Supporting Children and Young People in a time of War

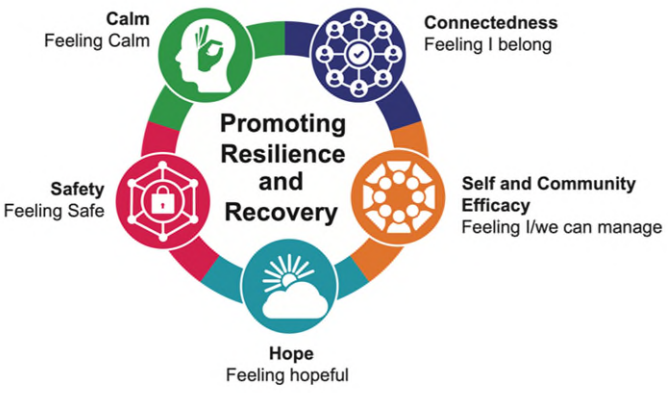
Advice for School Staff

Talk and images of countries at war can be very upsetting for children and adults. It can threaten their view of the world as a safe and predictable place. It can cause different reactions and emotions for some children and young people, being more affected than others. Vulnerable groups at the moment may include:

- Children and young people of Ukrainian and Russian heritage;
- Children and young people who are seeking protection in Ireland (asylum seekers and refugees);
- Those who have experienced separation and loss;
- Those with pre-existing risk factors;
- Those with additional needs.

When children and young people's sense of safety is threatened, a secure and trusted relationship with key adults will help them to process and manage how they are thinking and feeling. Adults can help support children and young people during this time by fostering resilience and promoting recovery using the five key principles (adapted from Hobfoll et al., 2007) that were outlined by NEPS over the last number of years in supporting all members of the school community during Covid-19. These are:

- Promoting a sense of safety;
- Promoting a sense of calm;
- Promoting a sense of belonging and connectedness;
- Promoting a sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy;
- Promoting a sense of hope.



Bearing these five principles in mind adults can support children and young people to navigate worrying and uncertain times in the following ways:

- **Model a sense of calm -** Children and young people look to the adults in their lives to guide them on how to cope with worrying and stressful events. If the adults in a child or young person's life are overly worried, their anxiety may rise. Equally, when adults are calm it helps to reduce children and young people's anxiety.
- **Tend to your own wellbeing needs –** Remember you are an important support to children and young people at this time. Be mindful of how your own wellbeing and how you are feeling and take steps to manage your own self-care. See supports available from the EAS service Spectrum Life here.
- **Maintain routines** – Supporting them to maintain everyday routines and engage in activities that they enjoy will help to reduce any stress or anxiety.
- **Give information in reassuring ways -** Children and young people will have different understandings of what is going on, without the facts, they often imagine situations far worse than reality. They need factual, age appropriate information about the war in Ukraine. Let their questions and their age guide as to how much information to provide.
    - Very **young children** need brief, simple information and reassurance that they are safe and that the people they care about are safe.
    - **Older children** may need help to separate reality from rumour and fantasy. Having the facts can help them feel a sense of control. They may also be concerned with their mortality, fairness and moral and/or ethical issues. Give them space and opportunity to discuss these in a supportive and safe way.

  Be aware of what you are saying if talking to other adults about the war in the company of children and young people.
- **Limit media exposure –** Limit what they see and hear on the news, images and reporting of war can be upsetting and frightening.
- **Foster a sense of control -** Encourage children and young people to think about small ways they might help: e.g. fundraising.
- **Be mindful of difference -** Adults can influence how children and young people view or react to others. Be compassionate in your actions and your talk and avoid prejudice or stereotyping of people based on their nationality.
- **Monitor vulnerable groups -** For the vulnerable groups listed above watch for signs of distress or anxiety e.g. clinginess or attention seeking behaviour.

For further advice on supporting children and young people, click on the links below:

- Wellbeing-Guidance-documents-for-parents-students-and-schools/
- Responding to Critical Incidents
- Children's Understanding and Reaction to Death According to Age (R6)
- Stages of Grief (R7)
- How to Cope When Something Terrible Happens (R8)
- Reactions to a Critical Incident (R9)
- Ways to help your Child through this difficult time (R12)
- Managing your thoughts and feelings
- Dealing with Anxiety
- Coping with Fear
- Managing Panic
- NEPS Resources