Supporting Ukrainian Students and Families in U.S. Schools

Mental Health, Cultural Context, and Practical Strategies

Presenter: Olya Bulda
Community Wellness Specialist





Olya Bulda

- I’m a Ukrainian.
- I came to the United States by myself in 2022.
- I’m from Zaporizhzhia — a region now fully occupied by Russia.
- My city is on the front line of the war.
- Current Work: Community Wellness Specialist at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Sacramento. Supports Ukrainian refugees through:
  - Trauma-informed care
  - Wellness programming
  - Connection to essential resources

I’m actively involved in the local Ukrainian and refugee community, volunteering with ParaSolka and serving in a leadership role with the Sacramento Region Refugee Coalition.





Our goal for today is to:

Provide participants with a clear cultural and psychological understanding of Ukrainian children and their families. This understanding will help to:

1. improve learning and academic engagement,
2. reduce misunderstandings and misinterpretations of behavior,
3. create an environment based on trust, emotional safety, and support for both children and their families.

To achieve this goal, we will focus on the following tasks:

- The psychological portrait of Ukrainians - both adults and children
- The main stressors connected to war and forced migration
- Typical emotional and behavioral reactions you may see in children
- Why mixed emotions positive and negative at the same time - are normal and healthy
- Common parental reactions shaped by trauma, displacement, and cultural background
- And key differences between the Ukrainian and U.S. education systems that often affect communication and expectations

Who are Ukrainians today:



Ukrainian children do not come to school on their own — they carry with them the experiences, worries, and emotional history of their families and their country.

Ukrainians as a community living under long-term stress



The war is not a single event that ended in the past. For Ukrainians, it is an ongoing source of stress that continues day after day.

Many families:

- have close relatives or friends living in active combat zones,
- have lost their homes, sense of safety, financial stability, and familiar social roles.



More than
8 million people
have fled Ukraine
since February
24, 2022

Since February 2022, the U.S. has accepted over 271,000 Ukrainians through various immigration pathways, including the U4U program. Nearly 16,000 have resettled in Washington State as of February 2023.



Psychological portrait of Ukrainians *(adults + children)*

Strengths of Ukrainian culture

- Resilience and ability to endure hardship
- High responsibility for family and children
- Respect for education as a means of survival
- Collectivism and mutual assistance

FOR MANY UKRAINIAN PARENTS, A CHILD'S SUCCESS IN SCHOOL = A SECURE FUTURE.

1 Cultural traits

People with a Ukrainian mentality are traditionally known for being tolerant, hardworking, careful with money, and respectful of private property. They also value personal independence and individuality.

2 Emotional & moral values

The Ukrainian nation has several distinct psychological traits, such as kindness and a forgiving nature, emotional sensitivity, warmth, and strong feelings, as well as a natural love for poetry and lyric expression.

3 Social & family orientation

These qualities go together with hospitality, a good level of education, loyalty and stability in family life, deep spiritual values, and great respect for older generations.

4 Community & family

For Ukrainians, family has long been the center of life a place of acceptance, safety, and freedom to be oneself. This sense of belonging often extends to close friends and the church community, viewed as an extended family.

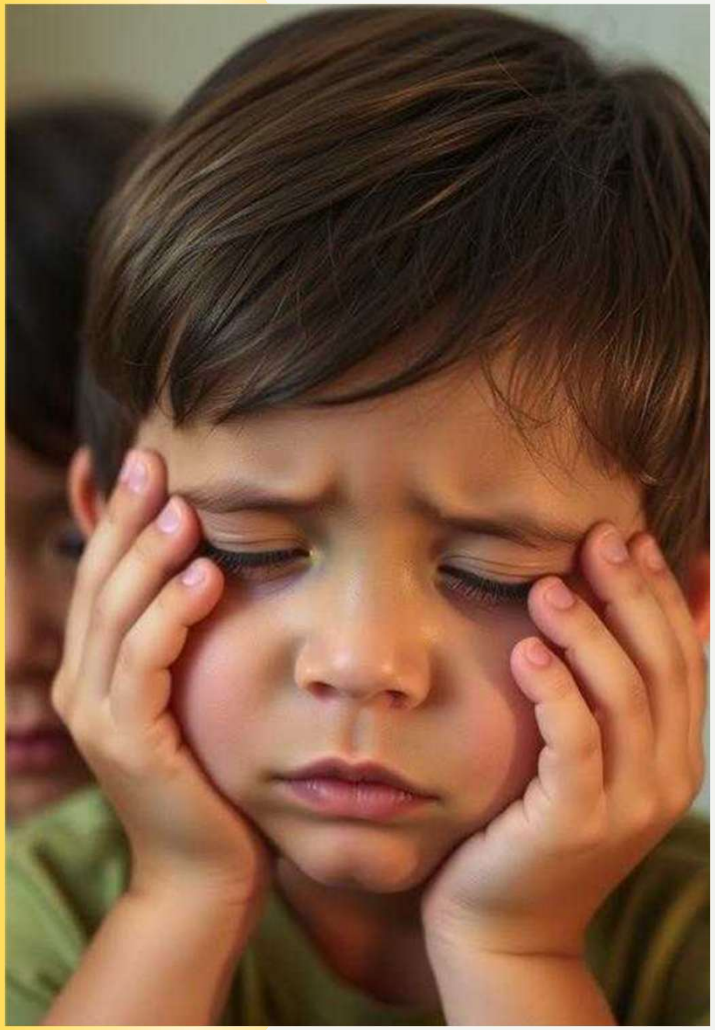
What have you already noticed in the behavior of Ukrainian children or parents?



Stressors and children's mental health

Main sources of stress

- War (even if the child has not seen it directly)
- Forced migration
- Loss (home, friends, status, language, familiar environment)
- Separation from one parent (often the father)



Forced displacement is not just relocation — it is a deep life rupture that affects identity, opportunities, and the nervous system.

Trauma-related stress often persists after reaching safety, leading to anxiety and depression and creating long-term mental health needs.

Stressors and children's mental health

Common mental health challenges for Ukrainian refugees include:

- PTSD
- anxiety
- depression
- somatic symptoms

Barriers to seeking help include stigma, difficulty recognizing symptoms, lack of trust, confidentiality concerns, and prioritizing basic survival needs over mental health care.

Typical psychological reactions in children

1 Emotional & behavioral reactions

1. Anxiety and fear: worries, feeling unsafe, fear of separation, loud noises, or new environments.

2. Regression: seeking comfort through younger behaviors (closeness, bedwetting, simpler language).

3. Attention difficulties: trouble concentrating, distracted, mental energy focused on stress survival.

2

Physical & internal reactions

1. Somatic complaints: headaches, stomachaches, nausea, tiredness without medical cause.

2. Depression & PTSD signs: persistent sadness, withdrawal, irritability, nightmares, repeated traumatic memories.

3. Turning inward: distress expressed through the body rather than words.

3 Turning inward

1. Children may stop sharing feelings and experiences.

2. Emotional distress appears through physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches) without medical cause.

3. Signals need for understanding, emotional support, and a safe space to express themselves.

Simultaneous positive and negative emotions are NORMAL, not contradictory

- Children can feel joy and sadness at the same time.
- Mixed emotions are natural responses to extreme stress.
- Moments of play, curiosity, or laughter do not mean trauma is gone.
- Moments of fear, sadness, or withdrawal do not mean the child is failing to adapt.

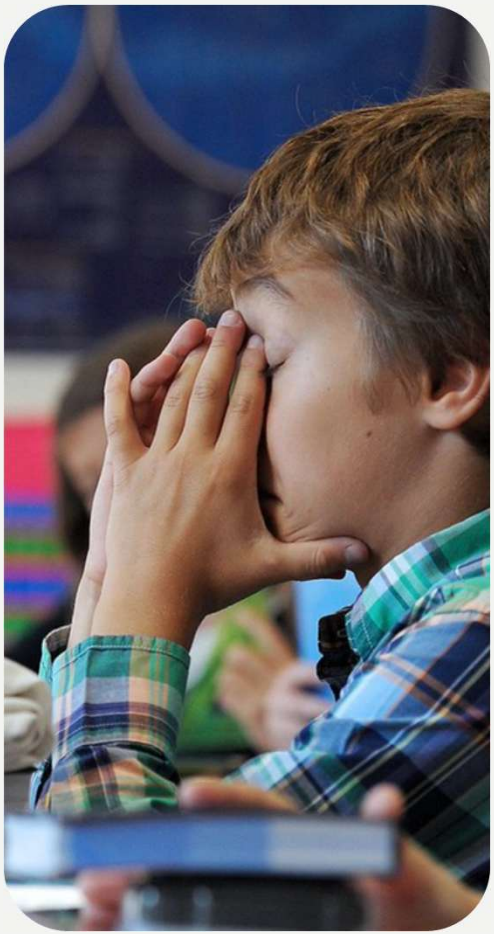


How this may appear in a school setting

- A child may miss home or feel anxious while also enjoying games and making friends.
- Positive emotions give short relief to the nervous system and support recovery.
- Negative emotions reflect normal reactions to loss, uncertainty, and disrupted safety.
- Both types of emotions coexist as part of coping and resilience.

Psychological explanation

- Forced migration disrupts life, safety, and identity.
- Emotional reactions are not signs of weakness or pathology.
- Mixed emotions show the brain activating survival and adaptation mechanisms.
- This coexistence is a foundation for resilience and growth despite trauma.





Resilience and adaptation

What helps Ukrainian children recover

- Preservation of identity: native language, culture, traditions.
- Social connections with peers, teachers, family, and community.
- School support: trusted mentors, clubs, caring adults.
- Belonging is as important as academic success.

Children as cultural mediators

- Children often learn the new language faster than adults.
- They help families navigate schools, doctors, institutions.
- This can empower children but also add emotional pressure.

Language & cultural understanding

- Access to Ukrainian-speaking counselors is crucial.
- Respect language preferences; do not assume everyone speaks Russian.
- Cultural understanding builds trust and therapeutic connection.

Emotional interaction as a resource

Stress as a RESOURCE

- Stress can activate creativity, empathy, and motivation.
- Children often show remarkable strengths while adapting.
- Teachers can support these inner resources without denying the child’s pain.
- Strength and vulnerability coexist.



Healing and Resilience

- Recovery requires acknowledgment of loss, care for belonging, and space to rebuild emotional integrity.
- Well-being returns when people are accepted as complete individuals with their history, strengths, and potential to contribute.
- Displacement can disrupt identity but also open a path to new meaning.

The power of Small Actions

1 *“Imagine that you are entering a classroom. A student who has recently moved from another country approaches you. He is silent, avoids eye contact, and sits alone.”*

2 Take 10 seconds to think:

What would you do to help this child feel safe?

PARENTS: why they react "differently" than expected in the US



Parents' emotional state

Many Ukrainian parents arrive in U.S. schools already living in a state of chronic emotional stress.

Constant anxiety:

- The safety of family members still in Ukraine
- Their children's future
- Their immigration and legal status in the U.S.
- Deep parental guilt

This emotional background strongly shapes how parents communicate, make decisions, and respond to schools.

Mental health background in Ukraine

Ukraine has a centralized healthcare system. Historically:

- Mental health services were mostly provided in psychiatric hospitals
- About 90% of mental health funding went to psychiatric hospitals
- Community-based and school-based mental health support was very limited

Because of this:

- Mental health care was associated only with severe psychiatric conditions
- Everyday emotional struggles were not viewed as something to seek professional help for

The escalation of the war in 2022 has had a lasting impact, especially on children.

Trauma, War, and Mental Health Risk

Many Ukrainian refugees are currently experiencing — or are at high risk of developing:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

However, these struggles are not always recognized as “mental health issues” by parents themselves.

Stigma, Fear, and Distrust

Stigma remains one of the biggest barriers to seeking mental health support

This fear has deep historical roots:

- During the Soviet era, people who opposed the government were sometimes declared mentally ill and placed in psychiatric hospitals
- As a result, mental illness became associated with danger, shame, and loss of rights

Because of this history, many Ukrainians fear that:

- A mental health diagnosis will stigmatize them socially
- Others in their community will lose trust in them
- It could affect employment or future opportunities

“Real” mental illness vs. “not serious enough”



For many Ukrainians — especially from former Soviet countries:

- Severe conditions (like psychosis) are seen as “real” mental illness
- Anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion are often seen as:
  - Personal weakness
  - Something to endure
  - “Not serious enough” to need help

Often, people are simply unaware of the tools and supports that exist, especially school-based or community-based services in the U.S.

Physical symptoms
instead of emotional language (Somatization)

Another important factor is how stress shows up in the body.

Parents may report:

- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Chronic fatigue
- Sleep problems

These symptoms are often treated as purely physical, without connecting them to emotional distress.

Somatization — when the body expresses stress that the person does not recognize or label as psychological.

Fear of information
not being confidential

There is also a strong fear of lack of privacy.

In Ukraine:

- Mental health diagnoses were often recorded in public medical records
- People worried this information could be accessed by employers or authorities

This fear often carries over into the U.S., where parents may worry:

- *“Who will know?”*
- *“Will this affect my child?”*
- *“Will this be shared with immigration or authorities?”*

Survival first:
mental health comes later

Their priorities are:

- Housing
- Employment
- School enrollment
- Legal stability

This aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs:
When survival and safety are not secure, mental health is often seen as a luxury, not a priority



Gender and age differences

Gender and age play a significant role.

- Men, especially those who see themselves as heads of households, often feel pressure to stay strong and not admit vulnerability
- As a result, men are much less likely to seek counseling, even when distress is severe
- Women may be more open to support but still feel responsible for holding the family together



Key takeaway for schools

When Ukrainian parents seem:

- Emotionally distant
- Overwhelmed
- Defensive
- Resistant to mental health support

It is often not lack of care or cooperation, but a mix of:

- Trauma
- Cultural history
- Stigma
- Fear
- And survival-mode thinking

Typical parental reactions

Because of trauma and past educational experiences, parents may show:

- **Excessive control of learning** (Constant checking of homework. Strong pressure to achieve high academic results. Anxiety about grades, tests, and teacher feedback)
- **Fear of mistakes** (This can show up as: Worry about doing or saying the “wrong thing”. Avoiding asking questions. Anxiety about evaluations, meetings, or school forms)
- **Distrust of flexible or “soft” educational approaches** (Emotional well-being. Flexibility. Individual pacing. Positive reinforcement)
- **Less initiative in communication** (Language barriers. Fear of misunderstanding or embarrassment. Worry about being judged.Uncertainty about their rights and role in the U.S. school system)

These behaviors often come from fear, not lack of care or trust.

DIFFERENCES between the education systems of Ukraine and the United States



Ukrainian schools

In Ukraine, the education system has traditionally been teacher-centered.
Key characteristics include:

- Strong teacher authority
- A clear hierarchy: teacher → student → parent
- High emphasis on: ✓ Discipline ✓ Academic results ✓ Control and compliance

In this system:

- → The teacher is the main decision-maker
- → Students are expected to listen, follow instructions, and not challenge authority
- → Parents often trust the teacher completely and rarely question methods

Attitude toward mistakes & learning focus (Ukraine)

- Mistakes are seen as something bad
- Errors often lead to correction, criticism, or shame
- Success is measured by correctness, not process

This creates a lifelong mindset:
"I must constantly improve what I'm bad at, instead of building on what I'm already good at."

This belief strongly influences how parents view U.S. education.

American schools

American schools are generally child-centered.
Key characteristics include:

- The child's needs and well-being at the center
- Greater flexibility
- Emphasis on: ✓ Self-expression ✓ Creativity ✓ Emotional development ✓ Individual learning pace

Attitude Toward Mistakes

- → Mistakes are seen as part of learning
- → Trial, error, and exploration are encouraged
- → The process is often valued as much as the result

How these differences affect adaptation

How children may react:

- Be afraid to speak up or ask questions
- Avoid giving answers unless they are 100% sure
- Wait for very clear, direct instructions
- Feel anxious in open-ended tasks

Silence often means:

"I don't want to make a mistake,"

not "I don't know" or "I don't care."

How these differences affect adaptation

How parents may react:

- Underestimate the value of learning through play
- Feel uneasy about flexible rules or informal classroom behavior
- Worry that: ***"My child is not being taught enough,"*** especially if there is less homework or fewer tests

They may interpret:

- Play-based learning as lack of structure
- Emotional support as lowering academic standards

Key takeaway for schools

When parents question methods or seem anxious about academics, it is often because:

- They are comparing U.S. schools to a very different system
- They want to protect their child’s future
- They fear that flexibility means falling behind

Bridging this gap requires:

- Clear explanations
- Reassurance
- And explicit communication about why certain approaches work

Practical recommendations for teachers and schools



1 Working with children: Key principles

Ukrainian children often adapt best when structure and emotional safety go together.

Structure helps children feel safe. Warmth helps them trust.

Key principles:

- Clear rules + warm attitude
- Predictable structure (routines, expectations, schedules)
- Recognizing emotions without pressure
- Respecting each child’s individual pace of adaptation

Reading Small Signals

Think about what these small signals might mean

1

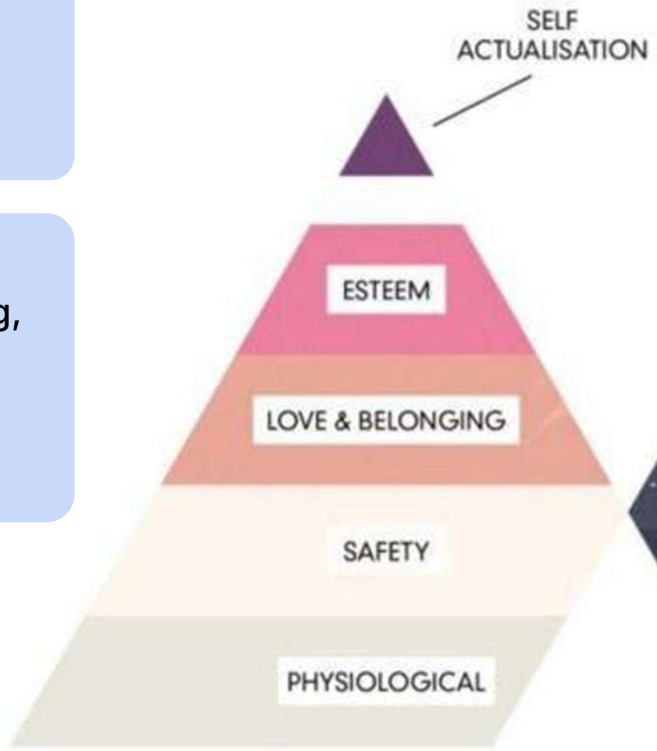


2

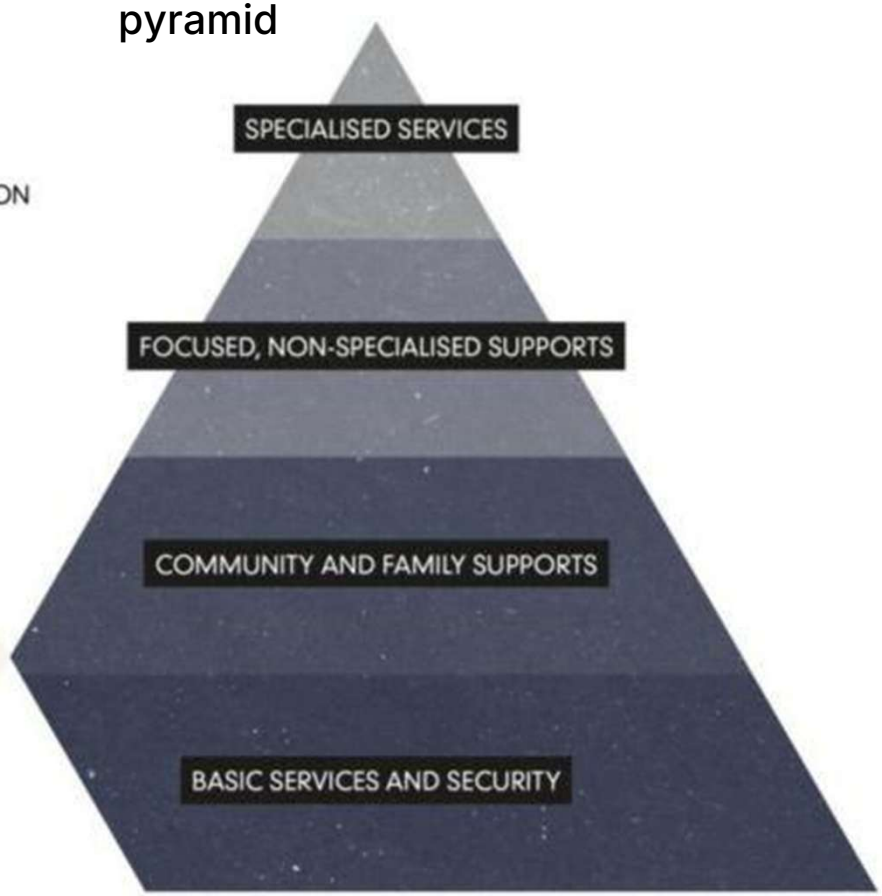


- All levels of both pyramids matter — ideally implemented at the same time, not step by step
- You cannot expect learning, emotional regulation, or behavior change if basic safety and trust are not present

Hierarchy of children's basic needs



Multi-level intervention pyramid



2 Creating a safe emotional environment

Any meaningful conversation with a child can only begin when:

- The atmosphere is calm
- The child feels safe
- The child feels the confidence and presence of a reliable adult

What children need to hear and feel:

- A clear explanation of what happened (at an age-appropriate level)
- Reassurance that they are not to blame
- Confidence that: “An adult is here, and will continue to take care of you.”

Children should be allowed to:

- ✓ Cry
- ✓ Be angry
- ✓ Be sad
- ✓ Be quiet

3 Supporting emotional expression

Adults should:

- Give children extra attention, especially if emotional outbursts happen often
- Create opportunities to: talk about feelings, draw or create art, express emotions through play
- Help children regain a sense of control
- Allow children to make small decisions, such as:
  - Choosing an activity
  - Picking a seat
  - Deciding how to complete a task

Control reduces anxiety

4 What NOT to Do (Very Important)

Under no circumstances should adults:

- Pressure a child to tell their story
- Force them to talk about traumatic events
- Minimize or dismiss their feelings

Avoid phrases like:

- ✕ “At least you survived”
- ✕ “Calm down”
- ✕ “Everything will be fine”

Do not:

- Make promises you cannot guarantee (for example: “It’s all over now”)
- Expect children to be “brave” or “strong”

Children heal through safety, not pressure.



Signs of emotional distress / numbness

Possible signs:

1. Constant memories of the traumatic event
2. Being easily frightened
3. Increased heart rate, sweating
4. Emotional numbness
5. Deep sadness or depression
6. Sudden changes in: behavior, speech, emotional reactions

Healing takes time

When a child seems emotionally “Numb”

When a child seems emotionally “numb”:

- Shows no joy
- Shows no sadness
- Appears disconnected

What may be happening:

- The child is in a freeze response
- The nervous system is overwhelmed
- Feelings are “shut down” as a protective mechanism

How you can help:

- ✓ Create an atmosphere of acceptance and care
- ✓ Spend time together without pressure
- ✓ Name emotions gently: *“It seems like you don’t want to do anything today. You might be feeling sad. That’s okay.”*

Reckless or dangerous behavior

"I don't feel safe. I need attention. I need protection."

Children who feel unsafe may:

- Act impulsively
- Take risks
- Ignore danger

- ✓ Risky behavior can be a form of self-directed aggression
- ✓ Fear often increases aggression, especially in children

Helpful strategies:

- Games or activities that release aggression
- Teaching positive ways to ask for attention and support

Children’s capacity for healing

- The psyche of children and adolescents has strong self-healing and self-regulation abilities
- With consistent adult support:
  - Children often recover faster than adults
  - Safety and relationships are more powerful than words



Adolescents: A High-Risk Group:

- Teenagers need special attention
- In a critical developmental stage
- Forming identity, values, and coping strategies
- Often lacking skills to care for their mental and physical health

Chronic stress can contribute to:

- Anxiety and depression
- Psychosomatic symptoms
- Long-term health conditions

The role of schools

1

- Schools = places of stabilization and healing

2

- Effective support = traditional teaching + emotional education + creative expression + skill-building for self-regulation

Working with parents

Key Principles

Supporting Ukrainian families works best when schools focus on:

- Trust
- Clarity
- Respect for cultural context

Regular, simple communication:

- Ukrainian parents often feel overwhelmed by: new systems, new language, new expectations
- Effective communication should be: regular, simple, clear, predictable
- Short, consistent messages build more trust than rare, long explanations

Explaining the logic
of American education



Many misunderstandings come from lack of explanation, not disagreement.

Parents benefit when schools explain:

- Why flexibility is used
- Why play-based learning matters
- Why emotional well-being supports academic success

When parents understand the logic, resistance often decreases.

Talking about support
without triggering stigma

- *Avoid words like “depression” or “mental health”*
- *Use: well-being, support, adjustment, stress management*

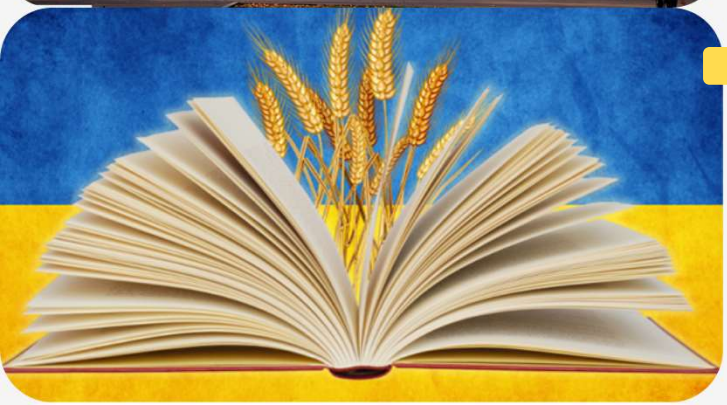
Effective strategy:

- Share information
- Ask about needs
- Explore resources before offering direct counseling



Religion & values as a source of strength:

- Faith is a primary coping resource
- Effective support: does not compete with faith, integrates with values, respects spiritual coping strategies



Language: a sensitive and identity-based issue:

- Language deeply connected to identity after 2022
- Ukrainian = dignity, safety, national belonging
- Historical Russian use often not ideological
- Refugees: language provides continuity, safety, self-respect



Culturally Sensitive Approach:

- Offer options, avoid pressure:

  "English interpretation available in Russian; Ukrainian if preferred."

- Shows respect and gives freedom of choice

What helps in practice

Professional and Community Networks:

- ✓ Example: Sacramento Refugee & Immigrant Coalition (SRRC)
- ✓ Allows sharing experiences, exchanging information, coordinating support, learning from each other
- ✓ Provides info about local services, support programs, community events

Learning from other states/regions:

- → Similar service-provider directories
- → Partnerships with non-profits
- → Local coalitions supporting refugee families
- Networks serve as referral points for: mental health, legal, social services, community connection

Practical tools for families (California example)

Support guide – Sacramento providers:

- Dedicated service directory for clients in California
- Includes:
  - Local resources
  - Organizations serving Ukrainian and refugee families
  - Practical, up-to-date information
- Benefits for families:
  - Reduces stress
  - Helps know where to go
  - Helps know who to trust
  - Assists in navigating complex systems



SANNA: a navigation tool for newcomers

- Chatbot designed specifically for newcomers
- Answers questions in: English, Spanish, Arabic, Dari, Pashto, Ukrainian
- Provides clear, step-by-step instructions
- Helps users understand: Available services/ How to access resources \ What to expect

Benefits for Ukrainian families:

- Reduces anxiety
- Increases independence
- Builds confidence in navigating systems



Key messages to remember

- Ukrainian children can be both vulnerable and strong
- Behavior is often the language of adaptation
- Resilience does not mean the absence of pain
- Culture and family context matter



A message to educators

Every question, every moment of attention matters

You already have the ability to:

- Restore dignity
- Provide meaningful support
- Help build a future beyond loss

Even small actions can shape generations.



Olya Bulda
Community Wellness Specialist

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!

We appreciate your openness, care, and commitment to supporting Ukrainian students and families

Questions or reflections?