

Supporting Young Children in Hostile Environments - Bait -Al Shams, the House of the Sun, in Beirut

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Beirut, Lebanon, refugee camp Shatila. Parents live here (and grew up here themselves) under difficult circumstances; in poverty, with high unemployment, suffering from (inherited) trauma and due to the camp's overpopulation, experiencing little to no privacy, even at home. There's a lack of safe spaces for women and girls where they can express themselves freely, develop friendships and social networks and engage with mentors to seek advice from a supportive environment. Parents in general are stressed, overwhelmed and have no mental space to fulfill their important role in child development. Based on the above, there was a need to start a parent-focused project, to work towards the home as a safe space for children and parents alike. The "Just Childhood" association started to open a kindergarten with Waldorf elements in 2015. Now they are about to open a second kindergarten in another camp, Baalbek.



Bait-al-Shams Kindergarten now has existed for five years, founded on the vision, that education is one of the most important aspects for a development that can change the cycle of poverty, violence and lack of rights. And with the peaceful methods of the reform pedagogy, Waldorf-Pedagogy, which has a deep respect for the individuality of each human being, this kindergarten tries to offer each child the best basis it needs to develop its inner talents, abilities and creativity.

The situation in Shatila has changed a little bit this year. We still have our very engaged and lovely team with seven teachers who take care of nearly 55 children in 3 groups: Fadiah and Zeinab in Bee group, Layal and Inas in Butterfly group, Samah and Nivine in Bird group and Khadijeh, for coordination. In February, two members of the team took part in an assessment with Bernhard Merzenich and were certified by the German Waldorf Academy in Mannheim. For the first time we had some major staff changes in Shatila. Two educators left for family reasons and we are happy to welcome Nivine Saber and Hilda Al Shoura as new coordinator. Working with those two started off in a wonderful way.

Just like during the previous years, Bait al-Shams hosted several trainings in 2019. In February we welcomed Bernhard Merzenich, in May Andrea Wiebelitz, and in October Andrea along with Francisca van Dijk. We have reduced the workshops a little bit and focused less on mentoring but more on theoretical and artistic work without the children.



During the week from July 6 – 14, an international team of trainers of the "Friends of Waldorf Education – Emergency Pedagogy" traveled to Baalbek to train the staff of a kindergarten affiliated to the Wavel Camp team in trauma and early childhood education. An intensive training week of the local team took place in Baalbek, in which the kindergarten teachers from Shatila also took part. A great support! In this way, content could be conveyed directly and realistically from the country's situation, without the detour of a translation into Arabic.

In the final round the feedback was amazing: The educators now want this new pedagogy. There was a spark of enthusiasm this week and despite many open questions and concerns or even "jitters" before the new beginning, they are ready and curious about the change. They want to try out how to get from academic to experimental learning and how to do it, how to foster learning through imitation, how to set up the rooms for free play, offer flexible toys and how to accompany that. In September trainers Martina Polleros and Almut Slezak joined the Baalbek team for a month to accompany the team on site for a month during the transition period.

So it is as if a big old ship gets a new coat of paint, sets off on new adventures with new sails and an extended crew. It doesn't matter that there can be storms from time to time, because the direction is known, there are good captains in the team and the ship is sustainable. On the farewell day there were many hugs and one had the feeling that the "friends" were saying goodbye to friends.

Many thanks to all of you who were there this week and who contributed to this impulse which hopefully will benefit many children and their families in the future.

Unfortunately, not everything went that smoothly this year. Just. Childhood started off the need of people in Shalita camp and one of the main needs of people here is creating safe places for children to learn, play and develop. Since 2015 we have been trying with full potential to satisfy this need, but due to security reasons, constant conflict and extremely bad infrastructure it became really difficult.

When we first opened our kindergarten, we opened in one of the safest neighborhoods in the camp. Unfortunately, situation has changed and last year we were forced to close our kindergarten for three months from end of May until end of August as result of armed conflict which caused our staff to be locked inside the kindergarten waiting for the shooting to be stopped to escape.

This incident was repeated this month on the second of December, this time we managed to escape immediately. Luckily during both incidents, children were already at their home safe. Such conflicts are unpredictable and can happen at any moment anywhere inside the camp and it is very frightening for all of us here to imagine such situation while the kids are still around. Under those circumstances and for the safety of our children and staff we decided to search for a new building.

The priority for us is finding a place within the camp area or near its borders for us to continue serving the needs in Shalita community and to maintain the trust and connection we established. However, at the time being we are able to work and maintain our doors open for our beautiful children and their families.

Samah and Zeinab continued their Eurhythmy Training with Judith Byford at Step Together Association in 2019 and they are very happy with the progress. Also, Zeinab took the responsibility of managing the training of the team in Baalbek. She is doing a wonderful job and looking at the new project in Baalbek, it made us realize how much the Shatila team has achieved during the last years and how valuable their contribution to the training of the new colleagues is.

Despite the difficulties we faced in Shatila and now since October due to Lebanon's political and economic instability, we would like to keep our positive spirit. Seeing the happy faces of our children on a daily basis makes it all worth it. Seeing them doing well in school confirms that we are on the right path and that this kind of education is really helpful for children.

Thank you for being there with us in your thoughts and thank you for your support.

Website of the association Just.Childhood: <https://www.justchildhood.org/>



Wiebke is the founder of Just.Childhood Association and has known Shatila Camp for 19 years. She is a political scientist who wanted to work with the Shatila community on something that is needed. Through her own children she had discovered Waldorf Education and wanted to introduce a holistic educational approach to the most vulnerable of the refugee society: its children.