



Best Practices Guide for Working with Families from Refugee Backgrounds in Child Welfare

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This guide is intended as an overview of selected topics that are relevant to providing culturally responsive services to families with refugee backgrounds and understanding their unique needs. General themes were identified through a literature review and interviews with refugee families. The term 'refugee' is a broad category that encompasses an extremely diverse group of people with unique cultures, histories, and experiences. This guide is not meant to be exhaustive or representative of every family with a refugee background.

Strengths and Protective Factors

"Refugees present perhaps the maximum example of the human capacity to survive despite the greatest of losses and assaults on human identity and dignity" (Muecke, 1992, p. 520).

Families with refugee backgrounds have a number of strengths that can be used to facilitate positive outcomes. Parents have endured extraordinary circumstances to protect their children and families and bring their children to a safe place.¹² A number of personal and social factors modulate the risk for maladjustment and mental health problems, including: in-tact family, adequate material resources, social support, belief in one's ability to cope, religious affiliation, and sense of cultural identity.

Tip: Begin by asking about any concerns the parents have for their children, ascertaining how the parents are currently responding to these concerns, and any supports they think would be helpful¹²

Different Cultural Norms

Resettlement to a new culture requires learning new social norms, values, expectations, and consequences, which may be different than those of their home country. New refugee families receive very little, if any, information or orientation to U.S. laws and norms around appropriate child discipline, parenting styles and expectations, and child supervision requirements.

Tip: Seek to understand the parenting and discipline norms from the family's home culture. Educate parents about the norms, laws, and expectations in the U.S. Provide information about what behavior is unacceptable as well as provide practical strategies for appropriate discipline and supervision.

New families may be unfamiliar with government interventions into what might be considered private family matters. In addition, families with refugee backgrounds have experienced persecution by government authorities and their conditioned response to state officials may be fear and distrust.

Tip: Provide education about:

- Your role (who you are, how you got involved, the limits of your role)
- What to expect (address families' fears)
- Their protections under the law and legal responsibilities
- Ask what the family understands about their case and the child protection system

Tip: Build institutional partnerships with ethnic community-based organizations and refugee resettlement agencies to provide ongoing outreach and education to refugee communities about the CPS process.

REFUGEE:

A REFUGEE IS A PERSON WHO WAS FORCED TO FLEE THEIR HOME COUNTRY AND IS UNABLE TO RETURN BECAUSE OF PERSECUTION BASED ON THEIR RACE, RELIGION, NATIONALITY, MEMBERSHIP IN A PARTICULAR SOCIAL GROUP, OR POLITICAL OPINION (SECTION 101(A)(42) OF THE IMMIGRATION AND NATIONALITY ACT).

Unique Challenges and Barriers

Resettling to a new and foreign environment can cause great stress for families, called acculturation stress. This stress comes from having to renegotiate cultural, ethnic, and religious identity and gender roles; role reversal and erosion of parental authority; intergenerational conflicts; and loss of support networks. Families may also be dealing with multiple losses, including loss of family members, loss of occupational status, and loss of the familiar.

Resettlement and acculturation stress, in addition to previous traumatic experiences a family may have experienced, can cause mental health problems, including anxiety and depressive symptoms, sleep disturbance and physical symptoms, and grieving multiple losses.

Tip: When discussing and making a referral for mental health concerns, refer directly to the symptoms that the individual has described (e.g. trouble sleeping, thinking too much, or stress). Do not use words like 'mental health' or 'depression,' which might be stigmatizing and difficult to translate.

Tip: Provide education to families about the availability of services to address mental health concerns, and provide necessary support for the referral, such as obtaining a release of information and contacting the mental health provider directly to discuss the referral, arranging transportation, or requesting that interpretive services be provided.

Resettlement also poses practical challenges for families, including barriers to finding stable employment; difficulty securing housing; poverty; and discrimination, racism, and social exclusion. New refugee families may be less likely to know where to go for help and may face difficulties accessing health and social services before problems reach crisis.

Additional Reading and References:

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- Muecke, M. A. (1992). New paradigms for refugee health problems. *Social Science & Medicine*, 35(4), 515-523.
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Tip: Address families' immediate crises and concerns so they can concentrate on the issues that led to their involvement with CPS.

Language barriers impact all areas of someone's life, including finding employment, housing, accessing health and social services, and meeting basic needs. When involved with CPS, communication problems and lack of appropriate translation and interpretation services can lead to inaccurate or insufficient information about a case. Additionally, failure to provide an interpreter may constitute discrimination based on national origin based on Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

Tip: Always make interpreters available for individuals who have limited proficiency in English. Never use minors, family members, or neighbors as interpreters. Promote hiring of bilingual and bicultural child welfare workers.

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