



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

**August 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 planning is ongoing 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 who have been welcomed to our schools 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. We have all shown how we can respond to and support children in challenging situations and we have skills and experience that will help us here. 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. School staff also need to allow time to get to know these children and to be mindful of ensuring their own wellbeing so that they can support the wellbeing of the children in their care. Most children will respond really well to the provision of this psychosocial response. Some children and young people, for a variety of reasons, will struggle a little to adapt and will need greater levels of practical and social support to manage. This may be linked to second language acquisition, additional learning needs, trauma or disruption to school attendance. Many of these needs will be met through the provision of a responsive Continuum of Support by schools, with assistance, if needed, from the Department's Support Services. Whether in mainstream schools, special classes or special schools, teachers are skilled at observing, identifying, and responding to the needs of all pupils. The Continuum of Support framework and Student Support File can be used to gather information, plan intervention and monitor the progress of incoming pupils who may have additional needs.

A small number of children and young people, some of whom who may have had pre-existing difficulties, may continue to struggle and may need higher levels of ongoing supports. In addition to the Continuum of Support provided by schools, it is likely that some of these children will need access to services provided by the Departments of Health and/or Children including HSE services and/or Tusla.

This guidance has been developed by NEPS and is intended to be adapted by school communities to support the wellbeing of all recently and newly arrived Ukrainian children to our schools. Regardless of the level of need, the principles of safety, calm, connectedness, efficacy and hope apply for all pupils arriving in Ireland; addressing their need to feel welcome and safe is the priority. Adaptations may be required to communicate these messages effectively for pupils with additional needs. With this in mind, strategies and resources have been collated in this document to assist school staff in tailoring supports to meet the needs of these pupils.

## STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL STAFF

### WELCOME TO OUR SCHOOL: TOP TEN TIPS

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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 or extend buddy systems
9. Allow space and time for children to settle and 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 recent times 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. 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.

### Further considerations and strategies to support children with additional and/or special educational needs to feel safe

Stability, consistency, a predictable routine, and clear expectations can be supported by using [visual supports](#) to increase predictability, to explain tasks, and to help children understand the sequence of events during the day. Some examples include:

- [Picture labels](#) on objects in the environment.
- Welcome posters in Ukrainian/Russian with visual images.
- Visual schedules showing the sequence of activities in the day ([Autism Good Practice Guidance](#) page 53).
- [Now-Next cards](#) to support transitions.
- Bi-lingual cue cards – e.g. help, toilet, break.
- Gestural cues to support understanding of general instructions e.g. cupping ear to indicate 'listen'.
- Approaches such as picture/photo stories and Social Stories™ can help pupils understand changes they have experienced and the changes they will encounter in the Irish school context. For newly arrived pupils, consider a 'Welcome to Our School' story with photographs of the environment, school staff, and information about what to expect.
- Allow additional time to transition between activities and places, and cue transitions using verbal/gestural countdowns and visual supports. If necessary, consider reducing the number of transitions throughout the day.
- Transitional objects can be used to support pupils to feel safe when separating from key adults e.g. photographs, or a comforting object such as a soft toy or sensory support (see [Autism Good Practice Guidance](#) page 58).
- Provide a visual system to 'check-in' with the student e.g. gestural (thumbs up thumbs down, or in the middle), or a visual ([five point scale](#) /emotion thermometer, see [Autism Good Practice Guidance](#) page 111).
- Identify a key adult who can provide reassurance and help identify and respond to individual needs.
- Initially consider graduated low-level learning activities to enable pupils to experience success.

## 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.

### **Further considerations and strategies to support pupils with additional and/or special educational needs to feel calm**

- Provide a [low arousal](#) environment - consider the number of people in the room, lighting, noise, tone of voice etc.
- Reduce sensory 'clutter' in the classroom e.g. staff chatting to each other, noise from outside/corridor, unnecessary items on desks, chairs scratching on the floor, lights buzzing. Consider some of the following [sensory accommodations](#).
- Provide calming, safe spaces for pupils to take [breaks](#) and photographs to support communication of this ([Autism Good Practice Guidance](#) page 52).
- Include more sensory play/activities in the daily schedule e.g. water play, arts and craft, sand, playdoh.
- Use visual supports to teach/practice relaxation techniques e.g. breathing gifs on the whiteboard and [grounding techniques](#).
- Provide opportunities for pupils to develop a greater awareness of their body cues by modelling how we 'tune into' and think about what our body is saying to us. School staff can support pupils' emotional regulation by modelling how to stay calm and being aware of and labelling, their own and others' feelings, as appropriate. Pupils can also be supported to develop emotional regulation skills by staff acknowledging and validating their feelings and helping them to address any fears or anxieties in a sensitive and responsive manner.
- Provide opportunities for repetitive and rhythmic movement as this can be very calming e.g. walking, marching, tapping a drum etc.
- Provide opportunities for fresh air and to connect with nature.
- Pupils may present with a wide variety of physical, emotional, and behavioural reactions to their experiences. These are normal reactions to abnormal events. Some pupils may verbalise their concerns, others may withdraw or struggle to communicate in an adaptive way. You may see an increase in repetitive behaviours or concerning behaviours. These should be responded to in a calm and accepting manner. Carefully consider what the function of the behaviour may be (e.g. what is the pupil attempting to communicate/ avoid / access through their actions). Regular and consistent communication with adults who know the pupil well will be essential in understanding the purpose of the behaviour and whether there is cause for concern.

## 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 provide them with opportunities to demonstrate these skills in school as well as encouraging them to engage with local extra-curricular activities.

### Further considerations and strategies to support children with additional and/or special educational needs to feel connected

- Work with the pupil's parents/carers (using translation supports) to put together a one-page profile.
- Observe the pupils closely and follow their lead, join them in their play, mirror their actions and allow them time to show you their interests and skills. You may wish to refer to person-centred communication supports, or to Intensive Interaction strategies, depending on the student's level of need.
- Show the pupils the parts of the class that are theirs e.g. their peg, their chair, their desk. Their name and/or photo could be added to these items.
- Help the student understand their social circle by making a personalised book with photos and names of classmates and school staff.
- Use talking mats and/or visual choice boards to identify preferences.
- Promote pupils' sense of belonging and relationships with peers through play, project work and creative alternatives (e.g. using technology to support social interaction).

## 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. A Psychological First Aid (PFA) approach is recommended to supporting the wellbeing of these children in our schools. This is in line with best practice. NEPS provides guidance on offering immediate support to distressed pupils by using a model of Psychological First Aid (PFA) called **Look, Listen & Link**<sup>1</sup>. The provision of this support is already familiar to many class teachers and special education teachers (SETs). It operates within the normal teacher-student relationship and does not require specialist skills. See [Look, Listen & Link - A model of Psychological First Aid \(PFA\) to help teachers support pupils](#) for more information.
- 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) for Irish schools from [‘Not Reliving-But Living-Psychological First Aid for Refugee Care: Helpful Do’s and Don’ts’](#) developed by the Psychological Society of Ireland (2022).

- 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.
- As appropriate, 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.

**Further considerations and strategies to support children with additional and/or special educational needs to feel that they can cope and manage (Self and Community Efficacy)**

- Give pupils short, clear instructions, supported by [visuals](#).
- Break down tasks into small steps and give pupils time and space to respond.
- Allow the pupils to watch an activity first, and join in in their own time and in their own way.
- Scaffold pupils to complete tasks independently using modelling, visuals, objects, and gestural cues, rather than doing things for them.
- Empower pupils and give them a sense of control by offering [concrete choices](#).
- Support pupils through the bereavement/grief process. Resources for individuals with intellectual disability can be found [here](#) and [here](#). Resources to support pupils with autism cope with major life changes, including bereavement can be found [here](#). The Childhood Bereavement Network have translated their '[I can...You can...](#)' postcards into Ukrainian for bereaved children to use as prompts for support.
- Support pupils to communicate when they require clarification or wish for an activity or interaction to change or stop (e.g. asking for help/a break), as this can promote their sense that 'I can cope'. In turn, responses by supporting adults that are positive and reinforcing of this message will strengthen pupils' sense of efficacy in themselves and in their new school community.
- Pupils who are pre-verbal should have access to their PECS books/augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices (if available) or be supported to use gesture, as appropriate, to enable them to communicate their needs. See the Language & Communication section of [Autism Good Practice Guidance](#). Staff should familiarise themselves with pupils' communicative behaviours or vocalisations (e.g. turning head away for no) as well as their likes/dislikes.

## 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.

### Further considerations and strategies to support pupils with additional and/or special educational needs to feel a sense of hope

- Use visuals/choice boards so the pupil can communicate one thing they enjoyed at school that day, and one thing they would like to do the next day.
- Send photos of pupils doing activities at school home with them to share with family. Consider making a scrapbook to recall enjoyable experiences that can be added to over time.
- Engagement with routines with an emphasis on fun high-preference learning activities can help shift the focus away from any feelings of distress and allow pupils to enjoy the present moment and look forward with optimism.
- Many of the good practices associated with supporting pupils with special educational needs are central to the approaches all schools implement (e.g. clear and repeated messages about expectations, greater use of visuals to reinforce new information, rehearsal of new routines to increase familiarity and mastery). These strategies will help pupils with special educational needs, including those with autism, to embrace the change in their school community.

## **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's wellbeing at this time. Schools may wish to 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.

### **August 2022**