



The good practices of reception centre sports

A guide to organising sports

Finnish Red Cross 

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Introduction

WAITING for a decision on an asylum application at a reception centre causes stress, uncertainty and distress for many. Exercising can help promote well-being and coping and boost self-esteem in a difficult situation. It also functions as an excellent way to integrate, make new contacts and build bridges. People exercising together are on a level playing field, regardless of their nationality, status, age or background community.

EXERCISING is common in Finland and can be utilised to form a tie to Finnish society, to learn about our customs, culture and language, and to create networks both locally and on a wider scale. Native Finns will also learn new ways of exercising and promoting well-being from the immigrants. Sports is something you can share even without a mutual language.

ASYLUM SEEKERS living in the Finnish Red Cross' reception centres had the opportunity to try out over 50 different sports during a sports project organised in 2016–2017. The most popular forms of exercise included swimming, football and gym training.

THE AIM of the sports project was to support the mental and physical well-being of asylum seekers by providing them with easy and fun ways of exercising. The main focus was on the aspect of exercising that supports well-being in social and everyday life contexts. In addition, models and good practices were created in order to support immigrants with exercising and goal-oriented sports, as well as in finding their place in local-level sports clubs and sports groups. The project helped native Finns, asylum seekers and immigrants who had arrived in Finland earlier to meet, which promoted integration.



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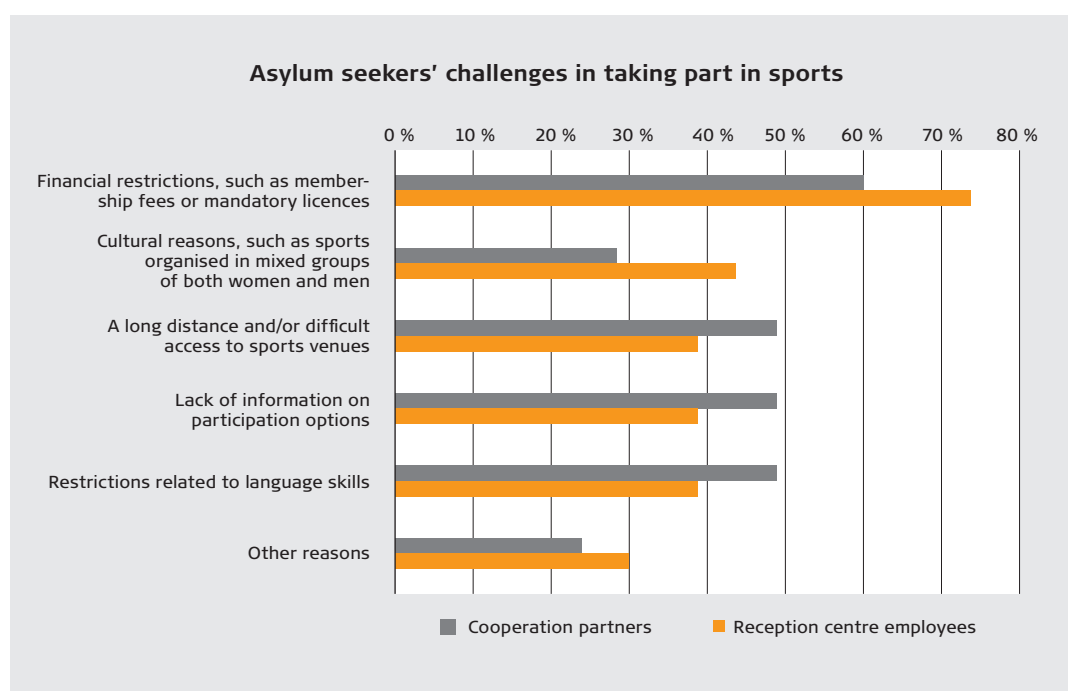
THE SPORTS project was made possible by a grant from the Regional State Administrative Agency for Southern Finland, allocated from the profits of Veikkaus. The cooperation partners included the Finnish Olympic Committee (previously Valo ry) and a number of local sports clubs and other sports-related operators.

IN this guide, the Red Cross has listed good practices found to be successful in organising sports at reception centres. The data was collected from staff members of reception centres maintained by the Red Cross, as well as from co-operation partners such as sports clubs.

Challenges in reception centre sports

THE ONLINE questionnaire sent to the instructors and cooperation partners of reception centres contained five pre-defined and pre-identified challenges: financial restrictions (membership fees, mandatory licences), cultural reasons (e.g.

mixed sports groups), lack of information on participation options, long distances and/or difficult access to sports venues, restrictions related to language skills and other reasons.



Impaired mental well-being

IN the open-ended questions of the questionnaire, some of the reception centres and adolescent units highlighted the poor mental well-being among their residents. A follow-up survey was conducted based on these answers by calling a few of the sports project's contact persons.

ASYLUM SEEKERS have been experiencing mental distress both during their asylum application process and after being granted asylum and

transferring over to the municipality's services. Because the asylum seekers share accommodation, they are also affected by each other's situations, which in turn increases and spreads the sense of uncertainty. This has an impact on exercising, as well. The motivation and commitment to exercise regularly lessen when faced with uncertainty.

AS ONE of the instructors put it, the psychological stress experienced by the residents becomes more pronounced in situations in which a resi-

dent feels uncertain about their future and must rediscover their place in life. The young people in an adolescent unit may also experience a similar situation when they are granted asylum and must face a life-altering change. These adolescents search for their place between cultures, miss their family and try to integrate into the surrounding society. However, the possible stigma of being an asylum seeker might hinder integration.

THE ANSWERS showed that the motivation to exercise is also affected by changes taking place at the reception centre, such as the client turnover. Sports activities such as football may have personal value to a resident, but a poor mental state will weaken commitment and enthusiasm to participate.



Without the sports-related activities, the well-being among the residents could not have been maintained and improved.



Good practices and solutions to the challenges

1. The financial restrictions

'Financial aid has been granted in some cases, if the social worker has deemed it necessary. Primarily, the aim is to negotiate good group prices at places like swimming halls. Access to a gym has been in such high demand that we have arranged a small one with donated equipment.'

- **Openness towards the cooperation partners.**
- **Solid cooperation between a reception centre and local sports clubs and organisations** enables negotiations on costs (e.g. terms of participation and licence fees). A local football club may decide to accept a few players into their team without a fee.
- **Accepting support from volunteers.**
- **Negotiating group prices**, for example for swimming halls.
- **Supporting a resident's sports hobby financially, covering the costs either partially or fully**, e.g. group transport or swimming hall and gym fees.
- **A city may offer free or discounted opportunities to do sports.**
Adolescent units may work in cooperation with a city's youth secretary. The city can organise sports like football, volleyball or kung fu, in which the residents of the adolescent units may participate.
- **Using local sports facilities through co-operation, if possible.**
A local sports club can make the facility reservations, which is less expensive than if an outside party, i.e. a reception centre, was making them.
- **Searching for sponsors.**
- **Monitoring projects that support sports and taking part in them.**
- **Lending sports equipment to a reception centre.**
Lending e.g. fishing equipment and providing instructions on how to use it so that residents can exercise independently.
- **Diverse and creative ways of using donated items.**
Donated equipment can be used to create a small gym. Donated footballs and other sports equipment enable daily games.



2. Cultural reasons

'Women's turn at the local adult education centre's swimming hall functions as a lifeline for them. They can spend some time without their children or husbands. Asylum seekers can take part in the activities together with native Finns, and some will gain new friendships'

- **Understanding cultural differences.**
- **Arranging separate introductory visits for women outside of opening hours,** for example at a swimming hall.
- **Organising women's own exercise groups and sports that they would like to do.**
- **Combining exercising and family activities.**
- **Being present and offering guidance and support** when trying out a new sport for the first time. Transfer to the so-called native groups will take place only after successfully completing the orientation.
- **The municipality's financial support makes targeted activities possible** e.g. football as a hobby for young girls and boys.
- **With mixed exercise groups, the recommendation is for men and women to have their own instructors of the same sex.**
- **Making exercise part of the reception centres' operations, which enables children and young people to take part in sports as part of their daily life while the facilities are reserved especially for them.**



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3. Restrictions related to lack of information and language skills

"Sports clubs and the municipality will also announce their activities on a reception centre's noticeboard. The staff will encourage the residents to take part in different events. Our community is small and nearly all operators know one another, making cooperation relatively easy and smooth."

- **A nurse and/or organisations will discuss the health benefits from exercise with the residents and encourage them to take part in sports**, for example through activity sessions. A nurse and/or social worker may encourage and guide some of the residents to take part in these hobbies.
- **Translating bulletins and the rules and practices regarding sports-related activities to the residents' native languages** either orally or in writing. Use of images will make the message more informative.
- **Active use of the noticeboard** is a good way of distributing information on exercise-related activities. Both the reception centre staff and local cooperation partners can use the noticeboard to distribute information about their events and activities.
- **Personal contact when distributing information**, for example door-to-door calls
- **Sharing experiences.** If some of the residents have enjoyed an exercise-related activity, they can be encouraged to share their positive experience with the rest of the residents.
- **Organising meaningful activities regularly**, so that the residents will know when and where they need to be
- **When trying out a new sport outside of the reception centre, it is recommended that you join in to offer your support at least during the first session**, even if you



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do not share a mutual language with the asylum seeker in question. Communicating with a familiar person is usually easier, even if you do not yet have a mutual language. E.g. sponsoring is a tried and tested practice.

- **A functioning relationship between a resident and an exercise instructor.**
- **Functioning as a conveyor of information between a resident and an exercise instructor, if communication between them has not yet taken place**, particularly in situations that the asylum seeker feels are challenging.
- **Encouraging the use and learning of Finnish, even a little.**

4. Long distances or difficult access to sports venues

'We have tried to get some of the instructors from the sports clubs to come here to this reception centre and acquired some sports equipment.'

- **Local volunteers, sports clubs, organisations and educational institutes are organising activities at reception centres.**
This solves the problem of long distances and allows the residents to integrate into Finnish culture by meeting local operators.
 - **A positive attitude at the reception centres towards the sports opportunities organised by local volunteers and organisations.**
 - **Arranging sports opportunities near the reception centres** by utilising their yards, the surrounding environment and shared indoor facilities. The equipment will be acquired with project funding or as donations. Football fields or volleyball and basketball courts, among other things, can be constructed at the reception centres.
 - **Showing the best access routes on foot, by bicycle or public transport**
This forms a clear and concrete task for the volunteers and enables independent commuting in the future.
 - **Inviting Finnish friends to events organised by reception centres.**
 - **Arranging transportation for groups, whenever possible, to a venue offering sports-related activities.**
Native Finnish parents can drive immigrant children from a reception centre to their hobbies and take care of these children as agreed with the children's parents.
 - **Active residents can function as instructors to the other residents in sports they know.** Residents who are interested in becoming peer instructors can be trained at the reception centres together with sports professionals.
- **Organising sports-related activities within a reception centre creates inexpensive, targeted (e.g. for women and children) and spontaneous activities for the residents that they can easily take part in.**



5. Reduced mental well-being

'You must be creative and open and commit fully to joining in the activities with the residents. You must also ask the clients what they would like to do, thus encouraging them to participate. Clients will be more keen to take part if you talk with them and plan future activities together. Furthermore, it is important that native Finns and the clients are able to work together in order to create contacts and positive experiences.'

- **Organising regular activities and providing information actively.**
The activities will be open to everyone and available at all times, and people of different fitness levels will have their own gym classes and sports clubs of various kinds.
- **Organising short-term daytime events** that provide activities for all target groups and differ from a reception centre's normal routines, e.g. different types of events, sports days and forest trips.
- **Discussing exercise events before and after with the residents**, discussing any emotions or questions the residents may have about an event.
- **Acquiring an outside instructor.**
The person must be interesting/charismatic and easy to approach. A young, outside pro-level football player volunteered at one of the adolescent units, and this person was able to pique the young people's interest with their appearance alone.
- **Being aware of an individual resident's situation and the general reasons behind any psychological burden, as well as understanding the effect these have on commitment and motivation.**
- **Increasing awareness on the effects of exercising to human well-being.**
Exercising improves well-being and coping, lowers stress levels and boosts self-esteem when facing uncertainty and distress, while increasing an individual's experience of being part of a community.
- **A personal experience of well-being through exercise in one's own life and/or an asylum seeker's experience of feeling better when staying active.**
- **Maintaining realistic goals and celebrating every new participant.**
Especially during more challenging times, the target number of participants should be set at a realistic level, trusting that someone will join the activities. During challenging times, even a single participant will be enough.



The key factors in organising sports successfully

ONE THING is more important than any other when it comes to overcoming the challenges and creating good practices: cooperation with your partners. A cooperation network can consist of local sports clubs, volunteers and the staff at a city's services. Cooperation will smooth out some of the challenges related to financial restrictions, culture, lack of information, distances, language skills and mental well-being. In addition, it will enable access to a range of sports, promote well-being in a stressful situation, allow residents to form networks within their surrounding environment and facilitate successful integration. The fact that **a single employee will be in charge of the reception centre sports** will greatly simplify the initiation and development of the cooperation.



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Tips from reception centre employees to a successful cooperation:

- Actively search for possible local sports clubs.
- Do not be afraid to contact them. Once you have created a collaboration partnership, maintain it.
- Be open towards your cooperation partners.
- Be broad-minded and do not hesitate to join in events arranged by others.
- Be active yourself – commit fully to the activities with the clients, particularly if the organising party is a club or an organisation.
- Have a positive attitude towards different types of activities.

Tips from reception centre employees for meeting with the residents:

- Be patient
- Talk to the residents
- Ask what the residents would like to do and why, and what needs changing and why.
- Listen to the residents!
- Be persistent when distributing information about sports activities

Open cooperation with the partners and listening to the residents are the key factors in organising sports at reception centres successfully

The Finnish Red Cross' reception centres and sports project

IN 2016–2017, the Finnish Red Cross' reception centres took part in a sports project funded by the Regional State Administrative Agency for Southern Finland. During these years, reception centres organised sports activities together with local exercise and sports clubs to the asylum seekers living in the centres, factoring in different target groups (children, young people, women, men and families).

THE FINNISH RED CROSS maintains reception centres according to an agreement with the Finnish Immigration Service. The Red Cross district divisions are in charge of the reception centres located in their respective areas. After the notable increase in the number of asylum seekers in autumn 2015, the Finnish Red Cross was managing over a 100 reception centres at the beginning of 2016 and 55 reception centres in December of the same year, housing approximately 10,000 asylum seekers. A number of reception centres were closed in spring 2017, based on the decision made by the Finnish Immigration Service. In December 2017, there were 26 reception centres maintained by the Finnish Red Cross, with approximately 4,600 residents.

The sports project's target group

THE TARGET GROUP of the Red Cross reception centres' sports project consisted of the residents living in these centres, including underaged asylum seekers who had arrived without a guardian and were living in group homes or supported housing apartments, as well as in 2017 those children and young people who had been granted asylum and were living in family group homes for minors.

THIS GUIDE uses the word 'resident', because the target group of 2017 also included children and young people who had received a residence permit. In addition, the term 'reception centre' is used to make the text clearer, but it also refers to group homes, supported housing apartments and family group homes. Some of the examples in this guide use the term 'adolescent unit', which means that the good practice in question originates mainly from units that work with adolescents.

Data collection methods

THE GOOD PRACTICES in the sports project were collected from the project's nationwide report of 2016 and by gathering data with an online survey in September and November 2017, targeted at the reception centres' instructors and cooperation partners, such as sports clubs. In addition, a few of the instructors in charge of the sports project were interviewed over the phone to get further information.

THE INTERVIEWS conducted over the phone were recorded almost word for word during the calls in order to guarantee the reliability of the data. The need to gather further information rose after several reception centres highlighted in the online survey the psychological distress experienced by their residents: the aim was to identify the factors affecting the mental state of the asylum seekers, study the forms these factors can take and find ways of addressing them.

