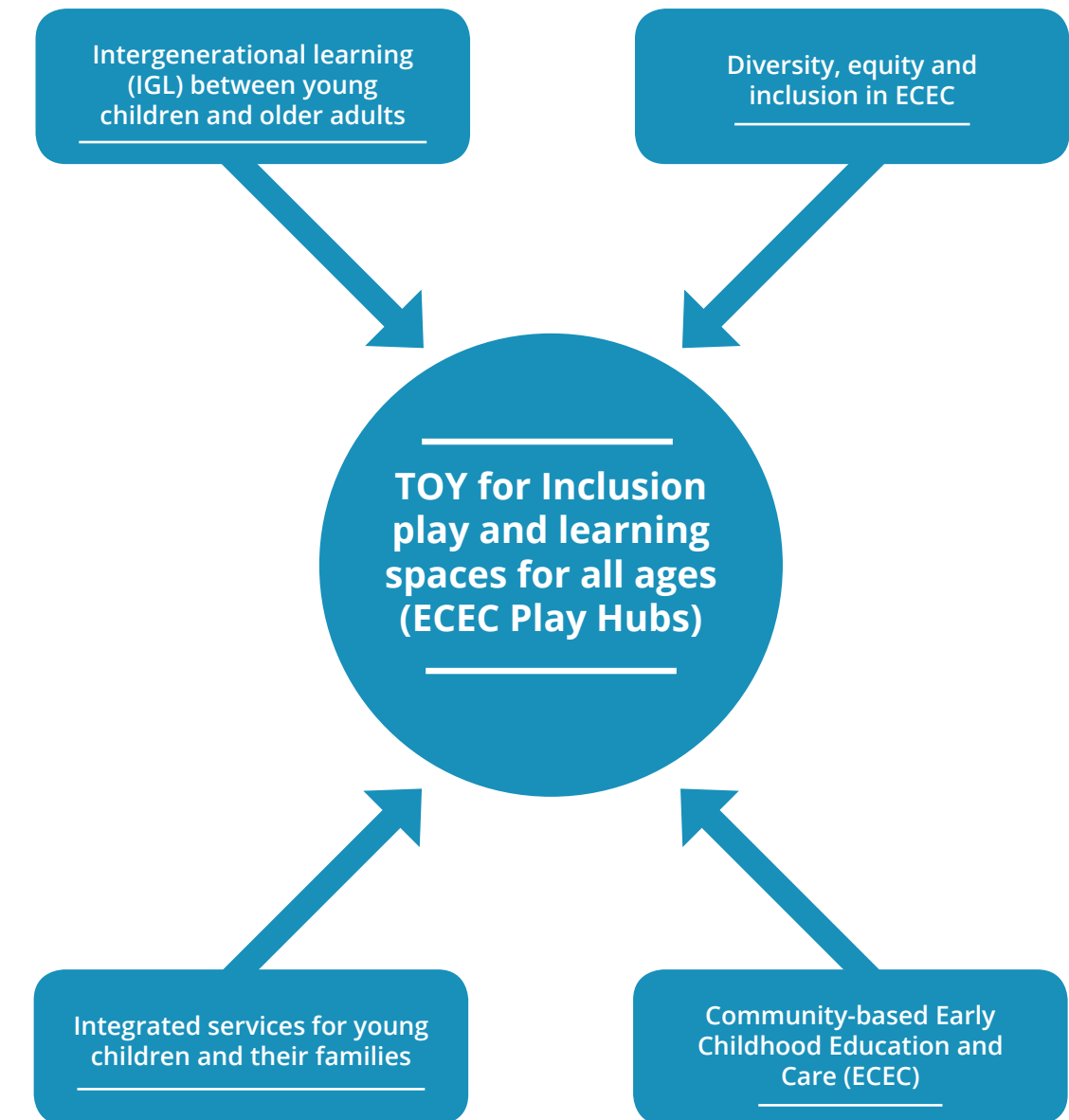
What are
ECEC Play Hubs?



The concept of the ECEC Play Hub was developed in the context of the TOY for Inclusion project and forms the core of the TOY for Inclusion approach. ECEC Play Hubs are safe **Early Childhood Education and Care spaces where relationships between young children and families from all backgrounds are built**. They are inclusive spaces where:

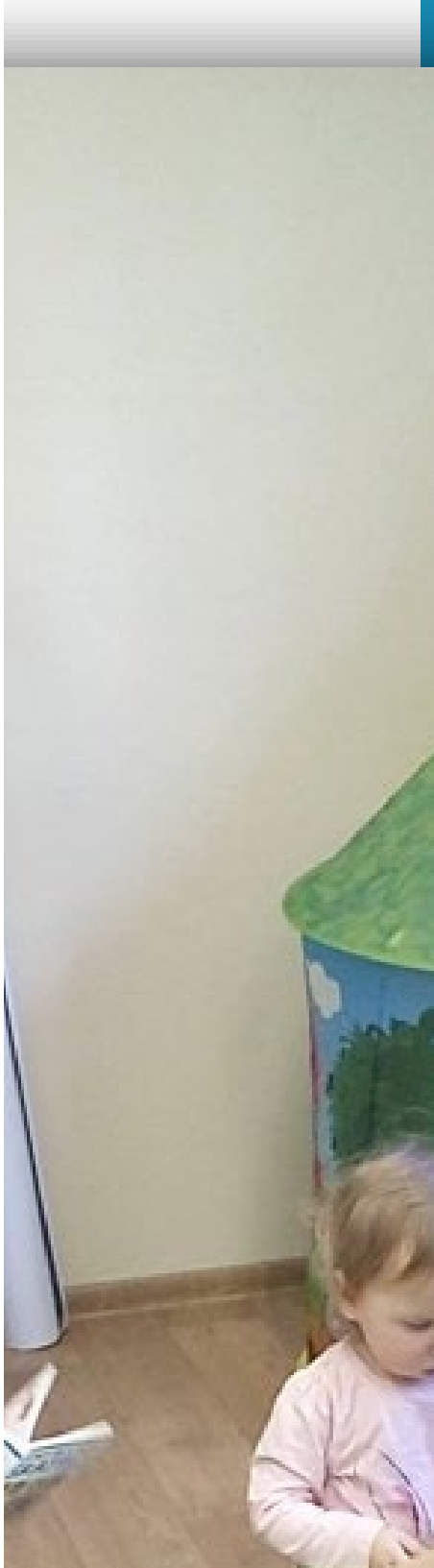
- children can **borrow toys** and educational materials to bring home
- children and adults of all ages are welcomed to **meet, spend time together and play games** with each other
- parents, grandparents and practitioners can informally access **information about childrearing, health, early learning and development**.

The TOY for Inclusion approach is based on **participative processes**, which are flexible and adaptable to different contexts and needs of different target groups. The main building blocks of approach are:

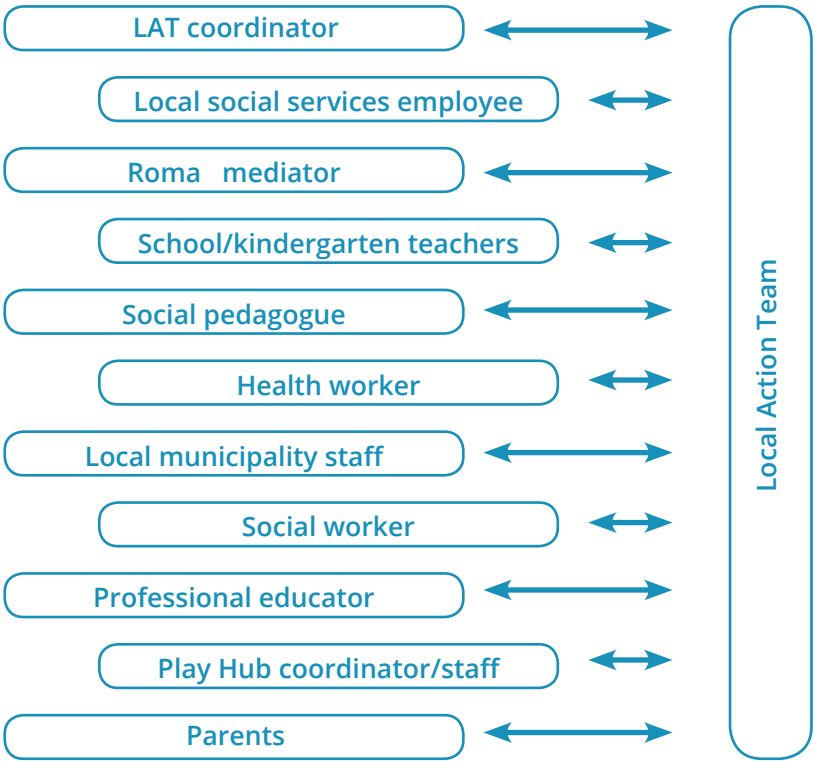


Based on the experience of eight ECEC Play Hubs in seven countries between 2017 and 2018, it was demonstrated that the **combination of these four building blocks** in the form of **locally run ECEC Play Hubs**, results in:

- **trust building and strong connections between early childhood practitioners, activists, policy makers**, and different types of volunteers working with children dealing with difficult circumstances (Romani, migrants, low socio-economic backgrounds, etc.);
- **challenging of the prevailing understanding of ECEC service delivery** as only possible in a formal environment,
- trust building between the Romani families and the non-Romani community, positively affecting **relationships between Romani and non-Romani children**
- **interaction and learning across all generations** including older adults in a community
- provision of an important **community safe space for interagency cooperation** between early years services.



ECEC Play Hubs are run by **Local Action Teams (LATs)**. These are local committees, which coordinate the process of **designing, running, and monitoring the ECEC Play Hub's activities**, ensuring good coordination, sharing of information, and local ownership. The LATs are formed with sustainability in mind: a group of stakeholders representing different institutions and communities (e.g. Roma/non-Roma) trained to work together to initiate and support ECEC and social cohesion initiatives (see below). In the TOY for Inclusion project, a **LAT** was formed in each location as the main managing body of the Play Hub. The average number of LAT members was 12 and the number as well as a composition of the LAT varied from location to location. **LATs were more successful when Roma participated.**



ECEC Play Hubs in numbers

In the first six months of 2018, already **1621 children and family members** have participated in activities and workshops in the eight ECEC Hubs. Approximately 20 % are of Roma background. The numbers involved are constantly increasing.



Children aged between 3 and 14 take part in activities in the ECEC Play Hubs, between January and June 2018, showcasing the importance of peer learning and support.



The eight ECEC Play Hubs continue to operate in **Belgium, Hungary, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Slovenia, and Slovakia** serving as the first step towards inclusive and integrated services for all generations.



ECEC Play Hubs
in the context
of EU policy

Availability: the organization and the atmosphere in the Play Hubs make all families, children and community members feel welcome, giving them a sense that **they belong and are represented**

Affordability: free of charge for children, families and members of the local community

Accessibility: the spaces are chosen carefully, close to where different communities live and where children spend their time. The organization of activities consider **the values, beliefs, needs and culture of parents** and other representatives of the local community

Coordination of Services: collaborative planning and implementation involving different institutions, organizations from public, business and civil sector. Function as a **"one stop shops"** - where parents and family members can meet with different professionals individually or participating in workshops

ECEC Play Hubs demonstrate how community interventions can contribute to the goals defined in the **EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) up to 2020**, in particular with respect to early childhood, education, health and employment, by developing approaches and activities which are interesting and inviting for members of Roma communities. **Roma participation** in the work of the Local Action Team (LAT) **"a feeling of being welcomed as an equal partner"** leads to **positive visibility in the local community, workforce participation in the Play Hubs and a feeling of being welcomed and an equal partner**. Play Hubs **increase access to ECEC** for many Romani children and provides them and their families with contacts with different services.

Play Hubs report **improved transition experience of Romani children to schools**, primarily by offering innovative responses to discrimination and nurturing children's preparedness for formal education, which is one of the priorities of the NRIS.

ECEC Play Hubs

Contributing to the development of the competent ECEC system²

The top-down (policy-makers' intervention) and bottom-up (local community's leadership) approach, as well as the local ownership and the operation of Play Hubs addressed all levels of competent ECEC systems:

Individual level

Involvement of LATs and mobilizing local people including those working in the ECEC Play Hubs; investing in their professional development and nurturing their agency and voice.



Institutional level

Creating teams and community of different professionals working in ECEC Play Hubs and sharing their knowledge and skills with institutions they are based in.



Inter-institutional level

Bringing different services together and creating conditions for them to work in a non-formal, but coordinated manner, together in one space.



Policy level

Involving representatives of Local Governments in the process of establishing, planning, operating and maintaining the Play Hubs.

²Urban and al. (2011), Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (CoRe Report) European Commission

Recommendation

1.

Encourage community-based ECEC and local ownership from the start and support the bottom up and top down approach

The ECEC Play Hubs build on the strengths of communities with regard to intergenerational learning and parenting competences, and strengthen the links between informal, non-formal, and formal settings for young children.

Roads to success

1.1 Foster local ownership

'The best decisions are made by individuals that the decisions will affect'

To gain support for the Play Hubs, include all the community parties that can contribute. To be able to plan and implement the actions in local community it is of outmost importance to form a body, which will take the lead and responsibility in the process and provide **a solid foundation for** community engagement.

Recommendations

In this section, the experience from the pilot project is used to formulate recommendations to scale up and implement local actions towards inclusion of Romani children and their families.

The crucial role of the LAT is stressed by all the partners. The power it has in **mobilizing the community and making decisions is key.**

The local ownership should be visible from the very beginning.

Participation in LAT should be inspiring and gratifying not a burden. The LAT can meet less frequently once the Play Hubs are established and activities are implemented.



1.2 Use data and information from the community for planning and choosing the implementation locality for the Play Hubs

When deciding where to establish the Play Hubs, the project partners selected localities that had experience with implementing similar activities. **Community mapping** was nevertheless a very important part of the project implementation, **revealing new contacts and resources.** Partners mostly relied on their own data or secondary data from existing resources. **Local contacts proved to be the most useful in data collection** (in all cases). Additional sources of information included: official statistics and academic studies.

1.3 Promote Roma leadership and partnership with Roma community

Addressing segregation and enhancing social cohesion, especially between Roma and other local communities, requires Roma participation from the start.

We have chosen not to characterize the programme as a ‘Roma project’ to maintain diversity in participation. Active involvement of Roma in the governance body, as employees, and as volunteers, significantly contributed to trust building in the Roma community. Experience has shown that active involvement requires trust building over time – it is very common that first visitors of the Play Hubs are coming from the dominant culture because they feel safe and relaxed encounters with the institutions and their representatives. To promote Roma participation and leadership, specific actions should be taken, and they require additional planning.

Building trust

“You need time and effort to gain trust of minority groups with a mainstream service. They would come to listen to you when you invite them and present the Play Hub to them. But it takes time for them to decide to come by themselves. It is crucial to come to them and present what the Play Hub offers”
[Slovenia]

To involve Romani children and families, it is necessary that they have agency and a say during the whole process.

1.4 Choose stakeholders aiming to include all the levels of the ECEC system

Seven main groups of key stakeholders were identified as key in the successful functioning of the ECEC Play Hubs:



Health professionals and religious leaders were also identified as stakeholders, although they were viewed as having a smaller role in some, but not all LATs. This emphasizes the importance of a specific approach tailored to a community. The involvement of **health professionals** was sought specifically to extend the activities of Play Hubs beyond education and care and **promote integrated service**.



Particular attention was drawn to the role of volunteers – whether senior **volunteers** (older adults) or others. While volunteering has different histories in different contexts, the Play Hubs managed to attract **volunteers of all ages** who wanted to devote their time to promote social cohesion in their communities and to organise or help out in the Play Hub activities.

1.5 Plan carefully when and how to include different stakeholders

Partners agreed that it was crucial to involve most of the local stakeholders from the beginning but identified also some groups which might be better involved once the Play Hub is in full operation and has some results to demonstrate. These can, for example, be the local businesses, which can help financially.



Recommendation

2. *Promote and nurture integration of services and coordination in service delivery for children and their families*

ECEC Play hubs help coordinated delivery of some services to parents and families by reaching out to them and not waiting for them to come to services. So called 'hard to reach families' proved **not to be hard to reach when services were delivered in a coordinated way.**

2.1 *Involve professionals from different specializations in the process*

Use the space of the Play Hub to involve a **range of different professionals in the early years sector** such as health professionals, educators, psychologists, social workers. They should come and address the questions that parents and family members have in a way that will contribute to trust building in different institutions and early years services. Also use this opportunity to nurture professionals' interest in organizing outreach services.

Recommendation

3. *Utilize the power of intergenerational learning and the Together Old and Young – TOY approach as a catalazyer of social cohesion, intercultural dialogue and inclusiveness*

In today's society, many families with young children live in a rather isolated way, separated from other community members and in many cases from the older adults in their own family. **Intergenerational initiatives facilitate connection and understanding between citizens of diverse communities and different ages**, providing a space for collaboration, connection and acceptance between different age groups and people with different backgrounds. By organising intergenerational learning initiatives, the lack of contact between generations and the lack of social cohesion between vulnerable and culturally diverse communities can be buffered.

3.1 *Involve older adults in the LAT to foster social cohesion*

Involving older adults and organisations working with or representing them (social care organisations, groups of retired professionals, etc.) in the LAT is crucial to ensure their participation in the activities of the Play Hubs. They should be **involved and consulted during planning, design, implementation and evaluation** and be considered as a key partner. *'We are often confronted with prejudices. But here generalizations are challenged thanks to these experiences, because I know I wouldn't have had contact with many of these people if I didn't do this work.'* Senior volunteer

3.2 The role of senior volunteers and grandparents

Grandparents play a central part in the nurture and socialization of their grandchildren. **Grandparents' role as listener, storyteller, and memory of family history** is seen as complementary to the role of parents. This can be particularly significant when a parent is absent or unavailable for long periods of time because of family breakdown, illness or migration. Older people should be central to intergenerational activities in the Play Hubs. *'Volunteering with children gives me a lot of pleasure. I bring them as much joy as I receive from them.'* Senior volunteer

3.3 Enriching learning processes of children and older adults

An important aspect of intergenerational learning is the opportunity for fun and enjoyment when **teaching and learning roles are more open**. This can happen in exchange visits and joint art, music, dance and gardening activities involving young children with older people, including those in old people's homes in the community where the Play Hub is located. *'It is all about learning of the values of sharing, solidarity, respect and acceptance of the other.'* Parent of child participating in an intergenerational activity

3.4 Facilitating older people as guardians of knowledge

Older people have an important role as guardians of knowledge, traditions and skills in a learning society. **Older adults are a vital link with history and cultural heritage and give children a sense of identity and perspective**. Examples include older people documenting stories or local legends to pass on to children, and older people and children, sharing experiences of play and living in a locality then and now. This is particularly relevant if the Play Hubs are trying to promote intercultural dialogue between Roma and non-Roma communities or diverse communities in general. *'During life, people acquire knowledge and it is positive to have the chance to transmit it as part of history to the younger ones.'* Senior volunteer

Intergenerational initiatives promote social cohesion and lifelong learning.

Recommendation:

4.

Actively support and implement respect for diversity, equity and inclusion

ECEC Play Hubs improve the capacity of ECEC practitioners and other stakeholders with respect to anti-discrimination, in turn increasing the inclusiveness of ECEC settings.

4.1 Go where the children and families are

A decision was made to locate Play Hubs in places which were **reachable to both Roma and non-Roma communities** to promote integration. Locations were diverse, including community centres, libraries, primary schools or kindergartens. In some cases, provision of transportation was needed to ensure participation of disadvantaged groups.

Roads to success



4.2 Encourage diversity in children, parent and family members experiences

Along with the regular lending of toys to families, three types of activities are organized in ECEC Play Hubs:

Community activities such as: ‘How to choose a quality toy for a child’ (Croatia), ‘School promotion’ (Italy); ‘Ringla learns traffic safety’ (Latvia); ‘Toy Library reading day’ (Slovakia)

Intergenerational learning such as: ‘Sewing a stocking bunny’ (Croatia), ‘Urban gardening’ (Italy), ‘Drawing Ringla’s calendar together’ (Latvia)

Intercultural learning such as: ‘Toy Library baking and cooking week’ (Slovakia), ‘Magic paper’ (Italy)

Activities are delivered in an interactive and inspiring way aiming to build positive feelings in children about themselves and others, **appreciating diversity, encouraging dialogue between different groups, learning about each other, sharing experiences.**

- stay and play sessions;
- parents-child reading sessions;
- intergenerational activities and activities on cultural heritage;
- hand-craft and toy making activities;
- parent clubs;
- workshops or info-sessions for parents in cooperation with other services in the community

Lending toys and materials helps develop of responsibility in children and adults.

4.3 Build strong relationship with parents and empower them in their parental role

In the Play Hubs **parents** have the opportunity to discuss topics connected with parenting with professionals, peers (from different ethnic, social etc. background) and older members from the community. In that way parents are involved in the discussion process and creation of new knowledge, as child’s first educators and equal partners in the education of their children. This is beneficial for all participants in the process – they share and learn together.

4.4 Combine tailored outreach activities with center-based activities to attract children and families

Occasionally, services give up on working with disadvantaged groups arguing that they tend not to come. However, service providers should **actively monitor equal participation and diversity** in the attendance and consider specific outreach actions to nurture those where needed. At the same time, Play Hubs need to develop diverse and contextualized place-based activities in order to explicitly attract Romani children and other local communities. With this balanced approach ECEC Play Hubs sustained heterogeneity among their users and volunteers.

Under no circumstances should the ECEC Play Hub operators or service providers provide two separate services for Roma and non-Roma or other groups.

4.5 Include children, families and members from different groups in community.

ECEC Play hubs have capacity to **address all local communities, minorities and groups** and offer them the possibility to participate. Only then can the Play Hub be fully inclusive and benefit from the contributions of all.

Recommendation:

5. *Support the workforce with continuous professional development*

It is crucial to **engage and rely on local resources**, including staff both for sustainability as well as ownership. It is also crucial to involve the wide variety of professionals working in the community to **build connections between various services**, even if unrelated at first. Giving priority to the local human resources may, lead to increased demands for training and continuous professional development.

Roads to success

5.1 Develop a flexible and generic training toolkit which can be used and adapted by local trainers

Operation of the ECEC Play Hubs is guided by the **TOY for Inclusion Toolkit**, which was jointly developed by the project partners and revised to reflect the actual experience of local implementation. The main purpose of the Toolkit is to provide all the necessary conceptual and practical information to enable trainers and practitioners from different sectors and levels of ECEC system to set-up and run non-segregated multigenerational play spaces. The special focus of the toolkit is on social integration, social inclusion, intercultural and intergenerational dialogue.

The toolkit addresses the following topics:

- Setting the vision for all the children in the local community;
- The importance of community-based ECEC and integration of services for inclusion, equity and respect for diversity;
- Toy libraries as community resource hubs;
- All generations learning and playing together (intergenerational learning);
- The importance of desegregated ECEC for Roma and non-Roma children, and anti-bias education;
- Quality in community-based ECEC.

The toolkit includes resources for the initiators of inclusive community-based non-formal ECEC activities, for all children and their families. The initiators are trainers and practitioners from various sectors, as inter-sectoral collaboration is key to the success of this approach.

A non-exhaustive list of initiators may include:

- ECEC practitioners,
- Preschool teachers, primary school teachers
- Representatives of local authorities,
- NGOs /CSOs
- Librarians,
- Community development workers,
- Social workers,
- Health workers,
- Social care workers,
- Volunteers.



5.2 Build local capacity to deliver training and guide the process

Train local team of trainers who will train individuals in their communities, either as volunteers or paid staff. This strongly contributes to the sustainability of the initiative and also elevates the level of **professionalism in local community**.

Organize training and professional development meetings in mixed groups. Include representatives of all relevant stakeholders and create a **stimulating and safe space for mutual learning, peer exchange and development of positive personal relationships** among professionals. It is important to pay attention to the quality of services and provide continuous training to the staff as well as volunteers.

5.3 Ensure adequate resources for monitoring and evaluation and allow implementing partners to make the necessary changes

As stated by project partners they need support and time to reflect in order to provide visitors to the Play Hub sufficient range of toys, materials and activities. This is why they need time to reflect as a team, but also with the external support and help.

Recommendation:

6. *Encourage sustainability of ECEC Play Hubs*

Commonly, 'sustainability' is looked at from a budgetary point of view: is there sufficient money to pay the staff, maintain the premises, buy and replace toys, books and materials? Experience from the TOY for Inclusion project indicated that **flexibility in use of the resources**, not their total amount is the most crucial for achieving the results. In their sustainability efforts, Play Hubs and their Local Action Teams have had varied experience in additional fundraising, often being able to fund some parts of the budget (rent, toys) while struggling with other types of costs (typically training and supervision).

Roads to success

6.1 Preserve quality of services

Focusing on quality of services offered in the ECEC Play Hubs is extremely important. Sometimes it is easy to attract children and parents to come once, the real challenge is to encourage them to come back regularly. One of the ways to make ECEC Play Hubs sustainable is **to create a demand in the community for this kind of service**.

6.2 Offer flexible management of resources

Diverse contexts require specifically tailored approach to funding and the experience from the pilot points out the need for flexible approach to co-financing. On a positive side, the experience also shows that all localities offered some **'in-kind' contribution, either in use of premises, donations of toys, strong volunteer base**, etc.

Introducing and nurturing volunteers and investing in building a body of volunteers influences:

- local ownership
- building local capacities
- mobilizing local community

6.3 Establish partnerships with local municipality and other types of administration

We have described above that the LATs should include all types of local stakeholders, including representatives of the municipality. Nevertheless, the **local municipality** (or other type of administration) should also play a role in sustainability by contributing resources – financial or in-kind. It is therefore crucial to maintain a close relationship with the municipality and continue developing it through the LAT.

6.4 Make your work visible in media and celebrate successes

Creating **materials to promote the ECEC Play Hubs** as well as results achieved is very important. In this way children in the local community, their lives and challenges become visible. At the same time, solutions to problems are shared too which empowers the local community. The pilot projects have developed information materials including leaflets and a video that documents the operations and the impact of the Play Hubs.

The **TOY for Inclusion Consortium:**



www.toy4inclusion.eu



www.toy4inclusion.eu