

# Baytna: Early childhood development for refugees in Greece

Case Study

May 2019\*

Baytna delivers psychosocial support and early years education to children age 0-6 and their caregivers. The overarching aim is to facilitate a safe environment to support the development of the youngest refugees and strengthen families by helping to build secure, positive relationships.



Credit: Refugee Trauma Initiative

\* Adapted from the Baytna case study in Kolleen Bouchane, Hirokazu Yoshikawa, Katie Maeve Murphy, and Joan Lombardi, 2018, [“Early Childhood Development and Early Learning for Children in Crisis and Conflict.”](#) Paper commissioned for the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report, Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls, UNESCO, Paris. Available at [bitly.com/2019gemreport](https://bitly.com/2019gemreport).

# Country Context

The Greek government has suffered repeated criticism from international agencies for its efforts to manage the refugee crisis. Camps remain severely overcrowded (in some cases working at six times their intended capacity) and the overall refugee population is estimated to grow by a further 25 percent this year, topping 90,000. At the end of March 2019, the Greek government ceased cash and accommodation assistance schemes for all refugees granted asylum in 2017, rendering large numbers homeless. Cash assistance and accommodation for other refugees is expected to be withdrawn later in the year.

## A Family-Centered Approach

The founders of Refugee Trauma Initiative (RTI), in partnership with Help Refugees, have sought to provide some consistency for families caught up in this turbulent and unstable environment by setting up an early childhood care and development programme called Baytna, which means 'our home' in Arabic.

Baytna delivers psychosocial support and early years education to children age 0-6 and their caregivers. The central overarching aim is to facilitate a safe environment to support the development of the youngest refugees and strengthen families by helping to build secure, positive relationships. The program addresses the violence and insecurity refugee children experience, which can lead to toxic stress and trauma, with lifelong impacts on development and wellbeing.



Through Baytna, parents with infants and children up to 6 years old meet and interact with each other and learn more about child development, including:

- Helping parents understand children's development stages
- Explaining how traumatic experiences can impact their child's development and behavior
- Enhancing sympathy and empathy by better understanding their child and his/her needs
- Helping mothers to understand and be aware of their own needs and challenges
- Helping parents to take care of themselves in their difficult circumstances
- Encouraging mothers to express their worries and concerns for themselves and their families
- Supporting new mothers with the challenges presented by breastfeeding, emotions, marital relationships, etc.

Children in the Baytna program are taught motor skills, reading and writing, numbers and counting, expressing feelings confidently through creative and sensory play, and healthy coping mechanisms for the future.<sup>1</sup> The Baytna approach is family centered and includes work on parent-child emotional connection and attachment, marital relationships, and family empowerment to foster resilience for children and caregivers.<sup>2</sup>

# Addressing Emotional Needs and Cultural Dislocation

Baytna employs people who speak Arabic and Farsi and represent the same communities as the refugees themselves. Zarlisht Halaimzai, one of RTI's co-founders, is a former refugee who fled the civil war in Afghanistan with her family when she was 11 years old and spent 4 years crossing Europe. Ms. Halaimzai attributes the success of the program not only to the specialized expertise of staff, but also to the experiences and culture they share with Baytna clients. She notes that refugee families can struggle a great deal with issues of guilt, doubt, regret, and waking up to the reality of their situation.<sup>3</sup>

**“Many of the questions parents ask of the Arabic-speaking Baytna staff are about holding on to a piece of their homes and selves: *Will their children lose their identity? Will they forget their culture? Will they be okay?*”**

Refugees can face violence and discrimination in their host countries, and many more obstacles to building a new life, including a lack of services that address their social and emotional needs and cultural dislocation. Many of the questions parents ask of the Arabic-speaking Baytna staff are about holding on to a piece of their homes and selves: *Will their children lose their identity? Will they forget their culture? Will they be okay?*

The Baytna model is based on principles that help refugee children and their families overcome the emotional fallout from forced displacement and discrimination. An early childhood development (ECD) approach allows Baytna staff to work with the whole family and offer resources to support their children's needs, as well as give them a place to tackle difficult and painful issues for the sake of the whole family — for example, the difficulty of adapting to or being accepted into a new culture. Engaging parents and caregivers in this way is a key part of the intervention to expand the capacity of refugee parents to provide care and protection, and to build resilience in their children.

In one group, when women were asked to share lullabies, one mother began to cry. She realized that with the stresses she had faced during the first three months of her baby's life, she had not yet sung him a single lullaby.<sup>4</sup> Baytna not only provides a nurturing environment for children, it gives families a place to take a breath, regroup, and refocus the energies that got them to safety on the development of their children and rebuilding their lives.

## First-Year Results

To study implementation in the first year of Baytna, attendance and retention were measured, semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the progress of regularly attending children was observed, showing a 'clear correlation between high attendance and developmental progress for children as well as empowerment of primary caregivers.'<sup>5</sup>



Credit: Refugee Trauma Initiative

Participants reported higher levels of wellbeing, including ‘improvement in the capacity to self-regulate, relate to others and feel more secure.’<sup>6</sup> Other findings from structured interviews based on the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) development milestones<sup>7</sup> (modified) include:

- **95.6%** of children **engaging more with other children.**
- **91.3%** of children were **calmer and found it easier to express their emotions.**
- **82.6%** of children were **sharing more.**
- **65.2%** of children **had become less aggressive.**
- **78%** reported that their child had **developed or improved numeracy and literacy (incl. vocabulary).**
- **86%** stated that their child has become **more able to focus and concentrate for longer durations.**
- **73.9%** of the women said they are now **more able to notice when their child is trying to get their attention, and that they are more able and willing to communicate and play with their child.**
- **65.2%** expressed that Baytna gave them a place to process their thoughts, and that their **family interacts in a calmer, more relaxed way.**

The more children attended sessions at Baytna, the greater their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical abilities. Some children who attended regularly demonstrated at least 5 or more skills in addition to the skills benchmarked for their age group. That means a 5-year-old refugee child demonstrated emotional, social, and cognitive skills of a child 6 years old or older,<sup>8</sup> and there was ‘a clear correlation between high attendance and developmental progress.’<sup>9</sup>

## National Expansion

Since December 2016, Baytna has operated at 7 locations, including camps, shelters, and community centres, reaching over 800 children and their parents. The Baytna team has been agile and small, taking time to build relationships with refugee communities and to understand their psychosocial and emotional needs.

RTI have expanded the programme’s reach through capacity building of local agencies that work with young children, including grassroots volunteers in Northern Greece, and a partnership with another organisation to develop a refugee-led programme. RTI partnered with the International Step by Step Association and the Municipality of Athens to create a specialist early childhood care and development (ECCD) training for Greek education professionals. In the coming months, Baytna will open at two additional centers in Thessaloniki.

Two and half years of implementation have formed the basis for the Baytna manuals – training guidelines, principles and activities to train other centers in delivering the programme. Now, a national expansion of the Baytna model is already underway. In February 2019, RTI launched the Baytna Hubs project. Using the model and the manuals already developed, RTI will oversee the establishment of Baytna programmes at three further locations in Greece. RTI’s core team will provide ongoing technical support and maintain quality at each Hub through regular supervision and evaluation. The hope is that the Baytna Hubs Project will pave the way for even greater expansion in the future, as there remains immense need for ECD services for refugees in Greece, and RTI is among very few providers.

To learn more about Baytna and the Refugee Trauma Initiative, visit [www.refugeetrauma.org](http://www.refugeetrauma.org)

# Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Refugee Trauma Initiative. (2019). Baytna: Early Childhood and Family Care. Available: <https://www.refugeetrauma.org/baytna-jan19> [Accessed 6 May 2019].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Bouchane, K., and Z. Halaimzai. (25 April 2018). Interview. *Refugee Trauma Initiative's work on the Baytna project*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Refugee Trauma Initiative. (December 2016 – December 2017). *Baytna Annual Report*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 4

<sup>7</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (22 June 2018). *Developmental Milestones*. Available: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html>. [Accessed: 28 June 2018]

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pp. 15-21

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. 16



Credit: Refugee Trauma Initiative

The Moving Minds Alliance is a funders collaborative and network convened to scale up coverage, quality, and financing of support for young children and families affected by crisis and displacement. To learn more, visit [movingmindsalliance.org](http://movingmindsalliance.org)