

# SUPPORTING STUDENTS AND FAMILIES OF AFGHAN BACKGROUND WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

Victorian students and families of Afghan background are currently experiencing trauma as events unfold in Afghanistan. Communities may be experiencing grief, anger and fear about the safety of loved ones and the future.

School staff can provide assistance by prioritising wellbeing and connection.

Children and young people of refugee backgrounds, including those born in Australia (and from refugee backgrounds other than Afghanistan), may experience “trauma reactions” as news coverage, social media and communication with those in Afghanistan remind them of their family’s history of trauma, and raise concerns for the safety of family and friends still living in unsafe circumstances.

These may impact on the students’ ability to focus and engage in learning.



**Trauma reactions may show in changes in their behaviour, for example:**

- In young children: regressing to behaviours of an earlier developmental age, clinginess, separation anxiety, appetite disturbance, nightmares or becoming withdrawn.
- In young people: social withdrawal, sleep difficulties, irritability, anger, lack of motivation, risk-taking behaviour, anxiety, and feeling alone and sad.

Trauma reactions in children and young people from refugee backgrounds could be exacerbated by:

- The current COVID-19 lockdown restrictions resulting in not being able to leave home to be with their extended family, community and to attend onsite learning.
- Feelings of intense anxiety, grief and fear related to their family’s prior experiences of ongoing danger, and for those who are now in danger.
- Memories of living with war, violence, persecution and oppression and of fleeing such situations.
- Being exposed to a stream of media images and news from distressed family members about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan.

If a student experiences persistent trauma reactions which impact their school engagement, we recommend making a referral to Foundation House

[www.foundationhouse.org.au/make-a-referral](http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/make-a-referral)

## Enhancing feelings of safety and control is crucial to addressing students' anxiety, fear and grief

Anxiety and grief are sometimes easily observed. You may notice students becoming highly irritable and unable to tolerate frustration.

Some students may withdraw and disengage from learning,

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Wherever possible, provide a predictable class routine and explain any changes to the routine.
- Work with students to set achievable expectations about tasks and be flexible where possible with timelines for completing work.
- Some students and families may feel overwhelmed by remote and flexible learning; providing the option for **on-site learning** may help them stay connected to school and reduce the level of stress at home. It may also act as break from the levels of tension and stress being experienced in some homes. See [Supporting Vulnerable Families](#). You may also access information about COVID-19 and education settings by calling 1800 338 663.
- Revisit individual risk assessments and consider on-site supervision and wellbeing check-ins for vulnerable students – which may increasingly include students of Afghan background.
- Set up individual catch ups to check-in with students and ask about their wellbeing.
- Ask open questions about how students are feeling and their current experiences.
- Allow students to control their level of disclosure if they choose to share their feelings with you and seek to provide a confidential and appropriate space. [Click here for a more comprehensive guide to managing trauma disclosures](#).
- Provide guidance for staff in responding to or initiating conversations and acknowledging what is happening, including confidence to respond to online comments or content which are insensitive or discriminatory.



## Regular communication with families can help strengthen a sense of connection and belonging, while also reducing fear and anxiety

Schools and services can support students and families during this period by strengthening connections, listening, and helping link families with additional supports and services.

Contacting families can be tricky. There is no easy solution to that – just keep trying to reach them consistently, and remember that, in general, families will be happy to receive regular positive contact from the school.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Post a message of support to the school's online platform on behalf of the school community, to express solidarity and care. Ensure that it is translated into community languages.
- Make use of interpreting and translation services which are free for government schools and early years services, via [LanguageLoop](#). See the [Interpreting and Translation Services policy](#) for further information.
- Let parents/carers and students know that you are “open” to contact from them and how to get in touch. You may also like to let families know that they can contact you via text message and you will call them back with an interpreter within an agreed time period.
- If possible, initially reach out to families via text message before calling them as some parents/carers may not answer their mobile phones if they receive a call from an “unknown” number. You could send a text in advance, e.g. “Your child’s teacher will call you at 3pm, please answer the unknown number then.”
- Make it clear that you are primarily calling to make sure the student is okay and that you are checking on their wellbeing.
- Families on temporary visas may be concerned about their future in Australia. The Australian government has stated that people will not be asked to return to Afghanistan in the current circumstances.



## Staff who are of Afghan background may also need support from leadership and colleagues as they work to support their community

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Nominate a member/s of the school leadership team to pro-actively check in with affected staff members and/or create a buddy system for check ins and debriefing.
- Offer support via the EAP or the school allied health team where appropriate.
- Recognise that their workload may increase as students and families turn to them for support, and help them to monitor and manage this.
- If your school or service has an Afghan Multicultural Education Aide (MEA) or Bi-Cultural Worker, seek their feedback and include their voice in your approach to working with the families.
- Ask your staff if they would like to be involved in the formulation of messaging to the community and whether they have any ideas they wish to share on how the school can respond.

Visit the [School's In for Refugees website](#) for further information and resources:  
[sifr.foundationhouse.org.au](http://sifr.foundationhouse.org.au)