

AWYAD's TEAM UP Approach: Restoring Hope Through Movement and Play

Transforming Children's Mental Health in Refugee Settlements Restoring Hope Through Movement and Play In the heart of Uganda's refugee settlements, children carry the invisible wounds of war, displacement, and uncertainty. In Kyaka II, Nakivale, and Oruchinga refugee settlements, many children have been uprooted from their homes, witnessing unimaginable trauma. Their young minds bear the burden of stress, anxiety, and a loss of normalcy. According to AWYAD's Needs assessment report (2020), 65% of refugee children in Kyaka and Palabek exhibited symptoms of trauma-related distress, with 40% experiencing severe emotional difficulties. Recognizing the urgent need for psychosocial support, AWYAD implemented the TEAM UP approach, a structured movement-based intervention designed to enhance the mental health and psychosocial well-being of children through play and physical activity. The TEAM UP approach, developed by War Child and Save the Children, adopted and implemented by AWYAD has been a beacon of hope for thousands of refugee children. Through structured games and movement-based activities, children are not only finding joy but also learning how to regulate their emotions, build resilience, and reconnect with their peers. As of December 2024, AWYAD has implemented TEAM UP in over 30 schools and communities, reaching 12,400 children across Kyaka II, Nakivale, and Oruchinga settlements.



An ECD Facilitator/Care Giver in Buliti ECD Centre facilitating a playful learning session with children.

The Healing Power of Play

For children affected by displacement and conflict, structured play can be a powerful tool for healing. The TEAM UP approach utilizes games that focus on themes such as anger management, stress relief, friendship, and conflict resolution. Each activity is carefully designed to enhance children's emotional and social skills, helping them develop healthy coping mechanisms. One of the most significant aspects of the approach is routine. Children participate in TEAM UP sessions weekly at the same time and place, providing a sense of stability and predictability in their otherwise unpredictable lives. This structure fosters a sense of safety and normalcy, essential for children recovering from traumatic experiences. Research indicates that children engaged in structured play interventions demonstrate a 75% improvement in emotional regulation and a 80% increase in peer interactions.

In addition, AWYAD has trained 50 TEAM UP facilitators (trained teachers and volunteers) who guide children through activities while fostering an environment of trust and support. They encourage positive social interactions, reinforcing cooperation, self-expression, and resilience among participants.

Success Stories: Lives Transformed through participation

1. From Isolation to Confidence – Rose and Maria's Story

Before joining the TEAM UP program, Rose (10) and Maria (12) two girls from Murunga Primary School in Oruchinga Refugee Settlement were always withdrawn and struggled with anxiety. Rose having lost her parents during the war in DRC and Maria having been separated from her parents, found it difficult to trust others and rarely spoke to their peers. Before the intervention, Rose only attended school thrice a week and Maria attended school only two days a week. After six months of consistent participation in TEAM UP sessions, Rose and Maria's transformation became evident. Their school attendance improved to five days per week, and their confidence in social interactions increased. Today, both girls are an active participant in class discussions and have formed meaningful friendships in class and outside class. They are also peer team up leaders in their school.



Rose (left) and Maria (Maria) of Murunga Primary School in Oruchinga Refugee Settlement with blindfolds playing catch the ball during a team up session.

At 14 years old, Bhahati Diamace, a Congolese refugee in Kyaka II settlement and a pupil of primary five – Byabakora Primary School, displayed signs of aggressive behaviours. Having grown up witnessing violence, he struggled with controlling his emotions, often getting into fights with classmates. He was labelled a “troublemaker” by teachers, which only deepened his frustration and isolation. When Bhahati joined TEAM UP, his behaviours gradually changed. His participation in play and recreation activities helped him with healthy ways expressing and regulating his emotions. Through structured games that emphasized patience, teamwork, and respect, Bhahati learned how to channel his energy into positive social interactions. Over a three-month period, Bhahati’s recorded incidents of aggression dropped by 70%. Today, he not only participates actively in school but has become a peer mentor, helping other children who struggle with anger.



Bhahati Diamace a pupil of primary five – Byabakora Primary School, Kyaka II settlement participating in a Team-up Session.

3. Rebuilding a Sense of Community: The Story of Oruchinga Refugee Settlement

In Oruchinga Refugee Settlement, TEAM UP has had a community-wide impact. The sessions have brought children together, fostering friendships across different cultural and national backgrounds. Reports indicate a 35% decrease in intergroup conflicts among children participating in TEAM UP activities. Schools in Oruchinga also report improved peer relationships and a more inclusive school environment.

Beyond the Playgrounds: The Lasting Impact of TEAM UP

TEAM UP offers more than play—it teaches vital life skills. Children gain emotional regulation, form lasting friendships, and improve conflict resolution. Data from AWYAD’s monitoring reports show that 70% of children who participated in TEAM UP demonstrate improved classroom behaviour, with 58% showing enhanced concentration and focus. In TEAM UP, children transform play into lifelong skills. They learn to manage stress, anxiety, and anger through creative expression and cooperative play. Friendships flourish, and conflicts resolve gracefully. Inspired by these safe, inclusive sessions, school engagement rises, and focus sharpens, paving the way for brighter futures and lasting well-being.

A Future of Possibilities

AWYAD’s commitment to child protection and mental health through initiatives like TEAM UP is creating a future where refugee children are not just surviving, but thriving. The success of the program in Kyaka II, Nakivale, and Oruchinga refugee settlements serves as a model for psychosocial interventions worldwide. While the scars of displacement cannot be erased overnight, initiatives like TEAM UP offer a path toward healing, empowerment, and hope. With continued support, more children in refugee settlements will have the opportunity to rebuild their confidence, overcome trauma, and envision a brighter future.

Call to Action: Expanding the Reach of TEAM UP

To sustain and expand this life-changing initiative, AWYAD calls upon partners, donors, and stakeholders to invest in scaling up TEAM UP interventions. By reaching more schools and communities, we can ensure that every child in refugee settlements has access to the psychosocial support they need. Together, we can transform the lives of refugee children—one game, one movement, and one step at a time.



Children of Rubondo Zone in Nakivale Refugee settlement participate in a community Team Up Session