

# LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

## CHECK-IN GUIDANCE

**This practical tool provides instructions on how to facilitate a 90–120-minute check-in session with children aged six years and up when they arrive back at school or another activity space that was closed due to an ongoing war. It is designed for use by adults – including classroom teachers – to help children settle back into a regular school routine. Space to discuss their fears and experiences of loss, displacement and other impacts of war among their peers and with the guidance of a trusted adult will help them to process their feelings and the effect the ongoing war is having on them.**

This guidance can also be used outside of a school context, i.e., in non-formal education settings, children's clubs, child protection-led activities, livelihood activities, etc.



## **Discussions with caregivers**

Discussing this welcome back check-in material with caregivers will enable them to reassure their children about the support they will get when they return to school and encourage them to practise activities such as belly breathing with their children at home. Explain that the check-in session is not psychotherapy and that a teacher/facilitator will be present if a child becomes upset. Be clear that you will not be asking the children to share personal stories they wish to keep private.

This initial discussion could take place at a parents' meeting. In some contexts, caregivers can be given the information in a letter, email or via another online platform. Encourage caregivers to reach out if they have any concerns or to share information that will help the school support their child.

## **Why are check-in sessions important?**

As a result of the current war, children and families in Ukraine have experienced displacement, loss of and separation from loved ones, and sirens and aerial attacks on their homes, schools, hospitals and communities. Most children have been out of school due to school closures and without routine or close contact their peers in familiar learning spaces. Some children have had access to digital learning, but not all.

Many children have witnessed their caregivers' increased anxiety, tension and exhaustion. As a result, their mental health and wellbeing could be at risk. Space to discuss and share experiences with their peers, and with the guidance of a trusted adult, will support children to process the effects and consequences of the war and help them return to learning.

## **Common reactions to stress, war and displacement**

Children who have experienced prolonged war, been out of school and separated from their peers and teachers may experience anxiety, extreme worry, sadness, and feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty. Although they may feel excited to see their friends and teachers when they return to school, and appreciate the routine of going to school, they may also be anxious about being separated from their caregivers, reconnecting with school life, and meeting new students. They may be worried about continued air raids, having spent a significant amount of time in bomb shelters or witnessed bombs or shelling. Some children may have been isolated at home, in a bomb shelter, or displaced many times with a vulnerable caregiver. Under these difficult circumstances, children's wellbeing and development may be affected by the lack of stimulation, routine, safety and security.

One common reaction to war is a lack of trust in others. War is a deliberate act, and it is often difficult for children as well as adults to understand why others have inflicted pain and grief. These feelings can lead to a sense of mistrust and 'polarized' thinking – for example, that people are either good or bad. Some people can lose empathy and understanding of people they perceive as 'not good'. This could lead, for example, to polarization of children from different language communities.

Difficult experiences can lead to impulsive, irritated and aggressive behaviour and to impaired concentration and memory. Sometimes this can be difficult to spot because some children keep their 'inner life' to themselves and do not manifest their feelings in their behaviour. When children grieve, for example, they often seem to move in and out of the pain, sometimes playing and interacting as usual. Then, perhaps because of a memory, word, smell or other trigger, they may react with outbursts of anger or sadness. It is important to tell the children that this is common and perfectly normal, there is nothing shameful in reacting this way.

## Benefits of a check-in with children

### As a supportive adult, you will:

- Gain insight into how children are feeling about returning to school and what they need to feel safe and supported as they enter back into routine classes or activities
- Have the opportunity to put children at ease, listen to their experiences and provide encouragement
- Have the opportunity to observe whether there are any children who need extra attention and support.

### Children will:

- Have the opportunity to reflect and strengthen their self-awareness as they share their experiences of the war
- Get the chance to understand their own reactions and feelings about their experiences, which will help them to manage their emotions
- Recognize that they are not alone and that their peers have had similar experiences
- Know that they are supported and learn about the resources available to them.

### Note to the facilitator

There may be children who need extra support or additional services. Before the check-in session, find out what services exist, how children can access them, and how to refer children if needed. After the session, and in the following weeks, continue to monitor your group and identify and refer children who are particularly distressed or in need of additional support or specialized care.



## Step-by-step guide to facilitating a check-in session

This guidance includes a script for a 90–120-minute check-in session consisting of a partially structured conversation, which takes place when the children return to school in person. The aim is to understand how they have been affected by the war and to reduce feelings of anxiety, sadness or confusion.

### The check-in session has six steps:

- 1** Introduce the session: how much time will be spent on the check in, how it will be done and its purpose.
- 2** How has the war affected us, our families and communities?
- 3** What has helped while face-to-face learning hasn't been possible?
- 4** What are we looking forward to?
- 5** What are we nervous about?
- 6** How do we take care of each other?

### You will need:

- A room or sheltered space where the whole group (preferably no more than 30 children) can sit safely together. If possible, everyone should be sitting in a circle, so they are able to see each other
- A blackboard/whiteboard and chalk/pen to write on the board
- Paper and pens for activities.

## Adapting the check-in for different ages

Facilitators should consider the age and developmental level of the children in their group before planning the check-in.

Ideas for adapting the session for younger and older groups of children include:

- **Younger children (6–8 years):** Consider shortening the session or potentially repeating it over several days using different prompt questions or activities to give more children the chance to share their experiences and feelings. Consider using art and play to illustrate and prompt the discussion. With any adaptation, make sure to end with Step 6 – how to take care of each other.
- **Older children (12–18 years):** Give them space to talk about what they are hearing about the war and any concerns or questions they may have. Time to journal – writing or drawing feelings and experiences – might be particularly appropriate for this age group.

### Tips for the facilitator



1. Acknowledge when a child shares, for example by making eye contact and thanking the child for their contribution. Make sure that everyone gets the chance to say something if they wish to. Dividing the children into smaller groups can make shy participants more comfortable about participating. You can invite a child to share, but don't put pressure on them.
2. You can provide general examples but be cautious about speaking about your personal experiences during the war other than broad statements such as, "I missed seeing everyone in school, what about you?" It is important to keep the children as the main focus of the conversation.
3. The times are indicative and flexible. Some groups may spend more time on one topic than another, but do not exceed the total time of 120 minutes.
4. It is important to use normalization and generalization statements to support children. Normalization statements are used to let the child know that they are having a normal reaction to a distressing event and that everyone experiences distress and adversity differently. Generalization statements let the child know that many other children share the same feelings and that they are not alone. See Appendix B for examples of commonly used statements.
5. If any children are new to the school or area (due to displacement), make a special effort to help them feel included and supported. See Appendix A for tips on how to support children in distress.

## Introduction to the session, how much time will be spent on the conversation, how it will be done and the purpose of the check-in

(10 minutes)

### Tips for the facilitator

The conversation must be led by a teacher who will be responsible for ensuring that the conversation is safe and inclusive. It is important to keep track of time as you have to get through all the steps and limit the conversation to 90–120 minutes in order to keep everyone's attention.



To start the session, sing a short song together or play an interactive game as an ice breaker.

Introduce the check-in session by saying something like, "Welcome back, it's great to see you! I've been really looking forward to getting back and I'm sure you have too. It's been a strange time and for some of us it's been really difficult. So, we'll spend the next hour or so talking about how things have been in our communities, how we ourselves have been, and how we can each help each other to adjust back into the routine of face-to-face classes or activities."

Go through the basic rules or have the children suggest and agree on them. (If possible, write them on a board.)

- There are no right or wrong answers – we respect everyone's opinion.
- We don't make fun of each other.
- We let each other talk and listen to each other.
- You don't have to say anything if you don't feel like it.

Ask if anyone has any other ideas for ground rules.

# 2

## How has the war affected us, our families and our communities?

(10–15 minutes)

### Tips for the facilitator



If a child shares something difficult, use techniques such as generalization or normalization. “Yes, I’m sure there are many others who have felt the same.” This part has two steps: first we talk about how the war has and continues to affect our lives, then how it has made us feel. The key is for participants to understand the connection between what has happened and the feelings they have had because of it. For example, “We’ve not been able to go to school and this has been difficult.” Or, “Many of us have been separated from our loved ones and this makes us anxious or feel guilty.”

Start by saying that, “The war has affected everyone in one way or another – children, young people and adults. Now we’ll talk about how the **events** have and continue to affect our lives.” Focus on **events** and give examples:

- We haven’t been able to go to school.
- Schools were shut down.
- Our parents, grandparents or brothers and sisters have become our teachers or helped us with our schoolwork.
- We’ve come together as a community and experienced great generosity.

If there are many children who have been displaced or shelling and bombs have destroyed a lot of structures, give these examples:

- We’ve had to leave our homes and towns to be safe.
- We’ve experienced bombing and shelling in our schools, homes or communities.

Ask for examples and acknowledge all the examples given.



Then talk about how these events have made us all feel many different emotions. Ask children to name some of the emotions they are feeling, or others might be feeling: sadness, fear, frustration, anger, confusion.

Emphasize that it is normal that we feel lots of different emotions. Normalize these feelings using statements in Appendix B.

Finish this part of the conversation by emphasizing that all reactions are completely understandable, and that there is a connection between the way our lives have been affected by the war and the way we **feel**.

Remind the participants that it may be helpful to discuss feelings and thoughts of being scared or sad with others. Encourage children to talk to someone they trust – whether that is with you as their teacher or another caregiver. Remember that if children do come to talk to you there are tips in Appendix A on how to support a child in distress.

### Note to the facilitator



If you notice that participants are hesitant to share (this may be the case with children who have experienced adversity) – you can switch the exercise around. Instead of asking the participants for input, you can provide a list of common events and the associated feelings and ask if anyone recognizes these in themselves or within their community. It may be easier for children to recognize feelings they have experienced, rather than to name their feelings.

For example, “I had to leave my home and only take what we could carry with us, and I wasn’t sure where we were headed and if I would ever see my home again which made me feel sad.” Or, “I was sitting in the bomb shelter with my grandmother and my brother and when the bombing was over, I felt relieved.”

# 3

## What has helped you while schools have been closed?

(5–10 minutes)

### Note to the facilitator

This part of the conversation is a brainstorm on strategies that have worked well for the participants. You can let them talk together in pairs first.



Next, make a list of the things that have helped them to feel better during the war. You can suggest ideas that others say have worked for them, such as:

- Talking or texting with a friend or loved one you're separated from
- Playing with siblings
- Asking for support

Give examples of other ways people in the community have helped themselves to feel better during the crisis:

- Being generous and supporting others
- Making new friends in community centres or temporary homes

Consider practicing belly breathing as a group to help everyone (including you!) feel calm.

### Belly breathing

With everyone sitting together in a circle, in a calm, slow voice, say:

“Sit up straight but relaxed and put both your hands gently on your belly. Look towards the ground if that makes you feel more comfortable. Now, let’s breathe in slowly and feel our bellies fill up with air. They should get nice and round. Now breathe out slowly and feel your belly get small again.”

Count from one to five slowly while you all breathe in, and then count back from five down to one as you all breathe out. Repeat four times. When finished, ask the children how they feel. Share how you are feeling too. Encourage children to practise belly breathing at home – maybe they can help teach their younger siblings or caregivers how to do it too.



# 4

## What are we looking forward to?

(10–15 minutes)

The purpose of this step is to support children to think positively about returning to school and to strengthen the sense of community within the classroom.

Now say something like, “Lots of children are really looking forward to seeing their friends and going back to face-to-face learning. What are you, or other children you know, most looking forward to about returning to school?” This gives children an opportunity to verbalize positive expectations and hear from their peers what they are excited about. You can also turn this into an activity and ask the children to draw what they are looking forward to and share it with the group or the person sitting next to them.



# 5

## What are we nervous about?

(5–10 minutes)

Reassure the group that many children are nervous about coming back to school or returning to other activities. Some are wondering whether their friends will still be their friends, some are afraid of sirens or being away from their family, and some are worried about having fallen behind in their studies. For some, it is like the first day in a new school, with butterflies in their stomach. Ask if they can relate to any of these feelings.

Tell the children, “It’s important to know and talk about what you’re nervous about. Ask for help, and together we’ll find the best way to help and care for each other.”



# 6

## How can we take care of each other?

(20–30 minutes)

Start by saying something like, “We all help to take care of ourselves and each other. I’m sure you’ve seen how communities have come together to support each other since the start of the war.”

Give examples of practices that will help students feel supported:

- Welcoming to the classroom new students who may have been displaced
- Helping new students find their way around the school (where things are located, how the school functions, etc.)
- Supporting each other with difficult emotions and feelings
- Being kind and supportive
- Making sure we all know what to do in an emergency; this can be an opportunity to remind children what will happen and what they can do in the case of an emergency, ensuring everyone understands the instructions and how they can help each other keep safe.

Now, let the participants ask questions about the practices above. Then ask them, “What will it take for us all to get off to a good start? Here you can add, “Be patient with yourself and each other, and be sure to include anyone you notice is feeling left out. Tell an adult [preferably name a specific person] if you are upset or see others around you who are upset.”

Ask the children to create posters or leaflets (depending on the supplies available). The posters can include drawings or key words that show how they are going to take care of themselves and others and deal with difficult feelings and thoughts. You can encourage children to create a song, drama or theatre production that can be put on for others.

**End on a positive note and say that you and all the other adults are looking forward to helping everyone have a good time at school and that it will be great to get started.**



## Staying well

War leaves a mark on everyone, including teachers. Many teachers will have been involved in efforts to support their community and witnessed the effects of war firsthand. It is important for teachers to also look after themselves and seek support from peers or professional help if needed.

### **To manage stress on a daily basis:**<sup>1</sup>

1. Take breaks when needed.
2. Take care of your basic needs.
3. Do something that brings you joy and something that is meaningful to you.
4. Take at least five minutes a day to speak to someone you care about.
5. Talk to your manager or other colleagues at work about wellbeing.
6. Establish and stick to daily routines.
7. Minimize unhealthy habits.
8. Regularly write down things you are grateful for.
9. Think about what you can and can't control.
10. Try relaxation activities throughout the day.

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. (2020). *Basic Psychosocial Skills: A Guide for COVID-19 Responders*. IASC.

## Appendix A: Tips for supporting children in distress

As a teacher, you are often the first one to notice when a child may be in distress. There are a number of ways you can help to calm, comfort and settle them. First, speak softly, slowly and calmly. Try to sit down next to the child or crouch down so that you are at their level. If it is culturally appropriate, maintain eye or physical contact, such as holding the child's hand or placing your arm around or on their shoulder. Always first ask the child if they feel comfortable with physical contact.

If the child is panicking or looks disoriented, encourage them to focus on non-distressing things in the immediate environment. For example, try to shift their attention to something they can see or hear, such as the colour of the room or the reassuring sounds in the environment. Help them to reduce their feeling of panic or anxiety by asking them to focus on their breathing and encourage them to breathe deeply and slowly. You can even make this playful and show the child how to breathe deeply like a cat or a lion. Or you can ask what their favourite animal is and ask them to breathe deeply like that animal. You can even make animal sounds!

When speaking with a child who may be in distress, always practise attentive listening skills.

- Show that you are listening by nodding, smiling and using facial expressions.
- Paraphrase what the child said and repeat it back to them to ensure that you have understood them correctly.
- Encourage the child to talk if they want to.
- Respond to what the child tells you – without judgement.
- Observe non-verbal cues and reflect them back to the child if appropriate.

## Appendix B: Using normalization and generalization statements

Normalization and generalization statements are not meant to ignore or dismiss the difficult emotions a child is experiencing, but to help the child to understand that they are not alone, and that the feelings they are experiencing are common. It is an opportunity to help the child and other children present to understand that there is a connection between the events they have experienced and their thoughts and feelings. The key point is that the child understands that their reactions are understandable and human.

Normalization and generalization statements can also be very effective in protecting the child from saying more than they are later comfortable with. Diving deep into emotions is not always useful, especially in a group without a trained mental health professional or outside of a close trusting relationship.

### Some examples of normalization statements:

"It's completely normal to have strong emotions like this. Emotions help us or give us information. For example, fear tells us to run or leave a dangerous situation. Sadness helps us to rest so that we can mourn what we've lost before we move forward."

"War can bring a lot of difficult emotions. You may feel stressed and overwhelmed by everything that's happening around you. It can be difficult to deal with these feelings, to communicate them to others, and to ask for help."

"It's completely understandable to feel angry. It's a common response to war. That someone did this to us can make us feel angry..."

"Yes, of course those of us who have experienced bombings can feel relieved and happy that we are safe, but we can feel confused and very sad and scared at the same time. It's not easy to experience so many emotions at the same time, but it's perfectly normal and it's because of what happened."

"It's perfectly normal to want to play and be happy sometimes, even if someone has died. That's how we're made as humans. Sometimes feelings change back and forth. It doesn't mean we're not mourning, but our hearts sometimes need to take in what's happened a little at a time. They need a break and we need to concentrate on the world around us."

"It's perfectly normal to be nervous on the first days back at school, especially if it's a new school with new friends. You're not yet familiar with the place or the people. That's why we all need to be kind to each other."

The purpose of generalization statements is to let the child know that many other children share the same feelings, and that they are not alone. Using normalization and generalization statements together is important so that the child understands that their feelings and reactions are normal and that many other children share them. This helps reduce feelings of isolation and can create a sense of hope.

Avoid saying things like "You'll be fine" because you do not know this to be true.

### **Examples of generalization statements:**

"I know a lot of children who are feeling the same way as you. Some are your age, some are older. I also know some children who are feeling much better now."

"I know one girl who's doing much better after talking to her mother about what was troubling her."

Such stories can be used to talk about how a child copes, without exposing the participants:

"I know many children who were very sad. It helped them to talk to their friends."

"I know many children who found the first months very difficult but are now doing much better..."

"Thanks for sharing this. I'm sure many of us in this room can recognize those feelings."

"I'm so sorry that happened, it must be very difficult. Most children who haven't heard from their father for a long time are very worried and can find it difficult to sleep, just like you described."

"I'm so sorry to hear that your [...] died. That's an extremely painful experience. Any child who loses their [...] will grieve and miss them and sometimes feel very alone. Many children I know have found it comforting to be with friends and do something ordinary like going to school. The feelings are still there, but for many it helps to spend time doing something ordinary."