

# Finding Hope at the Lowest Place on Earth

The early childhood education  
system for Israeli evacuees  
from the Gaza border area





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By: Dr. Maya Wizel



## Thank you!

To all the coordinators of the daycare centers and the educational staff who took part and shared their experiences, and to all the program's wonderful partners.

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: the Hebrew term "gan", which is parallel to what is referred to as nursery school or kindergarten in European countries is translated as "daycare" or "preschool" throughout the text. The meaning here is the early childhood education system for children ages 0-6.

Noise.

And silence.

A luxury hotel.

Empty, lost glances.

Groups sitting silently on couches in an elegant lobby.

Shock with no words.

Noise and silence.

Bags and bags of donations.

Clothes for every imaginable age, piles of shoes and sandals, masses of toys, games and art supplies, bottles of shampoo and conditioner in unending piles.

Improvised therapy stations.

Bleary-eyed parents pushing strollers in endless laps around the lobby.

Dead silence.

Noise.

On Saturday, October 7th, 2023, thousands of Israeli residents of the Gaza border area were evacuated to hotels at the Dead Sea; some after having left their homes with only the clothes on their backs, others having had time to pack a small bag. Everyone who arrived at the hotels in those first days felt the dissonance - the dissonance between the luxury hotels and the feeling of chaos and loss; the dissonance between the big signs for the spa and dining room and the trauma, uncertainty, and anxiety.

Residents of Kibbutz Be'eri were evacuated to the David Hotel. In the face of the community's feelings of chaos, it was clear they needed anchors of stability and quiet, as well as space for the parents of young children to mourn and process. This led to the creation of the daycare system before any government official was involved and before any other quality, regular educational framework had been offered to evacuees. Similarly, daycares were established in several evacuation centers for residents of Sderot in the Dead Sea area.

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## Introduction

This document has two goals. The first is to document the establishment of an early childhood education system at the hotels for evacuees in the two months following October 7th. The second is to add to the body of educational research and to draw insights that may serve the establishment of education systems during crises in Israel and around the world.

## Glossary

**Evacuated community:** The community from which the Gaza border area residents were evacuated.

**Evacuation hotel:** The hotel to which the civilians were evacuated, which became their temporary home.



**Daycare location/center:** The area in which several daycares were established in the same hotel.

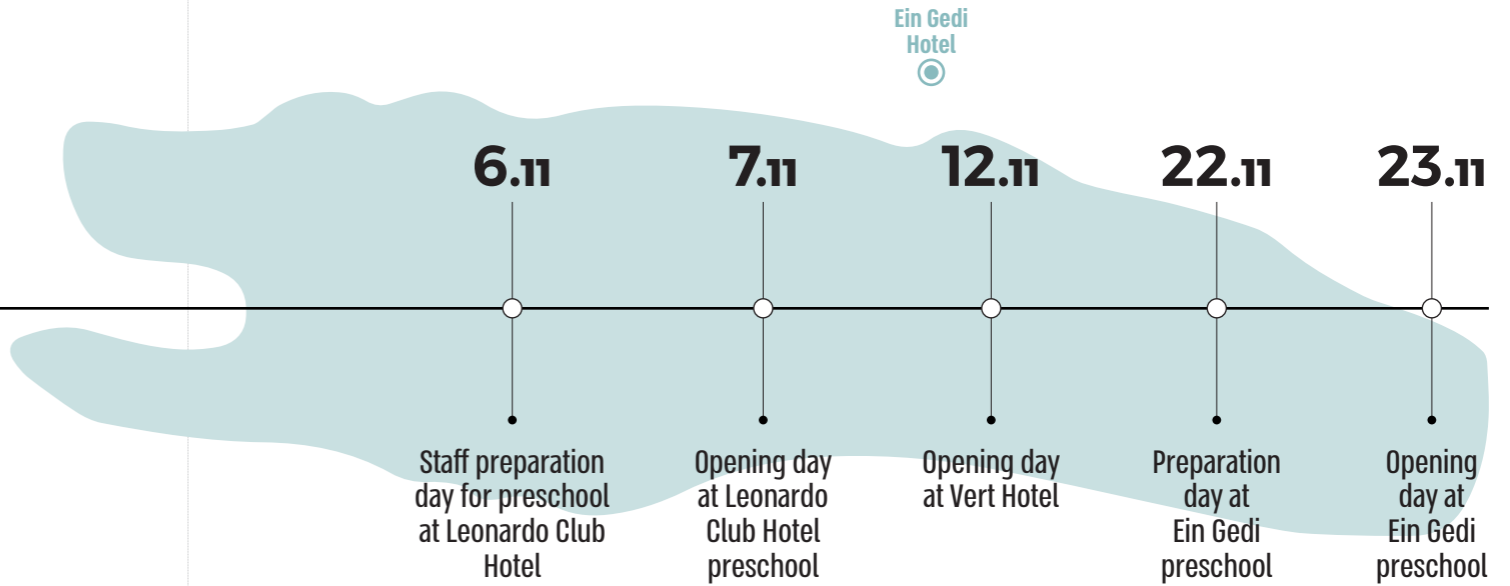
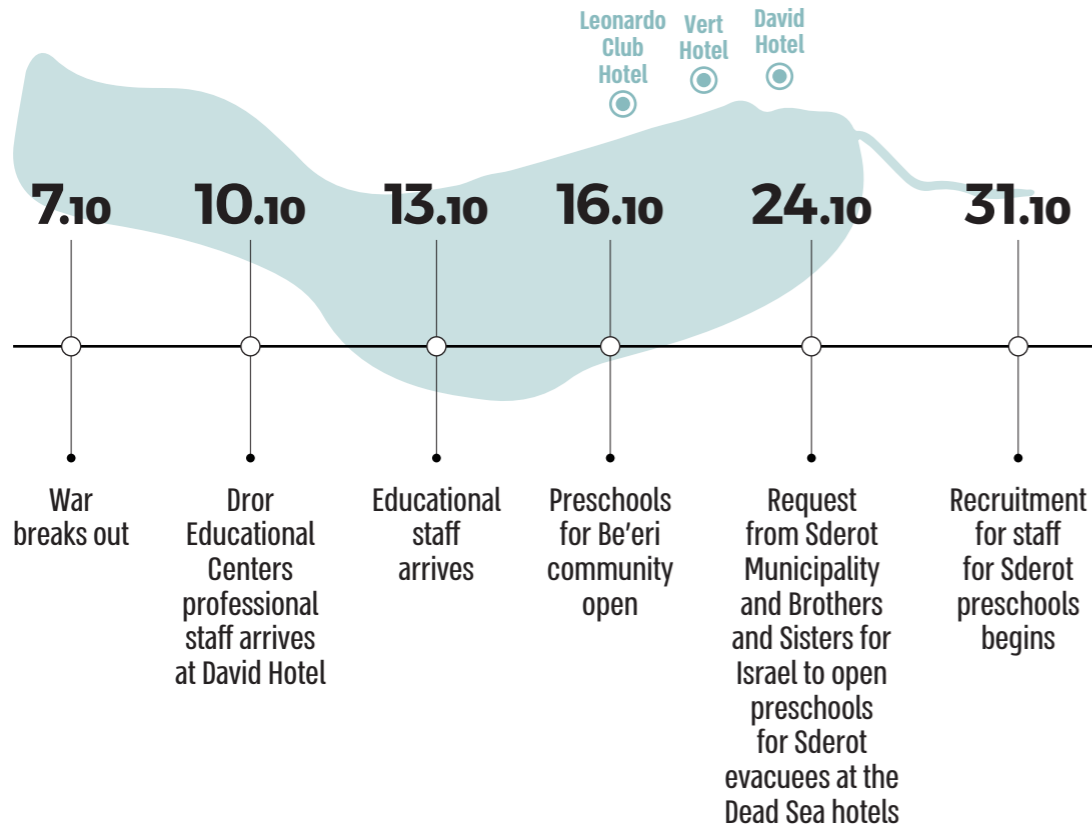
**Daycare group:** The group which serves as the educational unit - like the daycare class in routine times.

**Educational staff/daycare staff:** Anyone who serves in an educational role in the daycare system.

**Daycare coordinator:** An educational figure whose role is to coordinate the daycare center, to make sure everything is taken care of, and to provide training and support for the staff.

**Partners:** Partners in establishing the education system, from the public sector (formal or informal representatives of the evacuated community, the education department, the Ministry of Education, the Kibbutz Movement) or from the non-profit sector (NGOs and aid organizations).

  
This is  
a story  
that needs  
to be told.  




**4**  
preschools

**5**  
preschool coordinators  
from Dror Educational Centers

**40-50**  
staff members  
(including volunteers)

**16**  
preschool classes



## First Steps

“

We were sure of what we wanted, we decided not to compromise - not with ourselves, not with the staff, and not with the children.

”



Following the evacuation of the Israeli residents of the Gaza border area on October 7th, 2023, two coordinators from Dror Educational Centers arrived at the David Hotel on October 10th, and later 14 additional educational staff arrived to re-open the early childhood education program of Kibbutz Be'eri.

In a blitz operation of 48 hours, coordinators set up large tents and purchased initial supplies that would allow them to start working. On Tuesday, October 16th, all six preschool classes were re-opened (and later the nursery class as well), based on the classes that operated as part of the early childhood education system on the kibbutz at the beginning of the school year. The classes operated five days a week, morning to noon, and gradually extended their days until 4:00pm. From the outset, the educational staff were supported by a psychologist and mental health staff that participated in staff meetings and provided individual support to the parents and children.

In light of the success of the program with the Kibbutz Be'eri community, Dror Educational Centers staff began establishing daycares at three other evacuation centers for evacuees from Sderot - hotels at the Dead Sea and Ein Gedi - in partnership with the Ministry of Education, the municipality, and the Brothers and Sisters for Israel organization. Brothers and Sisters for Israel built physical spaces for the daycares in three locations: the Leonardo Club Hotel in the southern Dead Sea area, the Vert Dead Sea Hotel, and the Ein Gedi Hotel. Each location had two to four classes for children ages 0-6 who were evacuated from Sderot.



## Goals and Guiding Principles for the Daycares

### Goals of the Daycare

- + To create a safe space that gives the children a sense of warmth, belonging, and security.
- + To develop the children's social and emotional skills.
- + To provide a space for self-expression and choice.
- + To provide the children with educational and therapeutic activities that match their individual needs.
- + To meet the needs of the parents (in relation to their children and themselves).

### Guiding Principles

- + A regular group of educational staff for a substantial period of time.
- + Keeping the daycare in one physical place without changing the setting.
- + A routine schedule of activities.

From a proposal submitted to the Ministry of Education and the Municipality of Sderot.





Donations of toys and games that piled up at the hotels in the first days

There were so many volunteers. It was chaotic and temporary.

## A Hotel That Became a Home

Overnight, hotels all over Israel were transformed from weekend vacation spots to long-term family housing centers that were supposed to meet all community needs. This is how it came to be that in each hotel there were booths for the various government and army entities such as the Home Front Command, and hotel rooms were transformed into medical clinics, donations centers, improvised playgrounds, and more.

The daycares were not established in a vacuum. From the first day, in each hotel, there was a flurry of volunteers and staff from many organizations who provided educational and therapeutic aid to the evacuees. Thus, establishing the daycares was an organized and structured initiative that took place alongside these other initiatives from within and outside the evacuated communities.

While the subject of partnership will be expanded on shortly, it is notable that the daycares were made possible in each location thanks to many partnerships. For the Be'eri daycares, the main partnership was with the educational staff of the kibbutz and the early childhood educational staff in particular. Other partner organizations were IsraAID and Early Starters.

For the Sderot daycares, the establishment and the day-to-day collaboration included several organizations: Brothers and Sisters for Israel, the Early Childhood Department of Sderot, representatives from the city government in each hotel, and the coordinator from the Ministry of Education.

There were so many organizations involved in the beginning that we had to map them out.



## The Early Stages: Insights

### / Pace

Speed has enormous significance in the process of establishing wartime education systems. There is no time for long decision-making processes. Educators require a level of professional self-efficacy that allows them to jump right in, and an administrative infrastructure for support and problem solving. The inherent difficulty in the fast pace is felt later and comes to light mainly in partnerships and relationships with organizations who do not work at such a pace.

“  
Everything  
happened  
so quickly.  
It just  
happened.”

### / Language and Symbolism

While establishing the daycares, special attention was paid to using elements of the early childhood education system that runs in peacetime. Thus, for example, the educational spaces in the hotels were called daycares (ganim) from the very first moment. These spaces had signs (usually handmade) that declared them daycares. The supplies and the way the space was organized also added to the message that this was a serious space for early childhood education with a familiar purpose and rules. As one of the staff members put it, “We conveyed the idea that we aren’t compromising. We’re not going through the motions.” Additional symbolic meaning was given to the nametags that the staff wore in the various evacuation centers (at least in the early days). This is how the educational staff made it public and visible that there were daycares at the hotel.



Special attention to the signage





## / Administration

Because the daycares were established on an ad hoc basis in a complex situation, assigning time, budgets, and human resources was especially important: including acquiring supplies, allocating physical spaces for the ongoing operation and logistics, the relationship with the community, and working with volunteers. At some of the daycares there was a clear distinction between educational administration and operational administration, while at others one coordinator filled both roles.

One example of the complexity of the situation in the daycares is understanding that neither the children nor the staff are living at home, and therefore craft projects could not be sent home, parents could not be asked to send anything from home, and that the teachers couldn't bring educational aids from home or print at home.





## Aspects of Establishing the Early Childhood Education System

“I met creative women who were called to serve and showed up. This human encounter is a very strong antibody against despair and the feeling of loneliness and chaos and end of the world.”





## The Educational Staff

In establishing the daycare centers, the main emphasis was on recruiting, training, and managing an excellent educational staff that met the needs of the hour. In each one of the locations, the structure of the staff was slightly different, but there were common elements. For example, in each of the daycare centers, it took time (several days/weeks) until the staff was filled, and the staff members had various professional backgrounds. They also worked together with temporary volunteers such as gap year volunteers, teacher-soldiers, and volunteers from the community.

“  
Teamwork  
restores faith  
in humanity.  
”



## Recruiting and Hiring Educational Staff

The initial recruitment process for educational staff was hastened and lasted only a few days for each of the daycare centers. For the daycares of Be'eri, there was relative certainty regarding the number of classes and children, and coordinators from Dror Educational Centers hired educational staff accordingly. They recruited directly from Dror Israel as well as by word-of-mouth and advertising on social media.

In the remaining evacuation centers, it was unclear exactly how many children of daycare and preschool age were in each hotel and area. It was similarly unclear how many educational professionals from the evacuated Sderot community would take part in operating the daycares. Therefore, a high level of flexibility was called for, and recruitment decisions took place last minute - practically the night before.

To hire staff for the Sderot daycares, ads were placed in social media groups for daycare teachers. Later it became clear that the ads also reached groups for job seekers in search of temporary employment. Ultimately, over 150 people applied.

The candidates were sent a Whatsapp message asking them to briefly explain their educational background, with an emphasis on early childhood education, or to send their resumes. Relevant candidates received a phone call for a short interview.

The short phone interview included several parts:

- + Explaining details about the role, the conditions, and the opportunity for meaningful work.
- + Asking the candidates to share their professional background, their immediate availability and short-term plans, such as employment or studies (asking about their past, present, and future).
- + Giving the candidates a chance to ask any questions they may have.

Beyond collecting the relevant information about the candidate's experience and willingness to work, serious attention was paid to the way things were said and to indicators of insecurity, stress, and motivation. The content of the interviews was documented.

The daycare organizers sought to involve as many educators as possible who came from the evacuated communities, and in most cases, it was difficult to find them ahead of time. After arriving at the hotel, and with the help of the Ministry of Education and the Municipality of Sderot, the Dror Educational Centers coordinators were able to find educators who were staying at the hotels, and offer them the opportunity to join the educational teams. In many cases, it didn't work out due to the emotional unavailability to commit to the work, or technical unavailability due to lack of childcare, caring for other family members, or inability to commit to a long-term stay at the hotel.

At the Be'eri daycare centers, young educators from the kibbutz as well as young people who had been taking a break from life on the kibbutz joined the educational teams<sup>2</sup>. At the Sderot daycares, early childhood teachers from the evacuated communities joined. Their involvement was crucial for several reasons. First, their presence on the staff as those who had experienced the evacuation, the trauma, and life at the hotel contributed greatly to the staff's understanding of the needs of the preschool and the complex experience that the evacuated families were going through. Second, in some cases the families already knew the staff, which increased their trust in the daycare system. Finally, the heterogeneous staff made up of both locals and outsiders proved the internal strength of the community, taking an active role in the healing process rather than relying solely on outside "saviors".

<sup>2</sup> In many kibbutzs young people who were born in the kibbutz are allowed to take a year off from living on the kibbutz before they are formally accepted as kibbutz members.

There's  
a wildly  
diverse  
human  
mosaic  
here.



## Educational Staff: Insights and Recommendations

### / How They Perceived their Role

Many young candidates with educational experiences from youth movements, gap year service, national service, or army service applied. These candidates saw themselves as possessing rich professional backgrounds which would make it easy for them to work with the young children in the daycares. Many candidates also applied who had extensive experience as babysitters or taking care of their younger siblings, and therefore felt ready to work with the young children at a daycare center.

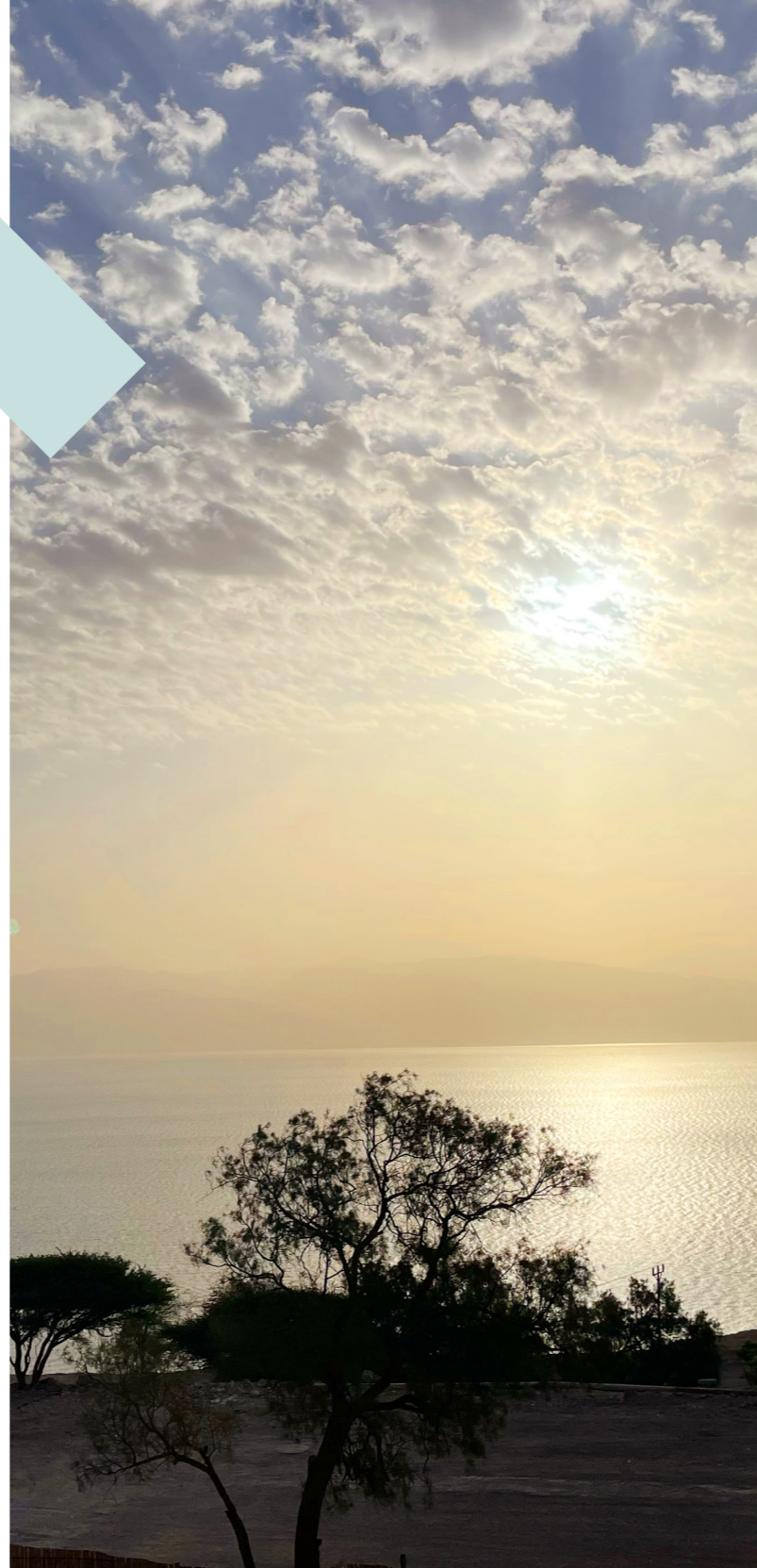
Throughout the interviews, it became clear that there was an incongruity between those feelings and the understanding that work with babies and young children requires educational expertise - there is a difference between babysitting babies and toddlers, and managing an educational framework for a class, which involves managing a schedule, pedagogy, relationships with the parents, and work with the class. In several cases, though a candidate might have significant experience working with young children, that experience did not necessarily lead to a sense of competence and willingness to take on the responsibility of running a daycare. Some of these reasons also had to do with the hierarchical nature that is customary in Israeli daycares, where the distinction between the teacher and the teacher's aide is stark. In the daycares established for evacuees, a unified daycare staff was created without distinction between roles and without hierarchy according to education or experience, such that some of the staff took on leadership roles in spite of their young age or lack of formal training.





## / Willingness to Work Far from Home

All of the candidates were willing to join the daycare staff and were immediately available for work. At the same time, because they would be employed in the Dead Sea area, far from home for most of them, they would need to be fully available five days a week. It was therefore important that the interview process included setting expectations about the exact meaning of full availability. This matter needed to be explained again and again, emphasizing why it wouldn't be possible to join the staff for only four days a week or to continue caring for their family members, grandchildren, or even pets during this time. An added issue was the uncertainty regarding when certain areas in Israel would return to routine operations, and a question arose as to whether to hire teachers whose daycares were temporarily closed at the time. The matter of full availability or lack thereof was in some cases physical (candidates who needed to care for their grandchildren or take part in weekly courses) and in some cases emotional (candidates who had children serving in the IDF or whose families were evacuated themselves).



## / Resilience, Flexibility and Living with Uncertainty

On October 7th, Israeli residents of the Gaza border area experienced a kind of hell, after which they were evacuated to hotels and evacuation centers. At the same time, all residents of Israel experienced war, with all its implications. In the phone interviews, many issues arose around the ability of the candidates to fill the roles. Some candidates felt they needed certainty around details like working hours or the number of children in the class (details which could not be provided until the daycares were open), and some wanted to come with their romantic partners or close friends. When looking at the staff members who were ultimately hired, it was clear that one of the prominent characteristics they shared was the willingness to deal with the uncertainty that was inherent in joining the project: uncertainty regarding living quarters, operating hours of the daycare, the makeup of the staff, and more. Accordingly, in the hiring process, preference was given to candidates who described past experiences with quickly and successfully adapting to a changing environment. Once the daycares were in operation, the resilience of the staff was apparent in their handling of the intense work and the reality of living far from home in hotels that had become evacuee centers. Immense flexibility was also required regarding working conditions, constant changes, and the unconventional roles that the staff filled.





“  
A circle of  
strangers  
that  
became  
intimate in  
48 hours.



## Initial Training

The term that the daycare coordinators began using to describe the process of establishing the daycare centers was “daycare and stockade, a play on the term “tower and stockade” - the name given to the process of establishing overnight settlements during the British Mandate. What they meant was that contrary to the way daycare centers are established in peacetime, these daycares needed to be opened very quickly, which uncertainty and common changes ingrained in the process from the very initial training phase.

Training days at each of the locations included getting-to-know-you activities and setting expectations, an introduction to working with traumatized populations, work in small groups according to the classes in the daycare, and guidance by educational psychologists. In addition, during these days the teams unpacked supplies and set up the physical spaces for the daycares. With slight variances, these preparations took place in all of the respective hotels. An important consequence of these short training processes was the creation and establishment an organizational culture that included staff meetings, joint study, conversation, and dialogue circles - a culture that ensued throughout the operation of the daycares.

## Leading and Training the Staff

While opening the daycares there was a conscious effort to create a united educational team with the following characteristics:

- + Regular team meetings.
- + Working as one team, joint decision making.
- + Ongoing training and professional development, with outside guidance.
- + Each educator is first and foremost a learner.

For each daycare class, a Whatsapp group chat was opened for the staff where updates were sent and information was shared.

## Around the Clock

Because the daycares were opened in communities that were evacuated to the Dead Sea, almost the entire educational staff stayed in that area. This led to a situation in which staff members not only worked together, but also were together for most of the day - breakfast, work at the daycares, lunch, staff meetings, and dinner. This 24/7 experience engendered a very fast bonding process, the sense of having known one another for a long time, and even had people saying things like "Every day here feels like a week." It also led to full availability for the educational task at hand. Beyond the organized activities, the staff went on cultural outings in the Dead Sea area and even organized activities like hiking trips and workshops for themselves.

"It's like one constant staff meeting", one of the teachers said with a smile. Indeed, one of the priorities in opening the daycares was



I had the privilege of getting to know wonderful women. We connected so quickly, like family. As if we had known each other for years; it's unbelievable.



devoting significant time to regular staff meetings. The idea was that staff meetings had an important role in peacetime, and an even more important role in wartime. To overcome the uncertainty and the many inevitable problems in opening daycares during a state of emergency, the staff required closeness, a social-professional support system, and a time and place to discuss needs and solve problems.







Working in education gives me a sense of control, I can succeed; it's very healing emotionally.

My friends at home are proud of me, but still everyone is in a different safe room, in a different bomb shelter...

I'm getting more than I'm giving.

I could never have believed that we would accomplish what we did, establish a daycare that is completely like a regular one, and have a Hannukah party with the parents. I simply didn't imagine that we would succeed like this.



## Meaning and Complexity

Formal and informal conversations with the daycare staff also reflect their gratitude: gratitude for the opportunity to fill such an important educational role that is so crucial to meet the needs of the hour. The words "privilege" and "meaning" were said again and again by the experienced staff (such as retired teachers) as well as by the younger staff who saw their work as a form of activism in the moment. The work was seen as highly rewarding, with immediate and significant satisfaction.

Along with these expressions of gratitude and meaning, many also expressed the complexities of this work and reminders that the country is at war.



Here there are no sirens; I'm on an island of sanity and creation.

It was obvious to me that I had to do something.

I feel that I have a role to play, I feel satisfaction at the end of the day when I listen to a child.

Children for me are a source of strength.

There's an overwhelming wave of feelings, I jump in. I am doing, creating. A happy place. We're having fun.

We put our lives on hold; I stopped other projects.







## Space

In accordance with the guiding principles, a separate and defined space for the daycares was also required. The requirements were modest, but clear - a defined space with a door that could be closed, that in the mornings would be used only for the daycare, and that had nearby bathrooms. Additionally, the space had to meet basic safety requirements.

Beyond these requirements, it became clear that ideally a few more conditions should be met, such as good acoustics and relative quiet. For each one of the daycare centers, a different solution was found with the help of hotel management.

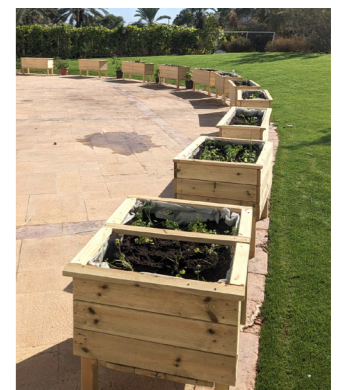
“  
It was a large hallway - and then all of a sudden  
there were partitions and daycares - it was amazing.  
I felt that for me it was a huge achievement.  
I was very proud.  
”



## David Hotel

At the David Hotel, a dining room that was being used as a storage space was transformed into a space with an entryway, an "office" for storage, and two daycare classes divided by unused buffet tables and salad bars. Four additional classes were opened in outdoor tents that were accessible from the exit of the dining room.

The significant advantage of this solution was that there was a door to the area which stopped passersby from inadvertently entering the daycare center. Additionally, the area was used exclusively for the daycare center, with nobody else using it in the afternoons or evenings. The tents were a very fast solution for additional classrooms but had certain disadvantages: strong wind or rain made the tents uncomfortable. The tents were also not acoustically isolated. The daycare center also used a relatively fenced-off playground on hotel grounds, which allowed for outdoor activities. During the first weeks, large planters were brought in and the children began planting and watering crops. After a few weeks of activities, a few walls were built to separate the indoor daycare classes, making it possible for the children to take afternoon naps there, thus allowing for a longer day of activities.







## The Leonardo Club Hotel

At the Leonardo Club Hotel, the daycares were given a large hallway on the -1 floor of the hotel, which led to several conference rooms as well as the swimming pool. The hallway was blocked off by large wooden partitions which were also used to divide the space into four classrooms, each class having a doorway and a glass wall facing the pool. Alongside the daycares, this floor was the location of many other services for the evacuees, including a health clinic and a pediatric healthcare center. During the first week there was a lot of noise from all the people constantly passing by the preschool, and because parents waited by the entrance during the initial shorter days. With time, the noise and crowds thinned out, partly due to the benches being moved (which encouraged people to congregate elsewhere) and partly because the daycares became more established and community members understood that the constant traffic was distracting. Additionally, communication was established with the "neighbors" - other educational programs that were operating nearby, such as the Chabad educational programs.

While the daycares were well-lit, they were not acoustically isolated, so it was difficult to run educational activities in the different classrooms simultaneously. Two solutions were found for this issue. Next to the exit towards the pool, there was an area that the staff closed off with a fence they improvised from benches and other furniture they found in the hotel. Thus, a small courtyard took shape, and the classes took turns going out to the courtyard, which allowed the neighboring class to run activities in the classroom. This was a creative solution that arose to a problem that came up in real time. Additionally, throughout the day, the children went to one of the conference rooms, which was transformed into a kind of playground. The space and its physical confines significantly impacted the daily schedule and the pedagogy.



## The Vert Hotel

In the Vert Hotel, on floor -1, next to the entrance to the dining room, there is an area with four conference rooms. One of those rooms was allocated for the daycares and was divided by a wooden divider into two identical spaces sharing one entrance. This conference room had no windows and had wall-to-wall carpeting.

This daycare center had a few challenges. First, there was one shared door for two classes, and a hallway at the end of which was a door that was constantly being opened and closed. Because of this, the staff constantly needed to verify that children were not entering or leaving the daycare by mistake. Secondly, although the bathrooms weren't far, they were in a separate space, meaning each time a child needed to go to the bathroom, a staff member had to take them there. As for the outdoor space, there is a lovely play area between the pool and the path to the sea. This area was perfect for the older preschool children, but required oversight as the swimming pool is not fenced in. The daycare staff found a patch of sand that was not originally a sandbox, but they made it into a wonderful play area with some buckets and shovels. Furthermore, after several weeks, large wooden planters were built, and the children took part in preparing them and planting in them - an opportunity for getting their hands dirty and a hands-on activity. In the adjacent rooms there were occasionally other noisy activities: organized activities for the entire community as well as private events like bar mitzvah parties.







## The Ein Gedi Hotel

The Ein Gedi Hotel is located on Kibbutz Ein Gedi, a half hour drive away from the Dead Sea hotels. The setting is rural, and the rooms are spread out throughout a large area, surrounded by nature and grass. In the beginning of the war, communities from Kibbutz Holit, Be'eri, and the city of Sderot were evacuated to the hotel. It wasn't possible to use existing space in the hotel for the daycare center, and after two and a half weeks, two tents were put up next to a large lawn at the edge of the hotel grounds to be used for a daycare center for evacuees from Sderot. The only bathrooms were far away, so port-a-potties were brought in and placed next to the tents. On the first day, it became clear that parents of babies were not willing to leave their children in the tent, which was open to the wind and the sand, and thus the nursery class was moved to a room that the hotel provided.





## Physical Space and Supplies: Insights

### / The Impact of Physical Space on Pedagogy

Various characteristics of each space and its location within the hotel impacted activities of the daycare - such as the ability to go outside, play music, or have quiet time. Additionally, in some of the locations there was an issue with children being able to leave the daycare space freely. After several weeks of living at the hotel, the children, even the youngest of them, felt that the entire hotel was their home, and thus felt a disproportionate sense of security in running around. In most cases the parents were near the daycare, in the lobby or in their rooms, which also made it difficult to create a sense of separation between daycare time and family time. It is apparent that other parts of the community felt this lack of separation as well, as sometimes young children were sent to pick up their siblings from daycare.

The physical space and the similarity of the rooms to regular daycare and preschool classrooms made it easier for the children to acclimate and for the parents to understand that it was a proper educational institution with clear boundaries and rules for behavior. It was common to hear remarks such as: "This is just like a real daycare!" from parents who saw the play areas and art stations looking just like those at their children's daycare back home. The floorplan and the supplies in this case went a long way in communicating the staff's expectations, such as the expectation that children should arrive on time and that parents should leave after the initial acclimation days (as opposed to the playground and



other child-parent areas at the hotels). The lack of facilities (a yard, bathrooms, sinks, acoustic separation), and the subject of going to the bathroom (for potty-trained children) became a serious issue. The bathrooms in the different daycares were not directly adjacent to or inside the classrooms like in a regular daycare, and visiting the bathrooms was a ceremony that required time and more importantly, a staff member. Furthermore, the bathrooms were made for adults, and thus the children required assistance to use them, which reduced their independence.

Similarly, there were no functioning sinks with running water in the daycare centers, a fact which impacted the decision whether to conduct messy activities such as finger painting. In some of the locations there was an issue with the boundary between the daycare and the hotel (which was seen as a home) due to the partial or unusual way that the space was separated from the rest of the hotel. The issue of needing to coordinate between adjacent "classrooms" due to acoustic challenges was also a common theme in all the locations.





## / Partnerships

Communication with hotel staff around the physical space was critical in all daycare locations. Beyond the initial allocation of physical space, cooperation and extreme flexibility were required from the hotel. Thus, for example, at the Leonardo Hotel, the tile floor was covered in synthetic grass in the area of the daycare centers and the supply room was converted into an office and storage space for the daycare. The bathrooms next to the daycares needed to be cleaned more frequently than usual, and the daycares needed portable water stations as well. The daycares needed to be cleaned, a task separate and different from the normal cleaning of the hotel. The hotel needed to consider the daycare's schedule when scheduling noisy maintenance work. In each of the hotels, the hotel staff demonstrated exceptional commitment and assistance in establishing the daycare centers and allowing them to operate without interruption. An additional significant partnership was between the Sderot daycares, the city representative, and Brothers and Sisters for Israel. This partnership helped solve problems that came up after the daycare activities began, like the need for additional supplies or safety requirements.





## Additional Aspects of Physical Space

### Naming:

In each of the daycare locations signs were put up (some more official than others) that said: "This is a preschool". This signage helped in announcing the establishment of the daycares, defining the boundaries of the physical space, and emphasizing that this was a relatively stable and permanent space.

### Sense of belonging:

The sense of belonging the children felt to the daycare was strengthened and expressed in several physical ways. In each of the daycares, each child had a drawer with their name on it. Additionally, the staff put a lot of effort into decorating the space with the children's artwork as quickly as possible. At the daycare center in the Leonardo Hotel, as the weeks went by, one of the teachers who is also an art teacher led the painting of a large mural on the dividers that served as walls of the classrooms, with help from children from the daycare and other children at the hotel.



### Playing outside:

The ability of each daycare to play outside varied. It depended on the safety conditions in each location (for example, needing to walk beside an unfenced swimming pool to get to the playground) and the level of confidence the educational staff had in keeping the children safe while outside.

### Supplies:

Beyond the physical space of the daycare center, which was a designated and separate area, it was important to have dedicated supplies. Each class received several types of daycare furniture - bookcases, chairs of some kind or large cushions, individual drawers for the children, and sociodramatic play areas. Additionally, each location had developmental toys suited to the ages of the children, books, and arts and crafts supplies.





## Trauma



We are all wounded, including those who weren't physically hurt.



There are young children here who don't have a large vocabulary, but they do know how to say 'terrorist' and 'rifle'.



The daycare centers were established during a horrific period for Israel. The war directly impacted the families living in the Gaza border area, alongside all citizens of Israel. In the days following the attack, this impact was magnified, as reserve forces were called up and the scale of the atrocities and the numbers of missing and hostages came to light. This is different than a local tragedy in which one part of society comes to the aid of another. In October 2023, the whole of Israeli society, at one level or another, underwent a traumatic experience, which echoed in the establishment and management of the educational institutions at the evacuation centers.

It was clear that trauma experts needed to be involved in the establishment of the daycares, as well as supporting the educational staff. Each of the educational teams received basic training in working with evacuees. In the case of the Be'eri daycares, this training was provided by the Early Starters organization, which had extensive experience in establishing educational spaces in evacuation centers in war zones in Ukraine, as well as by IsraAID. The staff of the Sderot daycares received initial training and support from mental healthcare providers from IsraAID, who had skills and experience from delegations abroad in disaster and war zones worldwide.

In addition to the initial training, the staff received ongoing psychosocial support. This support dealt with the experiences of the staff members themselves, as well as dilemmas concerning how to deal with the children and families - offering a professional response to extreme cases. An emphasis when working in a community that has experienced trauma is stability: aiming to ensure continuity of staff, a permanent space, and a regular schedule. Alongside this stability, a high level of flexibility is required. It is not possible to "copy-paste" the daycare framework from peacetime or from one community to another. This flexibility was expressed through expanding the staff of each location, communication with parents, and roles that are not traditionally a part of daycare management. For example, liaising with the hotel or mental healthcare providers.

The staff came from all over Israel, and all of them had been exposed to the events of October 7th and the war to some extent. Some of the staff had partners serving in combat, and almost everyone knew someone who had been killed. Alongside this stability and commitment, flexibility was required to allow the staff members to attend funerals and condolence visits, or to return phone calls to soldiers who called unexpectedly.



During war, the children are not regular children. They went through something unusual. It's hard to work with children and fears, it's not easy.





## Community Connections



Forming connections with the community is delicate work.



The parents are moved by what we're doing; it's something special.



In the initial meetings with parents I felt that I had to be very cautious.



Establishing the daycares impacted the entire community, and one of the goals was to return its sense of strength and to help with the healing process. Community relations can be divided between formal/organizational and informal connections. Formal communication was with those who held educational coordination roles in each of the evacuated communities - the education director from Kibbutz Be'eri and the education department and the early childhood division of the city of Sderot. Because this was a state of emergency, most of the communication was on an ad hoc basis, such as quick phone calls and texts, and problems were solved as they came up and not at pre-scheduled meetings. Some of the administrators held their roles prior to October 7th, such as the educational director of Kibbutz Be'eri and the head of the Sderot education department, and some of them came to their roles based on needs that emerged after evacuation. For example the head of the early childhood division of Kibbutz Be'eri was a member of the community, a preschool teacher, who filled the role temporarily. Another example was a school principal from Sderot who, during the war, liaised the municipality and the field regarding establishing educational institutions at the evacuee centers.

Additionally, continuous communication with the parents was required. Over the course of the first days, teachers had brief conversations with parent to obtain information regarding the child, their habits, and any other information that could be important for the staff to know. In each class, staff opened a Whatsapp group for communication with the parents about general information, the daycare schedule, etc., and of course there were parent-teacher conferences about educational issues as needed. Informal communication also took place with evacuated community members







“  
We were uprooted,  
and you uprooted yourselves  
from your homes for us.”

whose rooms were close to the daycares. Sometimes community members helped to raise issues with the hotel and sometimes they helped with building or carrying supplies, and occasionally also supported the educational staff.

Several events were held for the entire daycare community, such as a parents' night, kabbalat shabbat, and a Hanukkah party. These events were important to the parents and provided a change of pace from the troubling situation of the community and the country as a whole, and from the everyday routine at the hotels. In these community events, parents had an opportunity to express gratitude to the staff. This gratitude took the shape of thank you notes and printed pictures at kabbalat shabbat, or modest gifts at the Hannukah party.





## Social Pedagogy

The daycare centers were operated by staff from Dror Educational Centers, an educational network promoting social pedagogy at its high schools, which has recently expanded to early childhood education as well.

### From "The Social Daycare":

1. The social daycare incorporates practices and pedagogical processes that reflect a deep educational and ethical outlook. The central value is a society emphasizing equality in which there is a place for everyone, while creating a strong and meaningful social fabric.

The educational staff's actions are also shaped by these values and the ways in which the staff meets, makes decisions, and acts toward the children. In this sense, the social daycare is not just a collection of good and effective practices for early childhood education and improving the children's skills, but rather a complete and encompassing process in which all parties - staff, children, and parents - have an important role.

2. The social daycare is a political act in the sense that it sees itself as an agent of change in its environment: parents, community, neighborhood, teachers, neighboring educational institutions, the city. This is apparent both in the content and activities that the staff chooses to develop and utilize as well as in the methods used. Additionally, activity at the daycare will respond to changing realities and encourage forming a personal and shared stance in active responses to this reality.

\* [www.dror.net.org.il/articles](http://www.dror.net.org.il/articles)

As aforementioned, the daycares were opened under a state of emergency and no prior organized process of forming educational principles took place. At the same time, the meaningful, practical principles of social pedagogy - the organizational DNA that came with the organizers - were put into practice in the process of opening the daycares. Thus, for example, central importance was placed on the staff functioning as one educational team that learns, develops, holds regular meetings, and makes decisions together.

A notable aspect of social pedagogy is the absence of hierarchical staff divisions in the daycares (as are customary in the public daycare and preschool system). This means that there were no titles like teacher and teacher's assistant, but rather the term daycare teacher or daycare staff was used throughout. In some cases, one educator took on the responsibility of communicating with the parents, but beyond that the decision-making and leadership were shared.

Additionally, some of the organizers were experienced working with at-risk populations. They adopted a holistic view in which each child or adult is seen in a border context, and within the community to which they belong, so that the educational act is meant to have a broad impact.

One can describe the daycares as a social initiative with an intention to heal, stemming from social-educational responsibility, as described here:

**We need to remember and to remind ourselves at every moment that our journey is to actualize and rekindle the spirit of progress, responsibility, collaboration, and chevruta<sup>3</sup> in systems that were not built for these purposes, and to enable in these systems a strong basis for creating a good society, and of course to act together towards its realization. This is not a pedagogical activity but rather a complete social-educational creation which requires actualization.**

<sup>3</sup> Here the traditional term for small group study of Jewish text is used to express the spirit of deep and personal partnership and connection.





## Pedagogical Insights

One of the main goals of opening the daycares was to create a safe space and provide a sense of security. That is, creating an educational, emotional, and organizational environment in which the children, their parents, and the staff would feel safe. This security was achieved, among other ways, through clear boundaries and certainty regarding the schedule and staff within the chaotic environment.

In each of the areas - recruiting and managing staff, physical space, and partnerships - balancing stability and clear boundaries with great flexibility was required due to uncertainty, emotional volatility, and constant change.

During a crisis, being sensitive and adapting to ever-changing needs is more critical than ever. Due to the lack of time in emergency situations, there is not sufficient time for in-depth training programs, creating shared language, and setting shared expectations. It is therefore important to allow the educational staff independence and to encourage them to bring their own pedagogical toolbox. For example, one staff member who came from an art education background brought her skills to both individual and group work. Similarly, staff members with backgrounds in horticultural therapy worked with the children on planting and gardening.



In the beginning, everything was permitted, there were no rules. Do whatever you want. And that was ok, they came from a war zone. Afterwards, we began to establish boundaries.







## Summary

“

Early childhood is the mirror that shows us the extent to which we can heal as a community, to which we can grow stronger from this tragedy.

It's the place that brings the most joy, the most optimistic, stable place in the hotel. It's our future.

”



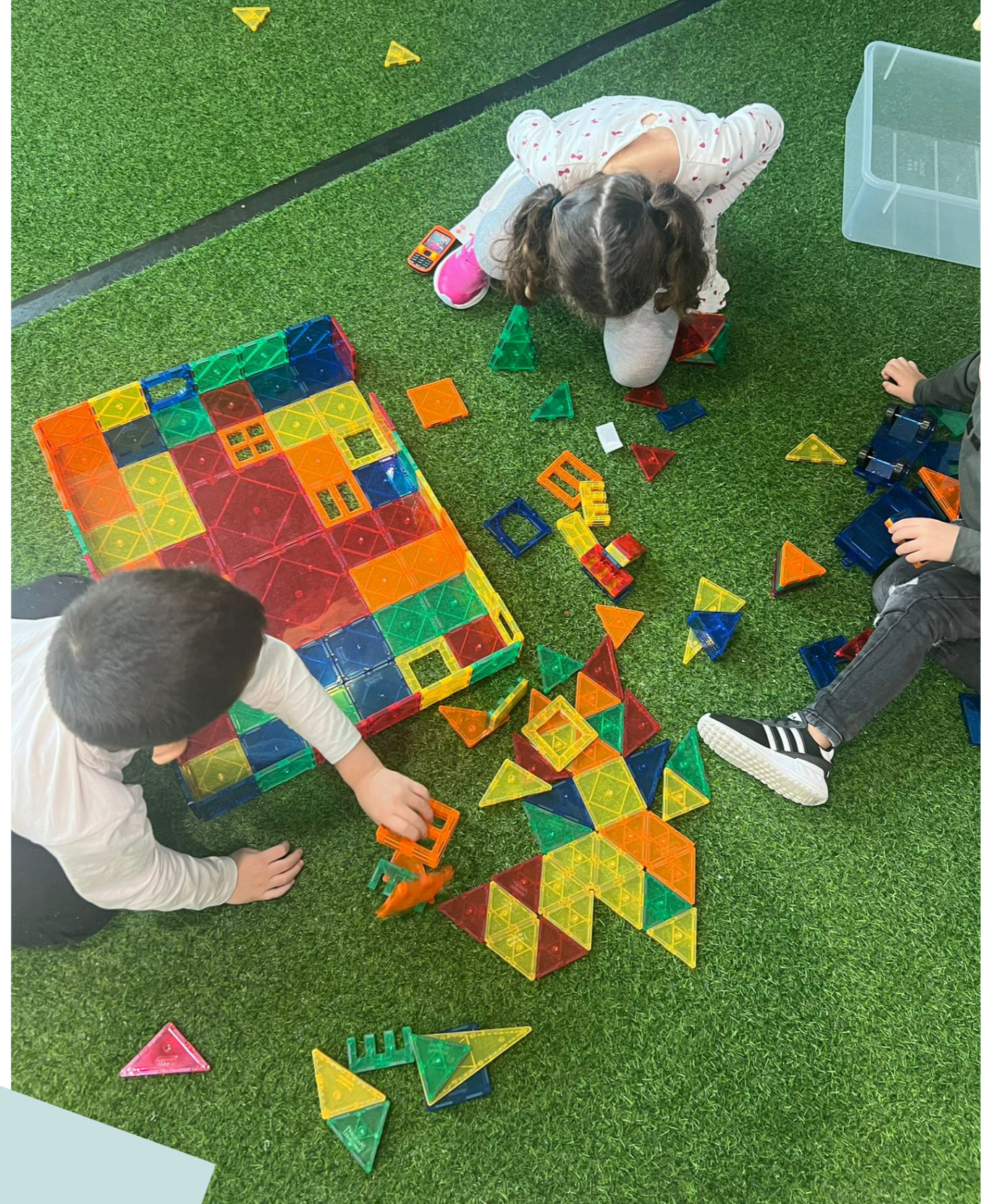
These words are being written at a point in time when the evacuated communities are still in hotels throughout Israel, and the war in Gaza is still ongoing. It is too early to draw conclusions, but nonetheless, some general insights are raised in this document regarding establishing daycares in emergency situations.

In the context of the educational staff, at each of the daycare centers similar insights were raised: a diverse, high-quality team of educators was recruited - educators who came with broad experiences and the desire to learn, motivated by a great sense of purpose. Furthermore, the significant investment in creating an organizational culture of a staff that supports one another and learns together proved itself. The team meetings served as learning and professional development experiences as well as offering respite and emotional support, which were necessary.

**The most important steps taken were:**

- + Setting clear and uncompromising goals.
- + Recruiting high-quality staff members capable of working independently and as a team.
- + Providing vast professional support.
- + Creating a strong logistical support network.
- + Building partnerships and maintaining constant dialogue.
- + Maintaining stability alongside flexibility.

**Throughout the first weeks of the war, the guiding principles of Dror Educational Centers' daycares at the Dead Sea served as an inspiration and a model for many other educational frameworks at evacuation centers throughout Israel.**





## Thank you!

**To all the educators who stepped forward when they were needed, with experience and professionalism, a smile and an inspiring desire to do good. It couldn't have happened without you!**

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