

Understanding and Supporting Refugee Children and Young People

**A Practical Resource for Teachers, Parents and
Carers of Those Exposed to the Trauma of War**

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Foreword

This book is the **go-to resource** for those parents and professionals seeking to support children through the trauma of war and conflict. Not only does it provide the evidence base for effectively integrating refugee children into their new schools, but it also introduces the reader to a range of key tools and strategies to both understand and manage anxiety and trauma-related behaviours. Practical and user-friendly, it demystifies the process of talking about difficult topics, providing helpful advice on how to do this in a trauma-informed way, making use of effective tools from therapeutic approaches to help our children and ourselves remain regulated and able to engage in post-traumatic growth.

About the author

Dr Tina Rae has 40 years' experience working with children, adults, and families in clinical and educational contexts within local authorities and specialist services. She is currently working as a Consultant Educational and Child Psychologist in a range of SEMH and mainstream contexts and is a widely published author.

Recent publications include the following:

- **Rae, T. (2022) *The Bereavement Book: Activities to Support Children and Young People through grief and loss.***
Buckingham: Hinton House Publishers
- **Rae, T. & D'Amario, A. (2021) *A Recovery Toolbox of Wellbeing in the Early years for children aged 3-6.***
Buckingham: Hinton House Publishers
- **Rae, T. & D'Amario, A. (2021) *A Recovery Toolbox of Wellbeing for Primary Aged Children 7-11.***
Buckingham: Hinton House Publishers
- **Rae, T. & D'Amario, A. (2021) *A Recovery Toolbox of Wellbeing for Adolescents and Teenagers aged 12-16.***
Buckingham: Hinton House Publishers
- **Rae, T. (2021) *My Toolbox of Wellbeing Journal - creative, inspiring activities and strategies.***
Buckingham: Hinton House Publishers
- **Rae, T. (2020) *Supporting Children and Young People with Emotionally Based School Avoidance.***
Buckingham: Hinton House Publishers
- **Rae, T. Middleton, T. & Walshe, J. (2020) *Nurturing Peer Supervision: Supporting the Wellbeing of those who Nurture.***
Glasgow: Nurture UK
- **Rae, T. (2020) *It's OK not to be OK: A Guide to Wellbeing.***
London: QED Publishing
- **Rae, T. (2020) *A Toolbox of Wellbeing: Helpful strategies and activities for Children, Teens, their Carers and Teachers.***
Buckingham: Hinton House Publishers
- **Rae, T. Such, A. & Wood, J. (2020) *The Well Being Tool Kit for Mental health leads in schools, A comprehensive Training Resource to Support Emotional Wellbeing in Education and Social Care.***
Buckingham: Hinton House Publishers





Introduction

As I write this introduction, the war in Ukraine continues to affect us all on an ongoing basis. During my 40-year career to date, I have never been as inundated with requests for psychological support and help from both parents, professionals and children and young people regarding heightened levels of anxiety, trauma-related behaviours and symptoms and significant mental health needs. In a time when access to specialist therapeutic services remains problematic and resources incredibly limited, it is more important than ever that we can access evidence-based and practical tools to support us in managing our own wellbeing and that of the children and young people we nurture and love.

All of us who work in the education or psychology disciplines recognise the extent to which many children and young people are experiencing an erosion in their mental health and wellbeing. For some, this is clearly linked to the Covid pandemic and the uncertainty and anxiety it has brought to all our lives. The Institute of Fiscal Studies (*Banks & Xiaowei, 2020*) has reported an 8.7% decline in wellbeing, and NHS monitoring is currently observing spikes in self-harm and eating disorders which are occurring in children younger than previously identified. Recent research from Cardiff University (*Moore & Morgan, 2021*) has also indicated that the impact of the pandemic will leave a **'lifelong footprint'** on the mental health of this generation of children.

Psychological services, both private and public sector, are currently inundated with requests for advice and intervention. Alongside the ongoing trauma of the Covid pandemic and the increase in mental health difficulties in our children and young people as a direct result of lockdowns, reduced access to social contexts, missed educational opportunities and rites of passage, our young people are now also experiencing heightened levels of stress as they seek to navigate the reality of war. It is as if the collective trauma has been doubled within a very short space of time.

Added to this, we are now currently navigating the arrival and transition of thousands of refugee children and young people into our country and into our educational system.

It is therefore imperative that appropriate support is provided to those who exhibit the symptoms of anxiety and trauma and also to whole school communities in order to both build and maintain a Recovery curriculum and whole school systems to promote wellbeing. At the heart of this, of course, are the teachers and support staff who are tasked with such an objective within underfunded and under resourced-communities – despite recent DfE initiatives (2022).

From my perspective, as an educational and child psychologist, there is a great deal that we can now do in terms of ensuring we effectively support our children to navigate the stressful times and also to successfully integrate our refugee children into nurturing, trauma-informed classrooms and schools of sanctuary.

This is my rationale for producing this resource. I am hoping that it will provide parents, carers and professionals with practical, user-friendly advice and

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resources to support our children and young people in talking about, understanding, and processing war and conflict alongside effectively managing their anxiety and fears. I am also hoping that the resource will also clarify how best to support our refugee children and young people and their carers and school-based staff and professionals who are seeking to create safe havens and deliver practical interventions to promote post-traumatic growth.

In a time when many adults are feeling overwhelmed and have so many questions about how to support their children, there is clearly a need for accessible resources which do not compound a sense of helplessness but rather provides genuine hope they can and should be able to effectively navigate this situation, recognising and developing the skills they need to maintain self-regulation and can regulate with their children and young people. This has never been more important in my view.

'We know that unregulated and stressed adults cannot effectively support and help children and young people who are also unregulated and stressed. It is impossible.'

(Rae, 2020, p7)

The first social media war

It is important to note that a significant factor in the levels of stress that we are all experiencing in this time of trauma is the fact that this current war is unfolding in real time through a screen. We are consistently bombarded with images of destruction, people hiding in shelters and civilians saying their goodbyes to those that they love. There are so many disturbing and tragic events, and these are overwhelming and extremely difficult to process.

It is not only the fact that the war is being broadcast live on 24-hour TV, but it is also presented on social media via apps such as Instagram, Twitter, and tick-tock. Adults and many of our children and young people are viewing violent images on a daily basis and some of those videos which have been tagged **#UkraineWar** have been viewed over 600 million times in a matter of days. Clearly, such material can be triggering to all of us and have a significant psychological impact.

Of course, the Ukraine war is one of many recent global conflicts. Unrest in Syria, the war in Afghanistan and instability in Iraq for example, and the worldwide Covid 19 pandemic are only a few of the items on a long list of traumatic events that have impacted on mental health across the globe.





War and mental health

The World Health Organisation (WHO) (Srinivasa Murthy, & Lakshminarayana, (2006) has stated that in situations of armed conflict, approximately 10% of those who experience traumatic events will subsequently develop a serious mental health problem. A further 10% will also develop behaviour which prevents them from functioning effectively on a day-to-day basis. The most common effects are depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic problems such as insomnia.

They further identify three populations who will be susceptible to negative mental health outcomes:

- Civilians (including children) within the targeted homeland
- The soldiers on both sides of the conflict
- Those consuming the images, videos and audio of the war through social media apps television, radio, and the web

All three groups, including civilians may develop the typical psychological profile of trauma. They may also develop a deep suspicion, a sense of mistrust and



hopelessness regarding any conflict which is close to home or far away.

From a clinical perspective, when it comes to times of crisis, more people now turn to electronic media as sources of information. Many individuals use social media to cope with stress or as a distraction. Watching the events across Ukraine and the rest of the world unfold on a screen allows them to empathise with those who are affected and can educate, inform, and inspire people to help. But increased screen time and oversaturation of traumatic content can also come at a significant cost to mental health overall.

So, it is vital that we all recognise how we can and should turn off our screens or limit the time viewing content which is triggering and traumatic. We need to recognise how social media algorithms are purposely built to be addictive and seek actively to combat this by our own self-care routines and behaviours.

In my view, this is vital if we are to truly maintain our own wellbeing so that we are fit for purpose in terms of supporting our children and young people as they navigate war and conflict and engage in post-traumatic growth.

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I think that there are FOUR KEYS to doing this successfully:

1. DEVELOP AN UNDERSTANDING OF TRAUMA AND ANXIETY

It is important to remember and understand how chronic stress, and the effects of trauma and anxiety impact on our thinking. This can then help us to support children more effectively in terms of making the right kinds of adjustments to the learning context and in relating more therapeutically with individuals exhibiting such difficulties.

Children and young people may exhibit the following symptoms:

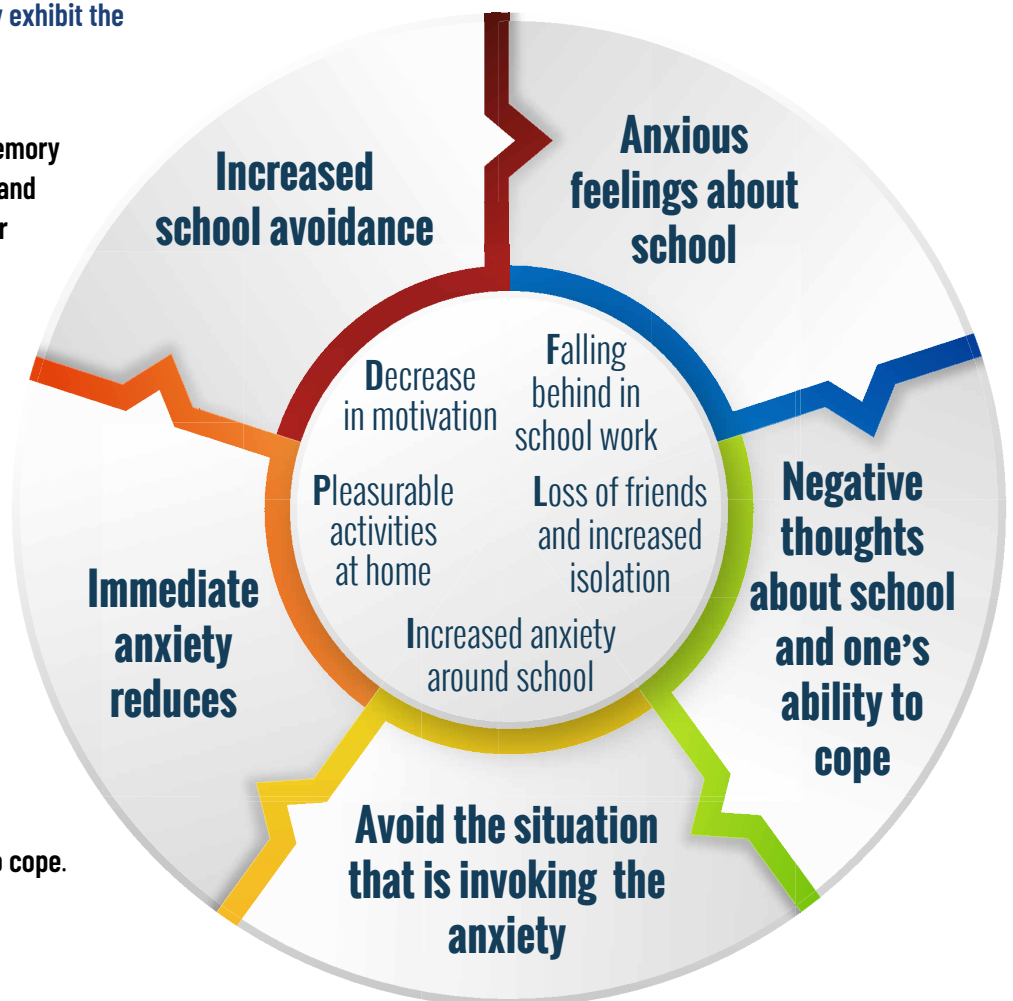
- Poor concentration
- less reliable working memory
- problems in organising and prioritising their work or activities

It is therefore vital that all involved in supporting them take care to allow additional time to process information and to support them with maintaining organisational skills with a range of tools including personalised checklists, visual timetables, and breaking tasks into smaller more manageable chunks.

Children can also become **hypervigilant and focus on only the negative outcomes, underestimating their ability to cope.**

This can lead to a loss of confidence and lowering of self-esteem overall. They may also engage in more black-and-white thinking where they think that everything will always be bad or always go wrong. Making such assumptions can lead to a **cycle of negative thinking, feeling, and behaving alongside distortion of their own perceptions.** Again, it is particularly important to understand these key factors and how to support the child or young person in gently challenging such negative patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

It is also important to understand that **anxiety very often exhibits itself as anger and embarrassment.** They are merely displaying the symptoms of their anxiety. It is therefore vital that the child or young person is supported on an emotional level and not punished for displaying such symptoms. This more nuanced and appropriate response can be also further supported through the development of trauma-informed classrooms and safe spaces.





2. DEVELOP AN UNDERSTANDING OF HOW TO CREATE TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOMS AND SAFE SPACES

The trauma-informed classroom ensures that all children can feel safe, nurtured, and included.

There are **six** key areas we can focus on right now:

1. **Belonging** - making sure the children feel welcomed, wanted and part of the group
2. **Predictability** - making sure that changes to routines are explained clearly and with empathy

3. **Organisation** - ensuring that the routines and activities are consistent and visual checklists are provided as necessary

4. **Regulation** - teaching an emotional literacy curriculum and ensuring a safe space or calm corner is available to children and young people and that they understand how to use this effectively in order to self-regulate

5. **Differentiation** - reduce processing demands in the classroom and provide clear structures or plans for each task

6. **Relationships** - keep connections healthy and empathic, modelling social skills and valuing and celebrating their strengths and achievements.



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3. DEVELOP AN UNDERSTANDING OF HOW TO USE SELF-REGULATION SKILLS AND STRATEGIES FROM KEY THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES SUCH AS CBT, POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND MINDFULNESS

Self-regulation skills start to develop in early childhood. When children have experienced co-regulation through consistent, sensitive, and nurturing relationships, they begin to learn how to manage their own emotions. Neuroscientific research suggests that these relationships help to develop the links between the emotional limbic brain, and the cerebral cortex, allowing children to be better able to rationalise, reason, empathise and problem-solve.

Some calming techniques to model to them and to teach them to self-regulate include.

- Mindfulness
- Visualisation
- Grounding
- Sensory activities
- Controlled breathing

Mindfulness is a particularly useful and popular approach with the growing evidence base in terms of its use in schools (Rae et al., 2017).

Making use of tools and positive psychology and cognitive behaviour therapy are also extremely effective in terms of supporting overall wellbeing.

These include:

- Challenging and reframing thoughts
- Engaging in positive self-talk
- Using affirmations
- Identifying three good things on a daily basis
- Expressing gratitude
- Journaling

It is important to note that supporting children and young people to make use of simple grounding techniques, mindful breathing exercises, visualisation and challenging negative automatic thoughts is something that **all adults** can undertake as long as they also take the time to make use of these strategies themselves and fully understand how to model them. This is all part of how they themselves can maintain their own wellbeing and provide good wellbeing role models to those they nurture and support in schools.

4. DEVELOP AN UNDERSTANDING OF HOW TO MAINTAIN SELF-CARE ROUTINES AND PEER SUPPORT FOR STAFF TEAMS

A final essential task for all who engage therapeutically or take on the role of the emotionally available adult is to look to ourselves first. We cannot pour from an empty cup.

The Healthy Mind Platter (developed by Dr David Rock and Daniel J. Siegel) has seven essential mental activities necessary for optimum mental health in daily life. At this point, it may well be worth considering **what you are doing to maintain wellbeing in these key areas in your life?** And what are the systems in your school or workplace which ensure staff wellbeing and mental health?

These questions need to be answered first before you begin to take on the role of the therapeutic adult who can successfully nurture our children and young people in these times of evident stress and anxiety.

I sincerely hope that subsequent chapters in this book will support you in this process. Alongside providing advice on how we talk to our children and young people about war and conflict, there are opportunities to gain an understanding of trauma, clarify and try out evidence-based strategies to support those with anxiety- and trauma-related behaviours, advice, and resources for supporting our refugee children, their parents and carers, and key tools and strategies from a range of therapeutic approaches from which we and our children and young people can all benefit.



This resource is presented in a user-friendly format, it is accessible and attempts to limit the use of any psychological or educational jargon. You will find practical ideas, tools, and strategies alongside a wealth of information and useful handouts and resources for young people and those who seek to support them in their journey of recovery and post-traumatic growth.

DOWN TIME Let your mind wander. Don't think about any particular goal.

FOCUS TIME Closely focus on a task or goal. This Challenge makes deep connections in the brain.

PLAY TIME Sit back, relax, and be spontaneous! Being creative and allowing time to “just play” helps the brain make new connections.

TIME IN Shhhhh. Quiet reflection helps to better integrate the brain. Focus on sensations, thoughts and feelings.

CONNECTING TIME Connecting with others in person, not via a screen! As well as stopping to connect.

PHYSICAL TIME Get up get moving! It strengthens the body, including the brain.

SLEEP TIME Get your Zzzzz's! While the brain snoozes, learning is consolidated. Sleep also allows the brain to recover from the day's experiences.



CHAPTER 1

Talking to children and young people about war and conflict

This chapter **covers**

- Talking about war plan
- The need for validation
- Using an emotion coaching approach
- The need to be a good listener
- Helpful phrases you could use in your conversations
- Key phrases you might consider using when talking about war
- The need for honesty and age-appropriate language
- The importance of fact checking
- The importance of curious conversations
- Be aware of the unique lived experience of each child
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- 5 Anxiety easy wins
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