

SUPPORTING VICTORIAN CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES FROM BURMA/MYANMAR

WHAT SCHOOLS AND
SERVICES CAN DO



**Foundation
House**

The Victorian Foundation
for Survivors of Torture Inc.

Families living in Victoria from Burma/Myanmar are experiencing ongoing trauma as a result of the February 2021 military coup d'état and the worsening COVID-19 crisis in Burma/Myanmar.

Communities are experiencing heightened anxiety and fear about the safety of loved ones who remain in conflict zones. By prioritising wellbeing and connection, leaders, educators and support staff can provide assistance at this difficult time.

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.

Making contact with families can be tricky. Keep consistently trying to reach them (via phone calls, emails and/or texts) and remember that, in general, families will be happy to receive regular positive contact from the school or service. Do not underestimate how significant it is to students and families to know that someone is reaching out to them.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- » Reach out to families to express solidarity, care and offer supports.
- » 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. Ensure that the specific language spoken by the family is requested.
- » 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 eg. “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; sometimes parents can get worried about receiving calls from school.
- » Consider the impacts of financial hardship – the strain on families is exacerbated as they support relatives overseas. This is important to consider in your planning.
- » Make families aware of community supports available such as [Lifeline](#) and local material aid agencies and locations.

Children and young people from Burma/Myanmar, including those born in Australia may experience “trauma reactions” as news coverage, social media and communication with those still in Burma/Myanmar recalls their own family’s history of trauma and raises concern for the safety of family and friends. These may impact on their 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 attend onsite learning, and reminding them of other times when leaving home or places of hiding has been unsafe.
- » 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 of fleeing such situations.
- » Being exposed to a stream of media images and news from distressed family members about the political situation and COVID-19 crisis, including funeral services via internet platforms being livestreamed into family homes.
- » Anger and disappointment for the lack of justice and relatively limited international response to the crisis in Burma/Myanmar.

ENHANCING FEELINGS OF SAFETY AND CONTROL IS CRUCIAL TO ADDRESSING ANXIETY, FEAR AND GRIEF FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Anxiety and grief are sometimes easily observed. You may notice individuals becoming highly irritable and unable to tolerate frustration. Some may withdraw and disengage from learning, others may become visibly upset.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- » Wherever possible, provide a predictable 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 families may feel overwhelmed by remote and flexible learning; providing the option for **on-site learning** may help them stay connected to 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.
- » Set up individual catch ups to check-in with children and young people and ask about their wellbeing.
- » Sensitively ask open questions about how they are feeling and their current experiences. Sometimes this may require scaffolding or giving examples students can identify with, for example: “Many children/people are feeling scared/overwhelmed/sad/angry right now, I’m wondering how you might be feeling?”
- » Allow them 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 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 comments or content which are insensitive or discriminatory.
- » Make students aware of supports such as [Kids Helpline](#), [eheadspace](#) and [ReachOut.com](#).
- » Purposefully connect with and build the relationship between the school and young people who are involved in risk-taking behaviours or who are disengaging from school.
- » View changes in behaviour/engagement initially through a trauma lens and use [trauma-informed strategies](#) when responding.

If a child or young person experiences persistent trauma reactions which impact upon their engagement, you can call the Foundation House [Intake team](#) to discuss whether a referral to Foundation House may be appropriate. Call (03) 9389 8900.

STAFF FROM BURMA/MYANMAR ALSO NEED SUPPORT FROM LEADERSHIP AND COLLEAGUES AS THEY WORK TO SUPPORT THEIR COMMUNITY

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- » Nominate a member/s of the 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 a Multicultural Education Aide (MEA) or Bi-Cultural Worker, seek their feedback and include their voice in your approach to working with the families.

SOME ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AND IDEAS FROM EDUCATORS TO SUPPORT COMMUNITIES

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- » Fundraising and awareness raising efforts directed at the affected groups represented in your community. Foundation House can offer support to identify where and how funds can be distributed with the assurance funds will reach communities.
- » Hosting a service or commemoration in consultation with the community.
- » Connecting with local community leaders and groups to build mutual understanding between school, community and families.
- » Involving staff in professional learning around trauma-informed practice.
- » Keeping aware of global events which impact the community.
- » Organising food bank donations to be distributed to families in need.

Visit the [School's In for Refugees](https://www.schoolsinforrefugees.org.au) website for further information and resources.



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