

C. What is involved in providing language support for children arriving from Ukraine?

Aim: To stimulate reflection on the language support needed by children arriving from Ukraine and how it can best be provided

Learning the new language is probably not the most urgent problem or aim for children arriving from Ukraine (or their parents). Other matters are likely to be more urgent and important for them. However, children arriving from Ukraine need elementary knowledge of the languages of the countries they find themselves in. Regular language courses with trained teachers may not be available, but support can be provided by teachers of any subject and by volunteers.

Bear in mind that the children in a group probably have different previous experiences, levels of education, social background, and knowledge of languages, and that various factors may affect their attendance, punctuality and their ability to concentrate, learn and remember.

Here are some recommendations.

- *Find out about the language skills children already have.* Their first language(s) should be valued, and, if necessary, they can be encouraged to offer language support to one another, for example with reading and writing.
- *Find out whether there is one or more common language that can be used to communicate with them.* Common languages may include the host country language or any other commonly spoken languages. However, any common language needs to be used sensitively: for example, some children may not be willing to use Russian even if they understand it. If necessary, some children can be asked to act as informal interpreters, and a teacher or parents from Ukraine may also be willing to help.
- *Focus on non-formal activities.* They can help to restore children's self-confidence and also help to pass the time.
- *Focus on social interaction.* Children arriving from Ukraine can more easily adapt to their life in the host country if learning activities provide opportunities for social contact, especially spoken interaction with children and adults from the host community.
- *If possible, organize activities outside the learning environment.* Sports, games, social events etc. are opportunities to meet children of the same age, to make friends and feel less alone. Activities involving people from the local community and members of local voluntary associations may also provide opportunities for enjoyable social interaction.
- *Let them speak as much as possible.* Children who are learning a language need as many opportunities as possible to use the language themselves. So, depending on the situation and your aims, you need to find the right balance between speaking yourself and giving the children opportunities to speak.
- *Avoid pressure.* Children arriving from Ukraine have experienced pressure on their journeys, and still be under pressure because of their current circumstances. Many language learners go through a so-called 'quiet phase', and some children may say nothing for weeks. Putting pressure on them to speak might lead to loss of motivation. It is important that they do not think learning a new language is an added challenge involving tests. Use your support activities as an invitation to enter the world of the new language and to enjoy it.
- *Allow children to help each other.* Their own languages are "islands of security" in a country where they do not understand the language and can be very helpful in learning situations. The first language can be



helpful in learning a new language. It may be difficult for you because you may not feel in control, but be patient and allow the participants time to think and to discuss things with each other. Also, show an interest in their languages, by, for example, asking them to mention words or expressions that are equivalent to those in the new language.

- *Limit interruption and correction.* Children may expect you to interrupt and correct their mistakes because you are seen as 'an expert'. In some cases, fairly correct pronunciation may avoid misunderstandings and enable other people to understand what they are saying. However, frequent correction may result in children losing confidence and keeping quiet to avoid making mistakes. It is important to strengthen their self-confidence by showing them that they can communicate successfully in the new language even if they make mistakes.

If you have never helped people learn a foreign language before – for example, if you are a subject teacher or volunteer - it is important to think about how it can best be done. Here are some points to remember:

- You do not need to follow a specific course programme or aim for a particular level of competence: focus on the children's most important language needs.
- You do not have to teach grammar because the aim is not for children to learn the new language correctly for an exam. The aim is to help them adjust to their situation.
- This means helping them learn enough of the language to communicate and to express their needs. In an urgent situation, useful expressions and vocabulary are more important than grammar.
- Even if you are not experienced in helping people with language you can explain things and provide useful information. You know how things work in your country and what kind of expressions and questions are useful for everyday situations: e.g. *what's that called? where can I find...? I don't understand, etc.*
- Using your language and/or a language that you and the children share, you can introduce them to the ways in which things work. Learning vocabulary, doing things with real objects, or, if permitted, visiting places together - walks in town, handicraft projects, music, sports and so on - are valuable ways of giving language support to refugees of all ages, especially children.
- You can be a 'communication partner' who has time and the patience and the willingness to listen and talk to them individually.
- You can act as a model when they need to repeat and practise useful words and expressions.
- You can offer praise and encouragement when they have language or other difficulties.
- Speak clearly and slowly and use pauses between sentences.
- Use body language such as gestures to aid communication but avoid speaking too loudly as this may be intimidating for some children. It may not always be possible to quickly establish an easy relationship until children feel reassured and supported.
- Repeat or paraphrase what you say whenever necessary, especially your questions.
- Avoid digression or sudden changes of topic.
- Use images, objects etc. in language activities and include games, movement, singing, and play.