



Klinik  
für Kinder- und Jugend-  
psychiatrie/Psychotherapie  
UNIVERSITÄTSKLINIKUM ULM

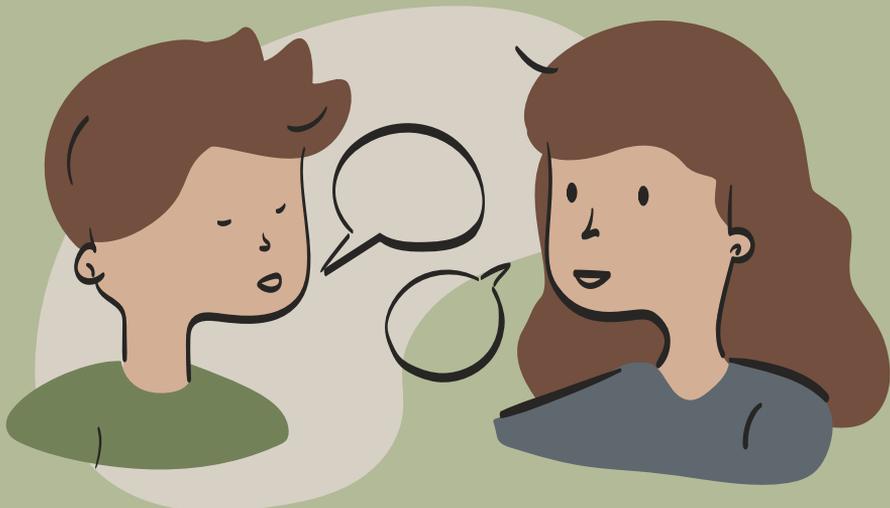


Baden-Württemberg

MINISTERIUM FÜR SOZIALES, GESUNDHEIT UND INTEGRATION

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# Information for parents and professionals to support children and adolescents affected by war



# Foreword

## Aim of the brochure

Due to the war of aggression in Ukraine, many people, including families, mothers, children and adolescents as well as unaccompanied children were and still are forced to flee. Some of the refugees suffer from the consequences of war and fleeing as well as from the separation of their fathers and relatives who stayed behind in the Ukraine or had to go to war. Due to the psychological strain of the war and fleeing, stress and traumatic experiences can be estimated as considerable for a part of the refugees.

These information materials address how to talk to children about war, what age-related trauma and grief reactions look like, and how children can be supported after an acute crisis. This brochure is aimed at parents and other caregivers of Ukrainian children, professionals, health care professionals, teachers, and volunteers who work with refugees from Ukraine.

Knowledge about trauma reactions as a normal reaction to an abnormal situation as well as specific information about age-related grief and trauma reactions can help to better understand and support those affected. In this context, it is important primarily to provide the affected families, children and adolescents with security, to give them the opportunity to talk about what they have experienced and to classify it, as well as to find an anxiety-free, regular daily routine.

In addition to information on early recognition of psychological reactions associated with stress and trauma, this brochure also highlights support approaches after the immediate crisis. These are intended to help children get through the crisis.

In addition, we refer to contacts who can be consulted if psychological distress persists.

Ulm, February 2023



## Informational materials from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network

The psychoeducational information materials in this booklet have been translated from English into German, Ukrainian, and Russian with permission from the U.S. National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN).

The original text can be found on the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) website <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/all-nctsn-resources> (last accessed February 2023).

This brochure is available in several languages (German, Ukrainian, Russian and English).

The QR code will take you to our [homepage](#):



The following QR codes will take you directly to the translations available in:

German



English



Ukrainian



Russian



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**Baden-Württemberg**

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# Table of contents

1. Age-Related Reactionsto a Traumatic Event.....	8
2. Traumatic Grief.....	14
3. Talking to children about war.....	20
4. After a crisis: Helping children heal.....	30
5. Contact persons and addresses.....	36

# 1. Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic Event

A fundamental goal of parenting is to help children grow and thrive to the best of their potential. Parents anticipate protecting their children from danger whenever possible, but sometimes serious danger threatens, whether it is

- manmade, such as war or domestic violence,
  - or natural, such as a flood or earthquake.
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When a danger is life-threatening or poses a threat of serious injury, it becomes a potentially traumatic event for children.

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By understanding how children experience traumatic events and how these children express their lingering distress over the experience, parents, physicians, communities, and schools can respond to their children and help them through this challenging time. **The goal is to restore balance to these children's lives and the lives of their families.**

## How children may react

How children experience traumatic events and how they express their lingering distress depends largely on the children's **age and level of development**.

**Preschool and young school-age children** exposed to a traumatic event may experience a feeling of helplessness, uncertainty about whether there is continuing danger, a general fear which extends beyond the traumatic event and into other aspects of their lives, and difficulty describing in words what is bothering them or what they are experiencing emotionally.



This feeling of helplessness and anxiety is often expressed as a loss of previously acquired developmental skills:

- Children who experience traumatic events might not be able to fall asleep on their own or might not be able to separate from parents at school.
- Children who might have ventured out to play in the yard prior to a traumatic event now might not be willing to play in the absence of a family member.
- Often, children lose some speech and toileting skills, or their sleep is disturbed by nightmares, night terrors, or fear of falling asleep.
- In many cases, children may engage in traumatic play - a repetitive and less imaginative form of play that may represent children's continued focus on the traumatic event or an attempt to change a negative outcome of a traumatic event.



**For school-age children,** a traumatic experience may elicit feelings of persistent concern over their own safety and the safety of others in their school or family. These children may be preoccupied with their own actions during the event. Often they experience guilt or shame over what they did or did not do during a traumatic event. School-age children might engage in constant retelling of the traumatic event, or they may describe being overwhelmed by their feelings of fear or sadness.

A traumatic experience may compromise the developmental tasks of school-age children as well:

- Children of this age may display sleep disturbances, which might include difficulty falling asleep, fear of sleeping alone, or frequent nightmares.
- Teachers often comment that these children are having greater difficulties concentrating and learning at school.
- Children of this age, following a traumatic event, may complain of headaches and stomach aches without obvious cause.
- Some children engage in unusually reckless or aggressive behavior.

**Adolescents** exposed to a traumatic event feel self-conscious about their emotional responses to the event. Feelings of fear, vulnerability, and concern over being labeled “abnormal” or different from their peers may cause adolescents to withdraw from family and friends.



Adolescents often experience feelings of shame and guilt about the traumatic event and may express fantasies about revenge and retribution. A traumatic event for adolescents may foster a radical shift in the way of thinking about the world.

**Some adolescents engage in self-destructive or accident-prone behaviors.**

## How to help

The involvement of family, physicians, school, and community is critical in supporting children through the emotional and physical challenges they face after exposure to a traumatic event.

**For young children** parents can offer invaluable support, by providing comfort, rest, and an opportunity to play or draw.

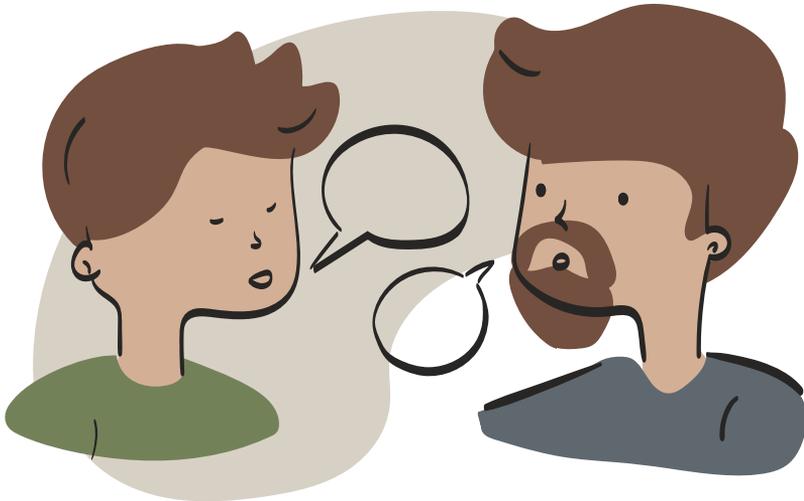
- Parents can be available to provide reassurance that the traumatic event is over and that the children are safe.
- It is helpful for parents, family, and teachers to help children verbalize their feelings so they don't feel alone with their emotions.
- Providing consistent caretaking by ensuring that children are picked up from school at the anticipated time and by informing children of parents' whereabouts can provide a sense of security for children who have recently experienced a traumatic event.
- Parents, family, caregivers, and teachers may need to tolerate regression in developmental tasks for a period of time following a traumatic event.



**Older children** will also need encouragement to express fears, sadness, and anger in the supportive environment of their family.

- These school-age children may need to be encouraged to discuss their worries with family members.
- It is important to acknowledge the normality of their feelings and to correct any distortions of the traumatic events that they express
- Parents can be invaluable in supporting their children in reporting to teachers when their thoughts and feelings are getting in the way of their concentration and learning..

**For adolescents** who have experienced a traumatic event, the family can encourage discussion of the event and feelings about it and expectations of what could have been done to prevent the event. Parents can discuss the expectable strain on relationships with family and peers, and offer support in those challenges.



It may be important to help adolescents understand “acting out” behavior as an effort to voice anger about traumatic events. It may also be important to discuss thoughts of revenge following an act of violence, address realistic consequences of actions, and help express constructive alternatives that lessen the sense of helplessness the adolescents may be experiencing.

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When children experience a traumatic event, the entire family is affected. Often, family members have different experiences around the event and different emotional responses to the traumatic event.

Recognizing each others’ experience of the event, and helping each other cope with possible feelings of fear, helplessness, anger, or even guilt in not being able to protect children from a traumatic experience, is an important component of a family’s emotional recovery.

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**Notice:**

1. Symptoms after traumatic experiences are a normal reaction to an abnormal experience.
2. The first priority is the elimination of danger and stabilization of living conditions.
3. A part of the problems can regress on their own with distance from the traumatic experience.
4. If the problems persist, there are helpful psychotherapeutic offers.

## 2. Traumatic Grief

Youth Information Sheet

### What is Grief?

Grief is the word used to describe the **different natural feelings** we have after someone dies. You can grieve after a family member, friend, or other important person dies.

You can show a range of:



- **Emotions & Reactions:** Sometimes you can be sad and miss the person. Other times you feel up to doing your usual activities, like hanging out with friends.
- **Thoughts:** You can remember positive things about the person, but also have thoughts which bother you, have trouble focusing, or have other worries.
- **Behaviors:** Your behavior may change. You may be less active, be irritable, not eat or sleep as much as before, or hang out less with friends, and want to be by yourself more often

There is no set amount of time for grieving. Most of you will find ways to cope with your feelings and the changes in your life. It is natural and OK if you still feel sad or miss the person even months or years later; especially if you are reminded of that person on certain special dates, events, activities or places you went together.

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There is no set amount of time for grieving.

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## Who gets Traumatic Grief?

Most of you who experience the death of someone important adjust and recover over time. However, some of you may have more trouble adjusting and may develop Traumatic Grief.

This can happen if the death was **sudden**, such as from war, a homicide, suicide, mass shooting, disaster, accident, or an unexpected medical reason. However, you can also have a traumatic reaction even if the death was from natural causes like old age, or a terminal illness such as cancer, especially if it was **sudden, confusing, or scary** in some way.

Traumatic or prolonged grief can also occur after an **unclear or ambiguous loss** (e.g., when a person is lost in a natural disaster or war).

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Most of you who experience the death of someone important adjust and recover over time. However, some of you may have more trouble adjusting and may develop Traumatic Grief.

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## How do I know if I have Traumatic Grief?

If you have Traumatic Grief you may:

- Have upsetting thoughts, images, nightmares, or memories about the scary way the person died which come into your head.
- Experience physical reaction such as headaches, stomach aches, or sensations that resemble how the person died.
- Become jumpy or have trouble concentrating.
- Avoid feelings or withdraw. Act as if you are not upset about the death or avoid reminders of the person, such as the way the person died, places or things related to the person, or events that led to their death.
- Remain in a bad mood or have unpleasant beliefs related to the traumatic death, such as being angry, feeling guilty, blaming yourself, distrusting others, or think the world is unsafe.
- Feel more irritable, have trouble sleeping or concentrating, or see your grades start dropping.
- Become extra careful and have more fears about your safety and others.
- Do self-destructive or risky things, like abuse alcohol or drugs, and feel like you want to hurt yourself.



## What can you do to feel better?

There are a lot of different things you can do to cope with grief related traumatic reactions, such as:

- Express your feelings in creative ways such as art, writing, or dancing.
- Do calming activities such as yoga or listen to music.
- Talk to friends and family to help you through.
- For processing grief, on the one hand, it is important to feel the grief or to deal with the loss. But you can't be sad all the time. Therefore, on the other hand, it is also important to participate in everyday life and allow yourself to feel joy.
- Check in with a mental health professional to see if you need more help.



## What if I need more help?

Special therapy can help you pull things back together with friends, at school, and at home. You can learn what sets off your reactions as well as ways to take control of them.



### 3. Talking to children about war

The attack on Ukraine has evoked many emotions including anger, fear, anxiety, worry, and confusion. It has created safety concerns for the region but also unsettled our own country. Some families may be worried about loved ones who are directly impacted, including those who live in affected regions; those who were visiting and are trying to get back; or those who are deployed as part of the military, government, or a relief organization.

Most children will learn about the war and its consequences through the media or social media. Caregivers and children alike may be struggling to make sense of what they are seeing and hearing.



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Children of all ages will be turning to trusted adults for **help** and **guidance**. Parents and caregivers can help navigate what they are seeing and hearing by having a **conversation** with them, **acknowledging their feelings**, and **finding ways to cope together**.

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## Potential impact on children and families

- For some children and families, the war may serve as a reminder of their own trauma or loss. This may result in feelings of sadness, fear, and helplessness, worries about separation, increased acting out, as well as possible disruptions of their sleep, appetite, and ability to concentrate.
- Caregivers can provide support to children by
  - 1) learning about common trauma reactions
  - 2) offering comfort and reassurance
  - 3) finding opportunities for connections with family and others important in their lives.
- Families who have loved ones in the Ukraine, Russia, and the surrounding region may need to take extra time to discuss children's concerns related to the safety of their relatives and friends, and to acknowledge how difficult the uncertainty and those worries can be for the entire family. It is also important to explain why it might not be possible to stay in contact with relatives from Russia.



- While keeping up with events is especially important when family is involved, finding some time each day to take a break from coverage and engage in other activities is important for everyone's overall coping.
- Recently, due to widespread blackouts in Ukraine, there have been difficulties getting in touch via phone or internet with loved ones. Parents should discuss these difficulties with their children in an age-appropriate manner.
- Military families may be experiencing an increased worry for loved ones who are or may be deployed as a result of the war or who are already stationed in the region. These families could use additional supports to help bolster their resilience and to assist their children through these challenging times.

## Talking to children about war

### Start the conversation

- Check in by asking what your children know about the situation. Most school-age children and teens will have heard something from media outlets, social media, teachers, or peers.
- Do NOT presume you know what your children are thinking or feeling. Ask how they are feeling about what is happening in Ukraine and respond to the concerns they share. Remember, their worries and feelings may not be what you think. Validate feelings your children share.
- Plan to have multiple conversations if they have had a lot of questions or as the situation changes. Checking when changes occur helps children to know you are open to talk about difficult situations.



## Clear Up Any Misunderstandings

- Listen and ask questions to find out if your children understand the situation accurately. They may think they are at risk when they are not.
- Different perspectives and misinformation about war is common. Family who live in the region may be getting different news stories. Clarify any misinformation your children might have heard. Discuss with older children the complexities of the political situation and the potential impacts.
- Discuss as a family if there are aspects of the current situation that you want to collectively support or research more about (e.g., donating to a charity, reading about the history of the region).
- The events in the Ukraine and Russia can be confusing for adults, too. Gather information from trusted news sources so that you can address your children's questions; this can increase your confidence in answering their questions as you begin the conversation. If you are not sure of an answer, that's OK. Let children know you appreciate the question and that you can work together to find the answer.

## Provide Context

- Younger children hearing about war may worry about their own safety. Discuss with them where the war is located and reassure them that their own community is safe. Young adults and older teens may wonder about a draft or may show interest in joining the military. Address their questions and support them accordingly.
- Help children identify assumptions they may hold about others based on their nationality, place of birth, or languages spoken. Carers and school personnel should ensure that all children are being treated with respect.



## Monitor Adult Conversations

- Use caution when discussing the war in front of younger children. Children often listen when adults are unaware and may misconstrue what they hear, and filling in the blanks with more inaccuracies may increase their distress.
- Monitor the tone of your discussions, as expressing views in an angry or aggressive way may frighten young children. Be as calm as possible when discussing the war in language young children can understand.
- Monitor your expression of worries and concerns about any economic impact the war may have on your family as your anxieties may unintentionally be communicated to your children.

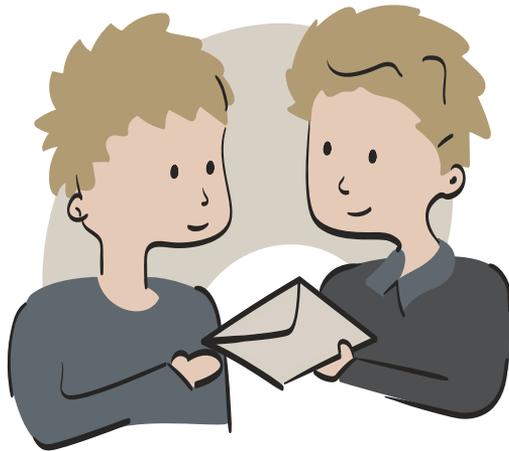


## Understanding Media Exposure

- Media coverage of war, combat, and its aftermath may be upsetting to children of all ages and can increase fear and anxiety.
- The more time children spend viewing coverage of the war, the more likely they are to have negative reactions. Excessive viewing may interfere with children's recovery afterwards.
- Very young children may not understand that the event is not happening in their community.
- Caregivers can help by limiting exposure to media coverage, including social media discussions of the war. This is helpful for caregivers too.
- The younger the child, the less exposure they should have. If possible, preschool children should not be watching coverage at all.
- Caregivers can support older children by viewing media together in order to answer questions or explain what they are seeing, even continuing to be open to discussion after you turn the coverage off. Check out with them what is being discussed on social media regarding the war, allowing continuing conversations about the matter.

## How to Foster Resilience

- **Increase connections:** Families can benefit from spending increased time together, providing extra reassurance and hugs, and reaching out to other family or community members. For example, reach out to those in the military or those with families in the area and check how they are doing and what they need during these stressful times. If it is not possible to get in touch with relatives in Ukraine for a long period of time, offer the child to write a letter to this person together to ease the child's fear.
- **Emphasize the helpers:** Caregivers can support children by highlighting the many ways people are working to support those affected by war and to end the conflict.
- If children wish to help those impacted by the war, consider ways to do so including sending letters to the troops, sending donations to responding charity organizations, supporting local refugee organizations, or participating in activities being offered by your faith, culture, or community organizations.



- **Keep to routines:** In times of stress, routines can be comforting for children and teens. As much as possible, keep to your routines and schedules in the face of current events. For those that are worried about economic hardships, discuss as a family the activities that can be done together which will not add to this burden but will still offer moments of laughter and joy.
- **Offer patience:** In times of stress, children and teens may have more challenges with their behavior, concentration, and attention. Caregivers can offer additional patience, care, and love to children and themselves, in recognition that everyone could be affected. Remember, just as you are being extra patient and caring with your children, you need to be patient and kind to yourself as we all may feel increased stress at that time..

## 4. After a crisis: Helping children heal

Young children, toddlers, and preschoolers know when bad things happen, and they remember what they have been through. After a scary event, we often see changes in their behavior. They may cry more often, become clingy and not want us to leave. They may have tantrums, hit others, have problems sleeping, become afraid of things which didn't bother them before, and lose skills they previously mastered.

Changes like these are a sign that the children need help. Here are some ways you can help them.

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S – Safety first

A – Allow expression of feelings

F – Follow your child's lead

E – Enable your child to tell the story of what happened

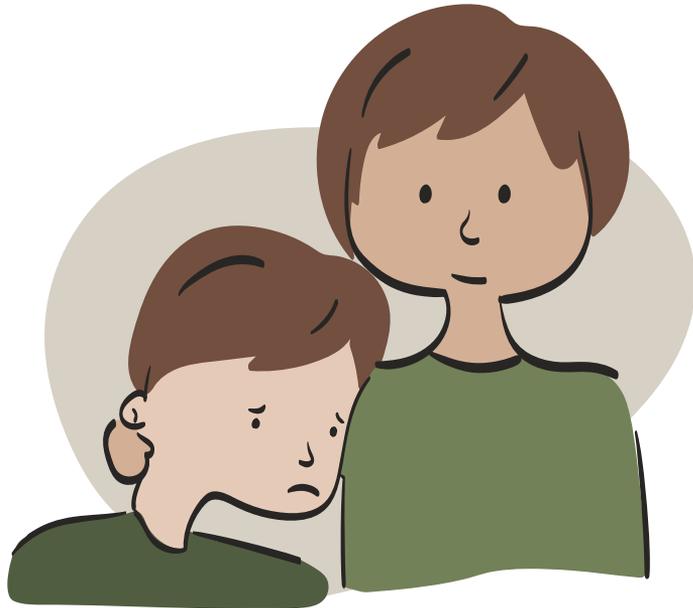
T – Ties – Reconnect with supportive people and activities

Y – Your child needs you

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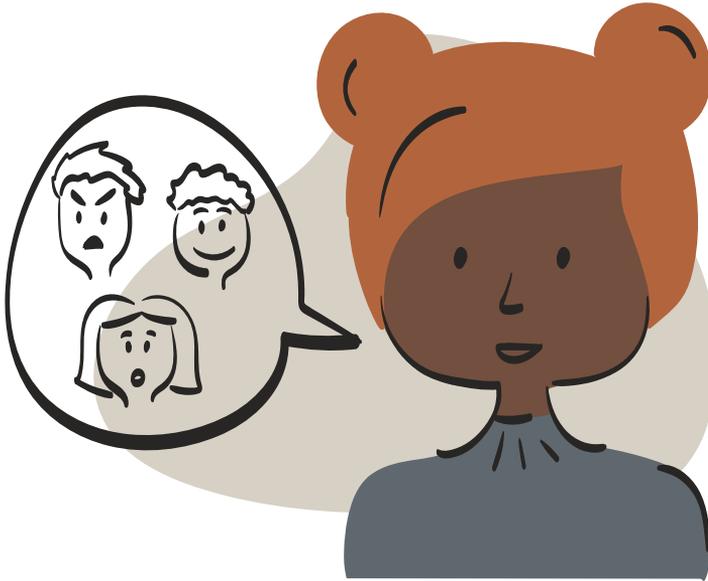
## S – Safety first. Your child feels safe when you...

- Hold your child or let them stay close to you.
- Tell your child you will take care of them when things are scary or difficult. With children who are learning to talk, use simple words, like saying “Mommy’s here.”
- Keep them away from frightening TV images and scary conversations.
- Do familiar things, like singing a song you both like or telling a story.
- Let them know what will happen next (to the degree that you know).
- Have a predictable routine, at least for bedtime: a story, a prayer, cuddle time.
- Leave them with familiar people when you have to be away.
- Tell them where you are going and when you will come back.



## A – Allow expression of feelings

- ❑ Young children often “behave badly” when they are worried or scared. Children can “act out” as a way of asking for help.
- ❑ Remember! Difficult feelings = Difficult behavior
- ❑ Help your child name how they feel: “scared,” “happy,” “angry,” “sad.” Tell them it’s OK to feel that way.
- ❑ Show your child the right way to behave, like saying “It’s OK to be angry but it’s not OK to hit me.”
- ❑ Help your child express anger in ways that won’t hurt, using words, play, or drawings.
- ❑ Talk about the things that are going well to help you and your child feel good.



## **F – Follow your child’s lead**

- Different children need different things. Some children need to run around, others need to be held.
- Listen to your child and watch their behavior to figure out what they need.

## **E – Enable your child to tell the story of what happened during & after**

- Having a story helps your child make sense of what happened and cope better with it.
- Children use play to tell their story. For example, they may make popping sounds to show what they experienced. They may hide in the closet to show what it was like to shelter-in-place.
- Join your child in showing and telling not only what happened, step by step, but also how you both felt.
- As you tell the story, follow your child’s lead. When the story is difficult, your young child may need breaks: running around, being held, playing something else. This is OK. They will come back to the story when they are ready.
- It can be hard to watch your children’s play or listen to their stories of what happened. Get support if it is hard for you to listen without becoming upset.

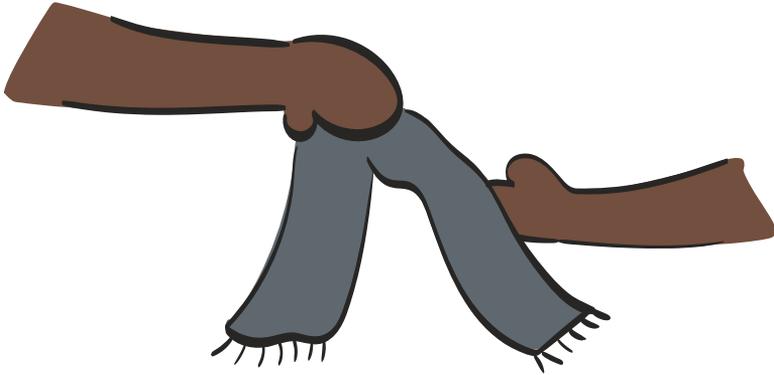


## **T – Ties – Reconnect with supportive people, community, culture & rituals**

- Simple things like a familiar bedtime story, a song, a prayer, or family traditions remind you and your child of your way of life and offer hope.
- If you belong to a group, like a church, try to find ways of re-connecting with them.
- You can help your child best when you take care of yourself. Get support from others when you need it.

## Y- Your child needs you

- Reassure your child that you will be together.
- It is common for children to be clingy and worried about being away from you.
- Just being with your child, even when you can't fix things, helps your child.
- If you need to leave your child, let them know for how long and when you are coming back. If possible, leave something that belongs to you, or a picture that your child can have.



## 5. Contact persons and addresses



The assistance described in this brochure to support children after traumatic events, such as war or flight, will be sufficient for many children. Even if they exhibit symptoms of stress and the trauma reactions described in the first few months, the symptoms may decrease and the children will not be further impaired in their well-being and development. However, there will be children who need further help and psychological support. It may be that in these children the symptoms

continue to be severe over time or become more severe after some time. For these children, contact persons and projects that can support them are named below.

### Contact persons for professional help

Practices of paediatricians and family doctors are often the first point of contact when it becomes apparent that a child is suffering severely after traumatic experiences. If necessary, referrals can then be made to child and adolescent psychiatric and psychotherapeutic practices or outpatient clinics.

### **Professional psychotherapeutic help should be requested if...**

... the psychological stress continues to be high and intense, resulting in subjective suffering (e.g. the nightmares and sleep disturbances result in high subjective suffering for the child or the family suffers from the child's strong outbursts of anger)

... a functional restriction of the child in the social or school area is present (e.g. due to the strong separation fears a child cannot attend school)

... a psychiatric diagnosis is suspected that requires clarification and treatment (e.g., symptoms of depression or post-traumatic stress disorder)

... in emergencies, e.g. in the case of acute danger to self or others, an emergency presentation in child and adolescent psychiatric clinics is possible.

### **Screening of symptoms**

An initial assessment of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental abnormalities is possible via the screening portal PORTA. Here you will find various questionnaires in different languages (including Ukrainian and Russian). Parents can also fill out questionnaires for their young children there.

After answering the questionnaires, you will receive direct feedback in the form of a traffic light system. This helps to assess whether a child's symptomatology is unproblematic, should continue to be closely monitored, or whether an appointment should be made with a psychotherapeutic contact point as soon as possible.

Here you can find the screening portal: <https://porta-refugees.de>



**PORTA-refugees.DE**

## Further contact persons, websites and projects

- **Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF)** - Information for people from Ukraine on staying in Germany can be found at: <https://www.bamf.de/DE/Themen/AsylFluechtlingsschutz/ResettlementRelocation/InformationenEinreiseUkraine/informationen-einreise-ukraine-node.html;jsessionid=366042C3E-05FA29AEDE4B3117C149750.intranet251#Information>
- **Ministry of Social Affairs, Health and Integration Baden-Württemberg** – Information on the Ukraine crisis and contact points: <https://sozialministerium.baden-wuerttemberg.de/de/service/informationen-zur-ukraine-krise/>
- **Bundesfachverband unbegleitete minderjährige Flüchtlinge** – Information in German and English at: <https://b-umf.de/>
- **Psychosocial centers for refugees or victims of torture** exist in various cities throughout Germany. You can find more information here: <https://www.baff-zentren.org/>
- **National Center for Early Help** – Information for pregnant women and families in Ukrainian, Russian and English: <https://www.elternsein.info/>
- **Save The Children** – On the website you can find concepts for psychological first aid. These can help professionals and volunteers provide psychological support to children in an acute crisis. Here you can find more information in German: <https://www.savethechildren.de/informieren/einsatzorte/deutschland/migration-und-flucht/kinderschutz-und-psychologische-erste-hilfe/>

- **German Federal Chamber of Psychotherapists (BPTK)** – Parents' Guide for Refugees: advice for different age groups in Ukrainian, Russian and English at:  
<https://elternratgeber-fluechtlinge.de/>
- **Appointment service centers:** Arranging appointments with medical or psychotherapeutic practices via the telephone number 116 117.
- **German Red Cross** – offering a federal contact point for refugees from Ukraine with disabilities and/or care needs, migration counseling centers, and a tracing service for families separated from loved ones by war. Information at:  
<https://www.drk.de/hilfe-weltweit/was-wir-tun/fluechtlingshilfe/hilfe-fuer-ukrainische-gefluechtete-in-deutschland>
- **Helpline Ukraine** – offering free and confidential telephone counseling for refugee children, youth and parents from Ukraine with concerns and problems. The counseling is available in Ukrainian and Russian - Monday through Friday from 2 to 5 p.m. at 0800 500 225 0.  
Helpline Ukraine is a project of the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs together with the Nummer gegen Kummer association and with the support of Deutsche Telekom.

