

# Trauma-Informed Support for Afghan Children & Youth

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# AGENDA

Historical & Cultural Background

Mental Health of Resettled  
Afghans

Supporting Afghan Children &  
Youth

Questions

# Historical & Cultural Background

Brief History & Recent Events

Languages

Ethnic Groups

Religion

Educational Background & Outcomes

Cultural Cornerstones



# BRIEF HISTORY & RECENT EVENTS

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- 40 years of war and conflict
  - 1979 – 1989 Russian invasion
  - Civil war
  - 1994 – 2001 Taliban control
- Recent Events
  - Feb 2020 U.S. and Taliban signed peace agreement
    - Escalation in violence
  - July 2021 Biden announced withdrawal of U.S. military by Aug 31
  - Aug 6, 2021 Taliban seized control of first key provinces; others fell successively
  - Aug 15, 2021 Taliban took control of Kabul; President Ghani fled and government collapsed
    - Chaos erupted at Kabul airport as desperate Afghans attempted to flee
  - Aug 30, 2021 End of U.S. military evacuation effort



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# LANGUAGES

- Over 30 different languages spoken in Afghanistan
- 2 official languages of Afghanistan: Dari and Pashto
  - 77% speak Dari
    - Dari vs. Farsi
    - Use a Dari interpreter for Afghans who speak Dari
  - 48% speak Pashto
  - About 75% of the population speak one or both languages

# ETHNIC GROUPS

- Pashtuns – Largest ethnic and tribal group
- Tajiks – Second largest ethnic group & largest non-tribal group
- Hazara – Ethnic minority group historically persecuted through today
- Uzbeks
- Aimak
- Turkmen
- Baluch



# RELIGION

- Islam
  1. Pledge to their faith and belief that “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.”
  2. Prayer five times a day facing Mecca
  3. Charity
  4. Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan
  5. Pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca
- 85 – 90% Sunni Muslims
- 10 – 15% Shi’a Muslims
- Main coping mechanism for Afghans

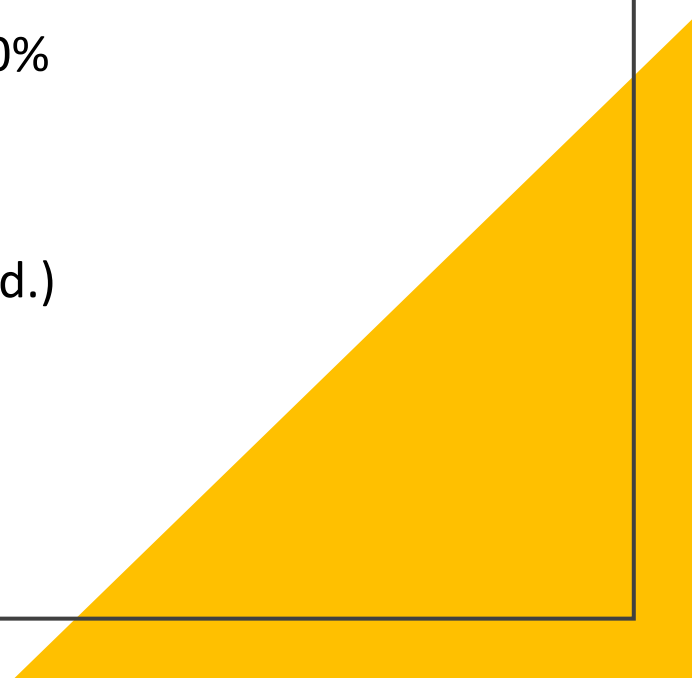


# EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

- Religious education (*madrassas or religious schools*) & public education
- National education system:
  - 2 3-year cycles of primary education
    - Grades 1-3 Lower Primary
    - Grades 4-6 Higher Primary
  - 2 3-year cycles of secondary education
    - Grades 7-9 Lower Secondary
    - Grades 10-12 Higher Secondary
  - Optional vocational education
  - Grades 1-9 compulsory
- Teacher-centered instruction and rote memorization



# EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

- In 2018, 10 million Afghan children attended school (UNESCO, 2021)
  - In 2018, Afghanistan's out-of-school population was 3.7 million – 60% were girls (UNICEF, n.d.)
  - In 2021, adult literacy rate: 37% (World Bank, 2021)
  - 48% of teachers have minimum academic qualifications (UNICEF, n.d.)
  - Educational outcomes are poor
  - Educational interruptions are common
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# CULTURAL CORNERSTONES

## **Family**

- Extended family with 3-4 generations living together or in close proximity
- Hierarchical system of relationships
- Loyalty and filial piety
- Family matters are kept strictly private

## **Gender Norms**

- Patriarchal, patrilinear, and paternalistic
- Clearly defined and strict gender norms
- Gender segregation

## **Shame & Honor**

- Central to Afghan identity

# CULTURAL CORNERSTONES (CONT.)

## **Education**

### **Respect for Elders & Authority Figures**

- Teachers, school administrators, healthcare professionals, etc.

## **Hospitality**

### **Superstitions**

- *Jinn* – supernatural or evil spirit
- Evil eye – misfortune caused by another's envy

## **Communication**

- High-context culture: indirect and implicit
- Less eye contact, particularly with elders & authority figures

# Mental Health of Resettled Afghans

General Statistics & Trends

Child- & Youth-Specific Statistics

Triple-Trauma Paradigm

Manifestations of Trauma

Risks & Resilience

# GENERAL MENTAL HEALTH STATISTICS & TRENDS

## Trauma Exposure

- 65% personally experienced at least one traumatic event
- 49% experienced 4 < traumatic events
- 47% Afghan women reported exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV)

(Kovess-Masfety et al., 2021)

## Mental Disorders

- Prevalence of psychological distress 47%
- Substantial impairment due to mental health 39%
- Sadness 65% and anxiety 27%
- 12-month prevalence rate for Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) over 5%, Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) 3%, Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) 12%, suicidal thoughts over 2%, lifetime suicidal attempts 3.5%

(Kovess-Masfety et al., 2021)

# CHILD- & YOUTH- SPECIFIC STATISTICS




## Trauma Exposure

- 25% 11-16-year-old had close relative or friend wounded or killed; 17% directly witnessed bombardment or rocket explosion related to war; 14% homeless; 29% experienced 3 or more (Panter-Brick et al., 2014)
- 71% experienced physical violence (O'Leary et al., 2018)
- 63% victimized by peers (Zupancic, 2017)

## Mental Health

- 28% substantial risk for psychiatric problems
- 42 – 52% PTSD, 49% depression, 45% anxiety (Ahmadi et al., 2021; Qamar et al., 2022)
- 53% high total difficulties (SDQ), 39% emotional difficulties, 52% conduct challenges, 15% hyperactivity/inattention, 83% peer problems, 12% problems impacted daily life (Kovess-Masfety et al., 2023)

## THE TRIPLE-TRAUMA PARADIGM

PRE-FLIGHT 	FLIGHT 	POST-FLIGHT 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Harassment/intimidation/threats</li> <li>■ Fear of unexpected arrest</li> <li>■ Loss of job/livelihood</li> <li>■ Loss of home and possessions</li> <li>■ Disruption of studies, life dreams</li> <li>■ Repeated relocation</li> <li>■ Living in hiding/underground</li> <li>■ Societal chaos/breakdown</li> <li>■ Prohibition of traditional practices</li> <li>■ Lack of medical care</li> <li>■ Separation, isolation of family</li> <li>■ Malnutrition</li> <li>■ Need for secrecy, silence, distrust</li> <li>■ Brief arrests</li> <li>■ Being followed or monitored</li> <li>■ Imprisonment</li> <li>■ Torture</li> <li>■ Other forms of violence</li> <li>■ Witnessing violence</li> <li>■ Disappearances/deaths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Fear of being caught or returned</li> <li>■ Living in hiding/underground</li> <li>■ Detention at checkpoints, borders</li> <li>■ Loss of home, possessions</li> <li>■ Loss of job/schooling</li> <li>■ Illness</li> <li>■ Robbery</li> <li>■ Exploitation: bribes, falsification</li> <li>■ Physical assault, rape, or injury</li> <li>■ Witnessing violence</li> <li>■ Lack of medical care</li> <li>■ Separation, isolation of family</li> <li>■ Malnutrition</li> <li>■ Crowded, unsanitary conditions</li> <li>■ Long waits in refugee camps</li> <li>■ Great uncertainty about future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Low social and economic status</li> <li>■ Lack of legal status</li> <li>■ Language barriers</li> <li>■ Transportation, service barriers</li> <li>■ Loss of identity, roles</li> <li>■ Bad news from home</li> <li>■ Unmet expectations</li> <li>■ Unemployment/underemployment</li> <li>■ Racial/ethnic discrimination</li> <li>■ Inadequate, dangerous housing</li> <li>■ Repeated relocation/migration</li> <li>■ Social and cultural isolation</li> <li>■ Family separation/reunification</li> <li>■ Unresolved losses/disappearances</li> <li>■ Conflict: internal, marital, generational, community</li> <li>■ Unrealistic expectations from home</li> <li>■ Shock of new climate, geography</li> <li>■ Symptoms often worsen</li> </ul>

# MANIFESTATIONS OF TRAUMA

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## Preschool – Young School-Age

- Sleep disturbances – nightmares, difficulty or fear of falling asleep, night terrors
- Difficulty separating from caregiver
- Somatic complaints
- Disinterest in previously pleasurable activities
- Extreme neediness/clinginess
- Regressive behaviors (bed wetting, thumb sucking, etc.)
- Engage in traumatic play
- Excessive crying or tantrums
- Aggressive behavior (hitting, kicking, biting, etc.)

## School-Age

- Changes in behavior (aggression, anger, irritability, withdrawal, or sadness)
- Trouble at school
- Refuse to attend school
- Difficulties with peers
- Fear of separating from caregivers
- Somatic complaints
- Constant retelling of trauma
- Sleep disturbances
- Difficulties concentrating and learning
- Reckless behaviors
- Excessive crying or tantrums

## Adolescents

- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Sense of responsibility or guilt for bad things that happened
- Feelings of helplessness
- Changes in worldview
- Relationship problems with peers, teachers, & family
- Reckless, self-destructive, or aggressive behaviors
- Self-harm
- Poor academic performance
- Rule-breaking/defiance
- Obsessive behaviors
- Excessive caretaking
- Mistrust



# RISKS & RESILIENCE

## Risk Factors

- Living in a single parent household
- Family separation
- Parental mental health problems & exposure to trauma
- Family economic hardship
- Perceived discrimination
- Intergenerational conflict
- Sensitive developmental periods
- Visa uncertainty
- Lack of language proficiency
- Poor support system and/or hostile and unsupportive community environment
- Lack of access to services

## Resilience

- Afghan cultural values fundamental to upbringing, psychosocial well-being, and resilience:
  1. Faith in Islam (*Iman*)
  2. Family unity and harmony (*Wahdat and itti-faq*)
  3. Service (*Khidmat*)
  4. Perseverance and effort (*Koshesh*)
  5. Morals (*Akhlaq*)
  6. Social prominence, respectability and honor (*Izzat*; Ventevogel et al., 2013)
- Positive, adaptive coping
- Hope for the future
- Family, social, & school support
- Sense of belonging & ethnic identity
- Language proficiency



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# Supporting Afghan Children & Youth

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Trauma-Informed & Culturally Responsive Support

Individual Considerations

Family Considerations

School & Classroom Considerations



# Being Culturally & Trauma-Informed While Assisting Displaced Afghan Families



## Build Connection & Trust

Use cultural ways to show respect:

- Stand up during hellos and goodbyes
- Put your hand over your heart and lower your gaze when thanking a person
- Use “jaan” (a term of respect) when addressing or acknowledging someone of the same gender
- Ask what name they would like to be called (elders don't use first names)
- Be open to giving them a familiar name (like auntie or uncle-jaan)
- When speaking to a family, acknowledge all family members
- Do not use children as translators



## Maintain & Strengthen Family Relationships

- Make sure parents are supported in making decisions about their children's needs
- When talking to a family, respect the role of the parents
- Help parents develop knowledge and skills on how to help children in the new environment
- Normalize challenges (i.e., I know things are different here and there are many new things to learn so let me know how I can support you or support your children)
- Respect cultural parenting practices unless they are harmful
- Always center the parent as the authority in making decisions about their children's future
- Help families develop a shared understanding of family/parent/child goals and needs



## Align with Child/Family Goals & Use A Strength-Based Approach


- Use strength-based framing by asking children/families what strategies they used before to deal with an issue
- Ask about their understanding of an issue and their ideas about dealing with it before making suggestions
- Frame action as being a step towards a life goal (e.g., education, housing, employment) rather than because something is wrong with them
- Frame support as being grounded in supporting the child/family as they try to achieve their goals
- Formulate important tasks to be addressed based on what the child/family identifies as being important to them and link all activities to the achievement of that goal



## Good to Know

- Be calm and compassionate
- Respect culture and diversity
- Actively listen without going into task mode too quickly
- Voice modulation is culturally bound; reflect on your biases
- Don't assume that nonverbal communication gestures (e.g., thumbs up) have the same meaning across cultures
- Let them share stories of their home country or their previous experiences but do not probe them for more details
- Help them adjust to the new community they will be resettling into (practical matters such as how to make appointments, connect with resources, learn English)
- Provide strategies for helping cope with current stress and trauma
- For additional trauma-informed strategies, review [PFA for Displaced Children and Families](#).

# INDIVIDUAL CONSIDERATIONS

- What you say and how you say it matters
  - Identify Afghan students with trauma and/or mental health issues and refer to school counselor
  - Regular collaboration between teachers and school counselors
  - Teach emotion regulation and grounding and relaxation techniques and utilize them when needed
  - Interventions for traumatized refugee children and youth:
    - Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)
    - Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS)
    - School-based expressive therapies and interventions
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# FAMILY CONSIDERATIONS

- Partner with Afghan families and facilitate family activities to foster engagement and relationship building between families and teachers/staff
  - Provide cultural orientation for Afghan students and families
  - Provide home-visits, if possible
  - Facilitate (or partner with organization) psychoeducational groups to support and improve parent-child relationships
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# SCHOOL & CLASSROOM CONSIDERATIONS

## Schools

- Provide training to school staff to improve cultural proficiency
- Provide interpreters and/or cultural brokers
- Assign a teacher or advisor as a trusted point of contact
- Assign peer mentors
- Identify and coordinate with community partners for multi-tiered system of supports

## Classrooms

- Teach through a trauma-informed lens
  - Increase predictability and consistency
  - Remove triggering content
  - Create healing classrooms
- Strengthen positive ethnic and bicultural identity
- Incorporate Afghan culture and values in curriculum so students can relate

# RESOURCES

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- Afghan Health Initiative <https://afghanhealth.org/>
- Afghan American Cultural Association <https://www.aaca-wa.org/>
- Afghan-American Foundation: <https://www.afghanamericans.org>
- Baha, A., Sajady, N., Mirzoy, S., Sadiq, A., Abdi, S., Louie, K., & Brymer, M. (2022). Being Culturally and Trauma-Informed While Assisting Displaced Afghan Families. National Center for Child Traumatic Stress (NCCTS). [Tip Sheet](#)
- Bloom Library. Afghan Children Read provides 330 books in Dari and Pashto for early grades. [www.bloomlibrary.org/Afghan-Children-Read/](http://www.bloomlibrary.org/Afghan-Children-Read/)
- Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services (BRYCS). (2007). Raising children in a new country: An illustrated handbook. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Available in [English](#), [Dari](#), & [Pashto](#).
- Colorin Colorado: How Schools Can Partner with Afghan Refugee Families. [www.colorincolorado.org/refugees/afghan](http://www.colorincolorado.org/refugees/afghan)
- English-Dari and English-Pashto Flashcards: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Gv11eHC2sHE5si6rVtnLV5pz9AjmtKKt>
- Good Thinking Trauma Workbook in [English](#), [Dari](#), and [Pashto](#)
- IRC's E-Learning Course: [Toxic Stress & Well-Being Among Students Affected by Forced Migration](#).
- Storyweaver offers hundreds of stories for children in [Dari/Farsi](#) and [Pashto](#)
- Switchboard's Toolkit: [Supporting Afghan Students in Schools & Youth Programs in the United States](#).

# RESOURCES: Afghan Books

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- Fly, Girl, Fly!: Shaesta Waiz Soars Around the World by Nancy Roe Pimm, Illustrated by Alexandra Bye. Age level: 6-9
- Four Feet, Two Sandals by Karen Lynn Williams, Khadra Mohammad, Illustrated by Doug Chayka. Age level: 6-9
- Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan by Jeanette Winter. Age level: 6-9
- One Half from the East by Nadia Hashimi. Age level: 9-14
- Saving Kabul Corner (Kabul Chronicles) by N. H. Senzai. Age level: 9-14
- The Sky at Our Feet by Nadia Hashimi. Age level: 9-14
- Sparks Like Stars: A Novel by Nadia Hashimi. Age level: Adults
- The Pearl That Broke Its Shell: A Novel. Age level: Adults



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# Questions

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