

Circle of Friends

In the current situation of war in Ukraine, we are witnessing a high level of stress among children. It is impossible, and unnecessary, to list all the types of problems - physical and psychological - that children experience as a result of constant worries about their own lives and the lives of their families.

In 2022, Ukrainians and Finnish were able to organize a large number of summer programs for children and families who had found temporary shelter in Finland.

The program "**Circle of Friends 2022**" was implemented in the Karjalohja district, consisted of two 5-day programs, and covered about 80 participants. More than 60 of them were children aged 6 to 13. This program was created as an **initiative of Tetiana Dzivalentovska** (Kyiv), a professional educator, and author of cultural, artistic, learning, and supporting programs for children and families. The program was implemented with the support of **Helsingin NMKY - Merkitystä elämään**, as well as the support of individual Finns and Ukrainians.

In the summer of 2023, another program for Ukrainians in Finland was implemented, which consisted of two stages and was attended by 29 children and 7 professionals (including 2 collective teachers).

The program "**Circle of Friends 2023**" was aimed specifically to invite children from Ukraine who live in the occupied territories to Finland.

The goal of the program is to organize a psychological reboot for children through a cultural and artistic recreation program in Finland. The program included the involvement of specialists in yoga, art therapy, meditation, and classical arts. Every day the children had morning and evening yoga, as well as stabilization, relaxation, and resource exercises. The art therapy included help with self-knowledge, stress management, and recuperation.

The advantage of the program in Finland was that the children felt safe and supported, there was a mild climate during this period, and the material and technical base was available, as well as the possibility of involving Ukrainian and Finnish teachers and psychologists.

The most popular question that the program organizers received was: "Why these particular children? How did you find them? Why did you choose them?"

When we already had confirmation from both locations that we are welcome, the question was: which children should we invite?

The first thing that came to mind was that the children should be young, under 10 years old. But the team of specialists rejected this idea. After all, for such young children being without parents so far away and for such a long time is even more stressful, rather than rehabilitation. And we had no opportunities to organize family programs so far.

The second idea was to invite children from pre-frontline areas, such as Kryvyi Rih. Children who hear explosions every day need to feel safe and take a break from the daily stress. But we faced another problem - parents could not send their children to another country. It was very frightening for them. The thought that something could happen to them, the parents, and the children would be left alone somewhere far away was a source of anxiety. But, as in the first case, the program would not be a rehabilitation program.

The program's specialists thought a lot about the age of the children, the city, and which children would really be able to complete the rehabilitation program and get everything from it.

Jasnakraina company suggested the "Smile" group from Konotop. Firstly, the children are already teenagers, independent, and do not need daily care and attention from their parents. Secondly, they are part of a team where children know each other and have teachers who are well-trusted by their parents and the children themselves. Thirdly, these children have been under occupation, and rehabilitation is absolutely necessary for them. And not only rehabilitation but also an opportunity to see that the world is not scary, that other countries are friendly and open to them.

A little bit from the history of Konotop for 1 month, 1 week, and 3 days - from 02/24 to 04/3/2022

After 17:00 on 02/24/22, combat began in Konotop, and people started dying.

On 25.02.22 at 3:35 a.m., Russian forces advancing from the northeast surrounded the town of Konotop and surrounded it.

In the afternoon of February 27, the enemy began to enter Konotop.

According to a list published on March 4 by the Office of the President of Ukraine, Konotop was included in the list of areas in need of humanitarian corridors.

On March 16, 3.5 tons of humanitarian aid was brought from Kropyvnytskyi to Konotop.

In the night of April 3, the Russian military destroyed the bridge across the Seim in the village of Chumakove in the Sumy region. The bridge connected the towns of Konotop district with Sumy on the P44 road between Putivl and Burynnia. According to locals, Russian soldiers crossed the bridge toward the Russian border and blew it up behind them.

Teenagers who came to Finland were hiding in bomb shelters. They were studying there, rehearsing their performances online, and thanks to their teachers, they did not lose hope and dreamed of future performances. And it happened! In Finland, the Smile group had six unplanned performances. And we had the opportunity to enjoy their shows and plunge into Ukrainian culture.

For parents, this program has also become a significant support: an opportunity to take a break and not worry about their children's lives, an opportunity to provide their children with a decent summer vacation.

What some parents wrote at the end of the program:

"In our case, this was the only opportunity for the child to leave abroad, even temporarily, for a peaceful, quiet life. My husband and I trust our teachers and therefore let Vera go to Finland. And I am comforted by the saying: "If you are worried, pray, if you have prayed, don't worry!" I am grateful to God that this story happened to our child!!! I am infinitely grateful to everyone who was involved in this trip, every step in this journey was an element in the chain of rehabilitation of our children!!! Special thanks to you for yoga and daily stories on Instagram, where I saw my child and realized how well he was doing!!!!"

"Good afternoon. I am Margarita's mom, she is delighted with you. Thank you for all the work you do for our children. For humanity."

"The theater of "Smile" group from Konotop, Sumy region, Ukraine visited a children's camp in Finland. Every morning began with yoga, and the children plunged into the practice, distracted from the terrible present, thus normalizing their state of mind, which is very important. The team of specialists became real friends and close people for my daughter because of love, sincerity, humanity, and professionalism. All this is combined in these wonderful people. My daughter is already at home, but she continues her yoga sessions, practicing meditations that Katya gave her, all of which help her feel joyful and calm. I wish you success in your chosen field, inspiration, and inexhaustible love!"

For the group of teachers who brought the children, it was not a vacation. They took responsibility for all the children during their trip. Every 2 hours they wrote to their parents and sent photos of the children. They smiled and spent time with the children despite the messages about air alerts in their hometown (there were 8 such messages in one day!). As the directors they did the impossible: 6 performances without rehearsals and proper preparation. The performances were amazing. The group brought their own costumes and decorations with them. And we also found out that the Smile group is actually a treasure of Ukraine. In 2022, they won a record for Ukraine in the nomination for "The largest number of child actors involved in a children's play", with 100 children in the performance. It's hard to imagine how the teachers made this happen in the context of Covid. We admire these women - the directors, teachers, and spiritual mothers of the "Smile" group, **Yuliia Yatsenko-Mekh** and **Tatiana Novykova**.

Yulia Yatsenko-Mekh shares her thoughts after the program,

"The first thing I would like to start with in my review of the program is a big, sincere 'THANKS' from a citizen, a teacher, and a mother of Ukraine. For donating not only funds for such programs but also for devoting personal interest and time to our children.

If we can talk about the difficulties, of course, there were some. The first is an extremely difficult road to Finland and back. Almost 35 hours on the road, it is physically difficult. Although we are extremely grateful to the transportation company that offered to help us.

There was a very tight schedule of performances and activities that we were offered at the program and of course, it was difficult for some children to handle.

To summarize, the program gave the children unforgettable impressions and experiences that can radically affect their future. Getting to know Finnish culture, living standards, and attitude to nature is a lesson for our children.

Yoga practice is a completely new skill for us. Some children had struggles because they did not know what it was, but gradually all of them found their interest in it and are now interested and going to practice it.

Such programs are necessary for our children, for gaining new positive experiences, for awakening faith in the future, for taking over the wisdom of the world and nations - all this is needed for Ukrainians to build a new free Ukraine!"

Tetiana Dzywaltowska's program "Circle of Friend" had a lot of support among Ukrainians who already live in Finland, among Ukrainian volunteers and many Finns, and was implemented from July 4 to 19, 2023, and **had 2 stages**.

On July 4, our team arrived at **Ensilän Kenttä** near **Tampere**, where **Kirsti and Lauri Vitanen** welcomed the children with open hearts. Thanks to them, we all got to know Finnish culture and nature. We had a sauna and a swim in the river, played Molky together, and went fishing. We even had a visit from Joulupukki! Thanks to Kristi and Laura, we also had a day of "Unity" with Finnish teenagers who had their Confirmation Camp program nearby. Together we sang, watched a performance of the "Smile" group, and made "motanka" dolls. It is believed that in ancient times these dolls were used as sacred guardians, but today people are such guardians for each other. We sincerely wish that traditional Ukrainian "motanka" dolls will become a protection for Finnish children and they will never see the war with their own eyes.

On July 14, our team moved to the **Karjalohja area** of **PELLIN LEIRIKESKUS** and, thanks to the hospitality of **Helsingin NMKY** and **Jyrki Eräkorpi** personally, settled into a time of calm and slowing down. Yoga, meditation, sauna, and swimming were unchanged, and we added walks in the woods, boat and banana rides, active team games, and time together for creativity and watching movies and the "Smile" record-breaking

performance of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory". The sharing of impressions and hearts took place at this location. And at this location, we were able to add a body-oriented therapy to the program, which the children gently and playfully called "squeeze therapy". This therapy helps to relieve tension directly from the body and muscles, work on fight-or-flight reactions and launch self-healing processes at the physical and emotional levels.

The second most popular question that the program organizers received was: " Do you need two stages? Isn't it enough to have one stage in one place?"

Each location is amazing and self-sufficient. Each location can be a complete program. But the program cannot be rehabilitative and restorative if it is only for the short term. Children spend 2 days on the road in one direction. That is, spending 4 days on the bus and 4 days in the program is not what we would like to do for children. A person can really feel relaxed and safe after acclimatization and rest from a difficult journey. And in our case, it was the bus ride: Konotop - Kyiv - Poland - Estonia (ferry) - Finland and back. We are very grateful to the transporters for the journey with the children and for providing everything they needed on the way.

The first part of the program was full of events, excursions, and interesting activities. The second part was full of leisure and recreation. And we are grateful to everyone involved. All the drivers, cooks, sponsors, teachers, audience, and everyone who cares about the fate of these children, the fate of Ukraine, and the future of the whole world.

The goals of the program have been realized, but the main goal of all Ukrainians and the whole world is peace and calm, the end of the war, and the impossibility of its repeating.

And the children are speaking for themselves:

Margarita

"This program gave us a lot of opportunities! New friends, a sharing of our culture, support from the Finns, and time away from the war in our country! These are unforgettable memories spent together in a wonderful country - Finland ❤️ Thank you to everyone who gave us such emotions for life.

Along with the specialists, love for yoga comes very quickly, because we understand what it is for and how it works with our bodies and souls. We learned the names of exercises, different terminology, and sensations that we didn't know before through this program! Thank you for making Katya a friend to each of us, forever in our hearts ❤️"

Volodymyr

"I am very satisfied. The "squeeze therapy" helped a lot with my back and leg pain. After my introduction to yoga, my mind was cleared of all the bad stuff. Thank you very much for your help and relaxation!

Margarita

"This yoga will interest everyone because it creates incredible impressions, great experience, and a willingness to work again and again!"

Igor

"I liked learning about the culture of another country and seeing interesting places in it.

Doing yoga and art therapy at each lesson made me feel much better and better. I was able to establish contact with people and my muscles stopped hurting. Thanks to everyone who helped me achieve this!!!!

All these things will remain in our hearts forever."

Maxim

"Yoga was very cool, especially yoga nidra."

Stas

"The people and atmosphere are as comfortable as possible."

Kirill

"Yoga helped me to relax and get all the emotions out of my head."

Dasha

"Yoga helped me to understand who I am for myself."

Masha

"Yoga helped me to control my emotions and my body more, it was a very interesting experience. Thank you for that!"

Iryna

"Yoga has become a new and useful experience for me, I plan to continue practicing at home."

Polina

"I really liked staying there. It was very interesting to learn about the culture of another country and make new friends."

Alina

"This program has given me a lot of new emotions and acquaintances. I am very glad that I was able to see Finland and its culture, as well as share a part of Ukrainian culture and traditions.

During the entire period, we were in Finland, we practiced yoga twice a day. At first, I thought it would be hard and boring, but in fact, it turned out to be an interesting experience. The therapy Katya gave us had several aspects. Thanks to a good coach, I was transformed both physically and mentally. I'm very grateful for this experience. Throughout the course of art therapy and yoga, I forgot about the terrible events that are happening now and restored my state of mind."

The third most popular question that the program organizers received was:

"What is the purpose of yoga in the program?"

What Ukraine and Ukrainian psychologists, PTSD specialists, ordinary teachers, educators, and educators are currently facing is not a worldwide experience. Many books and studies on PTSD tell us how to help a person who has already emerged from traumatic events. Ukraine, unfortunately, has not. And even more so, the professionals who are supposed to work with people in such pain, which does not end, are in this pain themselves. And we, Ukrainians, need to learn how to cope with our emotional and mental state, help children and continue living! To build a future that is being created now. We are waiting for the war to end, but we are NOT waiting, we are living, doing, improving, and growing. We expand our consciousness, unite, and become stronger.

Yoga gives us answers to all our questions and needs. But our nervous system needs security. When there is safety, then growth and recovery begin. For our children, this is extremely necessary.

The "Circle of Friends" program is about safety. Safety of the body, safety of the environment, and safety of the community.

And thanks to yoga and neuroscience, we have the opportunity to provide assistance and support to children, help them overcome psychological trauma, and gain stress resistance skills.

This includes breathing, exercises to calm down and raise energy levels through breathing. It also includes body postures, stretching, flexibility, and developing body strength. It is also about discipline. It is also about concentration and focus. These are practices of awareness and consciousness expansion.

Bessel Van Der Kolk (one of the world's most famous trauma specialists, who has spent more than 30 years studying PTSD - post-traumatic stress disorder) has written extensively about yoga and PTSD: "Whether yoga can change HRV (the change in the time intervals between heartbeats that occur due to the influence of external and internal factors) - it can. And we started to help people who have suffered psychological trauma learn to live calmly in their exhausted bodies with the help of yoga." Yoga programs have also been developed and implemented for marines at the Camp Lejeune military training center and for veterans with PTSD in the United States. And Harvard scientists Sarah Lazar and Britta Heltzel have demonstrated to the world that intensive meditation has a positive effect on the very areas of the brain that play a crucial role in physiological self-regulation. There are many such examples. And we must take this experience and expand it, creating new rehabilitation programs for civilians and children in particular. During the days of the program, a new course was launched, in which Tetiana Dzivaltovska is a co-organizer. This course is the foundation of the Trauma and Recovery training program for yoga teachers and psychologists with the assistance of international experts in neurobiology, mindfulness, yoga therapy, and mental health.

"The Circle of Friends is a rehabilitation program, and rehabilitation today is based on yoga and meditation practices.

The last most popular question that the program organizers received was: "Do you really think that such programs for children are worthwhile?"

Our whole team sincerely believes that such programs create a safe, peaceful, and happy future. These children are the future we are facing today and can influence. These children are the future adults: actors, singers, doctors, teachers, politicians, diplomats, and presidents... Even the idea of war, destruction, and occupation will not exist in the future if children's life values are based on love, mutual support, sincerity, and serving others.

We are grateful for your support, we are grateful for your open hearts, and we rejoice in our international unity in the dream of seeing a Happy World.

Author Kateryna Didenko

Co-author of the methodological part,
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Knight of Humane Pedagogy

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