



NIP – Crisis Intervention Network School Psychologists (NIP-CINS)

A Dutch Model of Psychosocial Support for Refugee Children in School

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1 Background and context

Schools are presented with the challenge of integrating children who are refugees. This document outlines a model of psychosocial support which will help the school and the child refugee to integrate well*).

The backgrounds and needs represented in the population of child refugees arriving into mainstream schools in The Netherlands are diverse. The children may already have spent time in one or more reception centers, have accessed education and language lessons in an asylum seekers center/school/switch class, or may have received help in coping with their traumatic experiences. Recently arrived children may have witnessed violent, shocking and traumatizing events without having received any support. There will be a wide variation in the information available about the child refugee. Sometimes there may have been many transfers/moves with very little information available.

Child refugees in asylum seeker centers are often provided with health and trauma screening by the public health service. The new school attended by the child refugee may already have received basic information from the asylum seekers center or another reception center, if the child still resides there. Assisting authorities and/or parents or other family members may also provide information.

2 Psychosocial support for child refugees

An evidence informed model of support is set out in this document and an explanation of the principles underpinning the model is provided. This model of support can be used by a teacher, mentor or school psychologist with one child refugee or a group. It may be necessary to use an interpreter. The interpreter will benefit from familiarity with the model if possible.

The Dutch model for supporting child refugees is an adaptation of the Dutch model for Group Crisis Intervention (GCI) after a shocking event in a school (NIP-CINS, Koning en Van Halem, 2013). The GCI model is based on the principles of the NOVA-model (National Organization for Victim Assistance, United States), the model Basic PH (CSPC, Israel) and the Dutch multidisciplinary mental health guideline 'Guideline for early psychosocial interventions after disasters, terrorism and other shocking events', Impact 2007.

Both models can be used in different situations with children as well as adults. While developed for meetings with groups of students, teachers or parents, they can also be used when working with an individual. The models can be applied immediately or shortly after a traumatic event, but also in the following weeks, months or years, as would be the case with refugee children. They consist of a phased approach with some central principles.

3 Basic principles of the model of support

Whole school approach

A whole school approach to providing a safe school climate and positive culture will be essential to successful integration of a student. Positive attitude of all staff and students towards a newly arrived student is important.

Inform

Giving clarity through information sharing and removing uncertainty helps to recover a sense of control. Provide information about what happened (after a shocking event) and what is going to happen. Indicate that all relevant new information will be provided. In the case of refugees provide information about the school, the classroom, why particularly this class, etc.

Provide information about common reactions to traumatic events or severe stress, but only if the students (or others involved, such as parents) disclose that they have trauma-related symptoms. However be modest with the amount of information about traumatic symptoms.

Social support

Focus on ensuring that there is support for the person in the situation in which they are placed. In addition to providing security, psychosocial support (providing a listening ear, understanding and solace) is one of the key protective factors in building coping and resilience after a crisis or traumatic event. Initial exploration with the person will be required to ascertain whether support is sufficient or if additional support is needed.

Focus on coping styles

People respond differently to traumatic events and most people have enough resilience to overcome difficulties. There are several modes of coping (talking, exercise / movement, creative activities, faith and belief systems, understanding facts, pondering, etc.). In principle all these modes of responding are good, they help to give meaning to the events. Talking through these different modes of coping may help the person to be more aware of what helps them most and they may become conscious of using effective strategies to cope.

4 Applying the model

The following is an outline of the application of the model with a student who is integrating into a mainstream school.

4.1 Preparation for integrating the student into school

Before starting the process of supporting the student by applying the model attention should be given to the following:

4.1.1 School climate and culture

All staff and students should understand the needs of refugee children and treat them in a respectful supportive way. The atmosphere in the school will be significant in the successful placement of the student. To promote wellbeing and positive mental health it is important that the climate in the school is warm and welcoming. This is something that is built up over time in a school.

4.1.2 Preparing of the reception class

Prior to the introduction to the class the teacher should tell the class that the new student has had a difficult experience and that they should respect needs to be private about this and not question the new student inappropriately. Explain that s/he will tell them as much as s/he is comfortable with at this time and that as time goes by and trust is learned s/he will probably be more open with them.

4.1.3 Information gathering - meeting parent/s

It is essential that the new school is as well informed as possible about how the student and family are doing before placement. The first step is for a representative of school management or SENCO to interview the parent/s (or other family members), if necessary use an interpreter. Information can be collected about the family's perception of the situation, living conditions in the country of origin, the flight history (if parents are willing and able to share), welfare of the children, current living conditions, activities to keep occupied and any concerns or uncertainties they may have.

4.1.4 Meeting the teacher/mentor

Before being introduced to their class the new student(s) will first be introduced to the teacher/ mentor in order to allow:

- Teacher/mentor and student to become acquainted
- Observation of behavior
- Teacher/mentor to be informed about experiences with school, needs, level of development and other relevant background information.

This information will inform how the student is introduced to the new class.

The purpose of the first conversation with the students is to prepare them for their new situation and to give psychosocial support by reassuring them and giving them information. Experience has shown that what concerns child refugees most, is their current living situation rather than their experience of previous traumatic events. When it is clear that the students are relaxed and reassured it may be appropriate to raise questions about their concerns and hopes for future achievements. It is important not to explore feelings too deeply or to force communication about previous experiences. Non-communication may be an appropriate self-protection mechanism and important for their current wellbeing and ability to function.

4.2 Model for interview with the student

There are five phases in the process of engaging with a student before introduction to school. In addition to providing information, attention is given to the **past, present and future**: what happened, personal experiences, how s/he copes and what s/he needs. The needs of the person concerned are central: safety, regaining control over own life experience, perspective, and senses of confidence in the future.

A teacher or mentor takes the student through the phases (allocate 20 to 30 minutes time). The manner in which this support model can be used for child refugees depends on their language skills. If the local language is not yet mastered use of an interpreter or family member may be appropriate.

1 Information giving

Introduce yourself at the first interview, welcome the student to school and say that you are sorry to hear that s/he has been having a difficult time. Show interest and build rapport by asking how s/he is doing right now and about favourite school subjects, interests, hobbies etc. Provide information about the new school, class, lessons, language lessons and support available. Give clear information, provide as much as structure as possible, then the feeling of safety and security will be strengthened.

Give the student an opportunity to ask questions. Give sufficient time to this phase until you are sure the student feels comfortable and reassured. Building trust with you will begin with this first meeting.

2 Exploration of refugee experience

In this phase the student will have an opportunity to tell what s/he has endured and what this meant: what happened, who was with them, their reactions, etc? By looking back on what happened, the student gets more control, insight and understanding of the situation. Reassuring the student is important by indicating that reactions are common and normal and, very likely will disappear in the future.

Give the student the opportunity to share experiences of the previous weeks/months:

- Where s/he was and what it was like?
- What s/he has done and any reactions experienced?
- Where appropriate, invite discussion of war/violence experiences and the journey to the new country
- If s/he thought about it afterwards, or had other reactions.

Reactions to trauma: When working with child refugees it is essential to have understanding of the usual reactions to experience of trauma, to be an active listener and to be able to take a non-judgmental position. If they share information about any reactions to their experiences make it clear that these are normal and that they should disappear in time (see 5).

3 Support received

Examine to what extent there was/is support available. To whom can s/he tell the story? What has s/he done? What helped most? (Talk about it, do activities together, sports, music/singing, playing, etc.) As a result, the student will become aware of what coping strategies work for him/her.

Explore how the student was supported:

- What help was received?
- Was s/he able to talk about difficult experiences?
- How did helpers react to his/her story?
- Has any other action helped to deal with the experiences if s/he has not talked about difficulties? Is there any one with whom s/he can talk now? If so would s/he like too?

4 Focus on the future

Helping the student to see a path ahead and what it would be like is important. What does the student do next? What expectations does s/he have of the school? What coping skills s/he can use, if s/he is finding it difficult? This promotes a strengthening of resilience and self-regulation.

Ask the student:

- How s/he sees the next days / weeks developing?
- What hopes does s/he have?
- What will it be like at school/home?
- Explore how s/he dealt with difficult situations in the past as a way of dealing with future difficulties
- Clarify concerns. Does s/he have concerns about family?
- What does s/he want to happen?
- What help does s/he need?
- What does s/he want to do her/himself?

5 Closure / follow up

After going through these four focus points summarize the conversation, provide reassurance that all reactions are normal following experience of an abnormal situation. Outline where help can be accessed. Make an appointment to have a follow-up conversation. Seek to increase self-reliance and confidence in the future.

Close the conversation with the student, ending with what s/he can expect in the near future as follows:

- Summarize what s/he wishes to share when joining the new class
- Share information about what is a common post-traumatic reaction if appropriate
- Explain how s/he can access help in future when needed
- Give information about a future meeting

4.3 Introduction to the new class

The teacher/ mentor will introduce the student to the new class using an interpreter if necessary and respecting the wishes of the student (allocate 10 to 15 minutes time).

In this group meeting the student will be briefly presented or if confident enough will introduce them self. The student will already have agreed what information to share with the class in the individual meeting. The other students can ask questions. If class members ask more questions than the student wishes to answer, the teacher steps in and supports the student by explaining that this topic is something s/he does not want to talk about at this time.

Child refugees have lost much in their lives and usually want to feel a sense of belonging, to feel safe and to regain control of their lives. That is why they often prefer not to talk much about what they've been through with the adults they meet or with other children. Their situation in the present is usually their central focus. With very young children the class is only told that the child had to flee from another country and where s/he comes from.

The best approach is to minimize for the student their sense of being exceptional in the class.

Initial Introduction

- The teacher provides name, country of origin, reason for fleeing (very short).
- The student with the teacher's help and depending on age and language proficiency will tell about where he now lives, hobbies, sports. The focus should be on sharing information about the ordinary things in a student's life.

Experiences of the student

- Only if the student wants: give information about the place where s/he once lived, whether s/he experienced war and what the journey to the Netherlands was like.
- Only if the student wants: what has helped her/him in that difficult period.

Closure / follow up

- Discuss with the class what they can do for their new classmate. Agree what help s/he would like. Who does what, identify possible buddies (minimum of two).
- Agree to meet up with the class again when new information will be shared.
- Give the new student, where possible, self the control about the agreements.

4.4 Follow up on placement

The school can play an important role in monitoring the placement of the student. It is recommended in the first weeks/months to observe and have regular one-to-one conversations with the student about needs. As soon as possible treat the student the same as the other students and give her/him appropriate responsibilities.

Keep in mind the principles and the different phases of the model in the following weeks. In the next weeks/months the five phase conversation can be repeated both individually and with groups according to the same structure or adapted to the situation at that time.

4.5 Parents / guardians of child refugees

It is important to have regular follow up contact with parents/guardians, especially in the beginning and until the student settles. The teacher/mentor can keep them informed about how their child is doing at school and get information about how things are going at home, worries the parents/guardians may have or changes in accommodation. Based on this information the teacher/mentor can adjust the psychosocial support in school. If there are problems at home, school can discuss with the parents/guardians how to deal with the behavior of their child or refer to the school psychologist, the student care coordinator, or a public health service. Discussion about how the parents themselves are doing is also useful. A stable and supportive home environment is one of the most important factors to prevent longterm trauma especially for young children.

5 Responses to stress and trauma

It will be important to monitor and observe if the student is experiencing trauma following his/her flight. When treatment is provided by public health service, they can probably (when the client/parents agree) share information with school. Shocking events such as war fleeing, violence, leaving family, friends and school, experiencing a tiring, long, dangerous journey in search of a safe haven, will often be traumatic for children. Months later they may still have stress responses. With most of the children these responses will disappear and the child's self-healing and resilience will be strengthened. The likelihood that children will overcome shocking events in a natural way (without professional assistance) is greater when their living situation is stable, if they are supported in a safe welcoming environment and listened to with understanding and care. Uncertainties should be reduced where possible and the self-sufficiency of the student should be stimulated. Overprotection is counterproductive. The family of the student has of course the main role, but family members can also be traumatized and unstable. School will be even more important for students coming from difficult home situations.

Child refugees can show, depending on their age and other factors, all kinds of stress responses resulting from the shocking events that they endured and the uncertainty of their situation. Symptoms such as:

- poor sleep, nightmares, bed wetting
- reliving events that they have experienced
- thinking about the places and situations where it happened (not wanting to talk about it)
- hypersensitivity, irritability
- anger (because it happened in their house/land)
- fear (especially fear of recurrence)
- concerns about absent family, boyfriends, etc.
- uncontrolled, enthusiastic behaviour
- guilt (I could have done something)
- closed, down and withdrawn behaviour
- revenge feelings
- feelings of being threatened
- aggressive and challenging behaviour

Seek professional help for very striking responses, such as disorientation eg severe confusion, no longer knowing where you live, unsure about past action etc.

6 Further reading (just in Dutch)

Draaiboek **Vluchtelingenkinderen bij ons op school**, KPC (2015).

Augeo - **online cursus Vluchtelingenkinderen** voor leraren, Pharos 2016.

Kinderen ondersteunen na trauma, Eva Alisic, Boom, 2012.

Lesgeven aan getraumatiseerde kinderen, Leony Coppens, Marthe Schneijderberg en Carina van Kregten, 2016

Crisismanagement (op school), Wil Koning en Odeth Bloemberg, hoofdstuk 6 in *Interventies in het onderwijs: werken aan goede verhoudingen*, red. Margot Taal en Caroline Poleij, Boom Lemma, 2011.

Let op, gecorrigeerde versie, zie de site van de uitgever.

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