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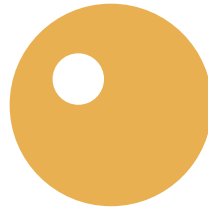
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THE ICONS



This symbol signifies the chapter 'Reactions to traumatic life events'. The chapter includes common reactions to war and flight at different ages.



INTRODUCTION – BEING A PARENT IN A REFUGEE SITUATION

You have made a great investment in your lives so that your children will have a better future. You have decided to flee from the familiar, but dangerous, to the unknown. The situation before and during your flight may have been very difficult and dramatic for many of you. Arriving in a new country can also be very challenging, despite the fact that it is safe. In this guide, we will provide you with advice and recommendations which we hope will assist you in giving your children a new and better life. In addition to this, we want to give you some advice as to what you, as parents, can do to establish stable conditions for your family and a new sense of security for your children. We have found that many of the recommendations in this guide are useful, not only for parents and their children, but also for young people and adults. We are aware that some of this advice may deviate from what is customary in your own culture. We do not wish to impose a new culture on you, but the advice and recommendations offered here have been established through a long history of meeting and helping children who have experienced difficult and traumatic events. You can use the guide as a reference work and hopefully find good advice for you as parents in everyday situations. You can also use the guide to understand the integration of children into a new culture. Additionally, the guide can be used in interaction with the staff at the asylum centre.

The parental role is demanding when everyday life is insecure, and you may feel powerless because there are many things which you can do nothing about, such as the asylum procedure. In that case, it can be a good strategy to focus on the issues that you are able to do something about, such as establishing good routines and habits in your everyday life. From child psychology research, we know that children of all ages need parents who can give them assurance and

positive attention and be there for them. Children need regularity in their daily lives, and it is crucial that every day feels safe and predict-



REACTIONS TO TRAUMATIC LIFE EVENTS

Parents in many countries usually underestimate how much children think about war and crises, and how long afterwards they continue to react to their traumatic experiences. Parents have a hard time acknowledging the intensity of the child's reactions and how long-lasting these are, because they cannot bear to see how hard it is for the child. When children laugh and appear happy, adults tend to believe that everything is forgotten and in the past. We have found that parents often think this way when they themselves feel helpless in their new circumstances. The child's reactions may also act as a reminder of what the parents have gone through. We want you, as parents, to bear this in mind when bringing up your children who have lived through very difficult circumstances.

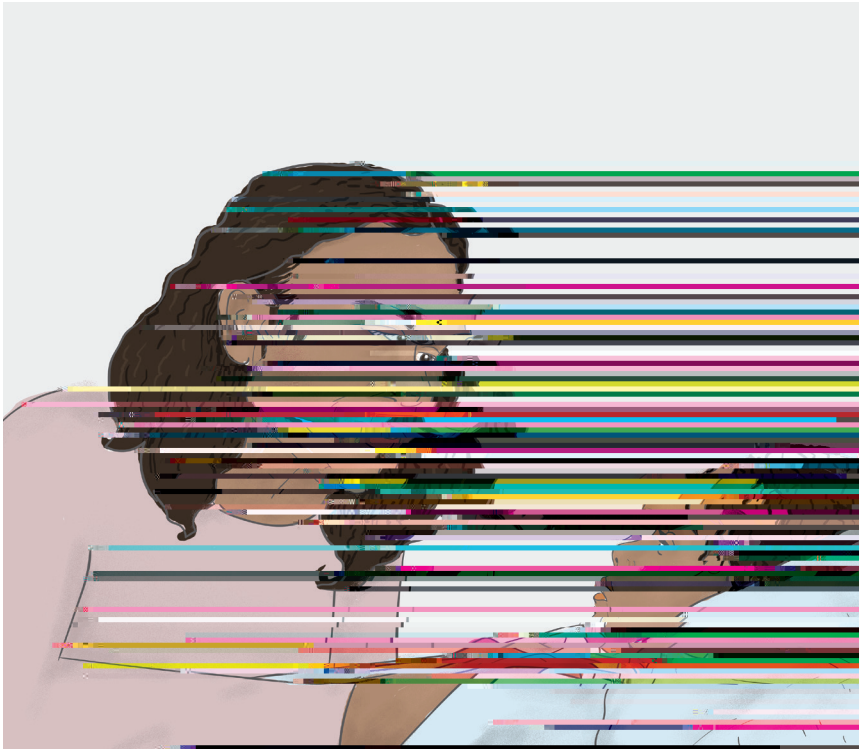
We have also found that refugee parents from many countries often say to their children: *"You're safe now, and you have to just forget what you've been through."* We wish it were that simple, but in our experience many children need help to take control of their painful memories, and it will be worse for them if you tell them to just forget everything before they have processed these memories. This is supported by research on the way in which the worst memories are stored in the mind. Many parents have painful and distressing memories like yours, which they may have made an effort to forget,

Children experience war and being on the run in different ways, and adults experience war differently from children. This means that we cannot know exactly how the experience has been for your child. However, there are certain similarities in reactions that we would like to point out. Acts of war are frightening because they cause death and destruction. They put the brain into a state of alert, warning the body to mobilise in order to deal with danger. A lot of energy is spent on ensuring survival. Small children prefer to stay close to their parents, while older children will check and examine whether the surroundings are safe. If a family has been living in a state of war for an extended period, the children may find it difficult to learn new things. They have trouble sleeping, and this causes irritability and anxiety and often leads to conflicts within the family. But even in situations of war, people adapt and try to create a life that is as normal as possible. Many of you, who have fled from war, have lived in refugee camps to begin with, followed by a perilous journey with fear and terror along the way. With a whole lot of potentially traumatic events along the way, children may have learned to successfully suppress their reactions. The human psyche often protects us in situations like this, causing us to perceive the situation as unreal and distanc-



- **POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS: AVOIDANCE AND ANXIETY.** A common reaction to trauma is to avoid anything connected with the traumatic experience. Situations, people, external reminders

- **SADNESS AND BEREAVEMENT.** Some children have experienced the deaths of immediate family members, friends, neighbours or others. All of them have lost their home, their school and their sense of security. Naturally, this leads to feelings of loss, longing and sorrow. Children have the capacity to move in and out of such feelings quite rapidly, and there is a special risk of them withdrawing into themselves if the emotions are too powerful. Parents can help children regulate the force of these reactions, so that they can gradually gain more control over their feelings. Explanations of what is happening, what has happened, and what the war was about, also help children regulate the powerful emotions that they carry around as a result of the distressing and painful memories.



- IRRITATION AND ANGER.



PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN (7-12 years) take in more of the world around them and have the ability to understand what is going on. They rely on their parents to both inform them and prepare them for things, thereby helping them regulate their emotions. They recognise injustice and can easily blame themselves for things for which they are not responsible. The older ones are beginning to understand the long-term consequences of the refugee situation.

OLDER SCHOOLCHILDREN (13-18 years) realise that being a refugee probably means that everything they had might be gone forever, and that the future is uncertain. They may feel strong indignation over the political situation and become “politicised” as a result of the injustice they are experiencing. It is quite natural that young people increase their political insight, but experts are becoming very aware of lonely young people “living” on the Internet and combining their new insights with religion and hateful thoughts of revenge. Adolescents can be very sensitive to what their peers might be thinking about them, and they may miss the contact with their friends very much.

WHEN DOES YOUR CHILD NEED OUTSIDE HELP?

It is not easy for you as parents to know when there is cause for concern about the wellbeing of your child. When you are staying in a first instance reception centre, and your children have not yet started school, it is difficult to know whether they are functioning well or not. Here are some signs to look for, indicating that your child might need help:

- The child is reacting strongly (see above) and continues to do so for months
- His/her reactions are becoming progressively more and more

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ADVICE ABOUT THE PARENTAL ROLE

others do not, for example knowing that a friend or family member in your home country has been killed, or that the house has burned down or been bombed, and so on. We strongly advise you to tell your children what you know, but to do it with compassion and care and



When speaking to your children about dramatic events, parents should listen first and respond later. Even though both are part of the conversation, it is important to let the children say what they think and feel before the parents start explaining or saying anything. This is particularly important for the first few times where children open up about difficult issues. Afterwards, their questions should be answered honestly and directly. Feel free to follow up with questions that pave the way for further conversation: *“What do you think about that? Have you thought a lot about...? I’ve been thinking a lot about... Is there anyone you’re thinking about?”* Sometimes you can start a conversation by talking about another boy or girl and what he or she went through, and then you can ask: *“Is that something that you can relate to?”*

Remember that children also need to understand the adults’ reactions and thoughts. If you do not put into words what you think and the reactions that you have, children are left to read the signals, look at facial expressions and listen to the tone of your voice. They will have to guess at what your reactions are right now, and they can get it completely wrong. Therefore, they can easily get confused, especially if you say one thing (for example _____), but they observe something completely different (fear or concern). Open and clear communication therefore means that you express how you are feeling, in other words, that you try to put into words what the children are observing. In that way, the children will also learn how to express their own thoughts and reactions, while at the same time learning ways in which to regulate their emotions.

Parents sometimes talk amongst themselves or with other adults when children are close by, about things that are happening in their home country or about their own traumatic experiences. As parents, you therefore need to be aware that children take in much more information from the adult world than you may realise. This means that you will either have to wait with those kind of conversations until the children are not around, or that you will have to explain to the

children in a calm and neutral way what the information means, and be prepared to follow up on any questions that the children might have.



EMPATHIC AND HEALTHY INTERACTION

For children, life as a refugee results in a lot of changes. Adults can help children cope with these changes, for example by explaining to them, in a warm and loving way, what is going on and what is going to happen. This will help them understand what they are experiencing in their daily lives, and the support, understanding and advice from adults will help children regulate their emotions. The youngest children develop through interaction with their parents, usually their mother, and they begin to learn from the moment they are born. Through physical closeness and contact, as the parents sing to them, speak with them and read to them, they will thrive in their development, almost irrespective of the physical environment they are in, of course provided that they are not constantly exposed to danger.



But life as a refugee also means major changes for adults. It is difficult to have good interaction if the parents are frustrated and the children are sad, or vice versa. Here as well, the right words, explanations and openness can build bridges between you and provide better interaction than silence and secrecy will.

Avoid unnecessary periods of separation and inform your children if you are going away for a few hours, as they can easily become scared that something might happen to you. Children who have suffered traumatic experiences often need to be prepared for completely normal situations, including visits to the doctor or dentist. If both of you have to be away from the children, it is vital that another adult, with whom they feel safe, is with them. A lot of hugging and physical

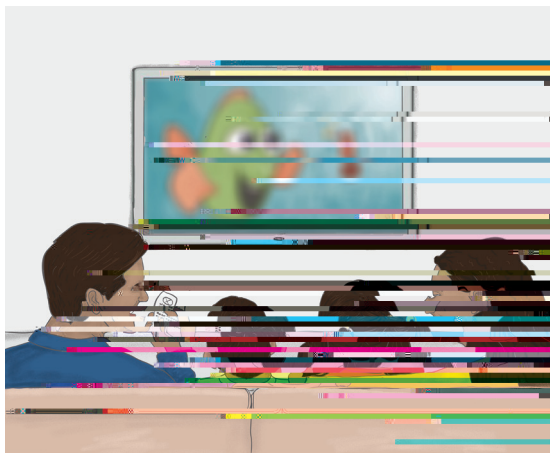


complete sentences like *"The worst thing for me was ..."*, or *"I wish I could have ..."* They can use drama and dance, create stories and write about everything they have experienced. Young people may gather in groups and listen to other people's stories, and some places organise discussion groups at the reception centre or through the local municipality. As parents you can support them and sometimes even give them a gentle push to make them join such a group. We also recommend that you and your children put together a book, containing text and images which tell the story of your family, from great-grandparents or grandparents onwards; so that your children know their historical roots and can have this as a document for the future.

THE ROLES OF MOTHERS AND FATHERS

DO NOT LET YOUR CHILDREN LISTEN TO OR WATCH THE NEWS FOR HOURS

Many parents are concerned about what is happening in their home country. Because of this, the TV or the radio can be on for many hours during the day. This creates an anxious atmosphere for the



children because they are exposed to violent images which they should not see, or hear stories that make them worried and sad. Children should also hear news from their home country, but these newscasts should not be on all the time, and children need guidance from adults

in order to understand the news. We suggest that you check the news in the evening after the children have been put to bed, or get a news summary when the children are busy doing other things. This will probably be good for you too, because the news can affect you in a negative way. Many parents who have fled from war have asked us whether it is okay for the children to see what is happening in their home country on DVDs sent to the parents, or through dramatic news clips found online. Our simple answer is no; it is not good for children to see these things.

In our experience children, especially when they reach school age, want to understand their parents' decision to leave the country. This means giving the children an understanding of the conflict – that is, explaining the background to the war, and why people are fighting. If it is possible to explain these things calmly and without expressing strong emotions, it will make it easier for the children to organise their thoughts. This conversation should not be seen as a one-off

event, because school-age children will gr Hr-auBBBB2cudrcB

LET YOUR CHILDREN HAVE CONTACT WITH THEIR
CULTURE



REGARDING SLEEP

If your child is having trouble sleeping, it is important to find out why. If it is because of feeling insecure, then the presence of a grown-up and a little conversation will often reduce the anxiety. If the child is haunted by memories, follow the advice given in the following section. Often it will be certain worries or thoughts that will keep the child awake.

HERE IS SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE:

- As a rule, anything that keeps the thoughts away that create anxiety will help the child sleep.
- A good distraction method is to ask children to try counting backwards from one thousand in steps of (say) 7, 5 or 1, depending on how good they are at counting (1000 – 993 – 986 – 979, and so on).
- Older children (over 10 years) can try the following breathing exercise: First, breathe normally three times. After the third exhalation, tell them to hold their breath for as long as they can. Then breathe out and in again three times normally and once again, after the third exhalation, tell them to hold their breath for as long as they can. If they continue with this exercise, they will soon become drowsy and start falling asleep. At the same time, focusing like this on their breathing will divert their attention away from their worries or the thoughts that create anxiety.

Maybe you or some of the other parents know of other effective methods for inducing sleep that you can teach your children.

ADVICE ON CONTROLLING INVASIVE MEMORIES AND THOUGHTS

When your children are being troubled by the return of unwanted memories, there are various methods available to help them take control and reduce the power of the memories. It can be difficult to motivate them to do this, because they have to think of the distressing memories that they would rather avoid. Here are some methods you can give to your children:



- Tell them that it is important that they take control of their memories. Ask

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to acknowledge that these losses have taken place. Feelings of loss, longing and grief are normal reactions that are to be expected and have to be accepted. Children are usually fully able to alternate between sadness and taking joy in activities with others. But if your

time, when thoughts of grief appear, they should say to themselves: *“Oops, I’ve started thinking about this again... but it belongs in my ‘grief time’ and I’ll deal with it then.”* If your children have lost a loved one in the family or a friend, you can also ask them to imagine this person speaking to them, saying something like: *“It’s important to me*

the child to spend more and more time exclusively on school work; this tends to decrease their motivation and drain their energy. To help them remember, they can write things down on their mobile phone or on sticky notes.

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in such situations. They can say to themselves: *"I can deal with this", "If I get angry, I'll be the one who suffers" or "I'm able to calm down again."* You can also give your child other advice, such as walking away from the situation, writing down the angry thoughts, and



SELF-CARE

The best help parents can give their children is to look after themselves. In order to handle the “new” parental role in a good way, you have to feel as good as possible, because your own state of mind will greatly affect your children. This means that if you are under stress, suffering from the after-effects of war, or feeling very frustrated in your life, it can affect the way you interact with your children. You are likely to be less present and available and less able to stimulate your child in the way that they need. You may also not be able to be part of the meaningful interaction with your child that is needed. Because children are so dependent on you caring for them, this quickly becomes a vicious circle.



There are various ways in which you, as parents, can look after yourselves. There is no simple formula for this, but we can offer you some tips that we know have been of use to others.

USE WHAT YOU HAVE USED BEFORE

You are the only expert on what works well for you. Every culture has its own methods for self-preservation, and there is every reason for you to make use of the methods that have helped you before: Methods that have calmed you down and made you able to cope with everyday life in a better way. It might not be possible, because your surroundings and the circumstances of your life have changed and stand in the way, but do the best you can. Maybe it will help you to talk to others, exercise, pray, write down what your worries are, or listen to music.

USE THE METHODS DESCRIBED IN THIS GUIDE

You have lived through many difficult situations, both before, during and after the flight from your home country. It is not unlikely that you have suffered and are still suffering from some of the reactions described here as common among children. Allow yourself and your children to mourn the losses you have suffered. The methods described earlier for helping your children, you can also use for yourself – they work for both adults and children. They can lessen your troubles and are easy to use. If you are getting no relief from the symptoms, you can ask the healthcare workers or the staff at your reception centre about where you can get help. The ease of getting access to help will vary, but advice and guidance is available if you contact the staff at the place where you live or through the local municipality's support system.

It is vital that you get help if you yourself are struggling with your emotions and the hardships you have been through. If not, you will have less energy for your children, be less sensitive to their needs, and probably also be more irritable and angry.



MUSIC AND EXERCISE

If you feel stressed or anxious, you should know that many people find that both music and exercise are excellent ways of recovering peace of mind and body. Exercise, such as a brisk walk, jogging or dancing, counteracts depressing thoughts and strengthens positive ones. Music has the effect of reducing stress, so lie down and listen to music or dance to music. Also, make sure that you get rest whenever you have the opportunity and try to have a positive view of the situation; this will also have an impact on your children.



WRITE DOWN YOUR THOUGHTS AND REACTIONS

Research has shown us that if you write down your innermost thoughts and feelings about events that have had an effect on you, it can improve your health. You do not have to spend a long time doing this. Use for example 15-20 minutes a day over the course of three to five days, where you put into words what has happened, as well as the thoughts and reactions that you are experiencing. During this time, by describing your thoughts, you can put the events into perspective, thereby organising and creating a better sense of understanding of what has happened. Perhaps you could also write down what you have learned from your experiences, and what advice you would give to others who are going through similar events.

CONCLUSION

As parents, you will face great challenges. The society you have come to has different values and ways of living than what you are used to. There will often be less emphasis on religion, and children in Scandinavia question their parents' authority to a much larger degree. This does not mean, however, that they have a more negative attitude towards their parents. In fact, research shows that children today are happier with their parents than ever before, and parents think that they are easier to manage. Your children and adolescents will adopt values from both cultures, and they will learn the new language faster than you will. This is the key to successful integration for the child, but at the same time it can be challenging for you, and the balance within the family is likely to change. We hope that the advice given in this guide will help you build a good foundation for the readjustment and growth, both for your children and for you. We know that your children's future is the most important thing in life for you.



