

Supporting Refugee Children & Youth Tips for Educators

As a result of violence and oppression around the world, many families are forced to flee their countries as refugees. Consequently, schools across the country are welcoming and serving students from diverse nations. These students bring their unique individual cultures and backgrounds while bearing some of the challenges and stresses of the refugee experience. The following tips and related resources can help educators meet the unique needs of refugee students.

Understand and recognize stressors. Refugee children and youth are often traumatized from premigration and resettlement experiences. They may have been exposed to violence and combat, home displacement, malnutrition, detention, and torture. Many have been forced to leave their country and cannot safely return home. Some may have come without their parents and without knowing of their health or safety. Psychological stress and traumatic experiences are often inflicted upon these children over months or even years, and many experience some kind of discrimination once entering U.S. schools. Additionally, they often resettle in high-poverty and high-crime neighborhoods, increasing exposure to stressful conditions.

Understand the effect of trauma on school functioning. Extreme stress, adversity, and trauma can impede concentration, cognitive functioning, memory, and social relationships. Additionally, stress can contribute to both internalized symptoms—such as hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, grief, fear, anger, isolation—and externalized behaviors—such as startle responses, reactivity, aggression, and conduct problems. Given the often chronic and significant stress placed on refugee students, many are at increased risk for developing trauma and other mental health disorders, undermining their ability to function effectively in school. Further, given the environment of their previous schooling and the immigration to the United States, many have experienced significantly interrupted schooling; coupled with language gaps, many students arrive unprepared to participate in school with their same-age peers.

Equip staff to provide trauma sensitive responses and supports. Creating trauma-sensitive schools greatly enhances supports for all traumatized students, including refugees. A trauma-sensitive school views behaviors as a potential outcome of life circumstances rather than willful disobedience or intentional misbehavior. Trauma-sensitive approaches emphasize helping school staff understand the impact of trauma on school functioning and seeing behavior through this lens; building trusting relationships among teachers and peers; helping students develop the ability to self-regulate behaviors, emotions, and attention; supporting student success in academic and nonacademic areas; and promoting physical and emotional health. Additional information is available at <http://traumasensitiveschools.org/>

Understand the challenges of relocation and acculturation. Refugee children and youth often have significant adjustments to life in their new communities and schools. This includes language differences, not understanding how schools function, not knowing where to go for help, little familiarity with the curriculum or social mores, and difficulty making friends. Some refugees are relocated to communities with an existing population from their country. Others may be the only people from their country, heightening the sense of isolation. Also note that children frequently adapt culturally and linguistically more quickly than their parents. Over time, this can cause conflict when children deviate from tradition and can increase the burden on children when parents rely on them to navigate their new environment and to act as language translators.

Be sensitive to family stressors. Parents and other family members are also dealing with the stress of relocation, including trying to navigate and achieve self-sufficiency in their new community. This includes overcoming language and cultural barriers, finding housing and employment, establishing a social network, understanding their role in their children's schooling, accessing social services, and connecting with their faith community. For many, having to ask for help or rely on others is not their norm and contributes to stress. Additionally, some parents may have experienced significant stress or trauma during the migration process, which can lead to increased risk for a range of negative outcomes for their children.

Identify children and youth who are at high risk, and plan interventions. Schools bear a responsibility to identify refugee students that may be at heightened risk based on the factors outlined above. In general, interventions delivered within comprehensive service models (i.e., multitiered systems of support) and focused on educational, social, and economic outcomes are more effective than clinical treatment alone, and can often prevent the need for intensive, direct services. However, by maintaining close contact with teachers and parents, the school crisis response team can determine which students may require more intensive crisis intervention and counseling services. Schools should also create a mechanism for self-referral and parental referral of students.

Understand cultural views regarding mental health. It is important that mental health professionals be aware of attitudes toward mental illness and the role of mental health services when providing assistance to students. Many cultures may have a minimal understanding of mental illness, and in some cultures and faith communities, mental health problems are greatly stigmatized. Some cultures may view emotional problems as a weakness in character as opposed to a natural response to adversity. Understanding these barriers is an essential first step to reassuring and engaging students and their families and ultimately building the trust necessary to provide effective services and supports.

Engage and empower families. Families from other countries may have different views about education, including the assumption that education remains the duty of the school and any involvement would encroach on that responsibility. Some families may not be proficient enough in English to know how to engage, despite a desire to do so. Additionally, many families may experience practical barriers, such as not having a car or employment that does not allow for active engagement during school hours. Schools can work with cultural liaisons and the families to find ways to connect with parents and ensure they have opportunities to participate in their child's schooling.

Focus on student strengths. Many refugee students bring many unique skills, strengths, and knowledge into the classroom. Build on those strengths of resilience, and consider having them share their knowledge about their country, customs, and culture. Educators should also support maintaining the home culture and language, while also balancing the importance of developing the skills and knowledge to succeed in the United States.

Access community resources. Reach out to community organizations that specialize in working with refugee families, if those resources are available, such as the [International Rescue Committee \(http://www.rescue.org/where/united_states\)](http://www.rescue.org/where/united_states). Maintain an accurate and evolving list of community resources available to help affected families. It is imperative to compile a list of community resources, including the names, telephone numbers, websites (if available), contact persons (if appropriate), descriptions of services, and any fees. Try to determine if support groups are being provided at local churches or community agencies. Consider also reaching out to state refugee coordinators (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/orr-funded-programs-key-contacts>).

Stop any type of harassment or bullying immediately. Refugee children may be at risk for harmful behavior by others if classmates or even teachers unfairly stigmatize them. Make it clear that such behavior, in any form (in person, online, on social media) is unacceptable. Promote acceptance and actively teach conflict resolution skills to both the perpetrators and the refugee student(s).

Note: Refugees who seek political asylum in the United States must gain approval from multiple federal agencies before immigrating. More information is available at <http://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum/refugees>.)

External Resources:

- Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (<http://www.brycs.org/>)
- The Center for Health and Healthcare in Schools (<http://www.healthinschools.org/Immigrant-and-Refugee-Children.aspx>)
- Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning (<http://www.springinstitute.org/>)
- National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network, Child and Adolescent Refugee Trauma (<http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/refugee-and-war-zone-trauma>)
- Screening and Assessing Immigrant and Refugee Youth in School-Based Mental Health Programs (http://www.issuelab.org/resource/screening_and_assessing_immigrant_and_refugee_youth_in_schoolbased_mental_health_programs)
- Partnering With Parents and Families to Support Immigrant and Refugee Children at School (<http://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2009/06/partnering-with-parents-and-families-to-support-immigrant-and-re.html>)

Note: Some of this handout was adapted from "School-Based Services for Traumatized Refugee Children", *Communique*, Vol. 39, Issue 5

© 2015, National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814, (301) 657-0270, Fax (301) 657-0275; www.nasponline.org.