

# **METHODOLOGY OF COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN**

**with a migration  
and refugee experience**

**FROM EXPERIENCE  
TO A TRANSFERABLE MODEL**



### **Inklucentrum – Centre for Inclusive Education**

Prepared by: Team of Ukrainian psychologists, CPP Bratislava III  
Kolodiazhna Yuliia, Lapshun Galyna, Plotnikova Alla

Expert text review: Alexandra Škorupová

Contributors: Jana Gott-Ridillová, Lucia Kaločaiová

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# HOW THE METHODOLOGY CAME TO BE: FROM EXPERIENCE TO A TRANSFERABLE MODEL

After the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022, a large number of children enrolled in Slovak schools within just a few weeks. The largest group of children and families from Ukraine settled in Bratislava, where schools counted almost 3,000 children (Inklucentrum, Support for Pupils from Ukraine in Bratislava, inklucentrum.sk). Teachers and specialist staff were not prepared for a situation of this kind and faced new challenges — they had to deal not only with the language barrier, but also help children with overall adaptation, doing so with a sensitive approach to their difficult life situation and the psychological burden caused by traumatic events. Most pedagogical and specialist staff had no prior experience with this type of crisis situation and did not have the necessary tools, methodologies, or professional capacity.

Building on the proven and well-functioning cooperation between Inklucentrum and the Centre for Counselling and Prevention Bratislava III (CPP BA III), after the outbreak of war in April 2022 both organisations approached key stakeholders and organised a series of online meetings. They succeeded in securing funding for three positions from the Regional School Administration Office for CPP BA III, which laid the foundation for a Ukrainian support team for the Bratislava region. The Ukrainian specialists brought to the system not only professional competencies but also — critically important at the time — the ability to communicate with Ukrainian children and families in their native language.

Shortly afterwards, in November 2022, the Centre for Educational Analysis (CVA), in cooperation with the Bratislava City Council and UNICEF, carried out a mapping of the situation in selected Bratislava schools. The findings were alarming — children showed dissociative states, visible anxiety and sadness, and a pronounced language barrier. Based on these findings, CVA experts proposed a set of concrete measures, which began to be gradually implemented in schools from January 2023 — primarily through a network of regional field workers who brought psychosocial support directly into the school environment (more in Chapter 3.6).

Between 2022 and 2025, the team provided children with a migration experience, their families, and schools with psychological, speech-therapy, special-education, and counselling support. This work included individual interventions, diagnostics, therapeutic groups, consultations for teachers, observations in schools, and training for the professional community.

This methodology is the direct output of more than two years of everyday work with Ukrainian children, their families, and teachers in Bratislava schools. It draws on the experience of our specialists, conversations with children, parents, teachers and specialist staff, as well as on recurring situations we encountered during this period. At the same time it reflects insights from cooperation with experts from Slovakia and the Czech Republic, including a professional meeting with the director of a Czech educational-psychological counselling centre in Plzeň, and it builds on current professional sources that complement and frame these experiences.

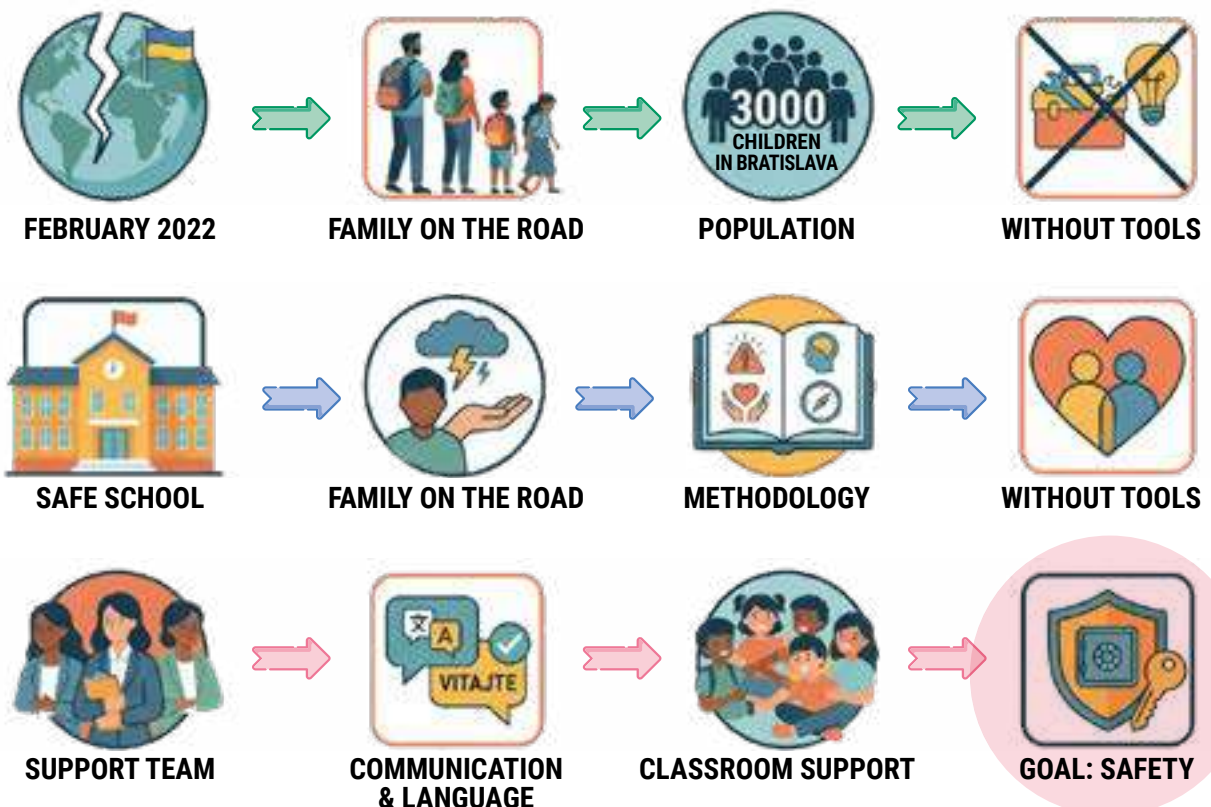
On this basis, in the methodology we connect knowledge from the fields of migration, crisis intervention, trauma work, diagnostics, and school support into practical recommendations intended for pedagogical and specialist school staff, staff of counselling and prevention centres, and other professionals who work with children and families with a migration experience. The aim is to offer clear explanations, practical recommendations, and procedures that can be used in everyday practice. The methodology also maps out the concrete steps of comprehensive psychosocial support — from the first contact with the child, through crisis

intervention and trauma work, to long-term integration support — and in this way creates a transferable model, usable not only in the current context of Ukrainian migration but also for future arrivals of other groups of children with a migration experience.

Despite the difficulty of the situation, in practice we repeatedly saw that on the part of schools it was not always simply a lack of capacity or experience — at times we also encountered a certain initial reticence or uncertainty about how to work with these children. One of the aims of this methodology is therefore also to point out, sensitively, that often no major systemic change is needed — that an ordinary, empathetic human approach can help significantly, and that fear of doing something “wrong” should not be a reason to do nothing.

We believe that a safe and welcoming school environment can be one of the most important stabilising factors for a child with a migration experience during the adaptation process. The support children receive today can significantly affect their sense of safety, trust, and ability to build healthy relationships in the future.

**Our findings and recommendations are based primarily on work with children aged 12–16 in Bratislava schools who fled the war in Ukraine. When transferring these recommendations to other groups — younger children, children from a different cultural background, or children fleeing a different crisis situation — we recommend treating the general principles (safety, sensitivity, an individual approach) as transferable, while verifying and adapting the specific procedures and tools to the given group and context.**





# THE CHILD WITH A MIGRATION AND REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Today's world faces many global challenges that influence people's decisions to change their place of residence. The reasons for migration are varied — from economic opportunities and family reunification to war, persecution, or natural and technological disasters. Every change of country represents a major life milestone for a child and their family, one that requires adaptation to a new social, cultural, and educational environment. Although even voluntary migration brings demands related to adaptation and identity formation, the experience of forced migration generally involves a higher degree of psychological strain. When supporting a child and their family, it is therefore essential to take into account the broader context of their life situation and their individual experiences connected with migration.

## 1.1 MIGRANT AND REFUGEE — WHY IT MATTERS

Children and families who were forced to leave their country form a distinct group. We consider it important to briefly explain the difference between the terms migrant and refugee. Although they are often used interchangeably in everyday communication, they denote different life situations that can have a significant impact on the needs of children and their families.

Migrants are people who voluntarily move for work, education, or better living conditions to another place or country, without their life or freedom being directly threatened.

Refugees, by contrast, are people forced to leave their country because of an immediate threat to their life and health. Unlike voluntary migration, forced migration (becoming a refugee) is associated with a sudden loss of the sense of safety, traumatic experiences, and uncertainty about whether they will ever be able to return to their homeland or even retrieve some of their valued personal belongings or necessary documents<sup>1</sup>.

It is precisely this immediate threat that lies behind most of today's refugee movements, since one of the most common reasons for forced departure is armed conflict. Prolonged exposure to war-related stress has serious consequences for the physical and mental health of refugees. Research points to a high prevalence of psychosomatic complaints and depressive symptoms among displaced persons<sup>2</sup>. In this context we want to emphasise that children and adolescents represent a particularly vulnerable group, since the effects of long-term stress and instability directly affect their ongoing development. Child development is a complex process in which physical, psychological, and social factors intertwine — traumatic experiences and worsened living conditions can negatively affect not only their physical but also their psychological and social development.

A key starting point for working with Ukrainian children is understanding how their situation fundamentally differs from that of children of economic migrants. This is not merely a terminological difference — it is a difference in lived experience, in the degree of control over one's own life, and in the psychological burden the child carries. The diagram below illustrates what the two groups have in common and where their experiences fundamentally diverge.

1 UNESCO (2021). Мигранты, беженцы и перемещенные лица: в чем разница? [Migranti, utečenci a vysídlené osoby: aký je medzi nimi rozdiel?]. Dostupné na: <https://www.unesco.org/ru/articles/migranty-bezhency-i-peremeschennye-lica-v-chem-raznica>

2 Haustova, O. O. (2022). Тривожно-депресивні розлади в умовах дистресу війни в Україні [Úzkostné a depresívne poruchy v kontexte vojnového utrpenia na Ukrajině]. *Neurológia. Psychiatria. Psychoterapia*, 4(63). Dostupné na: [https://health-ua.com/multimedia/userfiles/files/2022/Nevro\\_4\\_2022/Nevro\\_4\\_2022\\_st22.pdf](https://health-ua.com/multimedia/userfiles/files/2022/Nevro_4_2022/Nevro_4_2022_st22.pdf)

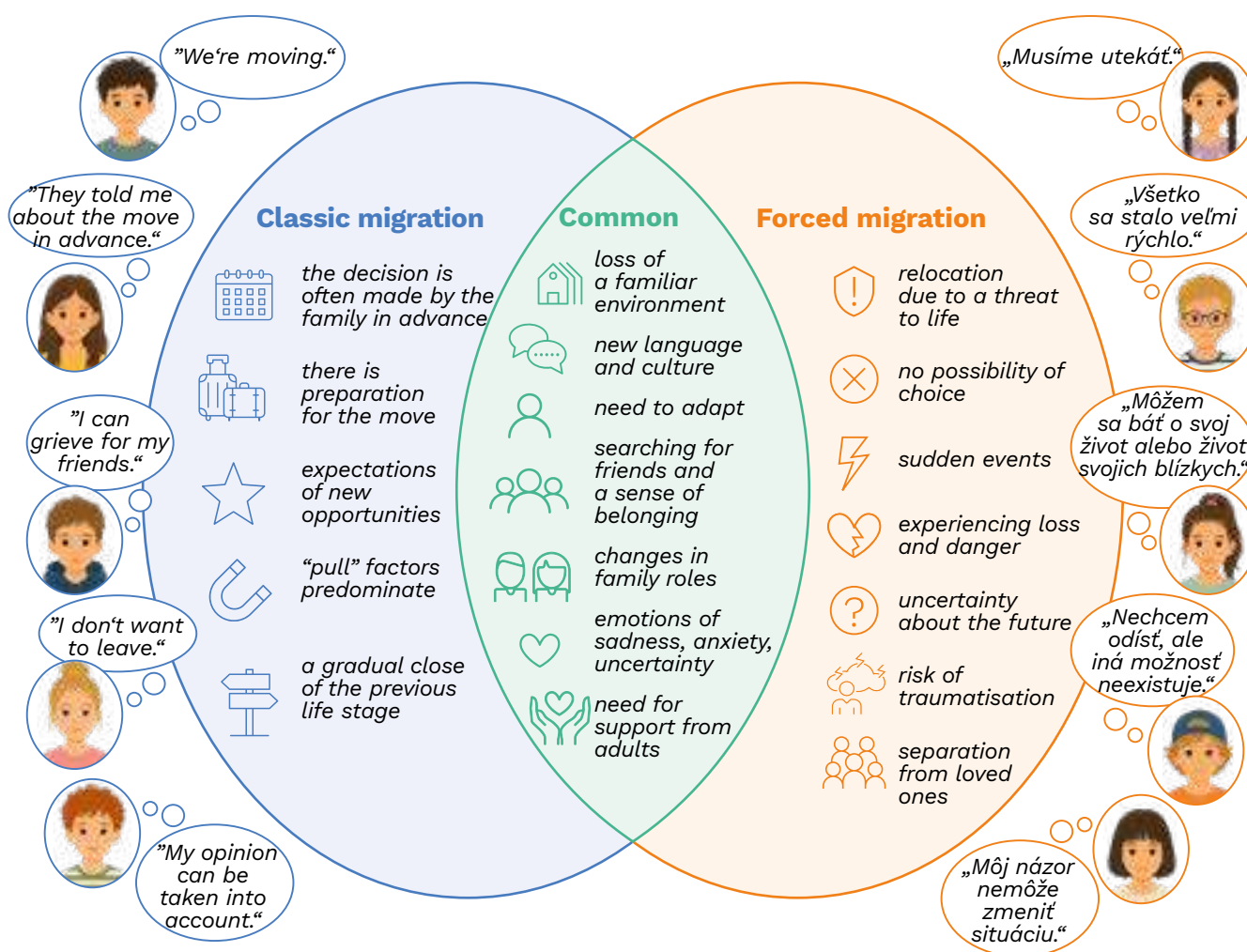


Figure 1 — Classic vs. forced migration: shared features and key differences

The statements by children alongside the diagram are not invented, but reflect what we hear in direct work with Ukrainian pupils. Experience from our own practice, as well as from the practice of the Czech educational-psychological counselling centre in Plzeň, shows that understanding the child's life situation is one of the important preconditions for successful adaptation. A child does not come to school only with a language barrier, but often also with an experience of loss, uncertainty, or long-term stress. A sensitive approach by the school can therefore significantly influence the child's sense of safety, inclusion, and further educational development.

Refugee children and adolescents also face challenges that go beyond the usual demands of migration. Many of them left behind an environment in which they had good social relationships, attended school, had friends, interests, and a clear idea of their future — the sudden severing of these ties can be accompanied by feelings of loss, uncertainty, and helplessness. In working with refugee children we intensely felt the need to take into account not only the usual adaptation challenges linked to migration, but also the experience of forced departure, the loss of a sense of safety, and a persistent hope of returning to their home country. This is precisely why it is important to approach this group of children sensitively, with respect for their life experience and with consideration for the particularities that can affect their functioning in the school environment every day.

This distinction does not, however, mean that children who moved voluntarily have an easy or risk-free adaptation. Changing country, language, school, and social surroundings is demanding in itself, because it affects the child's identity and their sense of where they belong, regardless of whether the move was forced or chosen. Paradoxically, children of economic migrants may have less space for their difficulties precisely because there is outwardly no obvious reason to explain their burden to those around them, or to themselves.

This methodology addresses children with both a migration and a refugee experience equally — most of its content and recommendations apply to both groups. Some parts, however, focus on risks specific to refugee children, since they are based on our team's direct practice with this group of children

**Behind every child is a story that shapes their adaptation.  
Supporting migrant and refugee children is an investment  
in the future of society.**



# FACTORS AFFECTING THE CHILD WITH A MIGRATION AND REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

The adaptation of a child with a migration and refugee experience is not a single moment but a gradual process influenced by numerous interconnected factors. Some act in the short term, immediately after arrival in the new country; others persist even after years spent in Slovakia<sup>3</sup>.

**It is important to keep in mind that even after a long stay in Slovakia, many children continue to face a range of challenges:**

- **Hidden language barrier** — even if a child speaks Slovak reasonably well at an everyday level, they often do not command the language at the level needed for deeper communication or academic learning.
- **Traumatic experience and PTSD symptoms** — surviving shelling, losses, and forced displacement have a long-lasting destructive effect on the psyche.
- **Cross-border split attention** — constant contact with family who remained in Ukraine, and continuous following of the news, create the effect of “living in two worlds at once.”
- **Loss of social status** — sudden changes in living conditions, housing, and the family’s material situation, and the loss of their usual circle of communication.
- **Educational disorientation** — the need to get used to a completely new teaching system, rules, assessment, and timetable.
- **The psycho-emotional state of parents** — parents (often just the mother) are themselves in crisis, which is directly transmitted to the child (the “mirror effect”).
- **Information vacuum** — a lack of quality, comprehensible, and thorough information in the child’s native language about the possibilities and rules of life in Slovakia.
- **Lack of access to quality professional support** — even when parents are aware of a problem, they encounter an acute shortage of available help. Finding specialists in Slovakia (psychologists, speech therapists, child psychiatrists) who are prepared to work in Ukrainian and understand the specifics of war trauma is extremely difficult.

The challenges listed above are among those we most often encounter in children with a migration experience, and many of them overlap and reinforce one another. Some are common to most children with a migration experience, others are specific mainly to children with a refugee experience. It is not possible within this methodology to address each of them in detail — we have therefore focused on four areas that have repeatedly proven, in our practice, to be the most decisive for how a child functions in the school environment: uncertainty about the future, language adaptation, loneliness, and limited access to professional support.

3 Hlinčíková, M., & Chudžíková, A. (2024). Migranti v meste: prítomní a (ne)viditeľní.

## 2.1 AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE AND ITS EFFECT ON MOTIVATION

An important characteristic of Ukrainian children, also confirmed by our own practical experience, is the fact that many of them do not see Slovakia as their final destination. A large proportion hope to return home once the war ends, or expect to move again. When a child or their family does not know how long they will remain in the new country, or whether they will return home at all, this directly affects how much energy they are willing to invest in adaptation. Investing fully in something that may lose its meaning within a few months is naturally difficult.

The lower motivation to invest energy in learning Slovak or building new relationships, which we have often observed when working with children after their arrival in Slovakia, need not therefore be a sign of disinterest, but rather a consequence of persisting uncertainty about their own future.

An adolescent who believes in an early return home will often avoid learning the language, because they see no point in it. A child who does not know how long they will stay at the new school is afraid to form friendships, because they do not want to experience another loss when they move again.

Over more than two years of working with Ukrainian children in Bratislava schools, this pattern is among the most frequent we encounter in practice. It is not an exception or an isolated case — it is a common and repeatedly observed part of the adaptation process across different schools and age groups of children.

**Low motivation to learn the language or form relationships is not always disinterest. Often it is a way in which the child protects themselves from further loss.**

## 2.2 LANGUAGE ADAPTATION IN CHILDREN WITH A MIGRATION EXPERIENCE: WHAT IS HAPPENING BEHIND WHAT WE SEE

The uncertainty about one's own future described in the previous subchapter manifests very concretely in relation to language, namely in the degree of willingness to invest time and energy in learning Slovak.

In practice this shows up in situations where, for example, children do not experience a ban on speaking their own language during break time as a step toward better adaptation, but as a suppression of their identity or a signal that the school is not a safe place. And this can often lead to the opposite effect: children and teenagers isolate themselves even more, trying to communicate in the toilets or in places where they are less visible. Conversely, when they receive an explanation of why learning Slovak can also be beneficial if they do return home, their motivation to improve can increase, making faster language acquisition more likely.

The experiences from practice we describe are not the exception but rather the rule. What at first glance looks like unwillingness to learn or defiance is often a physiological response of the nervous system to prolonged strain. A child who fled the war, does not know where they will be in a month, and functions every day in a foreign language among strangers, is in a state of chronic stress. And this directly affects what the school expects from them every

day: concentration, memory, and the ability to learn. Fear, anxiety, and intense emotions limit a person's cognitive abilities — in situations of emotional stress, the capacity for concentration, the quality of memorisation, and the ability to learn all decline, which makes it harder to effectively acquire a foreign language and manage other demanding tasks.

## FROM PRACTICE — TEEN CLUB

*Since September 2023, Inkluentrum has organised support groups for Ukrainian teenagers, who met regularly in the so-called Teen Club under the guidance of a Ukrainian psychologist (2022 was devoted to preparing materials and mapping needs; the club itself only began operating in September 2023 — Inkluentrum, Support and Inclusion of Teenagers from Ukraine in Bratislava; Education of Children from Abroad, inkluentrum.sk). Adolescents from this club described, for example, that in Ukraine they had been among the successful pupils in mathematics, but after arriving in Slovakia they felt they could not concentrate even on simple tasks. When solving problems, it was “as if they suddenly couldn’t think”, or they “got stuck even on things that used to be easy”. Similar experiences were reported in relation to learning the Slovak language. Foreign languages had not been a major problem for them before the war, but after being displaced they felt they “couldn’t save a new file to their head”. Slovak, in their words, “got mixed up with English”; they forgot even simple words and were unable to retain new material in the long term. One participant in the group described her experience in these words: “When I have to study Slovak, everything gets muddled and my head fills with chaos.” Some adolescents reported experiencing marked physical symptoms of stress when learning Slovak — they described them as an “inner trembling”, a “shaking inside the body”, or a feeling that “they cannot calm down and concentrate.”*

These accounts suggest that the school difficulties of these children are not primarily the result of insufficient ability or motivation, but rather reflect the psychological burden associated with their war experience, forced departure, and adaptation to a new environment.

An important factor that many teachers are not aware of is how much time acquiring a foreign language actually takes. The ordinary conversational fluency a child needs to talk with friends at break time is usually acquired within one to three years. Acquiring the language needed to manage school subjects, reading comprehension, working with specialist terms, or coherent writing, however, takes five to seven years if the child already has good literacy in their native language, and seven to ten years if they do not<sup>4</sup>.

A similar timeframe — one to two years for everyday communication versus five to seven years for academic language — is also highlighted by the organisation META in its infographic on long-term language support for pupils with a different mother tongue<sup>5</sup>. The agreement between these two independent sources only confirms that this is information many educators are not aware of, and we consider spreading it among both professionals and the general public to be one of the important aims of this methodology.

4 Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

5 META, o.p.s. (2024). Infografika: Dlhodobá jazyková podpora žiaka. Dostupné na: [https://inkluzivniskola.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Infografika\\_dlouhodobá\\_podpora\\_210x297\\_09\\_2024-1-1.pdf](https://inkluzivniskola.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Infografika_dlouhodobá_podpora_210x297_09_2024-1-1.pdf)

Dieťa preto môže na chodbe či cez prestávku pôsobiť, že už „vie po slovensky“, a napriek tomu potrebovať ešte roky, kým jazyk zvládne na úrovni, ktorú škola vyžaduje pri písaní testov, čítaní učebníc alebo formulovaní zložitejšej odpovede. Práve tento rozdiel medzi bežnou hovorovou rečou a akademickým jazykom patrí medzi najčastejšie prehliadané príčiny toho, prečo učiteľia mýlia jazykovú bariéru s nedostatkom vedomostí.

**The years that acquiring a language requires are not an excuse, but a reality that must be reckoned with.**

## 2.3 LONELINESS THAT TIME DOES NOT HEAL

Another recurring theme we encountered during psychosocial work with Ukrainian children and adolescents was a feeling of loneliness in the new social and cultural environment. Many spoke of losing friends, of difficulty forming new relationships, of the language barrier, and of a feeling of not belonging anywhere. We therefore decided to explore this topic in more depth through our own research.

In a study carried out on a sample of 185 Ukrainian adolescents aged 12–16 from eight Bratislava primary schools<sup>6</sup> ], we examined the relationships between anxiety, social-emotional health, loneliness, school belonging, and life satisfaction. The main research activities were carried out in June 2024, when the full-scale war had already lasted more than 27 months; a further group of adolescents completed the questionnaire survey in November 2025, i.e. 33 months after the start of full-scale military action. The minimum length of stay in the Slovak Republic among research participants was 2 months, and the maximum reached 2 years and 11 months.

The data obtained show that school belonging and the feeling of loneliness do not depend on the length of stay in Slovakia. Time itself is not the decisive factor in integration — the qualitative aspects of the school environment and supportive interventions play a more important role, namely the opportunity to form new relationships, to experience acceptance within the class group, and to have accessible social support from classmates, teachers, and family. This finding is also supported by the conclusions of authors such as Tyrer and Fazel<sup>7</sup>, who argue that the long-term adaptation of refugees depends primarily on support and acceptance within the school environment, not merely on the time elapsed since arrival.

The research also showed that a feeling of loneliness significantly affects the psychological well-being of adolescents and represents one of the significant mental-health risk factors for children and adolescents with a refugee experience — the more lonely they felt, the more anxiety negatively affected their life satisfaction.

These findings also point to an important practical conclusion: early identification of children experiencing loneliness, and creating opportunities to build safe relationships in the school environment, are among the significant forms of psychosocial support. Reducing the feeling of loneliness can, at the same time, positively affect the life satisfaction of children with a refugee experience and support their overall adaptation in the new environment.

6 Mikulajová, M., & Lapshun, H. (2025). Škola rozvoja a podpory jedinečných potenciálov žiakov

7 Tyrer, R. A., & Fazel, M. (2014). School and Community-Based Interventions for Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children: A Systematic Review. PLOS ONE.

**The length of stay in the new country alone does not automatically guarantee a reduced sense of loneliness or a higher degree of school belonging. What matters is whether the child has the opportunity to form safe relationships.**

## 2.4 LIMITED ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Moving to a new country often means losing an already-established support system that many children had in place in their home school environment. Many children regularly saw psychologists, speech therapists, special educators, psychiatrists, or attended rehabilitation or developmental courses before the war. In the new country, however, the family often encounters language barriers, long waiting times for specialists, a lack of information, or financial difficulties, as a result of which this support is interrupted or becomes substantially less accessible.

**In practice we often encounter two situations:**

- In the first case, the family comes from a small town or village where the child attended a small school. Special educational needs or developmental difficulties may have remained largely unnoticed thanks to the small number of pupils, an individual approach by teachers, or a lighter workload. After moving to a large city and starting at an ordinary school, the child's difficulties become significantly more visible, and the child themselves may not be able to cope with the new demands.
- In the second case, the child received comprehensive support from several specialists at once in Ukraine, and it was precisely this systematic help that made it possible to compensate for their difficulties and support their development. In the new country parents cannot always secure the necessary scope of services, which often leads to a marked deterioration in the child's situation in education, behaviour, communication, or emotional state.

Both examples point to the same underlying reality: a child who appears “new” or “problematic” in Slovakia may in fact simply have lost the support they previously had. It is also important to remember that war, forced migration, and prolonged uncertainty are themselves a powerful stressor — a deterioration in a child's functioning after moving is often the result of a combination of stress and the loss of their usual support, not a new or separate problem.

For the teacher and the school support team, this implies a practical recommendation: if a child shows sudden deterioration after moving, it is worth contacting the family directly and finding out what professional support the child previously had, and what they lost. Helping to find a replacement for this support in Slovakia — even if initially this means only mediating a contact or helping the family find their way around the system — can be more effective than waiting for the difficulties to deepen further.

**The loss of professional support is often an invisible obstacle to adaptation.**



# SUPPORTING THE CHILD IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Knowing the risk factors is not, in itself, enough. What matters is how the school is able to translate this knowledge into everyday practice.

A child with a migration experience entering school does not mean simply starting at a new educational institution. For many children and their families it also represents entry into a new language, new rules, new ways of communicating, and an unfamiliar social environment. For families from Ukraine this process can be even more demanding — many of them arrived in the new country unplanned, as a result of war, after a period of high strain, uncertainty, or a sudden departure from home. Some children attended several schools before arriving, or experienced prolonged stress connected with migration. What may be routine for the school can be experienced by the family as an overwhelming experience.

The first days and weeks at the new school significantly influence whether the school will be perceived as a safe and supportive place. Even seemingly small steps — clear communication, the possibility of receiving information in one's own language, an introduction to the school, or support from the class — can help the child and their family a great deal.

**Adaptation begins with a sense of safety.**

## 3.1 PODPORNÁ SIEŤ DIEŤAŤA A JEJ AKTÉRI

Effective support for a child with a migration experience is not the responsibility of a single specialist or a single institution. It rests on the coordinated cooperation of several actors — from the class teacher and school psychologist, through the school leadership, to the counselling and prevention centre and field workers. Each of them plays an irreplaceable role in this network, while the child, with their needs, experiences, and strengths, always remains at its centre.

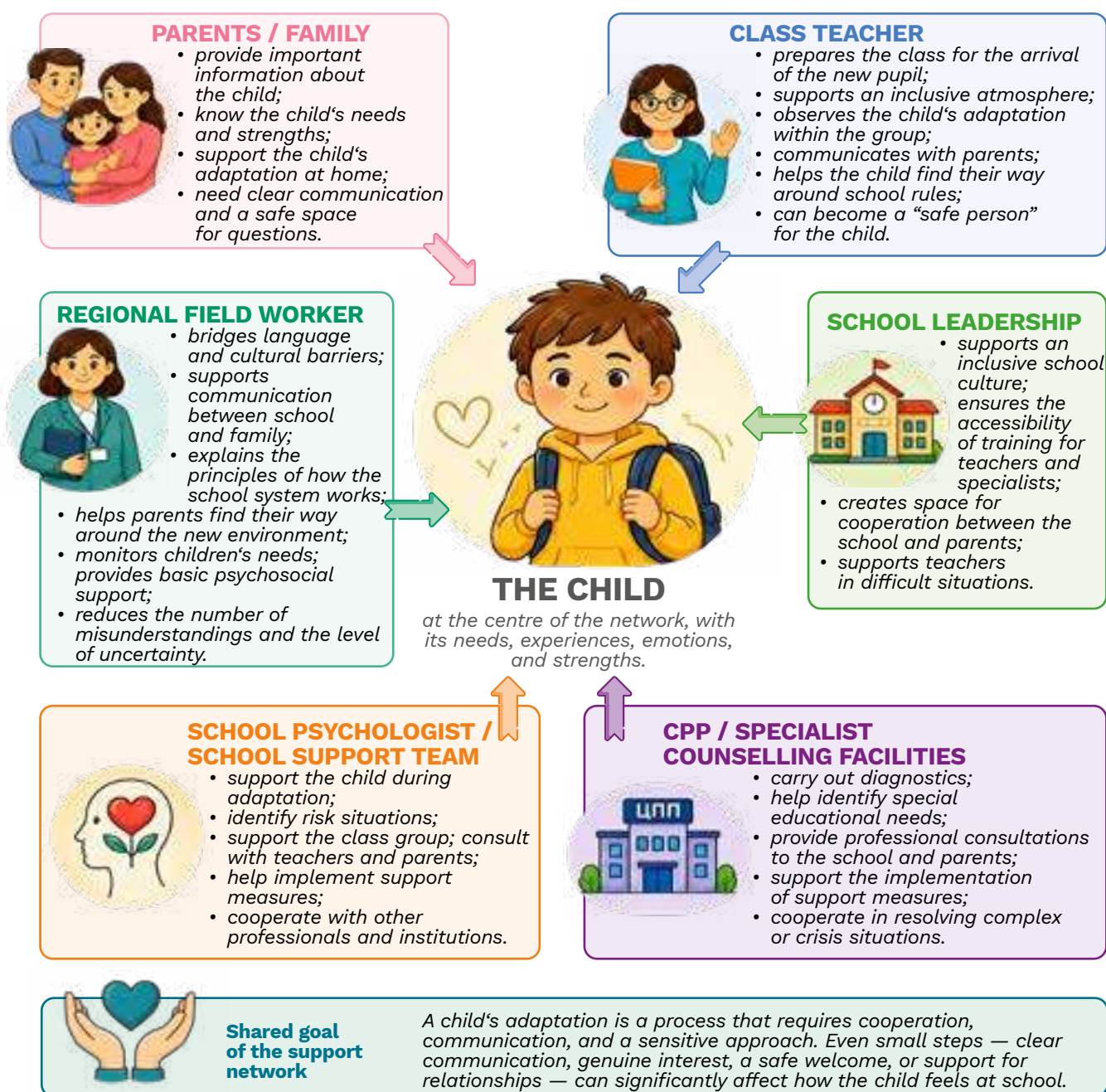


Figure 2 — The child's support network: actors and their roles (working draft — the final graphic design will be produced by the graphic designer in the document's unified visual style)

**Adaptation of a child is a process that requires cooperation, communication, and a sensitive approach. Even small steps — clear communication, interest, a safe welcome, or support for relationships — can significantly affect how the child feels at school.**

## 3.2 PREPARING FOR THE CHILD'S ENTRY INTO THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND COOPERATION WITH THE FAMILY

### *“Not accepting a child blindly”*

The first meeting with the family, even before the child starts school, can significantly influence the quality of the entire subsequent adaptation. It helps the school better understand the child's situation, set up support, and prevent later misunderstandings or crisis situations. At the same time, it gives the family a clear signal: the school has an interest, not merely an obligation.

### WHAT TO FIND OUT BEFORE ENROLMENT, IN CONVERSATION WITH THE FAMILY

We recommend a structured intake interview focusing on questions such as:

- where the child is coming from, and how many schools they attended previously,
- what previous school experience they have, and at what level they command the language,
- whether they have a diagnosis or the status of a child with special educational needs from their country of origin,
- whether the family has any documentation available,
- what the child's strengths are, and what helps them in stressful situations,
- what the parents' concerns are.

Some parents do not know that a diagnosis or support measures from their country of origin may also be relevant for a school in Slovakia. A language barrier, migration-related stress, or distrust of institutions often mean that this information is not passed on to the school in time — not out of disinterest, but out of not knowing how the system works.

### WHAT TO EXPLAIN TO PARENTS

Just as important as gathering information is providing information to the family. Parents need to understand:

- how the school operates (communication channels, grading, EduPage),
- attendance rules and how to excuse absences,
- what forms of support are available for the child — language, adaptation, professional,
- who the contact person is, and who they can turn to.

Research shows that parents with a migration experience are considerably less involved in school life compared with local parents. This is not due to disinterest, but because they feel less welcome at school, feel they have no influence on their child's education, or are worried about the language barrier.<sup>8</sup> The first meeting is therefore also the first opportunity to break this pattern.

**The first meeting determines whether the family feels welcomed, or merely enrolled.**

<sup>8</sup> Turney, K., & Kao, G. (2010). Barriers to School Involvement: Are Immigrant Parents Disadvantaged? University of Pennsylvania.

## LONG-TERM COOPERATION WITH LEGAL GUARDIANS

Cooperation between the school and family is one of the key factors in a child's successful adaptation, even after the child has already started school. For families with a migration experience, however, building communication can be more difficult because of the language barrier, unfamiliarity with the school system, cultural differences, or adaptation stress — some parents may have experience of a differently functioning school system, distrust of institutions, or a high level of psychological strain connected with forced displacement or their war experience. This is precisely why recommendations for communicating with these families differ, in some respects, from standard communication with parents.



organise separate information meetings for foreign parents



ensure language support or interpreting



create a safe and informal space



explain the practical workings of the school



and give parents a sense that they have a place at the school

Our experience shows that many parents expect the school to make the first contact, and often need more time to build trust. It is therefore important to create an environment in which parents feel welcomed, informed, and safely involved in the life of the school.

### FROM PRACTICE — WHEN A PARENTS' MEETING CREATES A SENSE OF BEING WELCOMED

*At one school, the leadership decided to organise a meeting for Ukrainian parents differently from the usual approach. Instead of a formal parents' association meeting, a safe and open space for a shared gathering was created. The school provided refreshments and the presence of teachers and interpreters, so that parents could truly understand the information and had the opportunity to communicate in their native language. Parents were given space to talk with teachers not only about problems but also about their children's strengths. Later, a similar model was extended to include separate meetings for Ukrainian parents. It turned out that much of the information Slovak parents take for granted is new and often unclear to parents from a different cultural and school background. An important part of these meetings was also time devoted to the parents themselves. After the organisational part came the question: "How are you doing?" Several parents described this as the first time since arriving in the new country that someone had asked about their own experience, not just about their child's school performance. This moment often brought relief and a sense that the parent, too, was seen at school as a person, not only as the child's legal guardian.*



Meetings of this kind serve several functions at once: they reduce parents' uncertainty and stress, help them find their way around the school system, strengthen trust between the school and the family, and make it possible to identify the child's needs in time. The more safe and welcomed a parent feels, the greater the likelihood that they will be able to convey a similar feeling to their child.

### 3.3 THE ADAPTATION PROCESS ON STARTING SCHOOL AND ORIENTATION WITHIN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

The goal of the first phase is not for the child to understand the school system as quickly as possible, but for them to feel safe, oriented, and accepted within it. As already mentioned, safety is the foundation of adaptation, and only on this foundation can learning, performance, and social relationships be built. Getting to know the school in advance together with the parents — for example a short walk through the building before the official start of school — significantly reduces anxiety on both sides and creates a firmer basis for adaptation.

|  <b>PODPORUJE BEZPEČIE —</b><br><b>Čo pomáha</b>                                                               |  <b>ZVYŠUJE NEISTOTU —</b><br><b>Čo škodí</b>                                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Dosing information in micro-portions: On the first day, only the absolute minimum (my classroom, the toilet, the canteen, when I go home).</i>                                               | <i>An information boom on day one: Overwhelming the child immediately on arrival with the school rules, timetable, grading system, and clubs all at once.</i>                                                         |
| <i>Getting to know the school in advance, together with parents: A short walk through the empty building (showing the classroom, canteen, psychologist's office) before the official start.</i> | <i>The first day blind and behind closed doors: A situation where the school will not let a stressed parent past the gate, which — after experiences of war — triggers enormous anxiety in both parent and child.</i> |
| <i>Visual support (pictograms, colours): Using colour-coded timetables, maps, and picture symbols for the daily routine (words evaporate under stress).</i>                                     | <i>Only verbal instructions in a foreign language: Relying on a child under strong linguistic and migration-related stress to catch and remember a spoken word.</i>                                                   |
| <i>Clear break-time rules explained sensitively: Clarifying the rules of movement around the school in advance (e.g. that pupils stay in the classroom during break).</i>                       | <i>Immediate punishment for not knowing: Notes and reprimands for breaking a school rule the child did not know (e.g. free movement around the school grounds, which is typical in Ukrainian schools).</i>            |
| <i>Checking understanding through a concrete action: "Vlad, please show me where your locker is..." — the teacher immediately sees whether the child really knows where to go.</i>              | <i>The formal question "Do you understand everything?": Out of fear, shame, and a wish not to stand out in front of the class, the child will almost always answer "Yes", even if they have no idea.</i>              |
| <i>Patient repetition, with a smile: Patiently reminding the child of basic rules and navigation during the first weeks, without any sign of irritation.</i>                                    | <i>Expecting that "hearing it once was enough": Treating the child's repeated logistical mistakes as ignorance, disrespect, or provocation.</i>                                                                       |

*Deliberate preparation of the class group in advance: A conversation with the class before the new pupil arrives, explaining the topic of migration, and preparing a welcome ritual.*

*Respect for the pupil's real name and identity: Finding out what the child is called at home, and respecting the original name (e.g. Vlad instead of the Slovak Vladko).*

*Name tags for the whole class during the first days: A rule that everyone has a name card on their desk, so the new pupil doesn't feel singled out.*

*Clearly designating a specific "safe person": Naming an adult (class teacher, psychologist, assistant) whom the child can approach physically at any time in the building.*

*Active first contact from the teacher: Offering a helping hand, brief messages in the first days ("Everything is fine, your son managed well today").*

*Accepting the limits of parents' migration stress: Patience with the fact that an overburdened parent may forget their EduPage password, a sick note, or a meeting.*

*Dropping the child into the group with no context: A teacher, in a noisy classroom in the morning, saying, "This is the new pupil, sit down in the free seat at the back." The child remains isolated.*

*Automatic "Slovakisation" of the name: Rewriting the name into a Slovak variant without the child's consent, which causes a sense of lost identity and disorientation.*

*Pressure on instant memory: Forcing a new pupil, who already has to cope with language and stress, to immediately learn the names of 25 unfamiliar classmates.*

*Unclear roles and being alone: A situation where a child experiencing sudden anxiety, panic, or a stomach ache has no idea who to go to or where to find them.*

*Passively waiting for the parent to take the initiative: Assuming that if the parent doesn't call or write on EduPage themselves, they have no interest in their child's adaptation.*

*Stigmatising the family for bureaucratic mistakes: Expressing pressure or anger toward parents for not following the school's administrative procedures.*

Watch out for arbitrary "Slovakisation" of names: our psychologists' experience shows that teachers often automatically change Ukrainian children's names to a Slovak form (e.g. Vlad → Vladko, Michail → Miško). For a child under stress, however, this is a loss of a piece of their identity — they often then don't even respond in class, because at home nobody calls them that. Always ask the child in advance exactly how they want to be addressed at school.

## FROM THE SUPPORT TEAM'S PRACTICE — THE POWER OF RITUAL VS. ISOLATION

*Negative experience: A pupil from Ukraine recalled that on the first day the teacher simply sat him in the free seat at the back of the classroom. No one introduced him, no one got to know him. He spent the whole day in complete invisibility and isolation, which only deepened his anxiety about the new environment. Positive experience: At another school, the class teacher devoted half of the first lesson to a welcome. Classmates prepared small gifts for the new pupil and wrote a welcome message on the board. The pupil recalled this moment with enthusiasm and said it immediately gave him a sense of safety and acceptance.*



## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY — WHAT PARENTS EXPERIENCE

In Slovak schools it is common for parents to accompany their children only as far as the entrance door in the morning, without entering the building. For Slovak families this is routine. For a Ukrainian mother who fled the war, however, it is an enormous trigger for anxiety. Having to let a stressed child go off into an unfamiliar building without knowing exactly where their classroom is, or where they would hide in case of danger, is an intensely traumatic experience for her.

### 3.4 SCREENING-BASED IDENTIFICATION OF THE NEEDS OF A CHILD WITH A MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

Admitting a child to school is only the first step. The fact that a pupil regularly attends lessons or outwardly appears calm does not necessarily mean they have successfully adapted. This is precisely why the school has an important role at this stage and should pay increased attention to the child even when they do not outwardly appear to need anything — calm behaviour does not necessarily mean the child is doing well; it may also be a child who has learned not to stand out.

If a teacher notices even minor signals of increased strain, it is worth devoting more time to the child, looking for an opportunity to talk, and, if necessary, using a screening tool as well. From practice we know that many difficulties only appear after some time has passed. Some children do not communicate their experience openly; others, because of the language barrier, are unable to adequately name their needs or emotional difficulties. The first signals of increased strain are therefore often indirect — shown through changes in behaviour, social relationships, school performance, or emotional experience.

As part of this methodology we also include a screening questionnaire, developed on the basis of practical experience in supporting children with a migration experience, reflecting the areas in which adaptation, emotional, or psychosocial difficulties most often appear. It is not a standardised diagnostic method, but an orientation tool that can help teachers, school psychologists, and support teams monitor a pupil's adaptation process.

The screening results should serve as a basis for further observation and support planning for the pupil. The result itself is not a diagnosis, and must always be interpreted in the context of the child's age, length of stay in the country, language competencies, and individual migration experience.

#### **In case of an elevated or high score, it is recommended to:**

- discuss the results with the school support team or the school psychologist,
- discuss the pupil's current needs with the class teacher,
- establish communication with the child's legal guardians,
- continuously monitor how the situation develops through repeated screening,
- in the case of persistent or serious difficulties, recommend a professional assessment at the CPP or another relevant specialist facility.

Screening can also help identify areas where the child needs increased support (language support, social integration, psychological help, learning support, etc.), and make it easier to

plan concrete support measures within the school environment. It serves for ongoing, planned monitoring of adaptation between individual meetings — if an acute signal appears in a child before the next planned screening, follow the crisis protocol in Chapter 4.

QR code and link to the complete screening form  
(PDF for printing and digital use)



### 3.5 WORKING WITH THE LANGUAGE BARRIER OF CHILDREN WITH A MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

One of the most common mistakes when working with new pupils from a migration background is mistaking language difficulties for a lack of knowledge or ability.

#### EXAMPLE FROM PRACTICE

*Since September 2023, Inkluentrum has organised support groups for Ukrainian teenagers, who met regularly in the so-called Teen Club under the guidance of a Ukrainian psychologist (2022 was devoted to preparing materials and mapping needs; the club itself only began operating in September 2023 — Inkluentrum, Support and Inclusion of Teenagers from Ukraine in Bratislava; Education of Children from Abroad, inkluentrum.sk). Adolescents from this club described, for example, that in Ukraine they had been among the successful pupils in mathematics, but after arriving in Slovakia they felt they could not concentrate even on simple tasks. When solving problems, it was “as if they suddenly couldn’t think”, or they “got stuck even on things that used to be easy”. Similar experiences were reported in relation to learning the Slovak language. Foreign languages had not been a major problem for them before the war, but after being displaced they felt they “couldn’t save a new file to their head”. Slovak, in their words, “got mixed up with English”; they forgot even simple words and were unable to retain new material in the long term. One participant in the group described her experience in these words: “When I have to study Slovak, everything gets muddled and my head fills with chaos.” Some adolescents reported experiencing marked physical symptoms of stress when learning Slovak — they described them as an “inner trembling”, a “shaking inside the body”, or a feeling that “they cannot calm down and concentrate.”*



It can be very frustrating for a child with a migration experience to have their performance assessed on the basis of their language level rather than their actual knowledge and abilities. Repeated experiences of this kind can lead to a loss of motivation, reduced self-confidence, and a gradual withdrawal from the learning process. When assessing new pupils it is therefore important to ask not “Does he know this?” but “Does he know this — or does he just not yet know how to say it in Slovak?” The difference between these two questions can fundamentally affect a child’s school adaptation.

It is similarly important to think about how we give feedback. An experience of feedback that focused on accent rather than content was described repeatedly, in therapeutic groups, by several girls — so this was not an isolated case, but a pattern that appears regularly in practice.

#### EXAMPLE FROM PRACTICE

*One of the girls recalled a moment that affected her particularly deeply: she had prepared a presentation, found the courage to present it to the class despite great anxiety, and received praise — ending with the sentence “Everything was excellent, but your accent is very noticeable.” What she took away from the whole situation was not the praise, but a feeling that, even after a year, she still wasn’t good enough.*



**Instead of pointing out the accent, the feedback could, for example, have sounded like this:**

- *“I can see how much work you put into this.”*
- *“It was very brave to present in front of the class.”*
- *“You’ve made great progress this year.”*
- *“You handled the presentation very well.”*

An accent is a natural part of learning a new language and often persists for a long time. Feedback should therefore be directed primarily at what the child has achieved — not at what they cannot yet fully control.

A similar pattern — where, instead of having their progress recognised, the child mainly hears what they still cannot do — was described repeatedly by children in the groups, across different subjects and situations. It is equally important, therefore, to track individual progress, not only comparison with the class. For children with a migration experience, the more meaningful question is “What could they do a month ago, and what can they do today?” rather than “Are they at the same level as the others?” It is precisely the perception of one’s own progress that supports motivation and willingness to keep learning despite language and adaptation obstacles.

**Assessment should not measure the distance from perfect Slovak. It should measure the distance the child has already travelled.**

### **3.6 GROUP INTERVENTIONS AND THE STRONG PROGRAMME IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT**

With the high number of newly arriving pupils, it was clear from the start that individual psychological support was not enough. Also thanks to cooperation with CPP BA III, which is in direct contact with schools’ pedagogical and specialist staff, we knew that schools often did not know how to approach newly arriving Ukrainian pupils and provide them with adequate support. Many of the children did not speak Slovak, were traumatised, and above all needed basic orientation in the new environment and a sense of safety before they could be ready for learning itself.

In cooperation with Inkluentrum, a system of field workers was therefore created, operating directly in schools and providing children with both group and individual support. It built on the measures proposed by CVA (see the introductory chapter) and gradually grew from ten Bratislava schools with the largest numbers of placed pupils from Ukraine to 19 schools, with the involvement of trained Ukrainian psychologists and teachers.

One of the first measures, implemented from January 2023, focused on intensifying and systematising the psychosocial help that Inkluentrum provided through regional field workers in schools. At the start there were 12 Ukrainian workers, who visited their assigned schools on a weekly basis with the aim of giving Ukrainian pupils in Bratislava access to basic psychosocial support and psychological first aid. They identified children at risk, provided them with appropriate support, and passed on relevant information to the team of Ukrainian psychologists at CPP BA III. In schools they mainly carried out group activities, offering children a safe space in the Ukrainian language, identifying their needs, and ensuring communication with class teachers and the school support team.

One of the group interventions implemented was the STRONG programme (Supporting Transition Resilience of Newcomer Groups), designed to support newly arriving children and adolescents with a refugee experience in adapting to a new social and school environment. Each group was led by a field worker (a Ukrainian-speaking trained specialist from among teachers or psychologists) together with a psychologist trained in the STRONG programme.

The STRONG programme was implemented in eight Bratislava primary schools in 2023–2024. It involved 153 Ukrainian pupils with a refugee experience. It focuses on developing strengths, coping with stress, building social support, and strengthening psychological resilience. For example, in the exercise “My Inner Strengths”, children often discovered unexpected sources of their own strengths, such as optimism or “resilience compared with my sister”, which they had not previously been aware of. Several of the activities are based on principles of the cognitive-behavioural approach and teach children to work with emotions, stress, and difficult life situations.[9]

The results of the STRONG programme in Canada, as well as our own experience in Slovak schools, showed that one of the most important benefits was the creation of new social bonds. As one of the programme’s facilitators put it: “Before the group, many of these children didn’t know each other at all. Today they are friends at school and spend time together.” Participants also learned stress-coping techniques, strengthened their sense of safety, and gained more confidence in their own abilities.

Experience from running the programme confirmed that school-based group interventions can represent an effective tool of psychosocial support for children with a refugee experience. In addition to reducing stress and feelings of loneliness, they support the development of protective mental-health factors such as self-confidence, perseverance, social support, and optimism.

**Ako sa škola môže zapojiť: Ak by vaša škola mala záujem o realizáciu programu STRONG alebo o absolvovanie školenia pre pedagógov, kontaktujte Inklucentrum — bližšie informácie o programe nájdete aj na webe Inklucentra.**



4.

# CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND THE IDENTIFICATION OF RISK SIGNS

Not every emotional reaction from a child is pathological. Fear, withdrawal, reticence, heightened sensitivity, or difficulty concentrating in the first months after moving can be a normal reaction to stress. At the same time, there are conditions that require immediate intervention, because without support they can lead to serious consequences for the child's mental health, education, and socialisation.

The aim of this chapter is to help pedagogical and specialist staff recognise the symptoms of a psycho-emotional crisis in time, distinguish adaptation difficulties from more serious conditions, and know what to do in such a case.

## 4.1 THE CHILD'S PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL STATE AFTER FORCED DISPLACEMENT

Children who have survived war, evacuation, the loss of their home, separation from loved ones, or a prolonged stay under stressful conditions, often also carry an invisible burden that may not show itself outwardly right away. Even when a child is in a safe environment, their nervous system may remain "on alert" for a long time — ready to react to danger that is no longer physically present. From the point of view of the body and brain, safety is not a state that occurs automatically the moment one crosses a border — it is something the nervous system has to gradually learn to recognise again.

**In practice, we most often see this as:**

- increased anxiety;
- difficulties with self-regulation;
- impulsivity;
- aggressive, or conversely, detached reactions;
- somatic complaints without medical causes;
- sudden changes in behaviour;
- regressive signs (childish behaviour, bedwetting, fear of being left alone).

A child is not always able to put their inner state into words, and this is especially true when they also face a language barrier. Younger children more often "speak through behaviour" — their experience shows itself more in play, physical reactions, or relationships than in sentences. Adolescents, by contrast, often hide their experience, especially out of fear of being judged, worry about appearing "weak", or distrust of adults that many of them carry from previous experiences.

It is not the school's role to make a diagnosis or to replace professional care — that is always the task of an assigned psychologist or other specialist. The school's primary role should be to be sufficiently attentive to notice warning signs in time and to involve the family or teachers in cooperation, or, where appropriate, to direct the child to a specialist who can provide more targeted help.

**The school's role is not to carry out a psychiatric diagnosis, but to notice warning signals in time and ensure a path to help.**

## 4.2 WHAT TO WATCH FOR

At the first meeting and during the first weeks after a child starts school, a teacher may also make use of a short orientation questionnaire for the pupil (the full version is included as an appendix at the end of this chapter, in both Slovak and Ukrainian). It is not a diagnostic tool, and its result is not a judgement of the child — it serves only as an aid to help the teacher decide whether it is appropriate to involve a psychologist.

Equally important, and in practice perhaps even more important, is ordinary everyday observation. The teacher spends time with the child regularly, and this gives them a unique opportunity to notice changes that would otherwise remain hidden. Particular attention should be paid to:

- a sudden drop in academic performance,
- social isolation,
- conflict-proneness,
- frequent absences,
- excessive sleepiness,
- tearfulness or sudden outbursts of aggression,
- fear of loud sounds, or exaggerated reactions to sirens, noise, or shouting,
- self-harming behaviour or expressions of hopelessness.

If a teacher decides to use the questionnaire, it is worth keeping a few principles in mind: it should be a calm, individual moment, with no sense that this is a test or a check — that is, a situation in which the child does not feel judged, but heard. The child's answers are not graded or corrected, and the child should never feel pressured toward a particular answer, or that a specific response is expected of them.

✂ printable appendix — for photocopying / photographing ✂

## QUICK QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE PUPIL

Dear pupil,

this questionnaire will help us better understand how you feel at your new school and how your adaptation to the new environment is going. There are no right or wrong answers. Mark the option that best describes your feelings and experience over the last two weeks. Your answers will help teachers and school specialists find out what support you might need. The information gathered will be used solely to create a safe, supportive, and welcoming school environment. For each statement, mark one answer: **Never** — this almost never happens to me; **Sometimes** — this happens to me from time to time; **Often** — this happens to me regularly or very often.

| Statement                                     | Nikdy                    | Občas                    | Často                    |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| I sleep badly or have nightmares              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I don't feel like communicating with others   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I often feel anger or irritation              | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I get tired quickly                           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I feel that nobody understands me             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I often feel like crying                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My stomach/head hurts for no reason           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I feel in danger even at school               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I feel fear or anxiety for no apparent reason | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I cannot concentrate in class                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

If a pupil marks “Often” on four or more items, it is recommended to inform the parents (legal guardians) and consider a consultation with the school psychologist or another mental-health specialist. The result must be interpreted in the context of the child’s overall situation, and does not replace a professional assessment. If symptoms persist for longer than 3–4 weeks, or worsen, a consultation with a psychologist is needed.

⌘ Швидкий опитувальник для учня — UA — príloha na kopírovanie / fotenie ⌘

## ШВИДКИЙ ОПИТУВАЛЬНИК ДЛЯ УЧНЯ

*Шановний учню!*

Цей опитувальник допоможе зрозуміти, як ти почуваєшся в новій школі та наскільки комфортно проходить твоя адаптація до нового середовища. Тут немає правильних чи неправильних відповідей. Важливо обрати той варіант, який найкраще відображає твої почуття та переживання протягом останніх двох тижнів.

Твої відповіді допоможуть учителям і шкільним фахівцям краще зрозуміти, яка підтримка може бути для тебе корисною. Отримана інформація використовуватиметься виключно для надання допомоги та створення безпечного й доброзичливого освітнього середовища.

Будь ласка, обери одну відповідь для кожного твердження: Ніколи — це майже не трапляється; Іноді — це трапляється час від часу; Часто — це відбувається регулярно або майже щодня.

| Запитання                                        | Ніколи                   | Іноді                    | Часто                    |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Я погано сплю або мені сняться кошмари           | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| У мене немає бажання спілкуватися з іншими       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Я часто відчуваю гнів або дратівливість          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Я швидко втомлююся                               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| У мене є відчуття, що мене ніхто не розуміє      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Мені часто хочеться плакати                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| У мене без причини болить живіт або голова       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Я відчуваю в небезпеці навіть у школі            | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Я відчуваю страх або тривогу без видимої причини | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Я не можу зосередитися на уроці                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

## 4.3 WARNING SIGNS REQUIRING AN IMMEDIATE RESPONSE

There is a group of symptoms that cannot be explained by “adaptation” alone. These are indicators of high risk that require an immediate response.

### EMOTIONAL WARNING SIGNS

- **Persistent depressive state:** the child appears sad, exhausted, or apathetic most of the time, and does not respond to positive stimuli.
- **Marked anxiety or panic reactions:** attacks of fear, shaking, crying, difficulty breathing, panic at unexpected sounds or a change of environment.
- **Emotional “numbing”:** the child shows no emotion even in important situations, speaks in a monotone, appears detached.

### BEHAVIOURAL WARNING SIGNS

- Self-harm: cuts, burns, scratching, head-banging, hidden injuries on the arms or legs.
- Aggression: uncontrolled outbursts of anger, physical violence against other children, destruction of objects.
- Complete social isolation: the child systematically avoids contact, does not communicate with peers, spends break times alone.
- Regressive behaviour: a sudden “return” to a younger age — baby talk, fear of being left without an adult, bedwetting.

### COGNITIVE AND LEARNING SYMPTOMS

- sudden deterioration of memory;
- inability to sustain attention;
- disorientation;
- “freezing” during lessons;
- difficulty understanding instructions even in the child’s native language — i.e. a situation where the problem is clearly not related to the language barrier.

### PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

- frequent psychosomatic complaints;
- sudden weight loss or weight gain;
- signs of physical violence;
- chronic fatigue;
- signs of neglect.

**Especially dangerous signals — these require an immediate response:**

- talking about death
- statements such as “I don’t want to live any more”
- jokes or references to suicide
- reports of violence at home
- sexualised behaviour that does not match the child’s age
- information about bullying or abuse
- signs of self-harm.

In such cases the child cannot be left unsupervised, nor can the response be postponed “until next week” — action is taken immediately, following the steps described in Chapter 4.4.

For children with a forced-migration experience, school often becomes the first place of stability after a long period of danger and uncertainty. This is exactly why teachers’ attentiveness, clearly defined procedures, and functioning cross-disciplinary cooperation can be decisive for the child’s mental health, adaptation, and further development.

## 4.4 HOW TO PROCEED IN A CRISIS SITUATION

One of the biggest mistakes an adult can make in a crisis situation is a chaotic or overly emotional reaction. A child in crisis needs, above all, the exact opposite of what they themselves are experiencing — they need predictability, a sense of safety, and a calm, clear procedure from the adult.

For children with a migration and refugee experience, it should also be taken into account that the crisis reaction itself can be intensified by additional factors — a language barrier, a previous traumatic experience, the absence of close family, or a deeply rooted fear of authority. What might look, in another child, like stubborn silence may in fact be a sign of panic or a learned distrust of adults and institutions. The following four steps help maintain a calm and predictable procedure, even in this more challenging starting situation.

### STEP 1: STABILISE THE SITUATION

- Make sure the child understands what you are saying.
- Use clear, simple language.
- If necessary, involve an interpreter or someone who speaks the child’s native language.
- Speak in a calm voice; do not raise it.
- Minimise the number of unfamiliar people present, and ensure a physically safe space.
- Explain your actions and the next steps to the child.

Conversely, it is not recommended to demand that the child calm down, to force them to talk, to interrogate them, to morally judge their behaviour, to use complex language constructions, or to interpret their silence as unwillingness to cooperate — silence, at such a moment, is often the only way the child is able to protect themselves.

## STEP 2: ASSESS THE RISK

Only once the situation is at least partly stabilised does it make sense to assess the level of risk. The key questions the adult should ask at this point are:

- Is there a risk of self-harm?
- Is the child endangering themselves or others?
- Are there signs of violence?
- Can the child remain in the classroom?
- Is there a trusted adult nearby?
- Is the situation unrelated to current events in the child's home country or to family circumstances?

If the risk turns out to be high, there is no need to wait for further signals — the school leadership and psychologist should be involved immediately.

## STEP 3: MAKING CONTACT WITH THE CHILD

How you speak to the child at this moment can either calm the situation or deepen it. The following phrases have proven helpful:

- “You are safe now.”
- “I can see this is very hard for you.”
- “You don't have to explain everything right away.”
- “We'll try to find help.”
- “You can speak in whichever language feels more comfortable for you right now.”

Conversely, phrases such as “Don't make things up”, “Others have it worse”, “You're in a safe country now” or “You have to be strong” should be avoided. It is particularly important to avoid the phrase “You're in a safe country now” — a subjective sense of safety does not always correspond to the child's actual living conditions. Many children continue to live with worry for loved ones who remain in Ukraine, or regularly and involuntarily encounter news from the war.

## STEP 4: INFORMING THE RESPONSIBLE PEOPLE

Depending on the nature and severity of the situation, other people become involved in the next steps — most often the school psychologist, members of the school support team, the social pedagogue, the school leadership, parents or legal guardians, the regional field worker, the counselling and prevention centre, or, where relevant, crisis services, medical staff, or the police. The exact order and manner in which these actors become involved differs from case to case and depends on the specific situation and on the given school's crisis-management setup — every school should have clarity in advance about who to turn to in which situation, ideally based on its own training in crisis management.

After the situation has been stabilised, it is important not to consider the crisis closed simply because the child has calmed down on the outside. Children with a migration and refugee experience usually need further support, ongoing monitoring of their adaptation, and above all the certainty that they can ask for help again, whenever they need it.

**Crisis management at school is not only a response to extraordinary situations, but above all a system for the early detection of risk and for creating a safe environment for the child.**

5.

# SYSTEMIC SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN WITH A MIGRATION AND REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

Support for a child with a migration experience is most effective when individual institutions cooperate and each takes on its share of responsibility. The school is often the first place where adults notice a child's adaptation, educational, or psychological difficulties. However, it cannot resolve every situation on its own.

As a first step, it is appropriate to make use of resources available within the school: the class teacher, the school support team, the school psychologist, the social pedagogue, or the school special educator.

If the difficulties persist, or require professional assessment, the school or parents can turn to the Centre for Counselling and Prevention (CPP). The CPP provides professional diagnostics, psychological, special-education, and speech-therapy services, counselling for families, and cooperation with the school in setting up support measures.

In situations that go beyond the competence of the school or the CPP, other institutions may also become involved in supporting the child, such as doctors, child psychiatrists, early-intervention centres, the child social-protection and social-guardianship authorities (SPODaSK), or other specialist or community organisations. It is important to view these individual services not as separate systems, but as an interconnected support network whose shared goal is to ensure the child a safe environment and appropriate help according to their current needs.

At the start of the large-scale war in Ukraine, Slovak schools took in a considerable wave of Ukrainian pupils. The physical safety they provided did not, however, mean an automatic resolution of adaptation difficulties or psychological release from strain. This is precisely why the need arose to create a specialised team combining psychological, counselling, educational, and adaptation support. Within the activity of the Ukrainian support team at CPP Bratislava III, a model of comprehensive help was created, combining various forms of support.

## **The team provides:**

- psychological diagnostics;
- individual counselling;
- therapy for children and parents;
- speech-therapy assistance;
- special-education diagnostics;
- therapeutic groups;
- group work in schools;
- classroom observation;
- consultations for teachers;
- career guidance;
- educational and informational events.

Over the course of its work, the team has responded to the changing needs of Ukrainian children and their families. While crisis intervention and stabilisation dominated in the first months, attention gradually shifted to long-term adaptation, integration, and support for children with specific educational and psychological needs.

## 5.1 FROM CRISIS INTERVENTION TO LONG-TERM SUPPORT AND INTEGRATION

*“They’ve been here a long time” does not mean “They’ve already adapted.”*

The changing needs of Ukrainian children gradually also changed the nature of specialists’ work. At the outset, the support team for Ukrainian children at CPP BA III consisted of three psychologists and one speech therapist. Over time, the team was expanded to eight specialists — official CPP BA III staff who each covered one of the individual Bratislava city districts (I to V). This significantly increased the capacity to provide support to a larger number of children and families.

Despite this expansion, we repeatedly found in practice that the needs of schools and families exceeded our capacity. Requests for support came not only from Bratislava, but also from other regions of Slovakia (the Bratislava, Trnava, and Nitra regions). At the same time, the nature of the problems that children and schools brought to specialists gradually changed. While crisis help and stabilisation dominated in the first months after arrival, questions of adaptation, integration, learning difficulties, mental health, and support for children with specific needs later came to the fore.

Experience from practice also showed that time spent in the new country alone does not automatically mean that a child no longer needs support. On the contrary — many difficulties may only appear, or become fully apparent, after months or years of living in the new environment.

**We often encounter statements such as:**

- “The child has been coming to our school for a year already.”
- “She arrived right at the start of the war.”
- “Well, she’s not from an area near the fighting.”
- “He already speaks Slovak well.”

Such arguments can create the impression that the child no longer needs additional attention or support. As already mentioned, however, the results of our research showed that the degree of loneliness has no statistically significant relationship with the length of stay in the country. Even a year or two after moving, a child may continue to struggle with loneliness, adaptation difficulties, emotional tension, or other challenges. From our team’s clinical experience, we know that the same is broadly true of the other areas discussed in Chapter 2.

## 5.2 WHY IS SUPPORT IN THE NATIVE LANGUAGE SO IMPORTANT?

Providing psychological and social help in the child’s native language is not simply a matter of convenience, but a fundamental therapeutic factor. When a person is under stress, their ability to function in a foreign-language environment decreases significantly. As already mentioned, moving to a new country often means losing an already-established support system. Even children who already command Slovak reasonably well often have difficulty describing their own emotions, experiences, or complex life situations.

**It was clear from practice that during sessions held in Ukrainian:**

- children made contact more quickly;
- they became more open;
- they were more willing to talk about their difficulties;
- they sought help more easily;
- they showed less tension.

**EXAMPLE FROM PRACTICE**

*During my own psychotherapy sessions in Slovak, I often used the word “rozčúlená” [literally “agitated”], meaning a state of being moved or emotionally touched. In Slovak, however, the verb “rozčúliť sa” actually means “to get angry” or “to become furious”. For a while, both the psychologist and I were convinced we understood each other correctly, even though we were, in fact, giving the word completely different meanings. If misunderstandings like this can occur between adults with a good command of the language, one can only imagine how much more complicated it is for children to describe their own experience in a foreign language.*

**THE “SIMPLEST ANSWER” STRATEGY**

In the practice of school psychologists, the following situation often arises: in response to questions from a Slovak-speaking specialist, Ukrainian children answer very briefly, tersely, or say “everything is fine.” This does not mean the problems don’t exist. It is simpler for the child to withdraw or give a bare-minimum answer, because they lack the vocabulary needed to describe the complex, ambivalent range of their emotions — for example, homesickness intertwined with a sense of guilt, or fear of not being accepted by peers.

**The native language is not just a communication tool. It is the place where a child can tell the truth about what they are experiencing.**

6.

# CONCLUSION: WHAT WE LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Experience from working with Ukrainian children and their families has shown that support for children with a forced-migration experience cannot rest on individual goodwill alone. It requires a system, clear responsibilities, and readiness to respond to the changing needs of families.

During the first months of the war, crisis intervention, stabilisation, and the provision of basic information were the most important. Gradually, however, it became clear that children's needs change, and the nature of the help provided must change with them. Children's needs do not end after the first months of staying in the new country. Even after years, language barriers, the effects of trauma, adaptation difficulties, or the need for professional support may persist. Integration must therefore be understood as a long-term process, not a one-off intervention

## ČO MÔŽE POMÔČť PRI BUDÚCICH MIGRAČNÝCH VLNÁCH?

Práca s ukrajinskými deťmi a rodinami od roku 2022 priniesla množstvo skúseností, ktoré by mohli pomôcť pri zvládaní budúcich migračných vln — či už pôjde znova o dôsledky vojnového konfliktu, alebo o inú príčinu núteného presídlenia. Pri spätnom pohľade vidíme niekoľko oblastí, ktoré by bolo vhodné pripraviť skôr alebo systematickejšie. Za dôležité považujeme:

- setting up a coordinated multidisciplinary team (psychologists, special educators, speech therapists, field workers) as soon as possible after a crisis breaks out,
- ensuring accessible support in the native language of children and families,
- the presence of specialists directly in schools — field workers pick up problems that would otherwise remain invisible if work were confined to a counselling institution,
- simple methodological guidance and information materials for teachers and parents, available from the very start of the crisis,
- regular training for pedagogical and specialist staff in working with children with a migration experience,
- diagnostic tools and professional materials in children's native languages,
- screening of children with special educational needs from the earliest phase of support,
- clear procedures for admitting new pupils to schools,
- active work with parents from the very beginning — information meetings, parent groups, interpreting,
- stable systemic funding rather than short-term project-based funding,
- building a support system in advance (contact networks, methodological materials, translation services, clear cooperation procedures) before a crisis hits

Effective support arises when the school, family, specialists, and community work together. This cooperation should be the foundation of every future model for helping children with a migration experience

**We do not see the experience of supporting children from Ukraine merely as a response to one extraordinary situation. It represents an opportunity to build a system that will be ready to support every child with a migration experience, in future migration challenges as well.**

This methodology arose at a specific time and place — in Bratislava schools, during the first years after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. We believe, however, that the principles that follow from it — safety as the foundation of adaptation, the value of support in one's native language, sensitivity to invisible forms of strain, and the importance of cooperation between school, family, and specialists — remain valid beyond this specific context, across different causes and forms of future migration waves..

**If this methodology helps even a single teacher take one small, more sensitive step toward a child with a migration experience, it has fulfilled its purpose.**





