



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education
An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Síceolaíochta Oideachais
National Educational Psychological Service



**wellbeing
in education**

Supporting the Wellbeing of Children from Ukraine in your School

Guidance for Primary Schools

March 2022

Introduction

The outbreak of war in Ukraine has resulted in the mass movement of people from Ukraine to neighbouring countries. Ireland has committed to accepting people fleeing from this conflict and has commenced planning across government departments to ensure a coordinated response to meeting their needs. Children moving to Ireland from Ukraine will have had a range of different experiences in recent times. What is happening in their country has threatened their view of the world as a safe and predictable place. All of the children arriving in our schools have experienced significant disruption to their lives. They have been forced to leave their homes, schools, extended families and friends and what they know. They are facing many changes and new challenges and are having to adjust to a new country, a new language, unfamiliar living arrangements and a new school environment.

Children will have had different experiences before and during their journey to Ireland. All will have experienced separation and loss. Some will have dealt with frightening and stressful situations, others will have experienced grief, and others too will have been vulnerable prior to the outbreak of this war. All of these children need time to settle and adapt to their new environment. Many will show remarkable resilience now that they are in a safer place, but for some recovery will take longer.

Children new to our schools will have a range of different feelings, thoughts and behaviours, and different responses to their recent experiences. This is to be expected and is a normal response to what are abnormal circumstances. In the early days they may appear very quiet and hypervigilant. They may tire easily. This is all normal and is an expected, typical and adaptive response for children who have experienced a traumatic event. It is also important to be mindful of how demanding learning through a new language is and how this might affect their behaviour.

We all have an inbuilt capacity to adapt and adjust and we do so by using our coping skills and by having supportive relationships. This is what is at the heart of resilience. The children arriving in our schools already have a range of skills and strategies to help them cope with challenging situations so many will adjust well to their new school setting.

The Hobfoll Principles (Hobfoll et al., 2007) of promoting a sense of safety, calm, connectedness, efficacy and hope, are key evidence-based principles known to help people regain a sense of normalcy and wellbeing in the aftermath of emergencies/traumatic events. Schools are familiar with these principles of support, as they formed the basis of the Department's response to supporting wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic. Children will do better in the long term if they feel safe, calm and hopeful, if they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to their new school, and they feel that they can manage and cope. Applying these five principles will help your school community, in its own unique way, to foster these children's resilience.



Children and their families arriving from Ukraine need to be given time to adapt and adjust to their new environment, new home, new school, and to be given access to practical supports, clear information and assistance to settle in and make friends. Counselling or psychological debriefing are not recommended at this time. A Psychological First Aid approach is recommended to supporting the wellbeing of these children in our schools at this time. This is in line with best practice, HSE guidance and the recommendation of the Psychological Society of Ireland, “Psychological First Aid is humane, supportive and practical assistance to fellow human beings who recently suffered exposure to serious stressors” (PSI, 2022).

This guidance has been developed by NEPS and is intended to be adapted by school communities to support the wellbeing of the newly arrived Ukrainian children to our schools.

STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL STAFF

WELCOME TO OUR SCHOOL: TOP TEN TIPS

The most important thing that schools can do now is to make children feel truly welcome in their new school. Schools do this naturally, but may feel a little challenged due to a possible language barrier. Here are some tips and ideas that might help.

1. Extend a friendly and warm welcome
2. Link with the families to gather and communicate important information
3. Have one key adult as the school's link with the family
4. Learn key phrases and practice new names in advance

Russian Hello (Privyet) Goodbye (Da svidaniya!) Thank You (Spasiba) Great (Atlichna)

Ukrainian Hello (Privit) Goodbye (Do pobachennya) Thank you (Dyakuyu) Great (Dobra)

5. Use visual schedules, visual cues and eBooks and tours to communicate the routine of the school day
6. Download and use translation apps to help with communication
7. Prepare peers for the new arrival and guide them on how to make the child feel welcome
8. Set up buddy systems
9. Manage the learning demands as the children adjust
10. Reassure them that the school is a safe place and communicate reassuring messages

STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL STAFF

Welcome to our School: Children need to feel safe

Feeling safe is the foundation of wellbeing. Many of these children have been confronted by threat in the last number of weeks which has resulted in stress. Promoting a sense of safety reduces stress, provides a context for the development of connecting supportive relationships and coping skills, and facilitates learning and problem-solving.



- Routines create a sense of safety by providing predictability. Establishing routines will contribute to a safe and calm learning environment and give children a sense of security.
- Explain established routines and rituals to the child/young person. Depending on the pupil's current proficiency in English, these will need to be communicated in different and often creative ways. Signal changes to routines in advance.
- Consider what additional routines will give the pupil a greater sense of security.
- Pair them with a buddy who can help them to become familiar with the physical environment.
- Provide visual cards so that they are able to communicate their needs e.g. need to go to the toilet, need help, need a break.
- Find out either from the pupil themselves or from parents/carers in advance what games they like to play and what activities they enjoy. Make efforts to involve them in school activities/clubs/sport/music/extra-curricular activities. Share information with parents/carers on accessible and free/low cost after school activities to facilitate peer interaction and community connection.
- Be sensitive to the cues in the environment that may cause a reaction where a child has experienced trauma e.g. fire drills, school bells, shouting at break times. School tours and bus trips can also trigger insecurities so these might need special preparation and choice. If using a visual schedule, including a 'Return to School / Home' at the end may be helpful.
- Be alert to and address any discrimination, teasing or bullying based on appearance, culture, religion or language.
- Be mindful of curriculum content for example stories of loss, separation, war.

Welcome to our School: Children need to feel calm

The ability to calm ourselves and regulate our emotions is a fundamental element of wellbeing. The more regulated and calm we are, the more we are able to think, plan, engage and learn, and the less stressed we will feel. Engaging in enjoyable and relaxing activities helps reduce stress.



- Children need time to settle and adapt to their new environment and a range of behaviour is normal during this time. Regulation activities built in to the daily routine will be helpful.
- There are lots of [Relaxation Techniques](#) and different things work for different people. Encourage the child to try a variety of techniques to help them find what works for them. Providing a menu of options will allow them to select the strategy that works best for them.
- Be aware that closing eyes when engaging in relaxation exercises may not be appropriate as they may not yet have the level of trust required. Breathing activities will be helpful as they can maintain their vigilance while participating. Additional breathing exercises are available from the Professional Development Service for Teachers [here](#).
- Identify quiet areas in the school and yard where they can go to relax and regulate e.g. quiet tent, bean bags, library area or a sitting area.
- Establish regular rituals within the day e.g. greetings and goodbyes, regulation activities and transitions between curriculum activities.
- Use visual systems to signal expected behaviours e.g. where to line up, one way systems. Use visual and auditory signals to help prepare for transitions e.g. music for lunch breaks, count down timers for completion of work.
- Use communication cards to let them signal when they are becoming tired or overwhelmed e.g. 'I need a break'. Use cue cards with emotion to help them to communicate how they are feeling.
- Validate and normalise their feelings rather than dismiss or minimise them. Help children to identify ways to cope and manage their feelings. Simple strategies can help lessen the intensity of emotions.
- Remember you are an important support at this time. Children look to the adults in their lives to guide them on how to cope with worrying and stressful events. Be aware of your own emotions and model calmness to reduce their anxiety.
- Reassure them that school is a safe place and communicate reassuring messages e.g. world leaders are working to achieve a peaceful resolution and adults are there to support them. School can provide a respite from the focus on war so limit exposure and make sure that discussions are developmentally appropriate.

Welcome to our School: Children need to feel connected

Feeling connected is a protective factor for wellbeing as it promotes a sense of belonging. It fuels empowerment, self-efficacy and hope and supports children to feel calm and safe. A lack of connection can lead to feelings of isolation which can lead to feeling overwhelmed in times of stress. When children feel connected and have a sense of belonging they are more likely to commit to and engage in school life. This improves educational outcomes and serves as a protective factor for mental health and wellbeing.



- Prepare classmates for the new arrival and guide them on how to make the child feel welcome.
- Support children to form friendships by providing lots of structured group activities within the class and during break times.
- Use peer support networks e.g. buddy systems, friendship squads, circle of friends.
- If setting up a buddy system, use a rota system in pairing them with a peer so that they have an opportunity to meet all of their classmates.
- Arrange more group work activities than you normally might.
- Provide opportunities for them to connect with others who speak their language, as well as opportunities to mix and connect with their new classmates.
- Spend time getting to know the child yourself, e.g. daily chats.
- Establish ongoing home and school communication to keep parents/carers informed and reassured.
- Find out about what talents and abilities they have and encourage them to engage with local extracurricular activities.

Welcome to our School: Children need to feel that they can cope and manage (Self and Community Efficacy)

Self-efficacy is about believing that you have the ability and skills to manage and cope. Collective efficacy in school is about the willingness of the school community to look out for each other and support one another when it is needed. Self-efficacy can give us a sense of empowerment, purpose, optimism and hope, all of which protect and promote wellbeing. Feeling that you belong to a community that is supportive, can protect and promote wellbeing.



- Support children to manage their response in their own way. Do not pressure them to share their experiences.
- If they wish to, however, provide space for them to talk about or draw their experiences.
- If children share their experiences and emotions, respond with calm non-verbal and verbal communication, acknowledge what they have said and communicate that you are seeking to understand and there to support.
- Give children plenty of opportunities to play. Play is 'the work of the child' and provides children with opportunities to express their feelings and deal with their emotions. Some children may cope by re-enacting experiences through play or through their interactions with others. Provide opportunities for them to engage in creative activities through music/sport/ drama.
- Keep the focus on their strengths. Find out what the child can do and is good at.
- Highlight strengths, interests and competencies in a range of areas. Acknowledge effort and achievement.
- Try to provide some choice in their day e.g. seating, activities, jobs. Allow flexibility in how they can interact with learning materials.
- Support them to experience success on tasks where there is an appropriate degree of challenge e.g. task analysis.
- Promote independence in learning e.g. checklist of steps involved, giving a limited time frame to complete a short task.
- Be aware that they may need support to feel that they are able to take risks in their learning, especially as they are dealing with a new language and a new 'foreign' environment. They may need to know that it is ok to make mistakes.
- Use Google translate and translation Apps to facilitate curriculum access. Microsoft Translator App allows live translation of conversations. See also additional useful links [here](#).
- Create double sided curriculum sheets English/Ukrainian or Russian.
- Give them time to settle in and create opportunities for them to demonstrate their skills in a way that they feel comfortable.
- Reassure them that they are safe but be mindful of the losses they have experienced. Many have left fathers and maybe brothers behind. Be sensitive at times of family celebrations e.g. on Father's Day, Easter etc.

- Communicate the message that children and young people of Russian heritage are not responsible for the actions that have resulted in the war. Model, coach and reinforce compassionate views towards others. Discourage prejudice or stereotyping of people based on nationality.
- Monitor how they are settling in. Observe behaviour, listen to comments and be guided by questions. This may give insight into how they are making sense of events and can help to address any misconceptions or fears they may have. Answer questions in an honest way using language they will understand. It is OK to say that you do not have all the answers. Watch for signs of prolonged distress or anxiety e.g. clinginess, attention seeking behaviour or regression. These behaviours are normal while children and young people settle and adjust.

Welcome to our School: Children need to feel a sense of hope:

Hope is essential for wellbeing as it motivates us to carry on and believe a positive future goal or outcome is possible. Without skills to manage challenges or achieve goals hope can be lost, leading to stress becoming toxic. Hope helps us remain motivated to take action towards achieving personal goals. It helps us persevere and believe that a positive future goal or outcome is possible which sustains us through stressful times.



- Foster positive emotions such as joy, humour, interest, contentment and love and engage the children in activities that are fun, like games, music, arts and crafts activities, sports etc.
- Teach and coach skills required to develop and maintain hope e.g. a helpful thinking style, coping strategies, accessing support networks, managing challenges.
- Mark the end of the school day with an acknowledgment of effort, progress and expectation for continued progress.
- Use declarations to anticipate positive future outcomes e.g. I will learn English, I will make friends, I will be OK.
- Model a sense of hope.

Tend to your own wellbeing needs

Finally, be mindful of your own wellbeing and how you are feeling and take steps to manage your own self-care. See supports available from the EAS service Spectrum Life [here](#).

NEPS Service

NEPS psychologists are available to support and assist schools about how best to support children/young people's wellbeing at this time. Schools may contact their assigned NEPS psychologist or their local [NEPS Office](#). NEPS will continue to provide guidance documents and resources to support schools to meet emerging need. These will be sent directly to schools and will also be available on gov.ie.