

**TIP SHEET**

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**SUPPORTING CHILDREN,  
YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES**

**DURING AN  
INTERNATIONAL  
CRISIS**



**Foundation  
House**

The Victorian Foundation  
for Survivors of Torture Inc.

## WHAT SCHOOLS AND SERVICES CAN DO:

# SUPPORTING CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES DURING AN INTERNATIONAL CRISIS

Families living in Australia from refugee backgrounds can experience ongoing trauma when instability and conflict arises or escalates in their country of origin. Communities can experience heightened anxiety and fear about the safety of loved ones who remain in circumstances of danger or be reminded about trauma that they have faced in the past. By prioritising wellbeing and connection, leaders, educators and support staff can provide assistance at these difficult times.

## 1. **Regular communication with families can help strengthen a sense of connection and belonging, while also reducing fear and anxiety**

Schools and services can support students and families during these periods by strengthening connections, listening, and helping link families with additional supports and services.

It may be difficult to make contact with families throughout a crisis, as they will be experiencing competing priorities in their lives. Keep consistently trying to reach them (via phone calls, emails, texts and/or home visits) and remember that, in general, families will be happy to receive regular positive contact from the school or service. Do not underestimate how significant it is to children/ young people and families to know that someone is reaching out to them.

### **What you can do:**

- ⇒ Reach out to families to express solidarity, care and offer supports. Ask young people and families how they would like to be supported and be guided by their preference.
- ⇒ Make use of interpreting and translation services which are free for government schools and many early years services via LanguageLoop. Ensure that the specific language spoken by the family is requested.

- ⇒ Let parents/carers and young people know that you are 'open' to contact from them and how they can contact your school or service. We suggest encouraging families to contact you via text message and arrange to call you will call the family with an interpreter at an agreed time.
- ⇒ If possible, initially reach out to families via text message before calling. Some parents/carers may not answer their phone if they receive a call from an 'unknown' number. You could send a text in advance. E.g., "Your child's teacher will call you at 3pm, please answer the unknown number."
- ⇒ Make it clear that you are calling about the wellbeing of the child/young person. Sometimes parents/carers can get worried about receiving calls from the school or service.
- ⇒ Consider the impacts of financial hardship - the strain on families is exacerbated if they are supporting relatives overseas. This is important to consider in your planning.
- ⇒ Make families aware of community supports available such as
  - [Lifeline](https://www.lifeline.org.au) 13 11 14
  - [Maternal and Child Health Line](https://www.mchline.org.au) 13 22 29
  - [Parentline](https://www.parentline.org.au) 13 22 89
  - [Kids Helpline](https://www.kidshelpline.com.au) 1800 55 1800
  - Local material aid agencies and locations.



Children and young people from refugee backgrounds, including those born in Australia may experience trauma reactions as news coverage, social media and communication with those still in danger recalls their own family's history of trauma and raises concern for the safety of friends and family. These trauma reactions may impact children and young peoples' ability to focus and engage in learning. You can [download our resource](#) to support you in responding.

**Trauma reactions may show as behaviour changes, for example:**

- ⇒ In young children: regressing to behaviours of an earlier developmental age, clinginess, separation anxiety, appetite disturbance, nightmares, or becoming withdrawn.
- ⇒ In young people: social withdrawal, sleep difficulties, irritability, anger, lack of motivation, risk-taking behaviour, anxiety, and feeling alone or sad.

**Trauma reactions in children and young people from refugee backgrounds can be exacerbated by:**

- ⇒ Feelings of intense anxiety, grief and fear related to the family's prior experiences of danger and for those who are now in danger.
- ⇒ Memories of living with conflict, violence, persecution and of fleeing such situations.
- ⇒ Being exposed to lots of media and news about the crisis, including the potential of videos and updates from distressed family members on-the-ground.
- ⇒ Anger and disappointment about the response by the international community or the potentially limited media attention to the crisis.
- ⇒ Other incidents at schools or services that elicit negative emotions, particularly feelings of injustice, racism or discrimination.



## 2. Enhancing feelings of safety and control is crucial to addressing anxiety, fear and grief for children and young people

Anxiety and grief are sometimes easily observed. You may notice individuals becoming irritable and unable to tolerate frustration. Some may withdraw and disengage from learning or may become visibly upset.

### What you can do:

- ⇒ Wherever possible, provide a predictable routine and explain changes to the routine.
- ⇒ Work with children and young people to set achievable expectations about tasks and be flexible where possible with timelines for completing work.
- ⇒ Arrange times to catch up with individual children and young people and ask about their wellbeing.
- ⇒ S sensitively ask open questions about how they are feeling and their current experiences. Sometimes this may require scaffolding or giving examples children and young people can identify with. E.g., “Some children/people are feeling scared/overwhelmed/sad/angry. I care about you. How do you feel?”
- ⇒ Allow children and young people to control their level of disclosure if they choose to share their feelings with you. Provide a confidential and appropriate space. Click [here](#) for a comprehensive guide to managing trauma disclosures.
- ⇒ Provide guidance for staff in responding to or initiating conversations. This may include acknowledging the crisis, possible behaviour changes among children/young people, practises to increase confidence in responding to children/young people’s comments or content which is insensitive or discriminatory.
- ⇒ Make children and young people aware of supports such as [Kids Helpline](#), [eheadspace](#) and [ReachOut](#).
- ⇒ Purposefully connect with and build the relationship between the school and young people who are involved in risk-taking behaviours or who are disengaging from school.
- ⇒ View changes in behaviour/engagement initially as possible reactions to trauma and use trauma-informed strategies.

If a child or young person experiences persistent trauma reactions, contact Foundation House Intake team and discuss whether a referral to Foundation House may be appropriate. Call (03) 9389 8900.

## 3. Staff from affected community groups also need support from leadership and colleagues as they work to support their community

### What you can do:

- ⇒ Nominate a member/s of the leadership team to proactively check-in with affected staff members and/or create a buddy system for check-ins and debriefing.
- ⇒ Offer support via the Employee Assist program (EAP) or school allied health team where appropriate.
- ⇒ If your school or service has a Multicultural Education Aide (MEA) or Bi-Cultural Educator, seek their feedback and include their voice in your approach to working with families.

## 4. Some additional strategies and ideas to support communities

### What you can do:

- ⇒ Publish a message of solidarity/support to your school or service community to acknowledge the crisis and offer support to affected families. E.g., Newsletter or text message.
- ⇒ Organise a fundraising or awareness raising activity for the affected groups represented in your community.
- ⇒ Host an observance or ceremony in consultation with the community, to acknowledge those affected by the crisis.
- ⇒ Connect with local community leaders and groups to build a mutual understanding between schools, services, families and community.
- ⇒ Involve staff, including administration and leadership, in professional learning around trauma-informed practice.
- ⇒ Keep aware of global events which impact the community, and share updates with staff as appropriate. Consider the relevancy of media sources for information.
- ⇒ Organise food bank donations to be distributed to families in need.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES  
SEE FOUNDATION HOUSE WEBSITES:

**SCHOOLS IN FOR REFUGEES**

**EARLY YEARS**



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