



SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH-ASSIST
ÉQUIPE D'APPUI POUR LA SANTÉ
MENTALE DANS LES ÉCOLES

INFO-SHEET

Welcoming Syrian Newcomer Students & Families to School

1. Creating Welcoming School Environments

The school environment has an important impact on a student's sense of belonging and overall mental health and well-being. A culturally competent school community expresses commitment to equity and inclusion, monitors and addresses intolerance and discrimination, and demonstrates a willingness to learn about the traditions, strengths, and needs of newcomers. There are many ways that staff and students can contribute to a welcoming school environment for Syrian newcomers and others who join our school communities from different countries and cultures.

For example:

- Take time to learn about the Syrian newcomer experience using credible information sources (e.g., [Citizenship and Immigration Canada](#)).
- Establish a school reception team to assist with welcoming and orientation.
- Ensure comfortable spaces for families and reception teams to meet and share information.
- Dedicate ample time for intake interviews to include parent concerns/hopes for their children.
- Ensure parents as well as students are involved in orientation activities.
- During initial meetings, inquire about the child's strengths, interests, and needs.
- Adopt a learning stance and avoid making assumptions about the family's prior experiences.
- During orientation, include information about safety procedures, routines, and attendance.
- Review aspects of school life that might be frightening for some students (e.g., ringing bells).
- Offer specially trained student helpers to provide full school tours for the whole family.
- Ensure that the student and his/her family has access to competent adult interpreters.
- Post multiple signs in Arabic and other common languages that are visible across the school.
- Provide translated information about settlement and mental health services in the community.
- Connect with families regularly to discuss their child's transition to school.

**Good Settlement Leads
to Good Mental Health!**

2. Creating Welcoming Classroom Environments

Creating inclusive and calm classroom environments can go a long way to preventing adjustment difficulties that can lead to problems in mental health and well-being.

For example:

- Greet each student individually by name daily with a smile.
- Have predictable visual routines in the classroom. Announce changes in advance.
- Make sure students know and understand the roles of key school team members.
- Ensure the classroom environment reflects the linguistic and cultural diversity of students.
- Build relaxation breaks into each day, particularly during transitions.
- Encourage and support students' use of their first/dominant language in the classroom and at home.
- Share information with the class to help students to understand and welcome newcomers.
- Take time to get to know the unique stories and strengths of newcomer students.
- Provide opportunity for all students to share information about their unique cultural identity.
- Pair each newcomer student with a peer helper to help with orientation and routines.
- Promote compassion and understanding, and address instances of intolerance directly.
- Notice and support student leadership and kindness vis a vis newcomer classmates.
- Know how to support students and families to access settlement and mental health services.

**Build on strengths
and resilience!**



3. Noticing Signs of Adjustment Difficulty

Although most newcomer children are resilient and do not develop patterns of emotional distress, some will require additional support because of migration stress, problems with adjustment and/or the experience of trauma. Educators are in a good position to notice when a student is struggling, and to provide caring support in the classroom.

Some signs of difficulty with adjustment include:

Physical	Social-Emotional	Cognitive
<input type="checkbox"/> Weak bowel/bladder control	<input type="checkbox"/> Worries when away from family	<input type="checkbox"/> Plays repetitively
<input type="checkbox"/> Headaches, nausea	<input type="checkbox"/> Sad, depressed, withdrawn	<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty engaging with classroom material
<input type="checkbox"/> Trouble eating and/or sleeping	<input type="checkbox"/> Aggressive, tantrums, defiance	<input type="checkbox"/> May block out new language
<input type="checkbox"/> More vulnerable to illnesses	<input type="checkbox"/> May appear angry or irritable	<input type="checkbox"/> Weak concentration, distractible
<input type="checkbox"/> May appear lethargic	<input type="checkbox"/> Emotional numbness/distancing	<input type="checkbox"/> Easily frustrated
<input type="checkbox"/> Reluctant to join physical activity	<input type="checkbox"/> Constant discussion of war	<input type="checkbox"/> Disengaged from classmates
<input type="checkbox"/> Substance use and abuse	<input type="checkbox"/> Exaggerated startle response	<input type="checkbox"/> Increased absenteeism

If any of these signs of difficulty appear to be severe, prolonged, significantly interfere with day to day functioning, or if the child's family is expressing concerns, then referral to professional mental health support within the school board and/or community is recommended.

4. Supporting Newcomer Students with Signs of Adjustment Difficulty

Educators are not mental health professionals and should not be expected to provide assessment or counseling support to newcomer students who are exhibiting signs of adjustment difficulty. The role of the educator is to provide a safe and calm classroom environment, with differentiated support for those who may need more care and attention than other students.

Helpful Classroom Strategies include:

- Foster a calm and predictable classroom environment.
- Provide cues to signal transitions, and warnings about changes to routines.
- Maintain a high level of physical presence, support, and supervision.
- Use a soothing tone in your interactions with the student.
- Create connections with the student and provide extra support through difficult situations.
- Set academic expectations that encourage motivation and success.
- Offer ways to manage emotions and behaviour in the classroom (e.g., quiet spaces, relaxation).
- Model and help the student to understand steps for problem-solving, conflict resolution, etc.
- Give the student choices. A sense of control will help him/her to feel safe and confident.
- Set limits, and help the student to comply with requests (e.g., I see you need help with...).
- Language learning can be challenging. Attend to, and reinforce attempts to communicate while supporting use of primary language.
- Create regular opportunities to share progress and to highlight strengths and concerns with parents.

This resource will be posted on EduGAINS:
http://www.edugains.ca/newsite/mentalHealth/school_mental_ASSIST.html

For resources to support newcomer English language learners in English Literacy Development programs in Ontario classrooms:
<http://www.edugains.ca/newsite/ell/index.html>

