

## CHILDREN OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN ISRAEL -

### PRE-SCHOOLS AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS (October 2020)

This report examines the needs and challenges of children of asylum seekers in the education system - pre-schools (gan) and elementary schools run by the municipality and the Ministry of Education.

The information in this report is based on interviews with teachers, parents, government officials and professionals working with children of asylum seekers, particularly in Tel Aviv. The report is written by ASSAF-Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel and the Garden Library.

There are around 30,000 asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan living in Israel. As of 2018, about 14,000 asylum seekers reside in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, mainly in Neve Sha'anana, Hatikva, and Shapira. There are also around 2,500 asylum seekers living in Petah Tikva, and smaller communities in Netanya, Arad, Eilat, Bnei Brak, and Jerusalem. In other cities, the number of asylum seeker residents varies from a few dozen to several hundreds.

As of the end of 2018, Israel is home to approximately 10,000 minors who are children of asylum seekers and migrants, most of whom were born in Israel, and are below the age of 10. Approximately 7,000 of these minors live in South Tel Aviv. In Israel, all children are entitled to be fully integrated into Israel's education system<sup>2</sup> regardless of their status. However, even though most children are integrated into the system in accordance with the Israeli law, it is apparent that the children, their parents and the educational staff face many serious challenges.

#### **Unregulated nurseries for infants (ages 0 to 3) known as "child warehouses"**

Before they start pre-school at the age of three, many children of asylum seekers attend unlicensed facilities, known as "babysitters" or "child warehouses,". They are run by staff who have no training or certification to care for children or to run educational facilities. Many of the children stay at the daycare center for long hours, in most cases under the supervision of a single person, in crowded conditions. Many times the children have no space to play outside, and sometimes they are left in bed all day. In the afternoons, they are joined by children from municipal pre-schools (gan) who cannot register for the afternoon programs there, due to financial difficulties, or because there is no such option. This increases the crowding and makes the conditions even more difficult.

According to a research report published by the School of Psychological Sciences at Tel Aviv University, "the outcome of extended stay at facilities in which the deficiencies are so severe, causes serious and prolonged developmental harm in a large proportion of infants." Along with the prospect of severe developmental damage, the stay in the makeshift facilities endangers the children's lives. In recent years there have been several deaths of infants due to neglect and harsh conditions in these makeshift facilities.

Due to this serious situation, in 2015 the Israeli government decided to allocate a budget of 14,000,000 NIS, for a period of four years, to establish supervised facilities as an alternative to these unofficial ones. As of June 2019, five such facilities have been established in Tel Aviv, but for only about 600 children. Thus, most children are still in the unofficial babysitters. To our knowledge, the budget has not been utilized in full.

### Challenges in the state education system - pre-school and elementary school

When the children turn three years old they are eligible to attend municipal pre-schools (gan). Many children of asylum seekers start pre-school lagging, on average, two or even three years behind Israeli children of the same age, largely as a result of the time they spent in the unlicensed babysitters. This results in severe difficulties in many areas, such as motor skills (for example, many of them will find it difficult to hold a pen or play simple games) and delayed language development, which causes difficulties communicating with each other, with their parents and their teachers, difficulties expressing themselves and behavior problems.

The educational staff in pre-schools and elementary schools say that the children are not ready for school when they start the first grade. Many of them experience difficulty sitting in a classroom or working in a team, are unable to recognize Hebrew ABC, count to ten, hold a pencil and so on. The children in schools have limited vocabulary and their literacy is much poorer than those of their Israeli peers. These difficulties lead to grave frustration that can cause a pupil to give up on the learning process or even lead to manifestations of anger and violence. Many pupils do not regularly attend school, missing many school days.

Education staff try to make up for the gaps and deficiencies, to manage behavioral issues and to make the study plan compatible with children of asylum seekers, but often do not have enough resources. Some schools raise funds from private donors to pay for linguistic mediation and diagnoses for children who are in desperate need of them.

### Children with special needs

The large number of children with emotional and communication problems, developmental delays, or behavior, requires a large number of professional diagnoses. Under the age of five, children who have health insurance are eligible for diagnoses by the Child Development Institutes of the health organizations (Kupat Cholim). Children over the age of five, can also be diagnosed through the Educational Psychological Service (EPS) in the local authorities, even if they do not have health insurance. Many times, children who do not have insurance and are under five years old are not diagnosed; they do not receive appropriate treatment in accordance with their needs, and are not integrated into preschools that are suitable to them.

For children in school-age, who are not insured, the EPS is struggling to deal with the number of requests for diagnoses, and only a small number of children are actually diagnosed. Due to a shortage in resources, even those diagnosed do not receive the variety of services to which they are entitled, such as a personal aide, tutoring, psychotherapy, or corrective teaching. Also, professionals say that the diagnoses that are made are not always accurate. This is due to the lack of their compatibility with the specifics of the population of asylum seekers.

When a child is diagnosed with special needs, staff often find it difficult to communicate the process to the parents. In addition, in cases in which diagnosed pupils receive a "combined treatment package," including paramedical care at various centers around the city, parents will find it difficult to take their children there, due to their financial circumstances, and therefore the children do not receive the treatment they are entitled to.

## WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN

### 1. Children of asylum seekers must learn together in the same classroom with Israeli children of Israeli citizens

Separating between children at pre-school and school due to their race, color, ethnic origin or nationality is illegal in Israel, but in many cases, separation exists between children of asylum-seekers and children of Israeli citizens. Separation causes damage to the development of children.

Therefore, children of asylum seekers must learn together in the same classroom with children of Israeli citizens, while giving them the special support they need to catch up with the Israelis' children.

### 2. Babysitters need to be supervised

The authorities must supervise the babysitters to make sure that they provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment for children. Unsafe babysitters need to be closed down.

### 3. Better communication between teachers and parents

Teaching staff must get translation services and mediation services so they can better communicate with parents. At the moment teachers struggle to update parents on their children's situation, get them to sign forms and so on. Parents find it hard to understand what is expected of them and of their children; they remain unaware of their child's academic status, their strengths and weaknesses.

### 4. Staff at the pre-schools and schools need special training

Pre-school and school teachers need more formal training to work with a foreign population, and new cultures and languages, and to deal with the unique characteristics and needs of these children.

### 5. pre-schools and schools need reinforcement and extra resources

Because of the many difficulties that children of asylum seekers are faced with, their pre-schools and schools must be reinforced and given extra resources. Besides the urgent need for translation and mediation services and special training for the staff, more teaching staff must be recruited and be present in the classrooms, especially in classes that focus on reading and writing in Hebrew, such as literacy knowledge.

## 5 THINGS THAT PARENTS CAN DO

### 1. SUPERVISE WHAT HAPPENS AT THE BABYSITTERS

If your child goes to a babysitter, always supervise the facility's safety and make sure that the children have a regular routine that includes playing outside, healthy meals and stimulation. Make sure that there is enough staff and that no violence is used by the caretaker.

### 2. SPEAK TO YOUR CHILD'S PRE-SCHOOL TEACHER

Make sure to speak to the teacher as best as you can - ask how your child was during the day and make sure you know when there are problems or issues that need addressing. You can speak to the teacher over the phone or face to face.

### 3. MAKE SURE YOU KNOW HOW YOUR CHILD IS DOING AT SCHOOL

Try to speak to your child's school teacher and make sure you know what is going on in the classroom and what the homework chores are. You can speak to the teacher or the school principal if you need to.

### 4. MAKE SURE THAT YOUR CHILD ATTENDS SCHOOL ON A REGULAR BASIS

In Israel it is against the law not to send your child to school on a regular basis. It is also extremely important for your child (and for the school) to attend regularly, whether by going to school or by attending the on-line lessons. It will help your child to develop a learning routine and healthy learning habits, which are very important for his/her success.

### 5. SPEAK AND PLAY WITH YOUR CHILD

It is important that you speak with your child in your mother tongue. This way your child will learn your mother tongue and will learn correct Hebrew. Always ask your child how their day was and see if they have any issues that need solving. Play and do activities together.

**ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel** was founded in 2007. It provides psychosocial assistance to asylum seekers and acts to promote their rights and status in encounters with the state authorities.

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**The Garden Library** - A community center for education, culture, and art, active in the Neve Sha'anani neighborhood since 2009. The Garden Library was established based upon the belief that culture and education are basic human rights that bridge differences between communities and individuals, and that can affect lasting social change.

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