As Canada opens its doors to those fleeing war-torn countries, and particularly those entering from Syria in large numbers in coming months, Ontario schools have a unique and important role in welcoming newcomer students and families as part of a whole community response. Fortunately, our province has much experience in supporting immigrant and refugee children at school, and we can draw on proven practices and resources. This Info-Sheet from School Mental Health ASSIST is designed to provide introductory information for educators in supporting the mental health and well-being of newcomer students. This will be a reminder for some, but may be new information for those working in schools that are less accustomed to welcoming immigrant and refugee families. This Info-Sheet is organized to support a planful, whole school approach that recognizes that (1) good settlement experiences are essential for good mental health, (2) newcomers from war-torn countries are typically resilient and possess many intrinsic strengths that they can draw upon as they transition to their new life in Canada, and (3) in spite of best efforts, some students will experience mental health difficulties, so we need to be ready to notice the signs and to ensure seamless pathways to specialized support in the school board and community. All school staff have a role to play in helping newcomer students to feel welcome and supported.

The school environment has an important impact on a student’s sense of belonging and overall mental health and well-being. For newcomers, it is especially important to create a culturally competent school community that expresses our commitment to equity and inclusion, and that demonstrates respect for the journey that has led them to our schools and our communities. Some school boards have newcomer welcome centres that provide information to families about school, but educators also have a role to play in orienting students.
The First Welcome

- Establish a school reception team (e.g., administrator, office administrative assistant, ESL/ELD teacher, interpreter, settlement worker).
- Ensure comfortable spaces for families and reception teams to meet and share information.
- Provide comfortable spaces for families to gather (to read announcements in first languages or meet fellow parents) to assist them with separation from their children. Safe places for prayer should also be considered.
- Post multiple signs in Arabic and other common languages that are visible across the school.

Orientation to School

- Offer specially trained student helpers, such as student ambassadors, to provide full school tours for the whole family, making introductions to students with similar interests.
- Outline safety procedures (e.g., what to do in a fire drill, managing inclement weather).
- Explain the ways that parents can contact the school in the event of absence, late arrival, or early leaving, and how they can access information on the school website (e.g., homework information, important dates).
- Show the procedures for borrowing books, using school equipment and technology, and lunchtime routines.
- Provide details to facilitate and encourage entry into sports programs, clubs, and other extracurricular activities.
- Think about possible triggers for trauma (e.g., announcements, bell ringing, fire drills, lockdowns, busy hallways) and prepare with the student for them. Explain what time the bells ring in the school and what they mean.

Communication

- Ask the family how they would like their child to be addressed; with consideration to correct pronunciation.
- Inquire about the child’s strengths, interests, and needs.
- Dedicate example time for an intake interview (in the first language of the student and their family), and for orientation information about school and basic routines.
- Ensure that the student and his/her family has access to competent adult interpreters who can assist with filling out forms, etc.
- Inquire about best methods to share information (paper, email, telephone, or through an interpreter).
- Make translated information about community resources widely available (e.g., libraries, community centers, adult ESL classes, places of worship, cultural organizations).
- Connect with families regularly to reassure them about their child’s transition to school.
- Share factual information with the class to help them to understand newcomer experiences and how best to welcome and communicate with the new students. Information about the experiences of Syrian refugee families can be found here.

Good Settlement Leads to Good Mental Health!

A culturally competent school community is inclusive and respects and celebrates differences. It is not an endpoint but a continuous process of inquiry and learning about a student and family’s culture, traditions, strengths and needs. With greater understanding and self-awareness, school communities can respond more effectively to the needs of new families.
CREATING WELCOMING CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS:

Creating inclusive and calm classroom environments can go a long way to preventing adjustment difficulties that can lead to problems in mental health and well-being. Focus on Student Strengths: Many refugee students bring unique skills, strengths and knowledge into the classroom. Build on those strengths of resilience, and consider having them share their knowledge about their country, traditions and culture. Educators are encouraged to support maintaining of students home culture and language while also balancing the importance of developing new skills and language.

WELCOME: SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS

Welcoming all students every day in a warm, safe and caring environment helps to build their sense of belonging within the classroom, which contributes to overall mental health and well-being.

• Greet each student individually by name daily with a smile.
• Encourage students to greet each other in different languages, helping them to take risks together!
• Laugh. Have fun. Start each day with a brief informal conversation with students.
• Have predictable visual routines in the classroom. Announce changes in advance.
• Make sure students know and understand the roles of all of the key school team members including the principal, vice-principal(s), resource teacher(s), teaching assistant(s), and guidance counselor(s).
• Ensure the classroom environment reflects linguistic and cultural diversity of students.

TEACH: CURRICULUM, TEACHING AND LEARNING

For all students, it is important to teach/reinforce the skills, attitudes, knowledge and habits that support mental health and well-being. This is especially true when introducing newcomers to the classroom.

• Explicitly teach and reinforce social-emotional skills as part of regular instruction, and as situations arise (e.g., problem-solving, conflict resolution, decision-making, social relationship skills).
• Support students, in developmentally appropriate ways, in identifying their emotions.
• Support students in their efforts to be mindful of each other’s needs.
• Practice everyday moments of gratitude, self-compassion and compassion for others.
• Build relaxation breaks into each day, particularly during transitions.
• Stay attuned to the nonverbal and verbal cues of students’ well-being and offer options for students who appear to need a break from activities or who may need assistance in self-regulation.
• Be aware of discussions around global events and how these may affect students in the class.

Resilience

“In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways.” - Ungar 2011
ENGAGE: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Welcoming newcomers to the school is a shared responsibility. Including students in these efforts can be enriching for all. They can learn how to be culturally competent and to support their newcomer peers.

- Provide opportunity for all students to learn and share information about their own unique cultural identity.
- Consider pairing each newcomer student with a peer helper, or older student, that can help them adjust to routines during class periods as well as during recess.
- Take time to get to know newcomer students and their unique stories and strengths. Engage them in classroom life by drawing on their strengths and interests.

LEAD: SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP

Educators lead by example, by modeling positive relationship-building, self-care, kindness, and resiliency. Students will learn how to interact in respectful ways with newcomer students by observing their teachers.

- Model respectful communication with newcomer students.
- Take a learning stance when interacting with newcomer students and encourage your students to do the same. Avoid making assumptions. When in doubt, ask!
- Respect and be aware of cultural differences (e.g., refraining from eye contact may be a sign of respect for people in positions of authority).
- Notice and support student leadership and kindness vis a vis newcomer classmates.

PARTNER: HOME, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Partnering with parents, families, school settlement workers and community allies creates opportunities for shared dialogue about culture, language, traditions and journeys.

- Become familiar with the settlement services available in your school, board, and community.
- Become familiar with the mental health services available in your school, board, and community.
- Know how to support students and families to access services in the school, board, and community.
- Invite newcomer families to help with classroom activities.
- Invite newcomer students and families to share information with the class about their traditions.
NOTICING SIGNS OF ADJUSTMENT DIFFICULTY

For some newcomer children and youth, the stress and trauma that they have experienced can interfere with daily routines and activities, and can result in emotional struggles. Responses to stress and trauma can be complex and may vary depending on the child's age, the duration and intensity of the traumatic events, the child's personality, and the child's experiences in a new country. Most commonly, those struggling after a traumatic event will show hyperarousal (hypervigilance to potential threats, easily startled, fight/flight/freeze responses), or dissociation (disengaged, numb, inattentive). A list of signs of potential difficulty is provided below. Although most children are resilient and do not develop patterns of emotional distress, some are more vulnerable and will require additional support. Educators are in a good position to notice when a student is struggling, and to provide caring support in the classroom. Knowing the signs of adjustment problems can also help with early identification and prevention of more significant mental health disorders.

Signs that a student may be struggling with adjustment or the impact of trauma:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Younger Students</th>
<th>Older Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Difficulty with bowel/bladder control</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Headaches, abdominal pain, nausea</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trouble with eating and/or sleeping</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• More vulnerable to illnesses</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May appear lethargic</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reluctant to participate in play or physical activity</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Substance use and abuse</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Younger Students</th>
<th>Older Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Becomes very anxious when separated from family</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Aggressive towards others, temper tantrums</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Re-experiencing or frequent discussion of trauma</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Emotional numbness or distancing</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Exaggerated startle response</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May appear angry or irritable</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May seem sad or depressed</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May become withdrawn</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May become withdrawn</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased absenteeism</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Defies authority, reckless behavior</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Younger Students</th>
<th>Older Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Plays repetitively with same toy for a long periods of time</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May block out new language, appearing not to listen</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Weak concentration, distractibility</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Easily frustrated, gives up if a task is too hard</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May not move around room and engage with classmates</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May seem disengaged from participation in class</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Difficulty with learning</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If any of these signs of difficulty appear to be severe, prolonged, significantly interfere with day to day functioning, or if the child’s parents are expressing concerns, then referral to professional mental health support within the school board and/or community is recommended.
STRATEGIES TO HELP NEWCOMER STUDENTS WHO ARE STRUGGLING AT SCHOOL:

Educators are not mental health professionals and should not be expected to provide assessment or counseling support to newcomer students who are exhibiting signs of adjustment difficulty. The role of the educator is to provide a safe and calm classroom environment, with differentiated support for those who may need more care and attention than other students. If an educator has a concern about a student’s mental health and well-being, they should use the school and board processes and pathways to access the consultation of a school mental health professional. Note that every school board in Ontario has a Mental Health Leader, and many have other front-line school mental health professionals and settlement workers who can help.

SUPPORT: PROVIDE ACCOMMODATIONS AND SUPPORT IN THE CLASSROOM

Students who are struggling with adjustment may need more care and support in the classroom for a period of time. Simple accommodations can be put in place to help them to meet with success.

- Foster a calm and predictable classroom environment.
- Provide cues to signal transitions, and warnings about changes to routines.
- Maintain a high level of physical presence, support, and supervision.
- Use a soothing tone in your interactions with the student.
- Create connections with the student and provide extra support when anxious feelings arise, to help them through difficult situations (without inadvertently facilitating avoidance of challenges).
- Set high academic expectations, but understand that newcomers may have gaps in education that will require skill-building, practice, and extra time for completion.
- Allow the student to leave the classroom to go to a quiet supervised space if feeling overwhelmed.

PREVENT: REDUCE RISK FACTORS WITH PREVENTATIVE STRATEGIES

An ounce of prevention can go a long way! There are ways that educators can help to reduce the risks associated with difficulties in adjustment and trauma.

- Language learning can be challenging. Attend to, and reinforce attempts to communicate.
- Listen. Normalize feelings of sadness, anger and worry. Remind students that they are safe.
- Give the student choices. A sense of control will help them feel safe and empower them to feel confident in their work and activities.
- Remain calm and avoid power struggles with the student. Set limits, and help them to comply with requests, instead of issuing warnings/ consequences if they do not (e.g., I see you need help with…).
- When consequences are needed, use restorative, rather than punitive, practices to repair relationships or property.
- Engage and maintain contact with the student’s family. Be sensitive to family stressors and their impact on the child’s attendance and learning.
- Monitor attendance, particularly for intermediate and senior students. Missing school may signal lack of engagement and difficulty adjusting to the new environment.
- Enlist the support of school-based professional staff (e.g. social work, psychology) to help identify vulnerable students, discuss additional strategies and ensure access to services.
EQUIP: BUILD PROTECTIVE FACTORS WITH PREVENTATIVE STRATEGIES

Just as some students need additional scaffolding and practice to learn literacy or numeracy skills, some require extra support in order to build social-emotional skills, attitudes, knowledge, and habits. Build on protective factors and strengths to help students to face challenges.

- All students benefit from learning social-emotional skills as part of regular instruction, and as situations arise. Those who are more vulnerable need a “higher dose” of instruction in these areas, and reminders about how and when to apply these skills.
- Provide tools for communicating emotion, like using labelled pictures of children experiencing different emotions.
- Offer ways to manage emotions and behavior in the classroom (e.g., quiet spaces, mindful/contemplative activities, relaxation techniques).
- Model and help students with steps for problem-solving, decision-making, and conflict resolution.
- Ensure that students and families understand how to get extra professional help with adjustment if the need arises (e.g., guidance counsellor, multi-disciplinary team, family resource centres, community agencies, etc.).
- Maintain a list of community resources that specialize in working with newcomer families and can help children adjust to school. Such resources may include:
  - Refugee HealthLine - This program provides transition care for refugees in a number of areas including mental health. The contact number is: 1-866-286-4770.
  - Mental health related topics for parents (available in Arabic and other languages) can be found here.

This Info-Sheet was prepared in consultation with members of the newly formed School Mental Health Newcomer Resource Group, and the School Mental Health Newcomer Advisory Network.

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Christine Preece (Mental Health Leader, St. Clair Catholic District School Board)
Marie-Josee Gendron (Mental Health Leader, Conseil scolaire de district catholique Centre-Sud)
Patricia Marra-Stapleton (Mental Health Leader, Toronto Catholic District School Board)
Sarah Lennox (Graphic Design, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board)
Purnima Sundar (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health)
Michael Ungar (Resilience Research Centre, Dalhousie University)
School Mental Health ASSIST is an implementation support team working alongside the Ministry of Education to support Ontario’s school boards in their efforts to promote student mental health and well-being. For more information, visit our website: www.smh-assist.ca