

Supporting refugee children with SEND

Guidance for schools and local authorities

This guidance was produced as part of a research study on [inclusive secondary education for refugee learners in Oxfordshire](#). The research was commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) and conducted by Refugee Education UK (REUK) in collaboration with the University of Nottingham. This guidance note provides recommendations for schools and local authorities on supporting refugee learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) of secondary school age.

Introduction

Schools across the UK are increasingly home to children who have been forcibly displaced by conflict or environmental disaster. Among them are rising numbers of refugee and asylum-seeking children who may also have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). In England in 2023, there were around 230,000 children in schools who speak, or are thought to speak, a language other than English, and who also have SEND (UK Government Statistics Service, June 2023). Many of these children and their families will be navigating a new educational system in the UK and the majority of them are likely to have also experienced trauma, conflict and disrupted education (Pinson & Arnot, 2010; UNHCR, 2023).

Refugee and asylum-seeking children face both over- and under-identification of SEND (Gladwell & Chetwynd, 2018). Trauma-related behaviours, communication differences, and cultural unfamiliarity can be mistaken for learning difficulties or behavioural challenges, while SEND needs may go unnoticed due to limited access to appropriate assessment tools and trained professionals (Kohli, 2011). This can result in inappropriate placement, exclusion, and a failure to meet legal obligations under the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DHSC, 2015).

Yet, schools can also be transformative spaces of inclusion, recovery, and learning for refugee children with SEND. Educators are uniquely positioned to adopt practices that are trauma-informed, linguistically accessible, and culturally responsive—helping children not only learn but also heal and thrive (Fazel et al., 2012). Recognising the intersectionality of children's experiences of forced migration, disability, language difference, and often racism is essential to building effective, compassionate support systems (Crenshaw, 1989; Robinson & Ghosh, 2019).

Drawing on interviews with expert practitioners within local secondary schools and Oxfordshire County Council, and supplemented by existing literature, this guidance shares learnings on distinguishing EAL from SEND and trauma and the importance of involving families and learners when designing support for refugee children with SEND.

Distinguishing SEND from EAL and trauma

The SEND code of practice states that difficulties related solely to EAL are not SEND (DfE & DHSC, 2015: 86). However, limited English proficiency can sometimes mask underlying special educational needs, making accurate identification more difficult (Cameron, 2016). Children and young people from refugee backgrounds might have been exposed to stressors and adverse events that could negatively impact their mental health or cause trauma (Spallek et al., 2011). Trauma in turn can result in academic disengagement, memory issues, or behavioural challenges, which may resemble SEND but require different interventions (Kaplan et al., 2016; Welply, 2022).

Practical guidance for schools to help distinguish SEND from EAL and trauma

- Use appropriate assessment tools that consider a child's first language and any prior education they may have received in that language ([see resources below](#)).
- Closely track a student's progress across different subjects to differentiate between language needs and SEND.
- Create a pupil profile for each student taking into account their varied backgrounds, diverse educational experiences and linguistic skills to ensure tailored, holistic and individualised support can be provided.
- Provide trauma-informed training to all school staff to equip them to identify and appropriately support students. Having a compassionate and curious approach is key to understanding the student ([see resources below](#)).
- Ensure close collaboration between the EAL Coordinator and SEND Coordinator to ensure that language barriers are not mistaken for SEND.

“Get senior leaders onto trauma training to understand the philosophy of supporting young people that have experienced trauma, and this is not just for migrants, this is for all children. And if you get that culture change at the top, then it will cascade down to your dinner ladies.” (Practitioner interview)

Involve learners and their families in designing support

Collaboration between families and practitioners is vital for supporting refugee and asylum-seeking children with SEND. To achieve this, a culturally sensitive, trauma-informed approach is essential, as families may face barriers such as language difficulties (Arnot et al., 2014), trauma (Fazel et al., 2012; Betancourt et al., 2013), and financial hardship (Phillimore, 2011; Stewart, 2005), alongside challenges like navigating

diagnoses and feelings of isolation (Walsh & Thompson, 2022). These barriers intersect and accumulate to create additional difficulties for refugee families interacting with the SEND diagnosis and support system.

Practical guidance for schools on engaging with students and parents/caregivers

- Involve learners and their families in creating individualised support plans. Have discussions with students about their prior educational experiences, goals, challenges in the classroom and desired support from school.
- Ensure all communication, including letters and emails, are translated into appropriate languages.
- Offer regular meetings, and provide interpretation for these as needed. It is beneficial for interpreters to also have an understanding of SEND, but using app-based or online interpretation tools in the absence of in-person interpretation is preferable to nothing at all.
- Follow up verbal conversations with an email, providing a written record of information shared.
- Provide a consistent point of contact within the school, with whom parents and caregivers can build a relationship.
- Involve parents and caregivers in decision-making about their children's education, including through regular communication, updates and feedback.
- Find out about parents' expectations and preferences for communication and involvement.
- Where possible, include teachers and/or teaching assistants with knowledge of refugee children's first languages within the school staff. In addition to supporting children to feel safe and understood, practitioners with a shared language as members of refugee communities can help strengthen relationships with parents and caregivers.
- Recognise the diversity of parent and caregivers' perceptions, past experiences and expectations related to SEND, and adopt a culturally sensitive approach.

“In Ukraine, we work together, parents and teachers together... Teachers would ask me what I think, “Is this okay?” ... So, every time we had feedback, I had feedback from teachers and they had feedback from me. It was [an] amazing programme because it was [an] individual programme.” (Parent interview)

Recommendations for local authorities

- Build expertise within SEND teams in local authorities around working with newly arrived families and children and young people with EAL, including, where possible, through the creation of dedicated support roles.
- When conducting initial assessments with newly arrived families, include prompts to assess for trauma and potential SEND to ensure early detection and swift support.

- Adopt a coordinated approach when assessing and supporting newly arrived children and families with SEND. This should include close collaboration with speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, and other relevant professionals. Ensure these families are connected with the appropriate NHS services so that needs related to SEND can be accurately identified and distinguished from those linked to EAL or experiences of trauma.
- Ensure that information and guidance provided by the local Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information, Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS) is clear, accessible, and translated into a wide range of languages, including the most commonly-used languages amongst families from refugee backgrounds in the local area.

“It’s just recognising how we identify the young people and get them into school and just make sure that their transition is supported, so that they feel cared for, listened to, and the family feels heard.” (Practitioner interview)

Conclusion

Inclusion of refugee and asylum-seeking learners with SEND in the UK education system requires an informed, collaborative, and context-sensitive approach. These learners might have experienced an intersection of displacement, trauma, language barriers, and disabilities which demands that educators adopt trauma-informed and culturally sensitive approaches to supporting them.

The research behind this guide highlights how misconceptions about EAL and SEND, cultural differences in understanding disability, and limited professional capacity can hinder effective practice. While there is no single, agreed approach to identifying and supporting EAL learners with SEND (The Bell Foundation, 2024), strategies such as trauma-informed training, early assessments by dedicated SEND professionals, and culturally responsive communication with families demonstrate that some challenges can be overcome.

Moving forward, schools and local authorities must invest in continuous professional development that equips educators to differentiate between language acquisition needs, trauma responses, and SEND. Additionally, strengthening collaboration between EAL and SEND leads, prioritising student and family voice, and adopting a whole-school commitment to inclusive education are all essential components. Ultimately, creating inclusive systems for refugee and asylum-seeking learners with SEND is not only a statutory requirement but a moral imperative; one that affirms every child’s right to equitable education.

Learn more

Training and resources

- **The Bell Foundation:** The Bell Foundation provides training, resources and guidance for school staff who work with learners using EAL. Website: www.bell-foundation.org.uk
- **NALDIC:** The national EAL subject association, providing networking, information, and resources for teachers. Website: naldic.org.uk.
- **Nasen:** The National Association for Special Educational Needs, providing information, training, and resources. Website: nasen.org.uk.
- **SENDIASS:** Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Services, providing information, advice and support to families, carers, and young people. Website: <https://bit.ly/kids-sendiass>.
- **Refugee Education UK:** REUK provides a range of resources and training for practitioners on supporting refugee children in schools. Website: www.reuk.org.

Further reading

- [**EAL and SEND: Guidance for Integrated Provision in Schools.**](#) The Bell Foundation, 2024.
- [**HERE's What We Know About the Educational Inclusion of Refugees with Disabilities in Europe.**](#) Hunt, L., McIntyre, J., and Robinson, A., Hub for Education for Refugees in Europe (HERE), University of Nottingham. 2025.
- [**Supporting migrant children with special educational needs: What information do schools need and how can it be collected?**](#) Jørgensen, C., Dobson, G., and Perry, T., University of Birmingham. 2021.

About REUK

[Refugee Education UK \(REUK\)](#) is a UK charity working towards a world where all young refugees can access education, thrive in education, and use that education to create a hopeful, brighter future. Our direct programme work supports children and young people to get into school, from primary to university, and to thrive academically and in their wellbeing. Alongside our direct work, REUK provides training, resources and bespoke support to education institutions across the country and carries out research to build evidence on issues related to refugee education.

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