

Using PARO Therapeutic Seals to Support Mental Health of Ukrainian Refugee Children in Poland

Case Study



Implementation Process

In response to the psychosocial needs of Ukrainian refugees in Poland, PARO therapeutic seals were introduced as an innovative support tool for children affected by displacement and trauma. The project was implemented in collaboration with psychologists, pedagogists, and speech therapists working in UNICEF Spilno Hubs in Poznań, Gdynia, Łódź, and Lublin, as well as in refugee centers in Warsaw coordinated by the Warszawskie Centrum Pomocy Rodzinie (WCPR – Warsaw Family Support Centre). PARO robots served as emotionally supportive companions, facilitating therapeutic engagement, emotional regulation, and communication. The initiative demonstrated positive outcomes in reducing stress, improving mood, and increasing engagement in refugee children.

1. **Initiation and Donation.** The project began when the Government of Japan donated PARO robots to the Medical University of Warsaw.
2. **Strategic Partnership.** Collaboration between the Medical University of Warsaw and Prof. Takanori Shibata enabled PARO units to be provided to UNICEF Spilno Hubs and the Warsaw Family Support Centre (WCPR).
3. **Training and Onboarding.** Psychologists, pedagogists, and speech therapists were trained to use PARO effectively in trauma-informed therapeutic practice.
4. **Deployment.** PARO robots were introduced in four UNICEF Spilno Hubs and WCPR refugee centers, supporting individual, group, speech, and art therapy.
5. **Ongoing Use and Data Collection.** PARO was integrated into routine therapy, with observational data collected (Nov 2023–Jun 2024) to evaluate engagement and therapeutic impact.

Impact and Results

- PARO was most commonly used as a tool for: Breaking the ice and initiating therapeutic contact; Supporting group integration; Delivering positive emotional experiences and moments of joy and curiosity; Reducing emotional tension and stress in children impacted by trauma or transition.
- In this context, the tool was highly rated by professionals: An average score of 4.75/5 was given for 49 group processes; An average score of 4.40/5 was reported across 64 individual therapy processes.

Country	Poland
Institution/Organisation	Coordinator: Medical University of Warsaw, Department of Health Psychology; Project sites: UNICEF Spilno Hubs (Poznań, Gdynia, Łódź, Lublin), Warsaw Family Support Centre (WCPR – Warszawskie Centrum Pomocy Rodzinie)
Type of setting	Community-based psychosocial support centers, refugee accommodation centers
National Context	Following the large-scale displacement caused by the war in Ukraine, Poland became one of the primary host countries for Ukrainian refugees, including a significant number of children. Local and international organizations, including UNICEF and municipal institutions like WCPR, mobilized to provide comprehensive support services addressing the emotional and psychological needs of displaced families. In this context, there was a growing demand for innovative and effective therapeutic tools that could engage children across language and cultural barriers while supporting trauma recovery and emotional well-being.

Success Factors

- Strong Institutional Collaboration
- Experienced and Adaptive Professionals
- Age-Appropriate Application
- Therapeutic Framing
- Cultural Sensitivity and Nonverbal Access

Challenges and Barriers

- Limited Long-Term Engagement
- Unrealistic Expectations and Disappointment
- Irritating or Disruptive Vocalizations
- Lower Effectiveness with Older Children and Adolescents
- Need for Structured Integration

Resources and Funding

- The project was initiated through a donation of PARO therapeutic seals by the Government of Japan to the Medical University of Warsaw.
- Additional units were made available to UNICEF and Warsaw Family Support Centre (WCPR) thanks to a collaboration between the Medical University of Warsaw and Professor Takanori Shibata, the creator of PARO.



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Recommendations:

- Based on the implementation experience and therapist feedback, the following recommendations are offered for future use and adaptation of PARO in similar contexts:
 1. Integrate PARO into Structured Activities
 2. Train Staff Not Only Technically, but Creatively
 3. Use Selectively and Flexibly
 4. Monitor and Adjust for Sensory Sensitivity
 5. Include Evaluation Tools from the Start
- By refining the contexts, methods, and populations in which PARO is used, future projects can build on this initiative to expand access to meaningful, emotionally supportive interventions for children in humanitarian and therapeutic settings.

Integration in Education Settings:

- PARO was incorporated into educational activities conducted by psychologists, pedagogists, and speech therapists, serving as a supportive tool during structured therapeutic workshops and group sessions. It helped create a safe, engaging environment that facilitated emotional expression, social interaction, and learning through experience, particularly for younger children affected by trauma.

Specific Environment and Limitations:

- High Dependence on Therapist Creativity: The effectiveness of PARO was highly contingent on the therapist's ability to design and adapt session content.
- Limited Scalability Without Local Production or Support: The availability and cost of PARO units remain a barrier to wider adoption, particularly in resource-constrained environments.
- Technology Limitations in Group Settings: In larger group formats, especially with more active or overstimulated children, PARO's passive and singular presence was sometimes insufficient to maintain engagement or regulate group dynamics effectively.

Key Lessons Learned:

- PARO is most effective when embedded in structured therapeutic or educational activities rather than used as a standalone tool.
- The robot works best with younger children, highlighting the importance of matching the technology to the developmental stage of users.
- Therapist creativity and flexibility are crucial, as the impact of PARO depends largely on how it is integrated into sessions.

Supporting Materials:

