



Promoting Resilience and Recovery in Early Learning and Care

Introduction

The outbreak of war in Ukraine has resulted in the mass movement of people from Ukraine to neighbouring countries. Children moving to Ireland from Ukraine will have had a range of different experiences in recent times, and these experiences may have threatened their view of the world as a safe and predictable place. All of the children arriving into Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings in Ireland will have experienced significant disruption to their lives. They, along with their caregivers, have been forced to leave their homes, communities, extended families and friends, and all that they know. They are facing many changes and new challenges, and are having to adjust to a new country, a new language, and unfamiliar living arrangements.

Although children coming from Ukraine will have had different experiences before and during their journey to Ireland, all will have experienced separation and loss. Some will have been in very frightening situations and experienced the loss of loved ones while others may have had early adverse experiences prior to the outbreak of this war.

Supporting Wellbeing in the Aftermath of Traumatic Events

The information in this resource has been adapted from guidance for schools developed by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) of the Department of Education with the aim of assisting ELC settings to support the wellbeing of newly arrived Ukrainian children. Guidance is based on the Hobfoll Principles (Hobfoll et al., 2007¹) that aim to promote a sense of safety, calm, connectedness, efficacy and hope. These are key evidence-based principles known to help people regain a sense of normalcy and wellbeing in the aftermath of emergencies/traumatic events. While the principles stay the same, their application in practice will look different for younger children than it would for older children and adults.

Children do better in the long term if they feel safe, calm and hopeful, and when they feel they can make choices and have some control over their environment. They are also more likely to thrive if they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to the adults and children in their ELC setting. Applying the five Hobfoll principles is a helpful way to reflect on your ELC setting and to put in place practices that foster children's resilience.



1. Hobfoll, S. E., Watson, P., Bell, C. C., Bryant, R. A., Brymer, M. J., Friedman M. J., et al. Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence. *Psychiatry*. 2007;70:283–315.

What Young Children Need

Children and their families arriving from Ukraine need to be given time to adapt and adjust to their new environment, new home and new ELC setting. They also need to be given access to practical supports, clear information and assistance to settle in and make friends.

Children 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. Some children may appear very quiet and withdrawn, while others may appear to be on high alert. Some children may have regressed in their development, for example, a child who was toilet trained might begin to have toileting accidents. Children may experience separation anxiety causing them to be clingy and very distressed by separation from their caregivers. These are expected and typical responses for children who have experienced a traumatic event or significant changes in their day to day life, and you should work with children and families to support them to settle in at their own pace. It is important also to be mindful of how stressful and frustrating it might be for children who are learning a new language and how this too might affect a child's behaviour.

We know that a child's relationship with their parents or primary caregivers is their most significant and that this relationship greatly influences a child's development and psychological wellbeing. We also know that when parents are stressed, this can impact on their parenting behaviours. You will need to consider ways you can appropriately support caregivers in their role.

Supporting Children to Feel Safe



Feeling safe, both physically and psychologically, is the foundation of wellbeing. Many children will show remarkable resilience now that they are in a safer place but for some, recovery will take longer. Trauma can change the way a child sees the world, making it seem a scary and dangerous place. It is only when children feel safe that they are able to explore their environment, build relationships and learn. ELC settings can be important places to foster this sense of safety for children.

It is important to remember that putting in place strategies to create a safe early learning and care environment for children will not necessarily mean that all children will feel safer. It may take longer for some children who have been through traumatic experiences to get to a place where they feel safe again. Having ongoing repeated experiences of feeling safe will help them to trust over time.





The best way you can promote children's feelings of safety is by building healthy, secure relationships within the setting that support the child's social and emotional wellbeing and help them to develop a positive sense of self. The availability of trusted adults in children's lives creates a sense of safety and security for children. Having a relationship with a key person in your setting is key in buffering stress and creating feelings of safety.

- ◆ Stay close to children and connect with them often, this will help to assure them that they are safe. Let children know you see them, you hear them, and they are important. Let them know that you will care for and keep them safe until their caregiver returns.
 - ◆ Follow a consistent, predictable routine that children will experience as familiar and dependable over time. A predictable daily routine can provide a sense of security and safety as children learn what to expect at different times of the day. A visual schedule of daily activities using photos will be helpful. Use of visual supports can also help 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
 - ◆ Be particularly sensitive to transition times and unexpected changes such as staff absences. Change can be stressful and children might need extra help during these times.
- ◆ The physical environment can make a big difference to how children feel in a space. It can help children feel safe and welcome or it can have the opposite effect and trigger feelings of anxiety, fear and danger.
 - Provide a low arousal environment, considering the number of people in the room, lighting, noise, tone of voice etc. Reduce sensory 'clutter' such as radio on in the room, noise from outside/corridor, chairs scratching on the floor, lights buzzing.
 - Think about sensory-related triggers. For example, while dimming the lights during rest time may be comforting for one child, it may remind another of frightening times spent in a dark place. Be mindful that sudden or loud noises such as furniture banging, other children crying/shouting or a fire alarm may trigger memories of frightening noises of bombs or sirens.
 - ◆ Reflect on how the physical environment and the atmosphere of your setting also impacts on parents' feelings of safety. Carry out a walkthrough of your setting and imagine what it might be like from different perspectives, for example, a parent and child coming to your setting for the first time or a parent who does not have English as a first language. Having some bilingual signs/poster may be helpful.
 - ◆ Engage with parents in a friendly, open and gentle manner. Parents may be exhibiting disorientation and other stress responses, so be aware of this.

Supporting Children to Feel Calm



The ability to calm ourselves and regulate our emotions is a fundamental element of wellbeing. When children are feeling calm they can play, explore, learn and socialise. When children are stressed or anxious, or have been traumatised, they may struggle to manage the intensity and duration of their emotions, resulting in them becoming easily dysregulated. They may struggle to self-regulate, not only on an emotional level but also on a physiological level, and will need your help to stay calm and regulated.

You can support a child to stay regulated through a consistent, attuned and responsive relationship. Through this relationship, the child will learn that their feelings are ok and will know that they can access your support to soothe their emotional distress. This is called co-regulation.



To create a sense of calm for a child, you can also provide calming, mindful and regulating activities throughout the day, especially ones that are repetitive and rhythmic. Children might need help to either 'down' regulate and become calmer or 'up' regulate and become more alert, whichever is required at a particular time. Down-regulation activities, such as breathing deeply, are best used when children are in a high-energy state, for example, anxious or excited. They aim to slow children down, regulate breathing and promote calmness. Up-regulation activities, such as dancing, can be encouraged when children seem disengaged or withdrawn. These raise the child's energy through fun activities that increase their state of alertness.

- ◆ Stay close to children who become easily dysregulated. Your presence can support children to stay calm and will help you to notice quickly if a child is becoming dysregulated and to respond appropriately.
- ◆ Ensure children have ongoing access to a wide range of activities and materials that they find calming and regulating such as art, music, movement, sensory materials.
- ◆ Be outside often. Outdoor play offers children many opportunities to regulate through gross motor movements like swinging, climbing and hanging from monkey bars.
- ◆ Provide natural spaces. Being in nature improves wellbeing and helps people to feel calmer.
- ◆ Include mindfulness-based activities throughout the day. These can help to calm children's minds, promote self-regulation and support children to become more attuned to themselves and others.
- ◆ Keep your environment well organised. Children can feel overwhelmed in a cluttered and disorganised environment. A well-organised space can feel particularly safe and calming for children who have been living in chaotic circumstances.
- ◆ Create calm, cosy spaces where children can go to take a break away when they are feeling stressed or overwhelmed, or are not able to focus on activities or listen to others. Include objects that support regulation such as cushions, blankets, soft toys, mind jars and sensory materials.
- ◆ Ensure that you yourself stay regulated and model calmness for children. A dysregulated adult will not be able to co-regulate a dysregulated child.

Supporting Children to Feel Connected



Everyone is born seeking connection.

When a child feels connected, this acts as a protective factor for wellbeing as it promotes a sense of belonging. A lack of connection can lead to feelings of isolation, which can lead to a child feeling overwhelmed in times of stress.

When you stay close to a distressed child, speaking calmly and kindly to them, trying to work out what the child needs and, when possible, meeting that need, you are telling the child, 'I am in this with you'. When the child experiences this again and again, they learn, 'This person will help me manage my big feelings'.



Every time you show a child that you understand how they feel and what they want, you are building connection.

- ◆ Adopt a key person approach in your setting. This will help to provide continuity of care for children through consistent, sensitive and responsive relationships. This approach supports children and their families when they are first settling in and throughout the child's time in the setting. Having a key person helps the child feel secure and brings about a sense of connection and belonging.

- ◆ Provide time and space for families to meet you as their child's key person during the settling-in phase so you can get to know each other, develop a positive relationship and establish trust.
- ◆ Honour children's connections with their parents and primary caregivers. Ensure a very gradual separation between children and their caregivers by slowly increasing the length of separations as the child becomes more comfortable and feels more connected to the educators in the setting.
- ◆ Children are happier when they have positive peer relationships and friendships. A setting that encourages all children to be kind and thoughtful towards one another will help children create connections with one another.
- ◆ Support children's sense of identity and belonging by ensuring that the environment reflects familiar aspects of their lives and is representative of their community.
- ◆ Plan for all spaces in the setting to have a homelike and comfortable feel. Add photos of the children and their family members to create a feeling of familiarity and belonging.
- ◆ Reinforce children's sense of community in the setting by ensuring children spend most of their time with familiar groups of children to help them form strong stable relationships with their peers.



Supporting Children to Feel Competent



Self-efficacy is about believing that you have the ability and skills to manage and cope. You can support children to develop a sense of self-efficacy, or agency in their lives, by giving them opportunities to exercise choice and control within their environment. Agency refers to a person's capacity to act independently and make their own free choices. Self-efficacy can give children a sense of empowerment, purpose, optimism and hope, all of which protect and promote wellbeing.

Collective efficacy in ELC is about the willingness of everyone in the setting to look out for one another and offer support when needed. Feeling that you belong to a community that is supportive can also protect and promote wellbeing.



As an early years educator, it is natural to want to try to 'fix' children's problems or focus only on what is going wrong in a child's life. However, it is important that children and families know that their voices matter. You should strive to build children's sense of competence and empowerment and adopt a partnership approach with parents.

- ◆ Offer choices to children. Children who have experienced trauma may feel they have little or no control over their lives. By ensuring the environment offers plenty of opportunities for choice, you are supporting children to feel like they have some control of their lives.
- ◆ Play is one of the most important aspects of children's lives and the provision of play opportunities is an essential feature in all early childhood settings. A key aspect of play is children's own agency and their control over the play experience.



- ◆ Play is a powerful tool for fostering children's resilience and helping them to recover from trauma. Provide many opportunities for children to gain confidence and mastery through their play. Children may be feeling unsure of themselves and their abilities, which will affect their confidence and competence. They may need a lot of support to explore the environment, make choices, challenge themselves and take appropriate risks.
- ◆ Parents who have experienced forced migration may be left feeling powerless with limited control over their lives. For this reason, it is especially important that you work in partnership with parents in a consistent, respectful and meaningful way.
- ◆ Ensure that parents have ongoing opportunities to engage in many different ways. Make it clear to parents that they have a right to have a say in all matters relating to the care of their child and their input is always welcome.

Supporting Children to Feel Hopeful



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.

You can cultivate children's feelings of hope by building healthy secure relationships with them that help them to develop a positive sense of self and by highlighting those moments of positivity that occur throughout the day.

- ◆ Adopt a strengths-based approach, which believes in resilience and the ability of people to heal and recover from trauma.
- ◆ Remember that children who have been traumatised are children first and foremost, and they deserve to have expectations and aspirations just like every other child in the setting deserves.
- ◆ Make time to share good news and talk about positive stories from children and families' lives such as family outings, family celebrations and acts of kindness.
- ◆ Gather books that reflect aspects of children's life experiences that offer hope. Provide somewhere soft and quiet for the children to look through the books on their own or to sit comfortably with an adult to read.
- ◆ Document children's experiences in the setting such as photos of them at play, records of their interests and learning stories, and reflect on them often with children and their parents. These will provide concrete evidence of how well children are adapting.
- ◆ Engage in collective community projects that foster hope for the future such as fundraising activities, neighbourhood clean-ups etc.

A Note About Your Own Wellbeing



While often enjoyable and rewarding, your role as an early years educator can also be emotionally demanding as you strive to ensure that each child is cared for and supported so they can reach their full potential. Working with children and families who have experienced trauma will bring additional complexities that may leave you feeling overwhelmed and susceptible to the effects of stress and trauma.

It is important to take time to reflect on your own wellbeing so you can recognise if you are feeling stressed. Plan to improve your wellbeing by creating lasting strategies to prevent burnout and stress and finding ways to resource and replenish yourself. Incorporate ongoing self-care practices into your life that you find regulating or fulfilling, whether this is meeting up with friends, getting enough sleep or spending time in nature. Prioritise professional self-care practices in the workplace such as accessing support and supervision from your manager, connecting regularly with your colleagues and setting professional boundaries.



Remember...

- ◆ You can support children to feel **safe** by letting them know you will care for them and keep them safe, following a predictable routine, keeping changes to a minimum, and reviewing the physical environment of the setting.
- ◆ You can support children to feel **calm** through co-regulation, and by encouraging children to spend time outdoors, practising mindful activities together and by providing calm and cosy spaces.
- ◆ You can support children to feel **connected** by adopting a key person approach, developing positive relationships with families, and supporting peer relationships.
- ◆ You can support children to feel **competent** by offering them choices and a sense of control, providing for play, and ensuring caregivers know that you welcome their input.
- ◆ You can support children to feel **hopeful** by adopting a strength-based approach, sharing positive stories, and reflecting regularly on how well children are adapting.

Useful resources

[First 5 Ukraine Supports](#)

[Mindfulness in Early Learning and Care](#)

[The Key Person Approach](#)

[Working in Partnership with Parents](#)

[Using Visual to Support Communication](#)



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