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PLAY, RESILIENCE, AND BELONGING: TOWARD AN INTEGRATED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE ADAPTATION OF UKRAINIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN

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Since the large-scale displacement of Ukrainian families following the escalation of the war in 2022, community- and school-based initiatives have become increasingly important in supporting refugee children's adaptation in host countries. Although play, resilience, and belonging have each been widely recognised as important for children's well-being and development, they have largely been examined within separate strands of scholarship. This theoretical article develops an integrated three-tier framework that brings together Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, social-ecological resilience theory, and research on play and belonging to explain how displaced children adapt within host-country contexts. The proposed framework conceptualises children's adaptation as a recursive process operating across three interconnected tiers. Tier one situates children within their ecological environments; tier two identifies resilience as a multisystemic process emerging through interactions between children and the protective resources available within those environments; and tier three positions play as the primary mechanism through which resilience processes are enacted, while belonging functions as both an outcome and a reinforcing relational process. The framework is illustrated through the context of Ukrainian refugee children in Estonia and generates empirically testable propositions to guide future research. By integrating ecological context, resilience processes, and play-based relational mechanisms into a single explanatory framework, the article offers a conceptual foundation

for understanding children's adaptation following forced displacement and provides implications for the design and evaluation of community- and school-based initiatives supporting displaced children.

Keywords: *play, belonging; social-ecological resilience; ecological systems theory; children's adaptation; Ukrainian refugee children; community-based programmes*

Problem Statement. Since the escalation of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, forced displacement has disrupted the education, well-being, and everyday lives of millions of Ukrainian children across Europe (UNHCR, 2024). In Estonia, formal schooling is complemented by a range of informal community initiatives, including Ukrainian-language Sunday schools, cultural associations, and youth programmes (Association of Ukrainian Organisations in Estonia, n.d.), which provide opportunities for social support, cultural continuity, and a sense of belonging, all of which may support children's adaptation (Toros et al., 2024; Birman & Zabrodskaia, 2024). In these contexts, play has consistently been shown to provide children with opportunities to express and process distress in ways that may not yet be possible through verbal communication (Landreth, 2012; Malchiodi, 2011; van der Kolk, 2014). Despite the growing use of play-based and community-based initiatives to support displaced children, the relationships between play, resilience, and belonging remain insufficiently conceptualised.

Play, resilience, and belonging have each been widely recognised as important for children's development and adaptation (Landreth, 2012; Masten, 2014, 2021; Hagerty et al., 1992). Without such a framework, it is difficult to explain how play-based community initiatives may foster children's adaptation, well-being, and sense of belonging or to identify the mechanisms through which these processes operate. Building on contemporary multisystem understandings of children's adaptation and resilience (Masten, 2021; Ungar & Theron, 2020), this article proposes an integrated theoretical framework that brings together perspectives on play, resilience, and belonging to better understand the everyday experiences of displaced children.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and its later bioecological development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) provide one of the most influential frameworks for understanding children's development within nested environmental systems, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. It is widely applied in research on refugee children because it enables simultaneous consideration of family, school, community, and broader policy contexts (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). While the theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multiple

environmental systems that shape development, it offers less explicit explanation of why children exposed to similar ecological adversity may experience different developmental outcomes.

Resilience theory provides a complementary perspective by explaining why children exposed to similar adversity may experience different developmental outcomes through the interaction of individual, relational, and environmental resources (Masten, 2014, 2021; Ungar, 2011; Ungar & Theron, 2020). Following Ungar (2011), resilience reflects the dynamic fit between children's needs and the culturally meaningful resources available within their environments. Masten's (2014) concept of resilience as ordinary magic shifts attention from rare individual traits to the adaptive capacity of everyday systems, relationships, and routines that support children's development under adversity. Masten and Narayan (2012) extend this perspective to children affected by disasters, war, and terrorism, emphasising that resilience depends on the functioning of ordinary protective systems even under extreme conditions. Building on these perspectives, Ungar and Theron (2020) conceptualise resilience as a multisystemic process emerging through interactions among biological, psychological, social, cultural, and environmental systems. This multisystem understanding of resilience is reinforced by recent empirical evidence. In a recent review of research on forcibly displaced children, Pluess et al. (2025) argue that effective mental health support should extend beyond the individual child by strengthening socio-ecological resources and addressing family, community, and structural factors that shape children's well-being. In the context of forced displacement, resilience is therefore best understood not as a fixed individual characteristic but as a dynamic process emerging through children's interactions with the relational, social, and environmental resources available within their everyday lives.

A complementary body of literature conceptualises play as both a developmental and therapeutic process. Landreth (2012) describes play as children's natural medium of communication, through which internal experiences can be expressed and processed without relying solely on verbal disclosure. Similarly, Malchiodi (2011) highlights the value of expressive and art-based modalities for children who lack either the vocabulary or the emotional safety to narrate traumatic experiences directly, while van der Kolk (2014) emphasises that trauma is often held in the body and may be regulated through embodied, non-verbal experiences. However, intervention research suggests that play alone is not sufficient. In a systematic review of psychosocial interventions for forcibly displaced children aged 6–12, Trimboli et al. (2021) found that unstructured play or educational activities alone did not produce measurable psychosocial benefits, whereas structured, relationally attuned interventions, including child-centred play therapy, demonstrated more consistent positive outcomes. These findings suggest

that the protective value of play depends not simply on opportunities to play, but on the quality of relationships and the broader ecological context in which play occurs.

Another important body of literature focuses on belonging, defined as the experience of feeling valued, accepted, and fitting within a social system (Hagerty et al., 1992). Recent work has further conceptualised belonging as a relational process emerging through children's everyday interactions with people, places, and environments, highlighting its importance for the well-being of young refugees (Haswell, 2023). Within research on displaced populations, belonging has been associated with positive adaptation, well-being, and resilience despite adversity (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Fazel et al., 2012). Similarly, qualitative research with Ukrainian refugee families and children in Estonia highlights the importance of supportive relationships, community connections, cultural continuity, safe and supportive environments as key resources supporting adaptation (Toros, Kozmenko, & Falch-Eriksen, 2024; Toros & Kozmenko, 2025). Although these studies did not explicitly examine belonging as a theoretical construct, their findings suggest that experiences of belonging may represent an important relational mechanism underpinning successful adaptation. These findings provide the foundation for the integrated theoretical framework developed in this article

Although empirical research on Ukrainian refugee children has expanded considerably since 2022, it has focused primarily on resilience, coping, mental health, and school-related factors, while comparatively little attention has been paid to how play and belonging interact with resilience as mechanisms supporting children's adaptation. In a systematic review of coping strategies among Ukrainian refugees and internally displaced persons, Rizzi et al. (2023) concluded that resilience is supported by a combination of social connections, support networks, faith-based coping, and other individual and socio-environmental protective resources, although the review focused primarily on adult populations. Among children, Korcz et al. (2024) found that school enjoyment and teacher support were more strongly associated with resilience than physical health indicators among Ukrainian refugee children living in Poland, while Urbański et al. (2023) demonstrated that children's coping strategies were associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety following displacement. Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of relational and ecological resources in supporting children's adaptation. Nevertheless, existing studies have paid limited attention to how play, resilience, and belonging interact as interrelated mechanisms, leaving an important conceptual gap that the integrated theoretical framework proposed in this article seeks to address.

Research Gap. Taken individually, ecological systems theory, resilience theory, trauma-informed play literature, and belonging research each provide important, yet partial, perspectives on the adaptation of displaced children. What remains insufficiently explored is how these perspectives can be integrated into a coherent explanatory framework that specifies how play, resilience, and belonging interact in supporting children's adaptation. The literature consistently highlights the importance of play (Landreth, 2012), resilience (Masten, 2014, 2021; Ungar & Theron, 2020), and belonging (Hagerty et al., 1992) for children's adaptation. However, these concepts have largely been developed within separate strands of scholarship rather than within an integrated theoretical framework explaining their interrelationships. The integrated theoretical framework proposed in this article conceptualises play as a mechanism through which resilience processes are enacted within children's ecological environments, while positioning belonging as both an outcome and a reinforcing relational process. In doing so, it aims to provide a clearer conceptual basis for understanding, designing, and evaluating community- and school-based initiatives supporting displaced children. The emphasis placed on belonging is informed in part by the authors' empirical research with Ukrainian refugee families in Estonia (Toros, Kozmenko, & Falch-Eriksen, 2024; Toros & Kozmenko, 2025). Although this interpretation is consistent with broader literature emphasising belonging, social connectedness, and positive social relationships as important contributors to children's adaptation and well-being (Hagerty et al., 1992; Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Fazel et al., 2012), its applicability beyond the Estonian context requires further empirical examination.

The purpose of this study is to develop an integrated theoretical framework that brings together ecological systems theory, social-ecological resilience theory, research on play, and belonging to explain how displaced children adapt following forced displacement. The article further proposes empirically testable propositions derived from the framework and illustrates its application through the context of Ukrainian refugee children in Estonia, providing a foundation for future empirical research.

Presentation of the Main Research Findings. The proposed theoretical framework (Table 1) is organised into three interconnected tiers, each representing a distinct level of theoretical explanation while building on the preceding tier to form an integrated account of children's adaptation.

Table 1 – An integrated three-tier theoretical framework of ecology, resilience, play, and belonging

Tier	Theoretical foundation	Function	Observable focus
1. Ecological context	Bronfenbrenner (1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)	Locates children's development within nested ecological systems	Which systems are accessible or disrupted for a given child
2. Resilience process	Masten (2014, 2021); Ungar (2011); Ungar & Theron (2020); Masten & Narayan (2012); Pluess et al. (2025)	Identifies protective processes supporting adaptation across ecological systems	Which relationships and routines are functioning as protective resources
3. Play and belonging	Landreth (2012); Malchiodi (2011); van der Kolk (2014); Hagerty et al. (1992); Trimboli et al. (2021)	Play serves as the mechanism through which resilience processes are enacted; belonging functions as both an outcome and a reinforcing relational process	Quality and relational structure of play (rather than its mere presence); the child's expressed sense of belonging within their social environment

Tier one locates children's development within Bronfenbrenner's nested ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For a displaced Ukrainian child in Estonia, the microsystem includes the immediate family, often reshaped by family separation, including fathers or relatives remaining in Ukraine, the host-country classroom, and community-based settings, such as Ukrainian Sunday schools and other community initiatives. The mesosystem captures the connections – or their absence – between these settings; the exosystem includes settings the child does not directly enter but which shape their circumstances, such as parental employment and housing policy; the macrosystem reflects the broader cultural and political climate toward refugees; and the chronosystem captures the accumulation and timing of transitions the child has experienced. This tier identifies where relevant resources and risks are located but does not, in itself, explain how these ecological conditions contribute to children's adaptation.

Tier two applies social-ecological resilience theory (Masten, 2014, 2021; Ungar, 2011; Ungar & Theron, 2020) to explain how resources within children's

ecological environments function as protective processes supporting adaptation. Following Ungar (2011), resilience reflects the negotiated fit between a child's needs and the culturally meaningful resources available within their environment. Masten's (2014) concept of ordinary magic emphasises that resilience depends primarily on everyday protective systems, such as stable caregiving relationships, predictable routines, and caring non-parental adults, rather than on rare or specialised interventions. Masten and Narayan (2012) demonstrate that these ordinary protective systems remain fundamental even in contexts of disaster, war, and forced displacement. Building on this work, Ungar and Theron (2020) conceptualise resilience as a multisystemic process emerging through interactions among biological, psychological, social, cultural, and environmental systems. This multisystem perspective is further reinforced by Pluess et al. (2025), who highlight the importance of strengthening socio-ecological resources to support the mental health and adaptation of forcibly displaced children. This understanding is supported by the two Ukraine-specific child studies reviewed above (Korcz et al., 2024; Urbański et al., 2023), both of which identified relational and school-based factors, rather than individual characteristics, as the strongest correlates of resilience. Tier two therefore reframes resilience away from a fixed individual capacity and instead asks of any setting: Does it provide the ordinary protective resources that this child currently needs in a culturally meaningful form?

Tier three represents the central contribution of the proposed framework by conceptualising play as the primary mechanism through which resilience processes are enacted and belonging as both the immediate outcome of that process and a reinforcing relational process. In this framework, belonging is understood as children's experience of feeling accepted, valued, connected, and fitting within their social environment (Hagerty et al., 1992). Consistent with Landreth (2012), play provides children with a natural medium through which difficult experiences can be expressed and processed when verbal disclosure is not yet possible. Similarly, Malchiodi (2011) emphasises the value of expressive and art-based activities for children who may lack the vocabulary or emotional safety to communicate traumatic experiences directly, while van der Kolk (2014) highlights the role of embodied, non-verbal experiences in supporting recovery from trauma. However, play does not operate in isolation. As demonstrated by Trimboli et al. (2021), its protective effects depend on supportive relational and ecological conditions. Building on this evidence, the framework conceptualises stable, predictable, and supportive environments as enabling exploratory, socially engaged, and relationally attuned play, whereas disrupted ecological conditions may constrain children's opportunities for such play. Through these relational experiences, children may develop feelings of acceptance, inclusion, and meaningful social connection, thereby fostering a sense of belonging. Belonging,

in turn, strengthens protective relationships (Tier 2) and reinforces children's engagement within their ecological systems (Tier 1), making the proposed framework recursive rather than linear.

Applied to the Estonian context, the proposed framework provides a conceptual basis for community- and school-based initiatives that combine opportunities for play, supportive relationships, cultural continuity, and predictable routines. These principles are broadly consistent with previous qualitative findings demonstrating that Ukrainian refugee children in Estonia identified family support, peer relationships, leisure activities, and community connections as important resources supporting adaptation (Toros, Kozmenko, & Falch-Eriksen, 2024). Rather than evaluating existing programmes, the framework explains how these different resources may interact to strengthen resilience and foster a sense of belonging among displaced children. In doing so, it integrates ecological context, resilience processes, and play-based relational mechanisms into a single explanatory framework of children's adaptation following forced displacement.

Toward Empirical Validation: Testable Propositions and Limitations of the Framework

The proposed framework generates several empirically testable propositions that may guide future research and provide a basis for its empirical evaluation. Three key propositions are outlined below.

Proposition 1. Play quality mediates the relationship between ecological context and belonging. The framework proposes that the quality of children's play, rather than the amount of time spent playing, mediates the relationship between ecological stability (Tier 1) and children's sense of belonging (Tier 3). In particular, relationally engaged, emotionally responsive, and socially interactive play is expected to mediate how supportive ecological conditions contribute to children's sense of belonging. This proposition distinguishes the framework from approaches that conceptualise play, resilience, and belonging as independent protective factors.

Proposition 2. The quality of play matters more than the quantity of play. Consistent with findings reported by Trimboli et al. (2021), the framework proposes that opportunities for unstructured play alone are unlikely to produce meaningful improvements in resilience or belonging. Instead, positive outcomes are expected when play occurs within stable, supportive, and relationally responsive environments that enable children to experience safety, reciprocity, and meaningful social interaction.

Proposition 3. Belonging reinforces resilience through recursive feedback. The framework further proposes that experiences of belonging strengthen children's protective relationships and increase their engagement with supportive

ecological systems over time. Consequently, belonging is conceptualised not only as an outcome of resilience processes but also as a mechanism that reinforces those processes through ongoing feedback between ecological context, resilience, and play.

The proposed framework also identifies clear criteria for empirical testing. Because the model conceptualises adaptation as a recursive process, longitudinal research is required to examine the temporal relationships among ecological conditions, play, resilience, and belonging. Cross-sectional evidence may provide initial support but cannot distinguish the reciprocal pathways proposed by the framework from alternative explanations, such as reverse causation or shared environmental influences. Conversely, evidence demonstrating that play quality does not contribute to children's sense of belonging once ecological stability is taken into account would challenge one of the framework's central propositions by suggesting that ecological conditions influence belonging directly rather than through play.

Conclusions and Prospects for Further Research. This article has proposed an integrated three-tier theoretical framework that brings together ecological systems theory, social-ecological resilience theory, and research on play and belonging to explain the adaptation of displaced children. Rather than conceptualising play, resilience, and belonging as separate protective factors, the framework proposes that play functions as the primary mechanism through which ecological resources are translated into resilience processes and, ultimately, experiences of belonging. By conceptualising belonging not only as an outcome but also as a reinforcing relational process, the framework highlights the recursive nature of children's adaptation following forced displacement.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the framework provides a conceptual basis for designing and evaluating community- and school-based initiatives supporting displaced children. Rather than focusing primarily on children's participation or programme attendance, the framework emphasises the quality of play, supportive relationships, and opportunities to develop a sense of belonging as central indicators of successful adaptation.

As a theoretical framework, the proposed model requires empirical validation. Future research should examine the reciprocal relationships among ecological conditions, play, resilience, and belonging using longitudinal research designs capable of testing the recursive pathways proposed here. Comparative studies across different host-country contexts would further strengthen understanding of the framework's wider applicability, while research examining community-based programmes could explore how the proposed mechanisms operate in practice. Such work represents the next step in evaluating, refining, and extending the framework presented in this article.

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ГРА, СТІЙКІСТЬ І ПОЧУТТЯ ПРИНАЛЕЖНОСТІ: ДО ІНТЕГРАТИВНОЇ ТЕОРЕТИЧНОЇ МОДЕЛІ ПІДТРИМКИ ДІТЕЙ-БІЖЕНЦІВ З УКРАЇНИ

О.І. Козьменко, К. Торос

Масове переміщення українських родин з 2022 року поставило кількасот тисяч дітей-біженців у системи освіти та громад приймаючих країн, зокрема в Естонії, де неформальні осередки підтримки — громадські недільні школи, культурні гуртки, ініціативи молодіжного діалогу — відіграють провідну роль у супроводі адаптації таких дітей. Наявні дослідження здебільшого розглядають гру, стійкість і почуття приналежності як окремі конструкти: психологія розвитку трактує гру як механізм опрацювання травматичного досвіду та саморегуляції; теорія стійкості розглядає соціально-екологічний контекст як головний чинник позитивної адаптації; дослідження приналежності визначають реляційну включеність переважно як наслідок успішної інтеграції. У статті обстоюється теза, що в реальному досвіді переміщеної дитини ці три конструкти функціонують як єдина, взаємопідсилювана

система, а не як окремі змінні, і пропонується трирівнева модель, що об'єднує їх у межах екологічної теорії систем У. Бронфенбреннера. Перший рівень розміщує дитину в межах вкладених екологічних систем; другий - застосовує соціально-екологічну теорію стійкості для визначення захисних процесів, доступних у цих системах; третій рівень розглядає структуровану та неструктуровану гру як операційний механізм реалізації процесів стійкості, а почуття приналежності - як безпосередній наслідок гри та водночас чинник зворотного зв'язку, що підтримує стійкість з часом. Модель проілюстровано на прикладі українських дітей-біженців в Естонії та запропоновано як теоретичну основу для подальшої емпіричної перевірки.

Ключові слова: гра, стійкість, почуття приналежності, екологічна теорія систем, травмо-інформований підхід, українські діти-біженці, неформальна освіта.

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