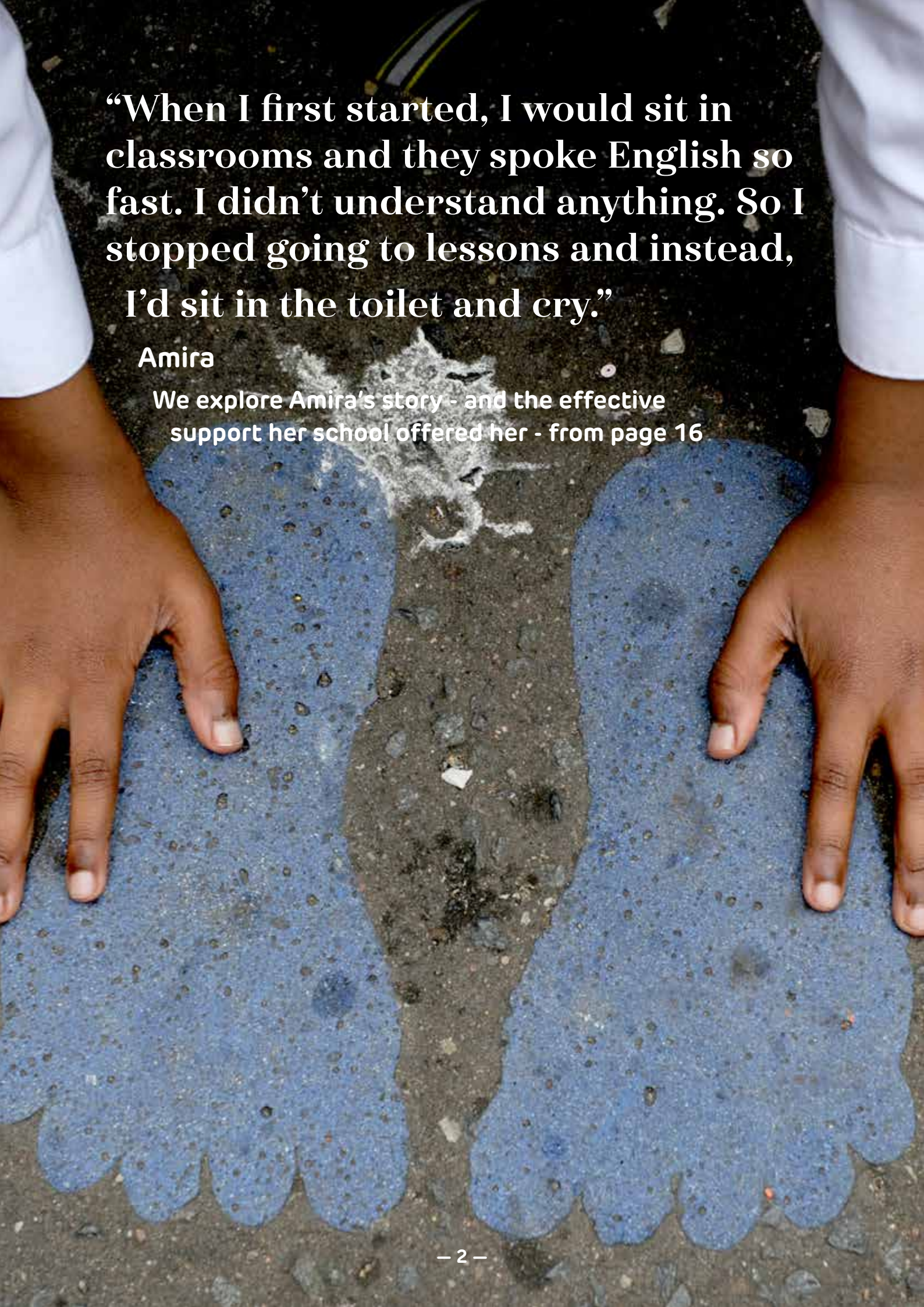
Supporting displaced families

A good practice guide for schools



“When I first started, I would sit in classrooms and they spoke English so fast. I didn’t understand anything. So I stopped going to lessons and instead, I’d sit in the toilet and cry.”

Amira

We explore Amira’s story - and the effective support her school offered her - from page 16

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About this guide

People being forced to leave where they consider 'home' to live elsewhere (involuntary dislocation) can happen due to many factors – from escaping war or persecution to fleeing domestic abuse or facing homelessness. It can understandably be a very challenging time for families.

This good practice guide aims to give education staff the knowledge and guidance you need to support displaced children and young people, and their families. We developed it by speaking to people and families with lived experience of being displaced, plus teachers and senior leaders working closely with these families.

Whether you have one child who has recently arrived and enrolled at your school or you're supporting a larger community of displaced families, this resource offers points to consider, guidance and suggested questions to reflect on. It also features the story of Folkestone Academy – a school putting much of our suggested good practice into action.

We hope this guide fills the notable gap we see in schools feeling informed and equipped to understand displaced families. It can also help you meet the Ofsted framework criteria of 'Supports the needs of particular groups or individual children/young people and their families'.

About Place2Be

Place2Be is a children and young people's mental health charity providing counselling, mental health support and training in UK schools. We've collaborated with Save the Children UK on this guide to help understand how schools can best support families who have been displaced. We're grateful for their funding.

To find out more about Place2Be and the services we offer, please visit **www.place2be.org.uk**

How your school can support displaced families

Remember there's no one-size-fits-all approach

Being forced to move from their home may of course impact a child or young person's wellbeing. However the impact will be different from individual to individual.

It's important to remember that the displaced students you work with aren't a homogeneous group – they may have had vastly different experiences. So there's no single approach to working with them.

It's crucial to see these children and young people as individuals. It's also vital to remember that being displaced is only part of their experience.

'All displaced families are traumatised with complex mental health illnesses' is a common myth. Fortunately, this isn't true. Experiencing involuntary dislocation is not a mental health diagnosis.

Reflection point

If you feel a child or young person's wellbeing needs are beyond what your school can meet internally, how can you support them?

- Can you provide support like counselling in a child or young person's chosen language?
- Is there a voluntary agency in the wider community that can offer support?
- If there's no option for support in the child/young person's chosen language, could support take the form of working creatively? For example, could support be based around art, drama or music therapy, where there's less pressure?

Being forced to leave your place of home isn't comfortable nor pleasant for anyone. However, everyone journeying to a new location will have a different experience, even within the same family. Some people might benefit from extra support. More often than not, establishing a supportive network will be most useful (see below).

See strengths, not just challenges

'All displaced children and young people are vulnerable' is another common myth.

Being forced to move from home may pose significant challenges to a child or young person. However, again, everyone is different. Alongside or instead of heightening vulnerability, being displaced can also elicit strengths and resilience in children and young people. This can include closer family relations, new skills, hope and ambition.

Seeing strengths alongside difficulties in all children and young people is important as it can help us to move from a 'problem-focused' approach to a 'solution-focused' one.

Reflection point

With these well-known myths in mind, what assumptions and feelings might your school have in welcoming a child or young person who has been displaced?

"I have learnt how much strength I have after everything I have been through."

Student

"My staff would be worried to say the wrong thing, to make things worse. Or they want to know too much. Actually, if you use your normal approach to relating to a child, this works best. Then the staff member realises that they support the same football team."

School senior leader

Build resilience

Risk factors are anything that can adversely affect a person on a physical, emotional, psychological or environmental level. They can come in many forms and show themselves internally and externally.

Resilience factors help a child or young person thrive despite adversity. They don't make risks disappear. However, they can act as a buffer against them.

We know children and young people with internal and external resilience factors can do well despite adversity. We can often be 'dazzled' by risk factors when working with children and young people who have been displaced. But it's important to locate and 'bolster up' resilience factors.

At school, the following can help build resilience:

- the ritual and routine of the school day
- the opportunity to experience relationships with trusted, helpful adults
- the safety offered around boundaries (around time, behaviour and relationships, for example)
- developing a sense of identity through extracurricular activities
- exploring skills and interests through a varied curriculum.

Reflection point

How is your school setting a place for resilience? What have you observed in your school culture or personal practice that can be considered a resilience factor?

"There was a time when I had to go to an after-school detention. This was on a Friday. I go to my mosque on a Friday – going there to worship is important to me and brings me peace. The school made sure that I could still go to mosque, I did my detention on another day."

Student

Think systemically

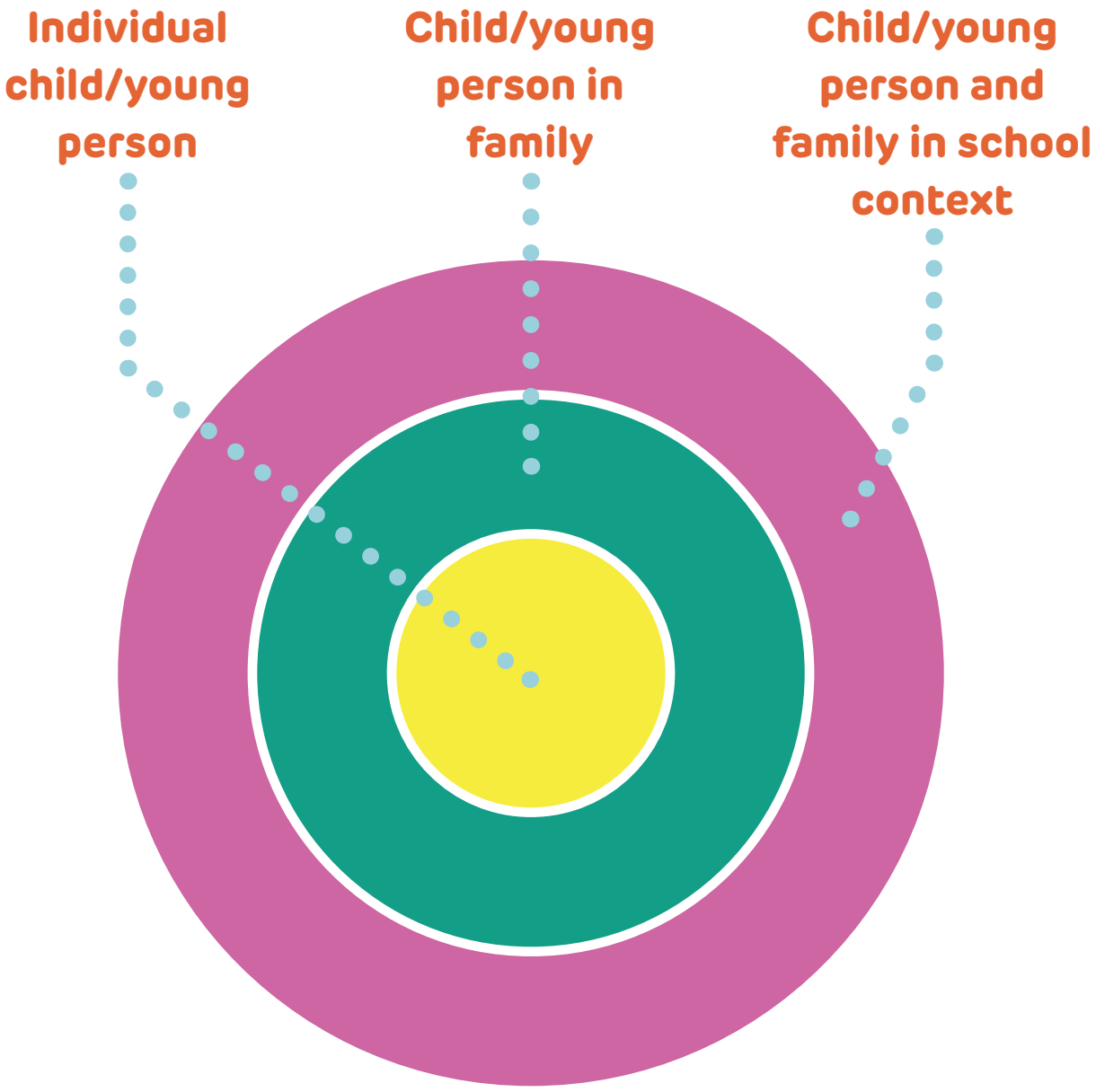
It's important to remember that no child or young person exists in isolation. Several factors impact their wellbeing, and it's useful to consider them all when working with displaced families.

Factors within the child or young person's immediate environment like family, school and neighbourhood – and the relationships between them (for example, between parents and teachers) – are usually the most influential.

However, wider environmental factors also have an important part to play. These include social media, local policies, NHS access and opportunities for progression. Wider social factors like economics, cultures, ideologies and racism can have a strong influence on the child or young person too.

Reflection point

Think of a displaced child or young person in your school. What systemic factors may be affecting them?



Adopt a relational approach

A relational approach in a school setting is about building and maintaining positive relationships among students, teachers and other staff to create a supportive and collaborative environment. It's grounded in the belief that strong, healthy relationships are fundamental to effective teaching, learning and overall school success.

Adopting this approach in your school can play a key role in supporting displaced children and young people to thrive. By prioritising relationships, schools can create an environment that supports displaced children and young people's academic success and wellbeing, making sure they feel connected, supported and empowered to succeed.

In practice in your school, this might look like:

- **Creating personal connections**. School staff should take the time to get to know students individually. This could be by learning their interests, strengths and challenges. Having that personal connection can increase displaced children and young people's engagement and motivation.

- **Building mutual trust and respect.** These are the foundations of any good relationship, and staff should work hard to build them with displaced children and young people.

- **Fostering a sense of belonging.** Encouraging collaboration and learning activities such as group projects and peer support helps students develop social skills and learn from each other. These interactions can also foster a sense of community and belonging.

"My teacher didn't speak my language, but she spoke to me slowly which helped so much. She was very patient. It helped so much, this is how I learnt English. She really wanted me to do well. I'll never forget her."

Student

"I know my teacher trusts me, it's the relationship that we have. She knows me. She is always so calm, even when I am being cheeky! But she does trust me when it comes to helping other students. She knows how much I like helping people who have just started in school."

Student

“Now when someone starts school that speaks my language, I know what it’s like, so I know how to show the school to them. If they don’t speak my language, I know I can still help them feel OK. I have made the effort to learn some words in other languages as I know it can help others.”

Student

“During Ramadan, my teacher asked the class not to have food out in the classroom – this made me so happy. I still remember this now, it was amazing that she knew about my religion. I really felt that she cared – this made me a better student for her.”

Student

"Parents groups that we want to build a relationship with, we work with them in a way that makes them feel safe. Therefore, we don't expect a family new to the school who doesn't speak English to 'pop in' to a coffee morning. For example, we have built up a large Roma community in this school. We held a Roma-specific coffee morning, we understand it's what you need to do to create a community."

School senior leader

- **Being inclusive.** Creating inclusive classroom environments where all students feel they belong, regardless of their background, can help develop a supportive and cohesive learning community. This could include checking that you're pronouncing a student's name correctly and taking genuine interest when a child or young person is talking about their background or interests. Validating home cultures, holidays or traditions can also give students a feeling of being connected to their new community.

- **Building a family-friendly culture.** Involving parents and carers in school activities strengthens the partnership between home and school, and can help displaced families feel part of the school community. Including displaced families might include making your school newsletter and communication channels accessible to all, holding family events and giving space to parent/carer voice in school decisions.

- **Reflecting.** We all have a level of internalised bias. It's useful to encourage staff to reflect on this and notice when bias might come to the surface (perhaps in the form of the language we use, for example). This can help them improve their interactions with students. Try to build space into your school culture for staff to reflect upon what anti-oppressive looks like for them.

"In our school, we hold a 'celebration of cultural dress' day. We often see another side to young people on these days which is so lovely. It's also an opportunity to learn about the cultures their teachers are from."

School senior leader

- **Making moments of challenge a learning opportunity.** It's important to see displaced children and young people flexibly when they're exhibiting challenging behaviour, bearing in mind their particular challenges.

- **Learning your local landscape.** Find out about any agencies in your local area that could offer resources and additional support for displaced students. Many smaller voluntary organisations don't advertise all their services, so it's worth contacting them directly to see what they might be able to offer. Bringing in outside, expert organisations can be helpful for both your school and students, helping schools address student needs comprehensively.

Reflection point

How does your school adopt a relational approach? Is there anything you could improve to support displaced students?

"If a dislocated young person is bringing unhelpful beliefs and assumptions, I really feel for them as it's so hard to navigate different cultural expectations. I remind myself that they are a product from their surroundings. I am not from British culture. So, I know it can be so hard. So rather than putting my hand on the school's behaviour policy, I take the time to speak to them and educate them."

Teacher

Consider how you welcome new families

What does your school admission process look like? The settling-in process could take longer for a child or young person who has been displaced. It's important to think through how to best approach this. Remember: first impressions count, both for children and young people and their families – it might be one of the few times family members visit your school.

Before displaced students start at your school, think about:

- **Forward planning for the family's arrival.** It's a good idea to appoint a member of staff who can be their key point of contact. They can also champion these families' needs on the school's agenda.

- **Your priority for your first meeting with the student and/or their family should be establishing feelings of safety and belonging.** Put the relationship first. You may want to try to gather as much information as possible from parents before this first meeting, rather than during it.

- **Arranging for the student to visit your school before their first day.** This is another opportunity to focus on creating a good relationship. Make sure you introduce them to key staff and give them a tour of the school – remember your school environment might feel quite different to what they've experienced before. If you have another student who speaks the same language, could they help with the tour?

- **Checking if the student has what they need to start school.** This could include uniform, PE kit and classroom equipment. Offer to support with this if necessary.

- **Reviewing your enrolment documents.** Are the documents your school uses to enrol new starters inclusive and equitable in how people can access them? For example, are they available in a range of languages? Are they reflective of the whole school community?

"My daughter had to tick a box to say which ethnicity she was. There was no one that looked like her in the school and sadly she couldn't find herself on the form. She felt like she didn't belong."

Parent

"I wasn't sure how the school system ran in the UK. I was confused about the year groups, as this is different to my country. My children were also confused. It would be great if it was written down somewhere, the ages in the year groups."

Parent

When it comes to your student's first day and settling-in period, consider:

- Some children and young people who have been displaced are ready for the classroom, some are not. Some need a bit more support before they can make use of their lessons.
- Your student might benefit from a reduced or staggered timetable.
- Integration is important. However, some students might need longer in a more supportive environment like an English as an Additional Language (EAL) class before they can make best use of the classroom environment.
- Make sure your student knows where to go in school if they need support. Think about setting up regular check-ins with a designated staff member to see how things are going.
- Be mindful that students may be unfamiliar with common faith celebrations in the UK, like Christmas. Taking time to explain these can be helpful.

"On my first day of starting school in the UK, I was given a timetable in English, I didn't understand this so I kept getting lost and couldn't ask for help."

Student

Reflection point

Imagine you're starting a new school or workplace in a different country. What might you need practically and emotionally?

"As Christians, celebrating Christmas is a wonderful time for us. In the UK – it is different. We had never seen crackers before. My children felt a bit silly as they didn't know what to do with them at the school's Christmas lunch."

Parent

Think about staff wellbeing and skills

You should consider the wellbeing of school staff working with displaced families, and whether they need support and opportunities to develop their skills. It's a good idea to start by asking staff what would be useful, as this will be very individual.

Some other points to consider:

- Specific training on working with displaced families will be useful for most school staff as well as specific staff groups, helping them feel more confident and skilled. Our resource list on page 20 lists some organisation that can help.
- Make sure senior staff have regular check-ins with staff who work with the school's displaced community. Timetable these as an opportunity to discuss wellbeing – not performance management.
- Consider the culture in your school around employee assistance programmes. Is the signposting to these services clear and visible? It can be helpful to normalise and encourage staff to access these services.

Reflection point

What's the current landscape of staff wellbeing in your school or college? Where are staff most likely to seek support? (Through peers, line managers or external agencies, for example?)

Case study: Folkestone Academy International Hub

Folkestone Academy in Kent is proud to host a large community of families and students who have been displaced. The school has met their needs by developing its International Hub.

The school understood that it wasn't helpful to place students straight into a learning environment before learning basic English, having the confidence to access lessons and developing effective relationships with school staff.

The International Hub is a centre where young people can access support to feel 'classroom-ready', emotionally and academically.

The Hub isn't just a centre, it's an approach the school takes. This includes:

- equity around technology so all students can access learning at home
- a relational approach, recognising each student as an individual
- being flexible and innovative in involving parents in the school community
- building self-awareness in the whole school community through staff training and wider school events.

The school has observed notable benefits in investing time and resources in their displaced young people. They access more lessons and need the hub less and less.

Folkestone Academy takes a whole-school approach, with the school's senior leadership and governance driving its passion for supporting its displaced community. This commitment has informed the school's policy, development plan and values (its motto is 'Strength in Adversity').

The International Hub puts relationships at the heart of the intervention. The school understands that it needs to foster internal safety before students are ready to engage with a full timetable. During this time, staff get to know students, teach basic English, and support students to navigate potential cultural differences.

Amira's experience at the Hub

Amira* arrived in the UK when she was 14, by boat after fleeing persecution in her home country. She had always had academic aspirations and abilities. However, in her home country she was no longer allowed to go to school because she was a girl. Amira rejected the expectations of marrying in her teen years and made the long and dangerous journey to the UK. The trip was especially dangerous for a girl, so she cut off her hair and disguised herself as a boy. She still faced abuse and violence during her journey.

After being met by the police when she reached the UK, Amira was placed with a foster carer. Two weeks later, she started at Folkestone Academy.

"When I first started, I would sit in classrooms and they spoke English so fast. I didn't understand anything. So I stopped going to lessons and instead, I'd sit in the toilet and cry," she says.

Amira accessed the school's International Hub for most of her timetable initially. Her teacher spoke to her slowly and took the time to get to know her. Amira loved art, especially sketching and drawing, and would share this with her teacher.

Amira was able to access counselling in her first language to process the big changes she had experienced. She was amazed at having access to this support and other healthcare. In her home country, she felt that women wouldn't be offered this.

The school dining hall was busy and overwhelming, so Amira used the International Hub at lunch breaks. She could work on her art and speak to her teacher in this quieter space.

"The school is really big and busy. Having somewhere to go throughout the day really helped," she explains. "Especially at lunchtime – at the start I didn't have any friends, but I had somewhere to go."

Over her first term, Amira's spoken English developed and so did her friendships. This was reflected in her timetable where she was able to access more lessons. "We notice that students use the International Hub less and less over time," says Amira's teacher. "Some come back to check in and say hello. It's about knowing that it's here for them."

Amira hopes to become a dentist and is very committed to achieving this. She still loves art and checks in at the International Hub. "I wouldn't know any English or be in lessons if I didn't have the International Hub!" Amira concludes.

Ali's experience at the Hub

Ali's* father worked with the American army. After his father's disappearance, he knew he would have to flee his home country for his safety. Ali travelled solo, for 18 months on foot, through seven countries before travelling by boat and reaching the UK. He was 14 at the time.

When he started at Folkestone Academy, he was met with a timetable in English. No one else in the school looked like him or spoke his language.

Ali found himself 'shutting down' during classes as he didn't understand what was being said. He also struggled to make friends as he had never met anyone who didn't share the same religion as him. He felt other students were wary of him and he couldn't make connections. He knew he had to learn English. His frustration around understanding others and feeling understood himself resulted in behaviour that challenged school staff.

At the time, the creation of Folkestone Academy's International Hub was in its early stages. Ali started to access this space and the Hub's teacher. Ali felt he finally had the time and space to learn English.

"My teacher didn't speak the same language as me, but she spoke slowly. She also wasn't from the UK which helped. She knew what it was like for me," he explains.

In the International Hub, Ali took part in discussions around the culture in the UK. He learnt to navigate differences between himself and others in the school and could start to form connections.

"It's not just learning English, it's about learning the way that English people think," Ali explains. "Then I learnt about how I thought. This really helped me – my teacher knew exactly how to help."

In learning about UK culture, he was moved and delighted when his religious traditions were recognised at school.

"During Ramadan, my teacher in the International Hub asked others not to be eating in front of me. This was amazing, I didn't realise they knew," enthuses Ali. "My religion is very important to me, and to see this in my class, it was a great day."

As Ali formed more relationships around school, his talent for playing cricket was recognised and staff supported him to take this forward.

Ali explains: "I have an accent and speak another language, so do lots of people. I'm also just a 16-year-old who loves cricket and spending time with my friends."

As the school's displaced community has grown, Ali now has the role of being a 'buddy', where he shows new starters around the school.

"I know how it feels to be new and not know anything. I'll learn some words in their language and speak slowly. I'll show them around the school and take them to the International Hub," Ali says.

Folkestone Academy teacher's perspective

"Some children haven't been to a school before so it's really important to manage expectations of what can be achieved in a term. If they've not been to school, then they start in a new culture – some struggle to grasp the education system altogether. These students need time, patience and a lot of understanding.

"When I have been challenged by these students, I remind myself that their frame of reference is a very different culture. They need to be met with empathy and support.

"I've noticed girls from certain communities arriving with very little academic hope or ambition, as they believe their purpose is to marry and have a family. It's our job to inspire and help them find their potential.

"So many students keep using the International Hub as it's somewhere they feel safe, they don't feel embarrassed at their level of English. Yes, they learn English in the Hub, but they mainly come for the emotional safety and support. It's a smaller community where they build social and emotional tools before venturing into the bigger school."

***names changed to protect identities**

More training and resources

Place2Be's children's mental health training course

Place2Be's senior mental health leads training (Department for Education assured)

Place2Be's mental health resources for schools

The Coalition for Inclusion and Anti-Oppressive Practice's Race is complicated toolkit for psychological therapies training

Anna Freud's Mentally Healthy Schools resources

Education Support, a charity supporting the wellbeing of teachers and education staff

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