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INFORMATION

Welcoming and supporting refugee children: Information for schools

Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP)

INTRODUCTION

The first task for a school planning to receive refugee children will be to develop a culture and context that will enhance the refugees' resilience by helping them feel safe, and start to develop a sense of belonging in the school and wider community, this is an essential prerequisite to formal learning. Schools and the adults working in them all play a key role in providing a safe and stable environment for refugee children in which they can develop, flourish and learn. Research has shown that, alongside other factors, education and learning are key in developing security and consistency for refugee children and their families (UNHCR, 2019). A well-planned and quick exposure to school-based support and an effective assessment of their learning needs, in line with their language competence, preferably in their home language, are central factors in helping children to integrate into their new communities. In addition, the experience of welcoming refugees is beneficial for the whole school community, in that it can be an opportunity to challenge both racial and other stereotypes and for peers to develop valuable skills, which include kindness, respect and empathy.

In recent years the UK has experienced increasing numbers of refugees and people seeking asylum. More recently, a number of families and children have been arriving from Afghanistan as part of a resettlement programme following the deterioration of the political situation and civil unrest in their country. Many local authorities and schools will welcome children and their families into their school communities over the next few weeks and months. Schools will be responding at short notice, and will be drawing on their extensive knowledge and skills to meet the needs of new arrivals.

INFORMATION

There are many resources and guidance documents available to support refugee children, including these from the BPS. This brief document aims to support the pre-planning, welcoming and settling of children into school, by summarising some key points to ensure that refugee children, arriving in the current context, can start to settle into their new communities, feel safe and emotionally contained, in order to start to learn and make progress in school.

PRE-PLANNING

Local Authorities across the country have developed a range of models to respond to the arrival of Afghan children and their families. Schools should engage with Local Authority working groups to see what support and response has been put in place to meet the needs of refugee children and their families.

Schools can start to prepare for new arrivals by:

- Pre-planning for the arrival of refugee children, using local, national and international guidance, referenced above to anticipate needs.
- Mapping the available provision and resources already in school to support refugee children and their families, including identifying a key worker and buddy system.
- Checking the availability of Local Authority and community resources in order to have a coordinated approach to meet the range of needs that the children and their families may present with.
- Being aware of good practice in more experienced schools and creating a forum for ongoing sharing of good practice.
- Developing awareness that refugees are a heterogeneous group and will have varying experiences and backgrounds. However, a significant number of refugees have fled countries ravaged by war and human rights abuses.
- Being aware that refugee children cope in varying ways. They may not start to process their experiences until they arrive, or become settled in the UK. Arrival in the UK may be the start of difficulties for some children, rather than the end, as they navigate a new culture and community. For many refugee children and their families, the adjustment period after relocation to a new country will be very challenging, especially if it is surrounded by continued uncertainty.
- Understanding that whilst refugee children might have developed strategies to cope prior to their arrival in the UK, factors such as poverty, potential prejudice, and hostility within their new environment may impact the settling process. Therefore, it is important to follow school procedures to engage psychological support, working alongside educational psychologists, health services, and other agencies. This will ensure that schools as organisations can plan with their psychologist to ensure that they are equipped with adequate support and resources to meet the emotional well-being and mental health needs of the children and young people that are arriving and that they have specialist psychological support to offer to children and families if necessary.
- Considering the delivery of services, and the cultural needs of the group and the implications of stigmatisation in relation to families' access to external agencies.
- Children may disclose information to trusted adults in school therefore it will be important to ensure that safe spaces and support resources are available for staff.

- Accessing local interpreters, independently or through the Local Authority offer, and ensuring they follow recommended BPS practice and guidance.
- Linking with local schools to share teaching staff who speak Afghan languages, including Pashto and Farsi.
- Identifying and deploying any additional staff within school that can be used to provide support for newly arrived children, with a clear timetable of support.
- Preparing the entire school community, including staff, children, and parents for new arrivals, establishing from the outset that you are a setting that welcomes refugee children and their families. This can include inviting parents to contribute to any local initiatives to collect resources for newly arrived children and their families. If necessary, schools may wish to hold a parents' meeting to discuss the school's policy of inclusion and explore any parental concerns.

WELCOMING AND SETTLING CHILDREN INTO SCHOOL

Settling children into their classes and facilitating a sense of belonging is something that schools do well. This is particularly important for refugee children, in order to start to feel and experience a sense of security. The way in which refugee children are received by their peers on arrival is equally important. Before refugee children arrive, it may be helpful to have a whole class/school assembly focusing on the experiences of change, moving home, being frightened and loss to generate a feeling of support and understanding for the newly arriving children. It will be important to note that this may be triggering for some other children in the school community, and they should be identified beforehand in order to offer support and debriefing if necessary.

Schools can use their knowledge of child development to welcome children and families into their communities. This can be supported further by taking a child centred approach, including:

- Being aware that adults in school have a key part to play in supporting refugee children on their arrival. As part of this support, it will be essential for key adults to develop positive relationships with refugee children.
- Helping students feel heard and valued is important, but this needs to be balanced with the adults' capabilities and needs. It is important that schools have a clear and consistent support system in place for staff, which may include support from external agencies.
- Teaching staff can also support the way in which refugee children are perceived by peers, including reducing the likelihood of prejudice by challenging stereotypes and considering the views and attitudes of the wider staff community, teaching community values, and developing empathy.
- Promote parental engagement in children's education through better provision of interpreters and induction and information sharing sessions to help explain key elements of the school and UK education system.
- Building strong relationships and effective communication with parents is essential to building a stable and nurturing environment both in school and at home.
- Developing newly arrived children's self-esteem, and confidence to take risks and engage with new learning, by ensuring that all adults and teaching staff focus on the children's strengths and the existing skills they bring. They can also celebrate children by highlighting the contributions that newly arrived children make to the school community.
- Identifying buddy groups to support refugee children when they arrive in their new schools. Such groups can be key in settling children and supporting them to navigate their way around the classroom and playground. Buddies should volunteer to participate rather than being 'put forward'. However, buddy systems need to have clear demarcation of roles and expectations

and require consistent monitoring by staff. Groups of buddies may be better than individual buddy support systems by giving a sense of collective and shared responsibility.

- Understanding the potential impact of refugee children's experiences, including potential traumas, bereavement, loss, and separation. Many children may have left family behind, and witnessed or been the victim of terrifying and traumatic events. But, this is not necessarily the case for all refugee children.
- Trauma-informed approaches highlight the importance of supporting children and young people to develop trust; and for the child/young person to be living and being educated in an environment where adults provide repeated experiences of attuned, sensitive, and safe interactions.
- Adapting the curriculum i.e. considering how you sensitively include references to family, relationships, death etc in teaching materials, whilst mindful of the experiences that children may have had before arriving in the UK and in school.
- Using planning time with an educational psychologist to review and develop interventions and strategies, and to create support systems at individual, group and whole school levels through extending the school's well-being policies and provision.

APPROACHES TO LEARNING

The primary needs for refugee children arriving in a new school will be to feel safe and belong, before they can start to engage with formal learning. Schools can help by ensuring that time spent in school builds on children's existing strengths and skills. A flexible curriculum with time for extracurricular activities could facilitate refugee children and young people's sense of competence and belonging.

It is important to bear in mind that English as an Additional Language is not a special educational need, although some children and young people may experience both needs. The Bell Foundation provide excellent frameworks and resources for support children with English as an additional language. Play is an important medium that can facilitate access to the curriculum, whilst also developing skills including language, cognition, problem solving for children and young people of all ages. It can also provide an authentic context in which to build friendships. Schools can use circle time and other activities that encourage interaction and collaboration for example, using non-verbal communication at the early stages of English acquisition. They can also encourage activities that focus on listening and speaking skills and support English language acquisition, such as role play.

For younger children use:

- concrete resources such as counters, puppets, picture books, and physical activities such as labelling, sorting, matching;
- creative activities, such as drawing/colouring or making things;
- games to develop peer interactions and
- music and rhyme to develop cognition and learning concepts.

For older children:

- ICT, pictures, audio books, and direct teaching of phonics skills to develop literacy skills;
- visual tools such as photographs, story boards, maps, and flow charts and
- ICT and games to develop skills including peer interactions.

CONCLUSION

Many schools will have had previous experience of supporting refugee children, and it is important to remember that before anything else that new arrivals are children, navigating the same developmental trajectories of their peers. The primary goals for schools in meeting the needs of refugee children will be the same as for all children. These goals include making refugee children feel welcome, promoting the development of friendships and emotional connections, providing support, and ascertaining suitable learning and language interventions. However, it is important to hold in mind that refugee children will be navigating childhood and adolescence, with the added pressures of accommodating a new culture, language, loss, and potential trauma.

It is possible that children joining your school may have experienced and been witness to traumatic events, including arriving unaccompanied and or leaving some family members behind. The transition to a new country and culture needs to be carefully managed. It is also worth noting, that whilst refugee children will have experienced loss, not all children will have experienced traumatic events. Therefore, it is vital that we understand that there are both 'typical' and 'atypical' responses to these challenging circumstances. It is important not to misinterpret the distress that children and families may present with, and by engaging with other agencies it is possible to develop more refined understandings of children's behaviour and to develop appropriate supportive interventions.

It is also important to keep in mind that refugee children and young people can and will make new positive developments following on from experiences of adversity, which schools and the local community can play a significant role in promoting. Schools and communities can promote hope and resilience.

Schools will be able to use their expertise and knowledge to decide how best to use the information in this document to meet the needs of refugee children in their school communities.

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