

# GUIDE FOR REFUGEE PARENTS

BY PSYCHOLOGISTS  
ATLE DYREGROV AND MAGNE RAUNDALEN



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## THE ICONS

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



This icon symbolizes the chapter 'Advice about the parental role'. Here you can find guidance on what is important to keep in mind as a parent.



This is the symbol for the chapter 'Advice from parents to children'. This chapter offers practical advice on how you as a parent can help and support your child the best possible way.



The chapter with this symbol is about 'Self-care'. In this chapter, you can find advice on how to take good care of yourself.



# INTRODUCTION – BEING A PARENT IN A REFUGEE SITUATION

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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 predictable, with regular routines. Brain development takes place in close interaction with the environment, and children's skills and abilities are developed on the basis of their interaction with parents and other close caregivers. The fine balance of communication between adults and children occurs when we make space for it, take note of what the children say and do, and only demand of them what is appropriate for their age and level of development.

An important precondition for your success in your parental role is that you manage to keep up with your children in their adaptation to their new culture. Children adapt relatively quickly to a new life in the country they live in, while it may be more difficult for parents



to do the same. Both you and your children have to live with uncertainty about the future. Studies tell us that both children and adults in a refugee situation find that the most difficult thing to live with is the uncertainty. To begin with, there may be uncertainty and fear concerning other

family members who have been left behind, but the overriding feeling is often one of uncertainty about the future. Will we be allowed to stay here? Do we risk being sent back? When will we know? Few newcomers receive any assurances from the authorities that they will be able to stay indefinitely – and you will have to find a way to live with the uncertainty about what the future might bring.



## REACTIONS TO TRAUMATIC LIFE EVENTS

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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, only to find that these memories keep coming back. It is the same for children. We usually say to children that we cannot do anything about what has happened, because it is in the past. What we can do something about, however, is the unpleasant thoughts and feelings that constantly accompany the memories. In this guide, we will be offering a wide range of specific advice for being a parent in a refugee situation.

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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 distancing ourselves from it. This is especially the case if someone close to us dies. Then, this feeling of unreality allows the child to keep parts of reality at a distance, thereby lessening the psychological pain. But this requires energy, and it can be difficult for the child to embrace the new feeling of safety and take joy in it.

Many children, who have lived under circumstances of war or been on the run for a long period of time, may have difficulties comprehending what they have been through. As they gradually learn to feel safe in our society without war, it is important to give them a simple explanation to the things they have experienced in their home country and during the flight, and explain why everyone is now here in a new place. It helps them organise their thoughts and understand what is happening to them, and why it was important to flee. It is important to know the normal reactions that a child will experience following traumatic events.



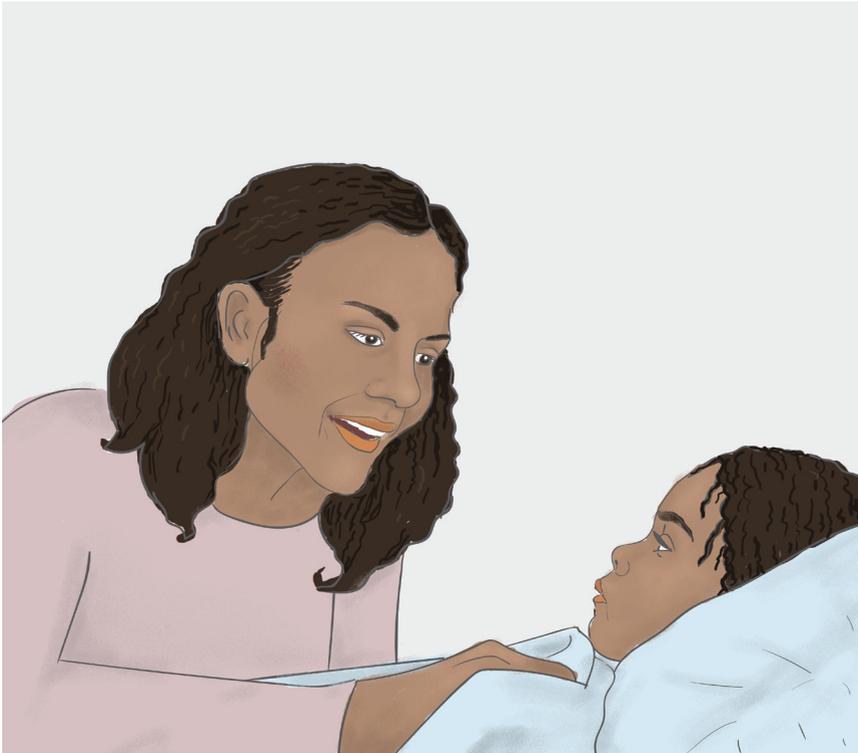
## COMMON REACTIONS IN THE AFTERMATH OF WAR AND FLIGHT FROM WAR

- **HEIGHTENED ANXIETY.** When we are exposed to danger, the brain will become more alert. In that case, the brain is extremely sensitive to anything that could be a sign of danger. Even signals which are completely harmless, such as noises or movements, can be perceived as dangerous. This sensitivity often remains active a long time after the danger has passed. This is shown as an increased tendency to be startled, difficulties concentrating and sleeping, fear of losing those we love, and the need to be close to those people who make us feel safe. Children may develop what is called separation anxiety. If that is the case, they want to have their parents within sight at all times. The biggest fear for children of all ages is that something should happen to their parents, but they may try to hide it.
- **POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS: INTRUSIVE MEMORIES.** Important and dangerous situations are often the ones most easily remembered. This is to assist us in rapidly becoming aware of new dangers, but it is also due to the fact that substances released into the blood, when we are afraid, will affect our memories. When we are exposed to overpowering situations, the memories can permanently burn themselves into our minds. Everything experienced during the event may be stored deep in the memory: Visual impressions, sounds, tactile sensations, tastes and smells. These may then return later as distressing memories, almost like reliving the event (also known as flashbacks). Anything that reminds us of the event, such as a smell, can trigger the reliving of the memory. When memories pop up uninvited, they can disturb our concentration and make it difficult for us to learn new things, and this is why it is important for children to learn strategies to gain control over such memories. Thoughts, feelings and memories may find their way into the mind for a long time.

- **POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS: AVOIDANCE AND ANXIETY.** A common reaction to trauma is to avoid anything connected with the traumatic experience. Situations, people, external reminders (sounds, smells, etc.) or internal reminders (memories and thoughts) can make children seek to avoid the specific situation. This can cause them to withdraw from things they used to do, thereby leading to a more restricted life. At the same time, they may be more restless than before because they are on the alert, and the substances released into their blood make them more anxious as they prepare them to face danger. Over time, these reactions can drain both their physical and mental resources, and the children may become passive, numb or react with little or no emotion. Post-traumatic reactions may continue for months, sometimes even years, after the distressing situation has ended.



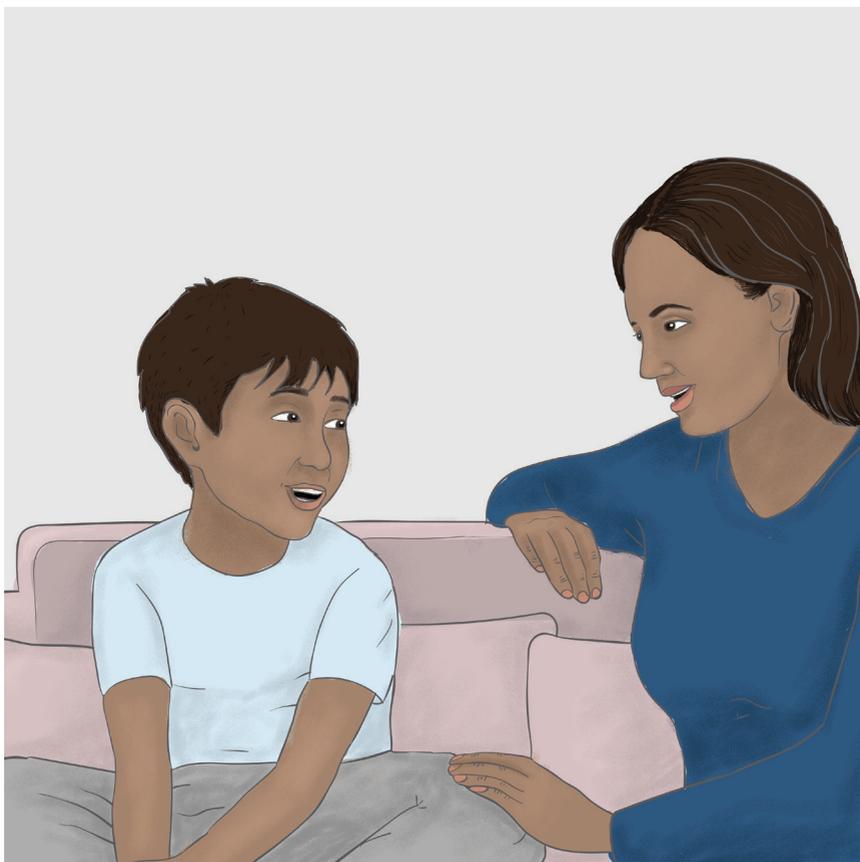
- **SADNESS AND BEREAVEMENT.** Some children have experienced the deaths of immediate family members, friends, neighbours or others. All of them have lost their home, their school and their sense of security. Naturally, this leads to feelings of loss, longing and sorrow. Children have the capacity to 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.



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- **IRRITATION AND ANGER.** It is natural and understandable that children can feel anger over what has happened. Their anger can be directed against those they hold responsible for the situation, against parents who have failed to protect them, against others or against themselves. Poor sleep, cramped living conditions and a high amount of mental energy can worsen the situation. Of course, this makes the job of parenting more difficult in everyday life.
  - **SELF-REPROACH AND FEELINGS OF GUILT.** Children (and adults) often blame themselves for things they have done, said or thought (or failed to do, say or think). Unfortunately, this happens in many situations where there is no basis for it. Children may believe they should have saved someone in the boat, brought others along with them when they fled, taken more responsibility for younger siblings, and so on. If they feel ashamed of what they have done or thought, this may especially weaken their sense of self-confidence. The loss of their home, their friends, all their belongings and the position that they held in their circle of friends may weaken their feeling of self-worth even further. Many children have said that they feel completely worthless because they have lost everything. If this is the case, it helps to emphasise to them how valuable they are, and that there is hope for a better future.
  - **DIFFICULTIES CONCENTRATING AND REMEMBERING THINGS.** With the high mental energy, intrusive memories, fear of new things, and great uncertainty concerning the future, it is not surprising that many children find themselves struggling with memory and concentration problems. This makes it harder for them to learn new things, especially in school where lessons require a lot of concentration.



- **DIFFICULTIES SLEEPING.** Many children, especially, encounter sleep problems, both in the form of having trouble falling asleep as well as waking up. Some of them also experience nightmares. When the brain is “on alert”, it is difficult to fall asleep, and you do not reach the level of deep sleep that you would otherwise have done.
- **PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS.** Children may react with physical symptoms such as headache, stomach pain, or pains and discomfort elsewhere in the body. Some can experience fainting spells similar to epileptic seizures, and they may also become more tired in their day-to-day life. This should be checked by a doctor, but most often it is due to fear or is a consequence of them trying to push the painful memories away. Talking to them about what they are afraid of, assuring them that they are now in a safe place, and urging them to express themselves through writing and drawing, and to take control over the memories, may help reduce the symptoms.
- **SOCIAL RELATIONS.** In most cases, the refugee situation itself causes children to lose contact with their friends, except for what can be kept up via social media. Some quickly make new friends in their new country, while others withdraw from social contact, often to protect themselves from further losses. Life as a refugee can be a lonely experience, especially if you are mourning friends and others who you may have lost.
- **OTHER REACTIONS.** As a reaction to war and life on the run, some children may take a step backward in their development. They may begin wetting themselves again after having successfully stopped using nappies, or they may start speaking in a more childish way. This is only temporary and will pass if you, as a parent, stay patient and do not get angry. Some children will become unusually active. This may be because physical activity keeps painful thoughts and memories at bay.



## COMMON REACTIONS AT DIFFERENT AGE LEVELS

**SMALL CHILDREN** (under 7 years) rely on adults in order to understand and interpret their surroundings. They react to their parents' fear, but they may also themselves have painful memories stored in the brain - memories that cause them, for example, to have extreme reactions to loud noises. With familiar and calm adults around them, they will gradually feel safe. Insecurity in small children often shows itself through them becoming clingy, losing skills (e.g. having a dry nappy), and perhaps above all, having sleep problems.

**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 pronounced
- The child withdraws into him- or herself, avoids contact with others and becomes passive and quiet
- The child's personality begins to alter

The child being affected by the new situation, and this extending over a period of time, is a normal reaction which should not give cause for concern – especially if there is uncertainty as to what will happen in the future. If you are in any doubt, talk to a professional (health visitor, doctor, etc.). Remember that in Scandinavia, asking for help is not considered shameful, neither for physical nor mental problems. For example, it is common practice to speak to a psychologist if you are going through a hard time.



## ADVICE ABOUT THE PARENTAL ROLE

The advice provided here comes from our extensive experience with meeting refugee parents and other parents who have experienced emergencies or disasters, as well as our knowledge of child development obtained from recent research.

### OPEN AND DIRECT COMMUNICATION

Research and experience show that talking openly about subjects related to loss and trauma is the best thing for children. Having an open dialogue about painful subjects enables the child to talk about difficult issues. It also prevents distrust in the family, where someone knows something about someone or something in the family, while



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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 accept that the news might be hard for children to accept. Making children sad by communicating honestly and directly with them is not a dangerous thing, because the parents are the only ones who can truly comfort the child. It is worse if things are covered up, and the children get to hear about it later from someone else. Then, their trust in you will be undermined. Answer the questions they may have about what has happened, about the reactions they have seen you have, and about their own reactions. Children do not need to know all the gruesome details, but important information affecting their lives now and in the future should not be hidden from them.

You have come to a country where parents are influenced by a so-called “child psychology culture”; they explain and converse with children about most things. We know that some of you may be thinking: *“Our family have all experienced the same, there’s nothing more to talk about; it’s best to try to forget.”* From trauma research carried out on children, we know that children will often be left alone with their thoughts and feelings if they are unable to talk to their parents about their experiences. They will also pick up signals from adults without asking questions, because they think it is too difficult for their parents to talk about. Talking to children about the hardest and worst things, and teaching them to deal with the difficulties that these things have caused, provides them with the best foundation for coping in the future. That way, they can use their resources on their school and education, without having recollections of war and their flight destroy their concentration and their memory. If there are several adults in your family (e.g. grandparents) now living together, it is important that you all agree (let the other adults know what this guide says), so that you do not give out different signals and information to the children.



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 *“Everything is fine”*), 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.



It is through interaction with their parents that children gradually learn to calm themselves down when they are feeling anxious. If your children have experienced frightening things, you as a parent can help them put their fears into words, and advise them what to do when they are having a tough time. For example, younger children can make drawings, while older children can write their thoughts down (see later advice in this guide). Children often carry around misconceptions of various situations, which the adults can help put right, for example when they feel responsibility for something that has happened.

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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 closeness is good for all children, especially the younger ones.

### **TALKING ABOUT THE ABSOLUTE WORST**

Some parents think it is dangerous for children to talk about the worst things they have experienced. Actually, the reverse is true. If children are being tormented daily by memories and thoughts about something terrible they have experienced, they need help from adults to organise their memories so that they become less overpowering and less distressing. As parents, you can do this by listening to your children, confirming their experiences, and carefully questioning and following up on what they are saying. If they are haunted by images in their minds, you can try out some of the methods mentioned later. At the same time, you can tell your children that danger is now over, that it belongs to the past and that they are now safe. It is normal that talking to your children about the painful memories will at first give rise to more anxiety and more nightmares. The reason why we still recommend you to do this is that things usually get much better in the long term.

You can encourage children to express what they are feeling through games or drawings, or through creating stories together with adults. Older children can do similar things, but they will gradually resort more to language to express themselves. You can ask them to



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**

Throughout the ages and in different cultures, parents have had different roles in relation to their children. This is especially the case when it comes to the youngest children and caring for children

with special needs. In these situations, the mother has often had the primary role. As a result of this, child psychology and books for parents were often aimed at the mother. In countries where it has become a widespread practice that both parents have full-time jobs outside the home, the distribution of roles within the family has changed. At the same time, child psychology research has shown that the father can play a very important role in caring for children. For this reason, our suggestions and advice for improving the care of children who have experienced war and flight are as much aimed at fathers as it is at mothers - because it is in the best interest of the children, including the youngest ones.





## 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 gradually build up their understanding, and as they grow older they will need more extensive information. It is the task of the parents to help them in this process.

### **SPEND TIME PLAYING WITH YOUR CHILDREN**

Many parents find that the refugee life entails a lot of waiting time. This time can be used with advantage on interacting with your children. This will be of special benefit to younger children, because their brains develop in interaction with the adults around them. Good conversations, play, interaction and meals together are all nourishment for the brain's development. Older children more often prefer to spend time with their peers.

Try to maintain an open dialogue with your children about how they are doing in their everyday lives. They may be experiencing stress from their environment in school or at the reception centre. When they know they can share their concerns and sadness with you as adults and can get advice from you, it will help them feel safe and secure.





## LET YOUR CHILDREN HAVE CONTACT WITH THEIR CULTURE

As a family, you have strong and deep roots in your identity and culture. These need to be safeguarded, but at the same time a new home country will mean new cultural impressions. Your children will probably gradually absorb the cultural characteristics of the country they have come to; perhaps faster than you do. This is natural, but it may feel frightening to you. You should maintain the relationship that



your children have with their “culture of origin” whilst also being open to new influences. In Northern European countries, the culture is somewhat individualistic, while you may have a stronger connection to your family and your network. This varies a lot, however. Questions about the native language always arise. Research shows that maintaining the native language is important

for a child’s adaptation to a new culture, and that those fluent in their mother tongue tend to be better at understanding the words and concepts of a new language.

## REGULAR ROUTINES AND CLEAR RULES

We have written this before, but it is so important that we need to repeat it: Research into children’s growth and development, and especially the ability to learn and to cope well in school, stresses the importance of regular routines, both during situations of crisis and in life afterwards.

Daily routines are good for us in crisis situations because they provide us with stability and structure in our everyday life. This is not easy to achieve when everyday life is unsettled, but it is nonetheless important to try to establish. Standard routines for meals and playtime, and standards for what is permissible in terms of behaviour and time spent away from the family should be adhered to. It is more difficult to maintain discipline or rules about what children are allowed to do and where the boundaries are, in a new and uncertain existence – especially if you, their parents, are tired, weary, depressed or traumatised. But when priority is given to this, most children will become more settled and feel more safe, and parenting will become easier. Parents, who create structure around their children while at the same time being involved, warm and empathic, are giving their children a good foundation for the future. Adults who are coherent and who guide children in a calm and predictable way teach children to take responsibility and develop self-control. Punishment, on the other hand, only teaches them that grown-ups, who are bigger than they are, can control them through force and sometimes pain.





## ADVICE THAT PARENTS CAN GIVE THEIR CHILDREN

### 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 them to conjure up an image from their past and see it on a screen (in their imagination). Then tell them to imagine that they have a remote control which they can use to turn the image or film on and off. They can switch from colour to black and

white, make the picture blurred or replace it with another one. Ask them to fill the entire screen with the image and then to insert a different and positive image in one corner. Ask them to let this positive image grow and take over most of the screen, while the painful memory withdraws to a place in the corner. They can then move the distressing image around on the screen, before getting rid of it completely.

- If the memory they see is like a film, they can modify it, creating a new version with a happy ending. They can then imagine watching this new version over and over again, until it becomes the dominant version which the brain will choose to keep.
- If they are haunted by certain sounds, you can let them recall the memories related to the specific sounds and imagine that they are listening to them on a radio or a mobile phone. They can then turn the volume down, edit the memory by adding music to it, or in other ways change the memory of the sound.

- If there are thoughts that keep popping up, such as worries and concerns, the following method has been of help to many:
  - Ask them to set aside 10-15 minutes every day to think about the things that worry them (or other thoughts they find troublesome). It is important that, as their mother or father, you are available to comfort them if they become overwhelmed by their thoughts. They can consider what could turn their concerns into reality, and the reasons why this will not happen. In this stretch of time, they should create space for the thoughts that haunt them.
  - If thoughts pop up outside of this “worry time”, tell your children to say to themselves: *“Oops, I’ve started thinking about this again, but it belongs in my ‘worry time’ and I’ll deal with it then.”* Get them to do this every time it happens. Tell them not to be irritated with themselves when this happens, but just to acknowledge that the thought came up and then repeat the words to themselves: *“Oops, I’ve started thinking about this again....”*etc.
  - Gradually, the thoughts will stop automatically, because everything we do becomes automatic if we do it often enough. But you have to remind your children that they need to practice this method many times before the worrying thoughts will automatically stop.

Even though children work on this on their own, it might be good if you, as parents, are around to provide comfort when potentially disturbing thoughts come up. It is best to do this training during the day, and not too close to bedtime.

## REGARDING LOSS AND GRIEF

The most important thing that parents can do in relation to the feelings of bereavement and grief that your children may experience over the loss of friends and family – or their home – is



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 children are sad and upset a large part of the time, you may have to talk more with them about the people or the things that they have lost. Tell them to write about their loss (older children) or draw the people or the things they are missing (younger children). Good conversations help children organise their thoughts and express their feelings. The method described above, of setting time aside to embrace worrying thoughts, can prove very beneficial in dealing with loss and grief – also if the child is sad most of the time. If this is the case, the set time for thoughts should be used to think about the people or the things that the children are missing. The rest of the





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 that you’re doing OK. That’s what I would have wanted. Use your time on things that make you happy, not on things that make you sad.”*

## REGARDING MEMORY AND CONCENTRATION

As parents, you will naturally be concerned if you notice that your children are struggling to remember things or have difficulty concentrating. These symptoms make learning difficult, and teachers in school will have an extra responsibility to adapt their teaching to the circumstances of the individual child. If the child has many painful memories and is suffering because of a strong feeling of loss, the advice given above will be able to improve the situation. Fortunately, these problems are usually only temporary. It is not a good idea for



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.

### **MANAGING MEMORIES OF BEREAVEMENT AND TRAUMA**

There are many things that can trigger reactions: A bang reminiscent of gunfire or shelling, a smell associated with an experience of war, a siren going off that arouses fear. Everything that was present when we experienced something violent or extremely distressing, can later trigger a reaction. But children will sometimes react without knowing what triggered the reaction. Knowing what triggered the feeling of fear, children can gradually teach themselves to control it by approaching their biggest fears step by step. If they have



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become afraid of big crowds, they can practise by going to a place where only a few people have gathered, and then gradually increase the number of people. If they are afraid of sirens, they can listen to the sound of sirens very faintly on a mobile phone or a computer, and then gradually turn the sound up. In cases where children start avoiding certain situations or people, making everyday life difficult, it is especially important that they can approach their fears gradually and with solid adult support. In this way, they will avoid having a life full of restrictions. If your child does not know what it is that triggers the reaction, you can try to work it out together. It is important that you, as parents, show patience, so that your children will not have to approach their fears too quickly.

### **ADVICE FOR DEALING WITH FEAR OF SEPARATION**

Uncertainty and lack of information mean that we feel most safe when we are close to those we love. Many children react to dangerous situations and crises with extreme distress when they are away from their loved ones. If their fear of losing their parents increases to a level where they are almost clinging to you, pleading for you to be in the same room, and going completely out of their minds if you are not around, it is called separation anxiety. In this case, it requires sympathy and patience from the parents to restore the child's feeling of safety. Similar to the section above, children need to be trained gradually to be able to be away from you. If you proceed too quickly, the problem may get worse. Your children's fear of being away from you can be reduced by gradually increasing their tolerance from a few minutes to longer periods of time, or from a short distance away from you to longer distances.

### **HOW DO YOU HANDLE ANGER IN CHILDREN?**

Children who are angry may be angry without realising why, or they may be angry for a good reason. If their anger translates into acts directed against their surroundings, or if they take it out physically against their siblings or parents, this is not acceptable. As parents, you need to state clearly if something is unacceptable and put an end to such behaviour without resorting to violence, and you must



remove the child from the situation to allow him or her to calm down. Discussing the situation with the child is most effective if you do it once the child has calmed down. You need to explain to the child why physical attacks are unacceptable and discuss why he or she reacted that way. As parents, you can then gently suggest what you believe caused the anger. In this way, the child will learn to talk about his or her own reactions and be better equipped to deal with the anger next time. Children can also learn to talk to themselves. You can tell them to use what we call “strong thoughts” to calm themselves down

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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 silently counting to ten. Young children who are very angry may need physical contact and closeness.

Different cultures use different ways of disciplining and educating children. In a new culture, you need to make sure that what you do is consistent with what parents in your new country do. In particular, the rules for corporal punishment are often different. In the Nordic countries, it is absolutely forbidden to hit children or physically punish them. Instead, you should talk to your children and explain things to them. Praise your children and encourage them to take control. It does not harm them to realise that if they fail to obey the rules, they will lose their privileges as a consequence of their unacceptable behaviour. Removing them from the situation, rewarding them for good behaviour, and allowing them a little extra time with a close friend can be used to steer children towards good behavioural patterns. They can earn something or lose something, depending on what they do. Generally speaking, clear and consistent behaviour from parents makes it easier for children to learn where the limits are. By adjusting parenting practices to the new cultural framework that you have become a part of, you maintain the respect of your children and the authority in your family.

In our culture, it is still common for children to speak more freely and openly with their mothers and with women in general, but this is becoming more and more evenly balanced between mothers and fathers. Some children prefer to talk to their father, because it makes them so sad if their mother begins to cry. Some children may also find it easier to talk to someone outside the family. This could be the school nurse or a child psychologist; someone who has not experienced the same terrible things that you, the parents, have. Sometimes it can be helpful to talk to an outsider about the things that are difficult.



## SELF-CARE

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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.



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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.

## CONTACT AND INTERACTION WITH OTHERS

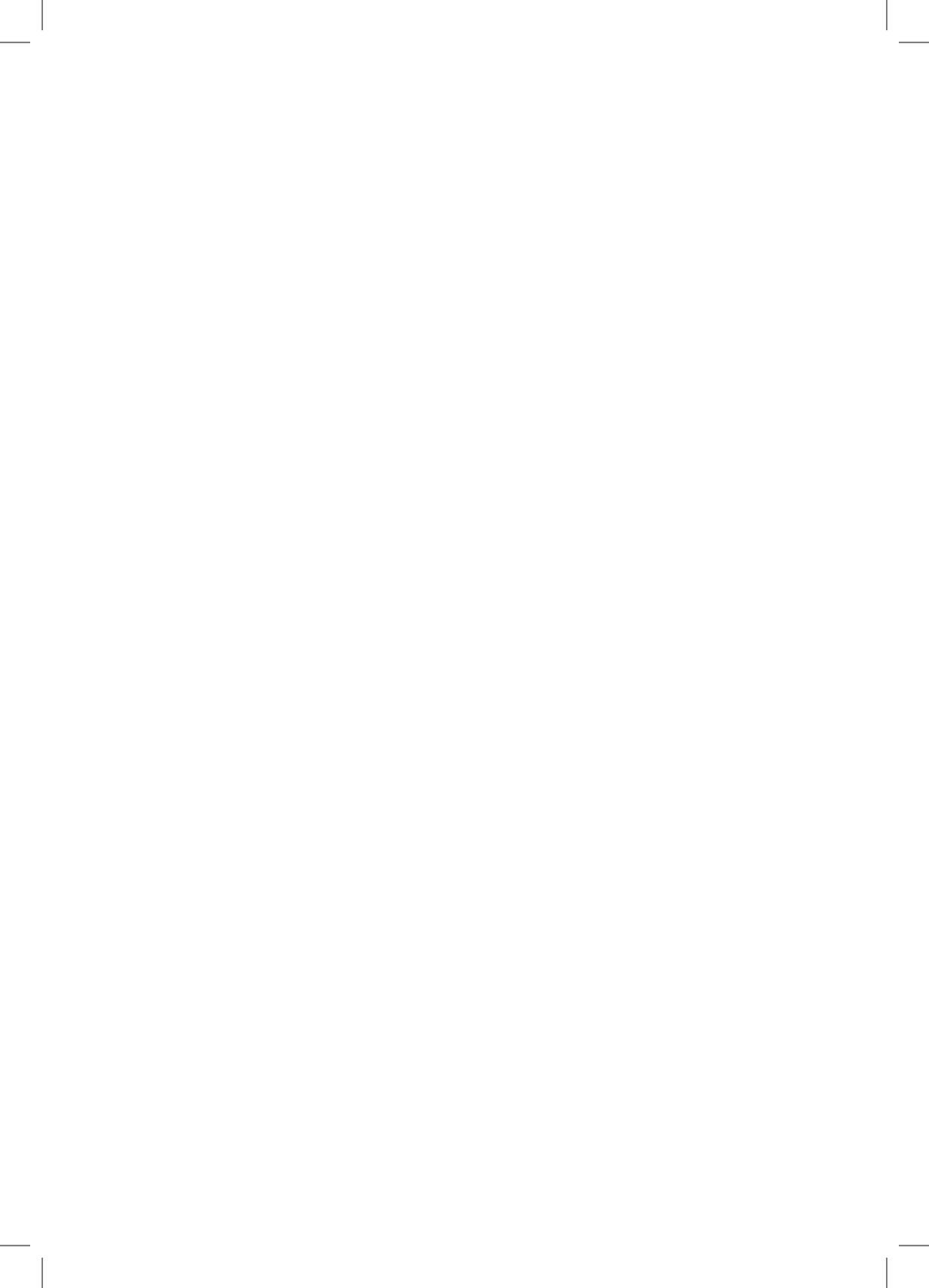
Stay in close contact with your family if possible, and invest time in building new relationships and an effective network in your new circumstances. Interaction and contact with others is a good investment, both in the present and in the future. Together with others, you can be active and counteract passivity. Basically, taking part in activities is an important investment, because it is a way of taking responsibility for your new life. It is good to show your children and others that you are an active resident in the asylum centre, because it adds meaning to your everyday life and counteracts hopelessness. It is also beneficial to be able to discuss with other parents how to handle your role as a parent, and to both give out and receive advice. Sharing joys and sorrows with others is satisfying and dispels the sense of being alone.



# CONCLUSION

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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.









RØDE KORS



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