

**ADAPTING YOUR PROGRAM FOR REFUGEE AND
IMMIGRANT CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES**

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CHILDREN'S SETTLEMENT NEEDS

LOSS

The impact of the refugee experience on each child, is life-changing. The many losses that children face have a unique impact on each child. The one most important loss may be the quality and sustainability of their attachment to their main caregiver. Their parent may be more distracted and less responsive to their child because of their own culture shock. Many Syrian children have lost significant family members and been put in unfamiliar surroundings with unfamiliar people. They may mourn these losses, feel less supported, have less confidence and lower self-esteem. They must adjust to the cold climate and lack of limited access to outdoor free play. The very primitive conditions in the refugee camps meant children may have had poor nutrition, inadequate shelter and exposure to diseases.

The trauma or culture shock in children can be profound. This may affect every aspect of a child's life, e.g.

- frequent illnesses due to exposure to new diseases and a weak immune system
- extreme reaction and trauma due to separation from their main caregiver
- overwhelmed by the changes and unable to engage in play
- little interest in peers
- weak impulse control due to intense fear and exposure to violence

LANGUAGE

The home language provides a vital link between the family members. Although most Syrians speak Arabic, it may not be their home language. Because of bias, families may not use their first language at home. It is important to value the home language and help families keep it. Children may have learned to hide their home language from peers, since being Syrian in refugee camps may have led to exclusion and bullying in the country of asylum. Some benefits of keeping the home language are:

- it reduces the stress
- it strengthens the emotional connection to family
- it is more likely to be interactive and it is spoken more richly and completely
- it improves the child's listening skills and focus
- children use their language to express their needs and have them more readily responded to
- it fosters self-identification and pride
- their language helps them feel more connected with others including their family
- bilingual children are more likely to achieve academic success and social advantage

It is also important for refugee children to gradually learn English, e.g.:

- children can more readily express their needs to non-home language users
- children can feel more connected to other children - feel they belong - feel less lonely
- less vulnerable to exclusion, bullying, rejection and isolation
- more likely to have academic and social success

CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

One of the most important signs of successful settlement is the child's ability to connect with others. The attachment and ability to separate from the main caregiver can be very challenging and take some time. Similarly, the child's interest and ability to connect with family members sets the stage for children being able to connect with others. Children who have been exposed to violence may have difficulty trusting others, including family members. Violence as a way to protect yourself may have helped a child survive. As victims of violence, children may not have learned other ways of reacting to fearful situations.

When children are able to make friends with others there are many benefits:

- children may behave and react differently to peers because of past traumas
- it shows that children are able to gradually trust others
- they feel less isolated which improves their self-esteem, confidence and relaxation
- they are less likely to react fearfully with inappropriate behaviour
- they are more likely to be able to focus, learn a new language and gain support from others
- social success is closely linked to successful settlement and development in many other areas

DEALING WITH CHANGE

Not all children adapt well to change. The refugee experience may cause so much trauma for some children that they may never recover from it. Once children's basic needs are met, their next challenge is to feel safe. Children may be very fearful when they don't feel protected or responded to. Once they feel safe, they need to feel connected - to feel loved and that they belong. This builds the child's self-esteem.

Refugee children have often had several severe challenging changes. Children may be feeling confused, afraid, overwhelmed, conflicted or angry. A child may not deal with change easily. Risk factors include:

- weak bond and attachment with family members
- past traumatic experiences, e.g. poor separation experience, victim of violence
- past difficulty adapting to changes
- difficulty self-soothing
- lack of responsiveness to new situations and new people

WELLBEING

Children's well being is at the core of their successful settlement. Paying close attention to the issues children face in life is important because their wellbeing is key to cognitive, social and emotional development. When the child is not able to successfully settle, they suffer psychological trauma, weak bonding with their family, low self-esteem and weak coping skills. Refugee children are more at risk for unsuccessful settlement because of the increased likelihood of :

- the severity of culture shock in the family - child feels abandoned and insecure
- the exposure to trauma including violence
- unsupported separation when children are not ready or capable
- lack of use of home language - increased feelings of isolation and confusion
- the impact of severe stressors on brain development

However, when programs make specific, special, on-going efforts to support children and families, many refugee children are able to develop strong coping skills - to be more resilient to these challenges and achieve a sense of wellbeing.

HELPING REFUGEE CHILDREN COPE WITH STRESS

An alarming number of Syrian children witnessed violence or were victims of violence. In their short lives they have endured catastrophic changes. With their family, they may have escaped the bloodshed and terror of Syria, survived the primitive conditions of a refugee camp and finally arrived in the alien environment of Canada. Their family has also endured these experiences and somehow survived. On top of this, the refugee child must cope with the separation from their parent as they enter school or childcare.

Refugee children may react in unusual ways to the tremendous stress. Here are some examples:

- whining, clinging, rocking, gazing unseeingly
- (shaking, gagging, vomiting, screaming, banging their head - especially upon separation)
- hitting, biting, kicking, pushing, pulling hair
- running, hiding

Culture Shock and Separation Anxiety

The stress that children feel as they cope with all the changes of settlement, can be described as culture shock. Each child reacts differently to similar stresses but some common signs are:

- Physical* - frequently ill, tires easily, difficulty sleeping/eating, lacking energy
Emotional - extreme separation anxiety, very withdrawn or very aggressive, unable to play
Social - depend on one caregiver, reject or be indifferent to peers, distrust or fear others

As caregivers, it is important to look at our expectations for refugee children. Many young Syrian children have never been separated from their family. If they have been separated, it may have been traumatic. A gradual separation is critical and humane. When caregivers work together with families, they can become more focused on the child and learn the best ways to provide comfort and support. They can heighten a child's sense of security at home and in the childcare. Assigning one caregiver allows the child to more readily develop a trusting relationship. The separations occur slowly and start in the childcare room when the child shows signs of readiness.

You can learn about a child's behaviour when the parent is in the room. During separation, it is important to very diligently shadow the child, to protect their safety and the safety of others. Providing protected spaces and respecting children's changing needs helps reduce the child's stress. Create quiet areas where the child can sleep or retreat. Some children need time to adapt and be alone while others may need the protection of the caregiver to learn how to play with others.

It may take time for children to be able to play. Refugee children may need help to learn how to play constructively. Modeling appropriate play will help. The program expectations will need to be relaxed during the beginning. Transitions can cause confusion and fear.

Other Stresses

When caregivers seen signs of children's stress, e.g. poor concentration, whining, clinging, becoming easily frustrated, less responsive, fighting with peers, they should:

- watch carefully to have a clearer picture of the stress
- ask families about their child's behaviour at home and ask families for suggestions to help child
- reduce the noise level and provide a protected space
- provide comfort items, familiar materials and encourage sensory play
- shadow the child to help her feel supported and safe and to protect the safety of others
- reduce transitions and have options for group time

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH REFUGEE CHILDREN

Home Language

Keeping the family home language is important. It enhances the family bonds, encourages feelings of connection and provides an easier way for children to express their needs and have these needs met. Families communicate more naturally, more interactively and with more emotional tone when they use their home language.

Syrian families may have had to hide their identity and language, e.g. to avoid persecution, to allow them to live safely in their country of asylum. These families may want to purge themselves of everything Syrian. School age Syrian children are especially at risk for hiding their identity and language as they try to fit in and make friends. When caregivers show that they value the family's home language this helps build pride.

Providing information in the family's home language will help parents understand the benefits. It will actually help their child learn English faster, when they continue to use their language at home. The most at risk for language loss are older siblings. It can be very beneficial if the family encourages all members to use their language at home. It strengthens identity, pride and enhances self-esteem.

Find out key words in the child's home language, e.g. "Mommy's coming", toilet. Help parents connect with other families who share their language. Ask families to help you learn simple children's songs in the child's home language. Ask families to tell or read stories in their home language.

Adapting Your Communication

Traumatized children are sometimes unable to accept any contact with strangers. Caregivers will need to patiently build the relationship as children gradually learn to trust and rely on them. During separation anxiety, the use of the new language should be extremely limited so children don't feel as alienated from the caregiver. Use calming sounds like "aah" or "hmm" may be more universally understood.

It can be challenging to communicate meaningfully when you don't share a language. Here are some tips:

- use inviting body language, e.g. squat down low, smile, make eye contact, gesture
- reduce your language but still communicate, e.g. "toilet" said with a questioning voice and squat
- use whole simple 3-5 word sentences
- model key phrases, e.g. "Help me", "I want", "mine"
- label actions, "It's in the box" (make sound as you place object in the box) - to encourage tidy up

A child's interest and ability to communicate may rely heavily on the caregiver's skill in engaging the child in non-verbal interactions. When caregivers use sounds, gestures and animation, the child can build a connection with the caregiver, e.g. as a car is rolled fast across the floor, the caregiver can make a crashing sound when it hits the wall with a light laugh to show you like the crashing. There are many unique interactive ways we can play with children. We can model how to turn puzzle pieces so that they fit. We can offer our hand when they want to be close.

BUILDING SOCIAL SKILLS

The Impact of the Refugee Experience on Children's Social Skills

Children's social development is very important for their successful settlement. The desire to feel connected to others helps reduce the child's isolation and loneliness. When children are interested in making friends, they rapidly learn ways to communicate with their peers. This practical need urges them to speak in their home or new language.

Yet, because of the trauma experienced by many refugee children, it may be difficult for these children to develop trusting relationships. Syrian children may have suffered rejection or bullying by peers. Some children may have been physically harmed by other children as they act out the violence they have seen around them. In the country of asylum, Syrian children may have been rejected by their native born peers. Having difficulty trusting others is quite understandable in these circumstances. Families may have discouraged play with those outside the family.

Because every member of a family is affected by the settlement challenges, family members may be less responsive to children. When parents feel stressed they lose the interest and ability to play with their children. This reduced interaction can be quite harmful to children. Without this attention, children may feel disconnected and even unworthy of love. Family bonds are the basis on which children develop social interest.

Strengthening Family Connections

Caregivers can help strengthen the relationship between parent and child by:

- casually mentioning the child's achievements in the program
- asking how the child ate, slept, play they had at home
- asking the parent for advice about their child's play interests, how they like to be comforted...
- asking the parent about what the child can do or say at home in their first language
- asking parents to share a song or story with a small group of children
- labeling what you think a child might be feeling and then asking the parent for reassurance

Building Friendships

For children to be able to be interested and seek out friendships, they must feel what it's like to have a friend. When caregivers show acceptance and appreciation of a child, other children show interest too.

Caregivers can:

- model how to enter play
- play with one child and invite another child to join them
- set up an attractive play area and leave the new refugee child in charge
- teach important social phrases, e.g. "Can I play?" "Look at me"
- model animation and gesturing while they model phrases
- say the words for children until they can learn to say it, e.g., "I want to be the mommy."
- create fun activities that encourage interaction

Allowing Alone Time

Most children need opportunities to play alone and to play with others. Avoid pressuring children into social situations, e.g. group time. Create space and time for quieter solo play or relaxation.

GUIDING REFUGEE CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

The Impact of the Refugee Experience on Children's Behaviour

Each child has unique experiences which mold their behaviour. The refugee experience is quite different for each child. Even children who have had similar experiences may act very differently. Children may:

- hurt themselves or others, especially during the stress of separation anxiety
- hide, shake or scream when approached by others
- have very volatile emotions and weak control over their emotions
- act out violent actions they have witnessed
- yell as they become easily angry or frustrated
- throw things deliberately or out of uncontrolled anger or fear
- have bizarre behaviour, long after the child seems to be well settled
- attack another child or their parent
- try to intimidate another child, e.g. threaten, grab, bite, pinch, hit, pull hair
- become very rigid and non-responsive (almost catatonic), out of severe trauma

Expectations

When children first enter group care there are new things to learn, e.g.:

- if you leave your toy, another child can play with it
- sometimes you have to wait to play with something
- when you finish playing with something you have to put it away
- you are not allowed to hurt others to get what you want
- sometimes you need to sit still even when it's hard and you don't feel like it

Caregivers need to recognize that children may not know these rules and may not be willing to follow them. Even when they know the rules, they may not be able to do what is asked. Some rules need to be softened until children feel more comfortable, e.g. tidy up can be done mostly by caregivers with children gradually taking on these tasks. Children can be given an alternative activity during group time. Visual props and movement can be added to group time. Parents may be struggling with controlling their child's behaviour. Without the support of other family members it can be overwhelming. Some parents may need help to learn guidance instead of punishment.

Strategies

- gather information from families about their child's behaviour, their limits, consequences
- have realistic expectations - do not withdraw your affection when children misbehave
- have clear, consistent limits that you demonstrate and follow up - use simple clear words
- shadow every new child to guide their behaviour (**** this is very important for safety)
- watch children's behaviour patterns and make changes to:
 - the environment, e.g. remove dangerous things, provide protected areas
 - the schedule, e.g. reduce the number of transitions and change to seamless transitions
 - the program, e.g. make group times more interactive and optional
- notice what led up to inappropriate behaviour and step in early
- use positive language, "gently" (while gently touching a child that is trying to hit)
- model language that asserts children's rights, e.g. "It's mine" "No" "I don't like that"
- praise the child's efforts at control
- work with the family about how you are handling a situation

BUILDING CHILDREN'S SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is the foundation of a child fulfilling their potential. If a child builds self confidence based on their unique self-worth, they will succeed in life. Without it, children flounder, become fearful and eventually, their low self-esteem determines their lack of success.

Self-esteem is nurtured when children have positive relationships with others. A child must feel worthy of being given positive attention. They need to feel that adults genuinely enjoy them. The more individual the reaction, the more children feel treasured. Blanket praise such as "good job" has little value. Genuine praise for accomplishments should be mixed with encouraging self-praise, e.g. "What do you like about your picture?" "Did that feel good?"

Children who feel good about themselves take part in healthy relationships. They are open to new ideas and eager to have fun with others. Their confidence enables them to face challenges, cope with disappointments and enjoy successes. Children with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to criticism, rejection or change. They are harder hit when things go wrong and "fall apart" with fewer coping strategies in tough situations.

Recognizing Confidence in Children

It is important to recognize when children feel confident and when they don't. No child feels confident or unconfident all the time. When children feel confident most of the time you may see that they:

- seem relaxed and natural with others
- readily approach others
- enjoy challenges and seem unafraid to try new things - tolerant of their failures and others
- use materials in their own way
- their play is freer, more advanced and more creative
- are not as concerned about how others think about them
- are not afraid to assert their rights

When children feel unconfident you may see:

- more rigidity in the play
- weaker ability to initiate play or approach others
- that they play with materials with less likelihood of failure, e.g. easier puzzles
- they have difficulty accepting changes
- they are more reliant on rituals
- very bossy behaviour OR very submissive behaviour

Tips for Supporting Self-Esteem

- model positive self-esteem, e.g. confidence, self-praise
- greet children warmly and individually - give an individual goodbye when they are going home
- learn how to say the child's name properly
- help children say goodbye during separations
- be available to children - find a special time for each child, every day
- create a trusting environment with lots of ways to do things - invite successes
- accept and encourage children to express a range of emotions
- allow every child to have opportunities to be leader and follower

RESOURCES

Books

- Julie Dotsch; Supporting the Settlement of Young Immigrant Children and Their Families: A Guide for Early Childhood Educators
- RomaChumak-Horbatsch; Linguistically Appropriate Practice
- Judith Colbert; Welcoming Newcomer Children

On-Line Resources

- www.mascanada.ca
 - Caring for Syrian Refugee Children
 - tip sheets, e.g. Helping Refugee Children Cope with Stress, Culture Shock in Children...
 - on-line courses (fee attached)
 - multilingual resources on key topics, e.g. Welcome Here Multilingual Resources for Parents
 - CMAS accepts orders for Supporting the Settlement... book, e.g. \$30 + shipping

Supports

- CMAS provides information, supports, monitoring and development of Care for Newcomer Children (CNC) programs across Canada. These programs are linked to LINC adult ESL classes
- CMAS also has developed the criteria for CNC programs and related occasional care programs