# **Additional considerations for supporting children and young people bereaved during conflict or war**

Grief that follows the death of a loved one can be one of life's most difficult experiences. Like adults, children and young people can experience a broad range of emotions when grieving. For most children and young people the intensity and frequency of difficult emotions reduce in time and they gradually learn to live with their loss. It helps if they have a supportive adult to help and guide them. Their reactions will depend upon a number of factors including their age and the nature of their loss. Those who have experienced war or displacement may find bereavement more challenging or traumatic. (Please see R9 *Reactions to a Critical Incident* (page 64) of [NEPS Critical Incident Guidelines](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CDAVID_~1%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CTemp%5CMicrosoftEdgeDownloads%5Ca94dc78f-0fc6-405f-80af-57bb742ab66f%5C40700_21b5193521d147c890b4309fe4bfce9d%20%285%29.pdf) ).

It is important to remember that refugees, displaced people, or those granted Temporary Protection orders will not have the same home comforts, family, friends and traditions that would usually support bereavement. In this regard the issues/factors below may be helpful to consider.

## **Settled**

**Has the family settled in Ireland? Has a usual routine been established and the child/young person’s basic needs been met?**

If the child or young person has been in Ireland for a sustained period, they may have already felt the loss of being physically distant from their loved one in Ukraine. Hence death of a loved one may not bring any real change to their daily life in Ireland. While this may help a child to get on with their daily routines, it could also make it difficult for them to realise and/or accept the permanence of their loss or take part in their family’s grieving.

Feeling safe and secure in a new environment increases peoples chance of coping and being resilient following a significant loss. The Hobfoll principles have been shown to help develop a sense of physical and psychological safety (s.f. pg. 5 ‘[Supporting the Well-Being of Children from Ukraine in your School](https://assets.gov.ie/219623/046c1f03-a1a6-41fd-ab89-13e08c125679.pdf)’).

## **Relationships**

**Have relationships with school staff and peers been established?**

A displaced child/young person may feel isolated and feel that the local community do not understand or care about what they are going through. Striving to foster a sense of welcome, inclusion and belonging to the school community from the outset may help them to see their new school as supportive, caring and understanding, and so help them to cope with challenges. (see *Supporting the Wellbeing of Children from Ukraine in your School*- [Primary](https://assets.gov.ie/219623/046c1f03-a1a6-41fd-ab89-13e08c125679.pdf) and [Post Primary](https://assets.gov.ie/219624/a2fb5086-46e1-4464-9a29-55a1219759e5.pdf)).

Traditions & Cultural Differences

Try to talk with the bereaved family or their extended support network for information about any cultural practices and/or the family’s approach to death and mourning; - ask about the family’s normal mourning ceremonies and how they would expect the school/parents/students to express their condolences. Open communication can help to avoid any potential difficulties or misunderstandings and ensure that the bereaved family feel their culture is respected.

Curricular Content and Media Coverage

Try to be sensitive to potential triggers in the curriculum in everyday discussions or media coverage that might have parallels to the lived experiences of the children/young people affected (e.g. history, current events). Exposure to such content may potentially interfere with the students’ ability to engage with everyday activities. Therefore, lessons may need to be modified, alternatives prepared, or the content flagged or discussed in advance with the bereaved student.

Unconfirmed Death

Getting accurate information during times of conflict and war can be difficult and families can often be left with incomplete or unconfirmed reports about their loved ones. With such uncertainty, children and young people may feel that their lives are unpredictable or unsafe. Maintaining consistency in routines and relationships can promote a sense of safety and social connectedness (see *Supporting the Wellbeing of Children from Ukraine in your School*- [Primary](https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/61206-supporting-the-wellbeing-of-children-from-ukraine-in-your-school/) and [Post Primary](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CDAVID_~1%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CTemp%5CMicrosoftEdgeDownloads%5C1311e280-9f15-4361-9aba-e3ae803aa616%5C219624_a2fb5086-46e1-4464-9a29-55a1219759e5.pdf) ).

Beliefs and Feelings

Families can react in different ways to death from conflict (e.g. anger, pride, sadness, guilt) etc.). Be sensitive and take care not to make assumptions about a family’s beliefs and opinions. If possible, communicate with the family or speak to local networks for information that will inform how the school can best respond, so as to avoid further upset.

Finally, it should be remembered that, while each bereavement is unique in its own way, there are elements common to all and that certain strategies and approaches will help you to support children and young people at this time. The [NEPS Critical Incident Guidelines](https://assets.gov.ie/40700/21b5193521d147c890b4309fe4bfce9d.pdf) have a comprehensive set of resources while the *Irish Childhood Bereavement Network* have developed a short film which also gives guidance - [Listen with Eyes, Ears and Heart](https://youtu.be/WZTjPCaTxYc) .