SUPPORTING THE EMOTIONAL WELLBEING OF REFUGEE CHILDREN

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AIM OF TALK

To relate evidence from contemporary research and practice on the mental health of youth to the current refugee crisis
MENTAL HEALTH?

“…a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of infirmity.” (WHO)

“Mental health is emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to enjoy life and survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a positive sense of well-being and an underlying belief in our own and others’ worth.” (Mental Health Foundation)
MH AS A SPECTRUM

- Without immediate action, the outcome for refugee children’s MH is diminished, including heightened anxiety, depression, PTSD ....;

- Huge role of pastoral care systems in schools in alleviating the distress of children displaced by war.
Preventative services to meet basic safety, security and economic needs such as housing, food and healthcare;

Social support and community engagement, with peers and school staff;

Learning the host country’s language;

Non-specialist interventions in the classroom;

Specialist care when needed, such as counselling/psychotherapy.
Social support and community

- Crucial role of a sense of belongingness: whole school will play a part in this process;
- Essential for school to engage in dialogue with support networks (such as family, community elders and spiritual leaders, community groups/charities, strengths-based support groups);
- Shift focus away from victimhood, symptom-reduction and pathology to seeing refugees as survivors of adversity with potential for resilience and strength.
Children displaced by war have been traumatized by separation and loss, fear and anxiety;

Staff need training in recognizing the signs of distress and showing empathy;

Schools need to liaise with psychological and social services and community resources;

Training programmes, e.g. Including Children Affected by Migration ICAM www.icamproject.eu/
“...we participate in Save the Children’s project to make schools better and safer.”

“...we decide how we can help each other and how we can help someone with problems.”

Save the Children www.savethechildren.org.uk
A SAFE SCHOOL IS IMPORTANT TO US BECAUSE...

“...it is a second home, a place to feel at ease.”

“...a school should be a place where children feel safe and not suffer, neither physically nor mentally.”

Save the Children www.savethechildren.org.uk
Young people from 9 countries recommended the following “active ingredients”

- Peer support;
- Fostering good family relationships;
- Enhancing purpose in life;
- Helping children to feel safe/protected from abuse

(Wellcome Foundation, 2021)
ACTIVE INGREDIENTS

- Agency, taking responsibility;
- Religious, spiritual, political belief;
- Strengthening cultural identity.
Interventions to help refugee children in the classroom

- Creative approaches are universal – music, play, dance, story-telling, group narratives, movement, film/video, poetry, drama, song;
- Aid the symbolic expression of feelings and “containment” for narratives of traumatic experiences;
- Reinforce identity; enhance a sense of belonging with own-culture communities;
- Help children to find meaning in their migration;
- Raise awareness of traumatic situations and lived experiences.
Anti-bullying toolkit

- Children at the heart of programmes to challenge bullying, racism and social exclusion;
- How to be an upstander against bullying

Diana Foundation Toolkit

www.diana-award.org.uk
Peer supporters' cyberbullying guide
EVERYDAY MAGIC

- Setting routines;
- Sharing memories together;
- Having fun together;
- Using social media creatively;
What was most helpful?

- Speaking with friends (65%)
- Exercise such as walking or running (55%)
- Listening to music (54%)
- Having a routine (45%)
CONCLUSION

- Support refugee families;
- Listen to the children; be aware of their needs, such as sports, the arts, being in nature, communicating with others, altruistic activities;
- Acknowledge the crucial role of schools in supporting children socially and emotionally.
REACHING OUT
Take the opportunity to affirm children’s deep human need for safety, connectedness, agency;
Collectively improve the systems within our society to enhance the emotional health and well-being of refugee children.
THANK YOU FOR LISTENING

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