

Caring for Syrian Refugee Children:

A Program Guide for Welcoming Young Children and Their Families

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As part of Canada’s commitment to resettling Syrian refugees, your program may be called upon to accept and provide care for Syrian refugee children in the coming months. Children coming from Syria as refugees at this time will have experienced traumatic events that will affect them in many different ways.



*To help support your program in giving these children the best possible care, we’ve brought together a team of experts in the sector to create this comprehensive resource: **Care for Syrian Refugee Children: A Program Guide for Welcoming Young Children and Their Families.***

It will provide program staff with the knowledge and tools they’ll need to better understand and respond to the unique experiences and needs of Syrian refugee children. The resource also includes tip sheets filled with practical strategies that are designed to be taken straight off the page and put into practice. These can be quickly and easily printed out to share with your team.

CMAS has been supporting programs in their work with immigrant and refugee children for over 15 years. And now, as Canadians work together to welcome Syrian refugees and help them settle successfully, we’re pleased to offer you this resource.

Feel free to share it and to contact us if you have any questions or need additional support.

Yours in partnership as we work toward the successful settlement of immigrant and refugee children,

Susan Hoo
Manager, CMAS



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Who are the Syrian People? (Life Pre-War)



Geography & History

Syria is a country in the Middle East, along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It has a population of 22 million. Full of ancient mosques, Roman ruins, and castles built during the Crusades, civilization in Syria goes back thousands of years, but the country as it exists today is very young. Its borders were drawn by European colonial powers in the 1920s.

Culture & Society

Syria is very diverse, both ethnically and religiously. Most Syrians are ethnic Arab and follow the Sunni branch of Islam, but there are also minorities such as ethnic Kurds, Christian Arabs and some Jewish Arabs.

Syrian men and women tend to socialize separately except on occasions when the whole family is involved. Making conversation is considered both an art and a skill, and men often engage in a sort of banter, trying to one up each other with witty and eloquent insults.

In social interactions, people stand close together, speak loudly, and gesture with their hands and heads. Greetings hold great significance and are often lengthy, including questions about health. They are usually accompanied by a handshake and sometimes by a hug and a kiss on each cheek. Placing the right hand over the heart when meeting someone is a sign of affection.

Men often walk linking arms or holding hands and hug and kiss a great deal, as do women. This type of close physical contact in public is more common between people of the same gender than it is between girlfriend and boyfriend or husband and wife.

Food is an important part of Syrian culture, especially during celebrations. For example, during Ramadan, each day's fast is broken with an evening meal called *iftar*. *Eid al-Fitr*, the final breaking of the Ramadan fast. This entails sharing large quantities of food, in particular, sweets, with family, friends and neighbours.

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Art

Syria boasts many modern world-renowned writers. There is also a long literary tradition that dates back to Arab poets such as al-Mutanabbi in the 900s and al-Maarri in the 1000s. Non-fiction writers must contend with government censorship, but fiction writing is not as tightly monitored. Perhaps for this reason, poetry and short stories are widely read and appreciated.

Films have been produced in Syria since the 1920s and Syria has spawned several internationally regarded filmmakers, including Omar Amirallay and Usama Muhammed, but their films, which deal with social issues, have been banned in the country.

Basic Economy

Despite economic sanctions imposed by the west, before the war Syria had vibrant, bustling marketplaces in the old cities of Damascus and Aleppo, as well as its own IT industry. Twenty- three percent of the population worked in agriculture and the country supplied almost all of its own food. Half of the workforce was employed in industry and mining. There was less of a gap between the rich and the poor in Syria than in many other countries.

Family Life

Syrian life centres on the extended family and, except in the more sophisticated urban circles, the individual's social standing depends on his or her family background. An older male, usually the father or grandfather, has the ultimate authority in the family. It is customary for several generations to live together in the same house. Children are highly valued and are seen as a blessing from God. The more children one has, the more fortunate one is considered. The bond between mother and son (especially the oldest son) is often particularly strong.

Education

The average literacy rate is 64%—78% for men and 51% for women. Primary education is mandatory and free for six years. Syria has vocational and teacher-training education, as well as universities in Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia.

Education levels will vary greatly among Syrian newcomers, but it is expected that most adults will arrive in their new communities with at least some elementary school education and a basic ability to read and write their own language. Many will also bring useful social media skills. Syrians under the age of 30 tend to be very technology savvy, using social media applications to communicate with friends and family, share information and organize activities. Even older Syrians have basic knowledge of email and Skype.



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Fleeing Syria (Life Post-War)

The Crisis and the Search for Peace

The civil war in Syria began in 2011 in the city of Deraa, where many Syrians took to the streets to protest after 15 schoolchildren were arrested—and reportedly tortured—for writing anti-government graffiti on a wall. The protests began peacefully, calling for the release of the children, democracy and greater freedom for people in the country. However, the government over-responded and the army fired on protesters, killing four people. The following day, they shot at mourners during a victims' funeral, killing another person. People were shocked and angry, and soon the unrest spread to other parts of the country.

According to the UN, more than 200,000 Syrians have lost their lives in four-and-a-half years of armed conflict. Every day refugees stream across the borders of Syria into the neighbouring nations of Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq trying to find their way to safety.

Fleeing Syria

The UN reports that more than 10 million people have fled Syria since the start of the conflict, most of them women and children. This represents one of the largest refugee movements in recent history. A report published by the UN in March 2015 estimated that four out of five Syrians were now living in poverty— 30% of them in abject poverty. Syria's education, health and social welfare systems are in a state of collapse. The Syrian people are in desperate need of help, but aid agencies report that getting aid into the country is impossible due to conflict and the rise of new threats, including those posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The Impact on Children

Syrian children have lost loved ones, suffered injuries, and witnessed violence and brutality. They are at risk of becoming ill, malnourished, abused or exploited. Furthermore, as many as 14,000 Syrian schools have been damaged, destroyed, or occupied since 2011. According to UNICEF, the decline in education for Syrian children is the sharpest in the history of the region.

Syrian children also face daily challenges, as their caregivers deal with the consequences of war and displacement and are unable to be as supportive as they once were. These ongoing stresses can have lasting effects on children's well-being and on their developing brains.

Syrian Refugees' Journey

The majority of Syrian refugees are living in Jordan and Lebanon; the region's two smallest countries, which are nearing a breaking point under the strain. An increasing number of refugees are also fleeing across the border into



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Turkey, overwhelming host communities and creating new cultural tensions. In desperation, hundreds of thousands of refugees are attempting the dangerous trip across the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey to Greece. Not all of them survive the trip, and those who do face incredible challenges. Resources are strained by the influx and settlement services are minimal. Furthermore, following terrorist attacks by ISIS, there is a growing sentiment in many countries (including Canada) that Syrian refugees should not be accepted.

Welcoming Syrian Refugees to Canada

Canada has a long history of helping those in need—and the Canadian government has pledged to increase its intake of refugees from Syria by 25,000. Canada will also work with private sponsors to accept even more refugees.

There are concerns about where the refugees will live; however, the government hopes to alleviate the problem by looking for any facilities that might be used for shelter. Finding jobs for the newcomers from Syria will also be an issue. However, for now, government officials are focused on providing the basics: food, shelter, clothing and security for the refugees, and many Canadians are seeking ways to help.

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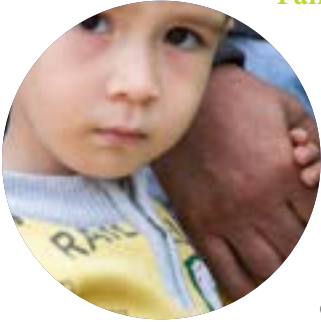
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The Impact of the Refugee Experience on Families

Families



Escape and Asylum

The journey that brings individual Syrian families to safety may differ greatly, but can often be traumatic. It can take a tremendous effort just to survive, and family members may get separated or go missing. Some may have died along the way. Those who eventually make it to safety are survivors who tend to have strong coping skills. They have mainly come from refugee camps in neighbouring countries of asylum such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

Because of the huge numbers of refugees living in these camps, there are often water shortages, limited food and inadequate hygiene. Life in the camps is grueling, with some asylum countries placing restrictions on movement and access to education and employment. The only form of shelter available may be a tent that houses several families together. The majority of refugees will live in these conditions for over a year before they find a country willing to accept them under tight selection and security checks.

School-age children coming from Syria have usually had many years of lost or interrupted schooling. Those Syrian children (especially girls) who have gone to school in asylum countries may have been targets for bullying, violence and extreme prejudice. Meanwhile, children who were born in the camps may have health issues and difficulties caused by inadequate prenatal care, poor nutrition and environmental factors.

The refugees that Canada sponsors are among the lucky few who find a new country to call home; however, Canada may not have been their first choice. Many of the refugees dream of a time when they can safely return to their homeland. Some come without possessions and do not know anyone in Canada, while others may have distant relatives or contacts.

Violence and Trauma

The war in Syria has caused over 200,000 documented deaths. Many more have suffered torture, disappeared or been raped, and ISIS has claimed the mass murder of religious minorities.

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Seventy-nine percent of Syrian families have had a death in their family since the conflict began. In one study, it was found that 60% of the children surveyed had seen someone shot at, kicked or physically harmed. Meanwhile, 30% of the children had themselves been shot at, kicked or physically harmed. So far, 11,000 unaccompanied children have crossed the Syrian border. Some extremist groups even enter the camps to try to recruit child soldiers.

Witnessing and being a victim of violence puts a great strain on a person's mental health, and the unusually high level of stress and trauma suffered by Syrian refugees is likely to have long-term consequences.

Settlement Indicators for Refugee Parents

Coming to a new country has a huge effect on every family member. Some parents already had strong coping skills and excellent family bonds before the war. Others were more vulnerable or fragile even before the war caused increased stress and mental health challenges.

Refugee parents often have symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. They may feel overwhelmed and could have nightmares and difficulty sleeping and eating as they relive past traumas. They may also be mourning the deaths of loved ones and may continue to feel disoriented, depressed, non-responsive and anxious. All of this can make it extremely difficult for parents to motivate themselves to complete the tasks required for daily living. These parents may become sick more often and may have unexplained pain in different parts of their bodies. Headaches, including migraines, are common. Furthermore, these individuals may have great distrust of others, including fellow Syrians—especially if they belonged to one of the targeted religious minorities.

The resettlement of a severely traumatized person will take a considerable amount of time. Once a family is physically safe, they may feel they can let their guard down as they gradually move away from survival to adaptation. For this reason, the parent may seem to collapse or fall apart. This can present itself in different ways. Some parents may become “overly protective” due to their past experiences of real danger. In other cases, they may seem uninvolved or “wooden” when communicating with others. This protective shield has helped them survive horrific situations. Others may have weak emotional control (e.g., crying easily, “overreacting,” or having inappropriate reactions such as laughing when their child is distressed).

The parents' anxiety about reestablishing their economic independence may make them frantic to attend English classes or find work. Meanwhile, their possible disconnection with their child may make them less responsive to their child's distress during separation.



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Some refugees are highly educated. These individuals may have unrealistic expectations for becoming self-sufficient, including finding skilled employment immediately. In fact, most immigrants face many barriers to finding skilled employment. Because a person's career is often a strong part of their identity, the loss of a career can lead to a loss of identity and be felt and seen as a loss of social standing.

Education was highly valued in Syria, and many families may become anxious for their children to succeed in school. However, because of the interruptions to the schooling of most Syrian children caused by the war, it is anticipated that many Syrian school-age children may be at an increased risk for failure.

They may have difficulty focusing, listening and absorbing information, even in their home language. They may show outward signs of understanding (e.g., smiling, head nodding) but they really may not be absorbing anything.

As families adjust to the many changes that come with living in a new country, the mourning of missing or lost relatives may combine with the mourning of many other losses (e.g., loss of country, home, culture, career, etc.). This overwhelming grief may make coping with daily life especially difficult. Older or frail relatives may not have been able to make the long exodus and the refugee family may now be living with more distant relatives. The former head of the household may not be present, and there may be a new head of the household who makes decisions with which a parent is not comfortable.

Family Dynamics and Syrian Life

Names

Syrian names are based on the child's first name followed by a middle name, which is usually the father's first name. The family name is often the paternal grandfather's first name or his family name. Women keep the full names they were given at birth. Ask families what they would like to be called and how they would like their child addressed.

Values and Discipline

Syrian values emphasize honesty, purity and responsibility through a strong work ethic. How parents guide their child's behaviour varies, although respecting elders is an important value that is always reinforced. Scolding is a common form of guidance. Domestic violence is not illegal in Syria and physical discipline of children is considered acceptable.

Social Lives and Family Dynamics

Before the war, young children (including girls who had not yet reached puberty) may have had a lot of physical freedom to play unsupervised. In a neighbourhood, many people watched the children and even non-related



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adults could scold or interact with children without their parent being present. Infants and toddlers were often readily handled by strangers. This included being picked up, kissed and offered sweets.

Pre-war, Syrians also enjoyed a very full social life, much of which took place within the extended family. Many Syrians lived together as extended families. Children were seen as a blessing and families were often quite large. Middle and upper-income families often had staff to look after their households and their children. In other large families, there were many people who shared child-rearing and supervision responsibilities (e.g., older siblings, aunts and grandparents). If basic care-giving was formerly done by others, the parent may resent having these tasks thrust upon them now and may feel overwhelmed and unprepared.

Urban families in Syria were more likely to have women working outside the home. In rural and more traditional homes, it was less likely for women to work outside the home. A mother's first duty was to her children and to care for the home. In traditional families, girls were expected to help with household chores while boys may have worked part-time or helped male family members with their tasks. Girls may also have been expected to supervise younger siblings, and boys may have had the duty to supervise their sisters' behaviour. In traditional and rural families, it was more likely that girls would be married at an early age.

In Syrian culture, gender separation is common at social events. When greeting each other, Syrians of the same sex will often be quite physical with each other (e.g., holding hands, kissing cheeks and touching each other's face or shoulders). However, married couples do not openly show affection in public. When men greet women, they don't usually shake hands if they aren't related. They may nod at each other instead and are careful to make limited eye contact.

Usually the oldest male in an extended family makes the decisions. Family reputation is seen as critical and is a more important indicator of social standing than a career or family wealth.

Food

Food is a very important aspect in Syrian culture. The sharing of food is not only a courtesy, but also an offer of friendship. Food is always offered to everyone present. A guest who isn't related is expected to refuse the food, at least the first time it is offered. There are food restrictions for Muslims (e.g., Halal meat, no pork or shellfish, and no alcohol). Coffee and tea with lots of sugar are common. The main meal is at lunch, which is often at about 2-3 p.m.



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Education

Before the war, the Syrian education system was seen as a model for other Middle Eastern countries. Education was free and highly valued. In fact, Syria used to have one of the best-educated populations in the Middle East. Even after the conflict started, when schooling was challenging and dangerous, families tried to find ways to keep their children educated. Most parents consider it their duty to supervise school work and activities. Today, half the children in Syria do not have access to schools.

Clothing

Clothing is modest, especially for females. A woman or girl may wear the same dress for two or three days, but it will have been washed and ironed each day. The nicest clothing is saved for wearing out in public. Those from urban areas are more likely to wear jeans or pants. Before the war, wearing the hijab was less common. However, as fundamentalist Muslims gained power, more women began to wear the hijab.

Sleeping

Sleeping in communal beds is common. As children get older, the bed is shared only with relatives of the same sex.

Medical Care

Before the war, Syrians had good access to medical care. Syrians tend to have great faith in the advice given by health professionals. A parent with an ailment is often eager to take medication, but once the symptoms lessen they may stop taking it. Same sex health professionals are strongly preferred, especially for sexual health issues.

Communication

Syrians often stand quite close when speaking to others. Their voices are often perceived as loud and large gestures often accompany verbal communication. To those who are unfamiliar with this communication style, it may seem like they are arguing.

Before the war, Syrians were tolerant of diversity, religious beliefs and inter-faith marriages. However, the current situation has brought new tensions and some distrust, and communication may be strained between Syrians of different faiths or sects. Being cautious with communication is a new element and in direct contrast to the open joyful, teasing communication that was the norm before the war.

Not all Syrians have Arabic as their first language, and although almost all can speak it fairly fluently, linguistic minorities may not be able to read or write in Arabic. The use of interpreters needs careful consideration. Confidentiality is



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one of the strongest concerns. There can also be issues if a male interpreter is translating for a female or if the interpreter uses an unknown dialect.

Some topics may be difficult or unadvisable to approach. For example, most health concerns are considered very private. Questions about life in the camp or other traumatic events are seldom appropriate, as they may cause high levels of stress and anxiety as victims relive painful experiences.

Language overload is a common problem for recent refugees. It's not uncommon for a refugee to misinterpret what is said based on understanding only a few key words. Competing priorities of urgency (such as finding housing, work, food and learning English) make listening and acting on advice very challenging.

Although it will be important for the parent to learn English or French in order to settle successfully in Canada, it is also important that the family maintain their home language. The first language carries all the personal, family and cultural history. Conversations also happen more naturally and frequently in the home language, and include more emotion and expression. What's more, first-language modeling is critical to second-language learning for children.

Young Children

The Impact of the Refugee Experience on Young Children

Many people believe that refugee experiences do not affect children, but this could not be further from the truth. At a time when their brains, language skills and sense of emotional stability are forming, refugee children find themselves in situations of extreme stress and trauma. At the same time, these young children have not yet developed strong coping skills, putting them even more at risk to the effects of stress and trauma.

A parent's emotional upheaval, diminished mental health and loss of a sense of security has a direct impact on the child. This loss of connection with their main caregiver is particularly stressful and can have long-term impacts. Regression is common when a young child's parent is less responsive.

Children born in a refugee camp may have different challenges. The mother may have had inadequate prenatal care. The birth may then have occurred in trying circumstances. In the child's early years, the parent or an older sibling may have carried the child everywhere with them for safety reasons, and this may have affected the child's motor skill development.

Children may also be mourning the loss of a main caregiver (e.g., their grandparent or nanny). Furthermore, if they fled with their families from Syria, they are quite likely to have witnessed violence or to have been a victim



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of it. They may have been silenced or bound tightly in dangerous situations. In the camps, the child may have had times when they were cared for by strangers while their parent worked to get the basics for daily living. A child's basic needs may have gone unmet. They may have experienced malnutrition and may have difficulty bonding with others, deadened emotions and intense anxiety.

Culture Shock in Young Refugee Children

Entering a new culture is often very traumatic for young children. It affects their whole being.

Physically they may have trouble eating and sleeping. Their bowel and bladder control may regress, and they may more easily soil or wet their pants. They may tire quickly, become listless and lack energy. They are also more vulnerable to physical illnesses, especially unfamiliar ones like colds and ear infections, and they may develop nervous habits and experience anxiety.

Emotional regression is also very common. Children's emotional expression may be quite volatile or they may experience extreme anxiety when separating from their parent. The child may use physical force or act aggressively when fearful. Alternatively, they may become very apathetic even when strongly provoked. They may easily tune out adults who try to guide their behaviour. In extreme situations, the child may appear to have autistic tendencies. This is usually short lived.

In the early stages of culture shock, children are often unable to play and may be disinterested in the play of others. Their play may also lack depth, and it is not uncommon for children to repeat this limited play over and over. Once the child is able to play for short periods, they may become easily distracted and unfocused. They may remain in one area of the room, often feeling most comfortable near the door. Transitions often cause distress.

Socially, a child may become dependent on one caregiver and seem unable to build a relationship with others. They may be fearful, especially in the early stages of settlement. Some children will be more readily comforted by a strange adult while other children find comfort fastest with another child, especially an older child.

Intellectually, a child may have weak concentration and become easily frustrated. They are more likely to give up if a task is too challenging. They may not seem very curious in the early stages, may be unable to move about the room, and may play with the same toy in a half-hearted way for a long time.

The new language is also a shock. Even preverbal children may experience distress when they cannot understand those around them. Preschoolers may try to talk in their own language and appear frustrated when they fail to get responses from others. It is common for children to stop talking all together



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for a period of time or to speak very little in their first language. They may even stop speaking at home and will not respond to a caregiver who speaks their language. Children may also block the new language and can have difficulty listening to and processing it.

A child's self esteem is also impacted by culture shock. This may decrease their confidence to try new things. They may look for more assistance and reassurance from adults about how to play with things. Children who feel insecure may also need extra support (e.g., being held if they will accept this, or being in a stroller or other protected space).

Trauma and Mental Health

Because many Syrian children have witnessed violence or were victims of violence, they may have some form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In extreme cases, there may be permanent damage to the child's development. However, if children are resilient and have strong family bonds, they may be able to overcome the impact of these traumas.

Traumatized children may be unresponsive and almost catatonic and may not have the words to express their trauma. Children who are "wooden" and despondent are more at-risk than those who cling to their parent and cry for attention. Traumatized children may refuse touch or other comfort, even from family members. This is a response by which they form a "shield" to keep out any possible harm from others. Many children also try to block all memory of traumas.

Separation Anxiety for Young Refugee Children

A child's firm attachment to their parent is vital. As the parent responds to their needs, a nurturing bond is built. This bond is the basis for the child's sense of security, self-esteem and a cornerstone for their development. For this reason, a child's and family's attachment must always be respected and valued. Ensuring a gradual and respectful separation of parents from children is especially vital when dealing with families who have recently experienced trauma and loss.

Imagine you are a refugee child. Everything has changed in your life. Your grandmother who loved you so much and took care of you isn't with you. Your winter clothes feel heavy and awkward. Everything feels and smells very different. You don't understand what is happening but you sense the tension in your family, especially from your mother.

One day you are taken to a childcare room—yet another new place. It is noisy and bright. There are lots of other children there without their mothers. Your mother speaks reassuring words to you but her voice is strained and she is upset. Suddenly you realize that she is leaving you. Will she ever come back? You are terrified.



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One of the first signs of culture shock is extreme anxiety. In these cases, separating from the parent will be an intense and traumatic experience. If the child has weak resiliency, a poor separation experience can cause permanent damage to their development. When separation is attempted without preparation, the young child often reacts strongly to this trauma by screaming, flailing, shaking, vomiting, gagging or banging their head. They may even stop breathing and turn blue. They may hide and rock themselves, or they may bite, hit, push, pinch or hurt themselves in their frantic distress. Poor separations also have a strong effect on the child's sense of trust and security with their parent. Traumatic occurrences do accumulative harm. Children who have been painfully separated from their parent in the past become more anxious the next time.

Children who have lost a close relative may also be more stressed. If parents have tried to hide that they are going to leave, the child is likely to feel anxious and angry. And if the child witnessed violence they may be even more fearful about being away from their family's protection. A distressed parent may also be going through their own difficulties and may be unresponsive or may give an inappropriate response to the child's distress (e.g., pushing them away or trying to silence them). This adds to the child's distress and trauma.

Ensuring that there is a gradual separation not only help to ease children's anxiety, it can also help a caregiver to integrate the child into the program. When the parent stays, it gives the caregiver a chance to subtly watch how they interact with the child. Caregivers can see what behaviour is expected, how limits are set, how bonded the child is to their parent, how the child is comforted, and how routines are carried out. Gradual separations also give the parent a chance to learn about program expectations and to gain trust in the caregiver—and when a parent trusts a caregiver, the child is more likely to trust them as well.

Supporting Parents

Refugee parents may feel overwhelmed by the many demands they are facing and uncertain about their parenting skills in the context of their new country. Giving genuine, appropriate praise at key moments—for example, when you witness a parent patiently waiting for a child to put on their own shoes or lovingly praising their artwork—helps parents feel more confident in working with caregivers. Encourage families to trust their own parenting practices and not to make any major changes to routines done at home while the child is settling into the program

A parent's authority over the child should always be supported. Remember, however, if there is any suspicion of child abuse it must be reported to the proper authorities. Try to give parents guidance on parenting expectations in Canada early in their settlement to help them understand this important part of Canadian life.



Encourage families to trust their own parenting practices and not to make any major changes to routines done at home while the child is settling into the program.

Care in Action: Childcare Tip Sheets for Working With Syrian Refugees



We all want to do what we can to welcome Syrian refugee families to Canada and help them to settle successfully. That's why these easy-to-use tip sheets were designed. They aim to give childcare programs like yours key knowledge and basic strategies for supporting Syrian refugee children and their families.

The tip sheets highlight key learnings from the *Caring for Syrian Refugee Children: A Program Guide for Welcoming Young Children and Their Families* and cover a range of topics related to providing quality newcomer childcare. The practical strategies and suggestions they contain are designed to be taken straight off the page and put into practice.

Read through the tip sheets here in this section and then use the links below to print them out, share them, and use them as quick references that can be consulted at any time by staff and volunteers.

- [Creating a Safe and Welcoming Environment](#)
- [Welcoming Refugee Families](#)
- [Supporting Refugee Families Through Gradual Separation](#)
- [Caring for Refugee Children](#)
- [Guiding Refugee Children's Behaviour](#)
- [Culture Shock](#)
- [Helping Refugee Children Cope with Stress](#)
- [Supporting Home Language Maintenance](#)

Read through the tip sheets here in this section and then use the links to the left to print them out, share them, and use them as quick references that can be consulted at any time by staff and volunteers.

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CREATING A SAFE AND WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

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CREATING A SAFE AND WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

After the trauma of fleeing their home country, it's important that Syrian families feel that the childcare room is a safe and stable environment. To create this kind of “safe haven”, programs can develop a space where children can hear English but are not pushed to use it, and where they can observe activities and are encouraged to join in but are not required to.

There are also many other things you can do to reduce stress and help ease this difficult transition for families.

Preparing Staff:

- Ensure all staff have the information they need on what to expect and tools for success. Do they understand culture shock and its stages? Are they aware of strategies for addressing it?
- Assign one staff member to take the lead with the family.
- Identify strategies for communicating with the parent. Take the time to learn some words in Arabic (or in the other languages spoken by the Syrian refugees in your program) to support early communication with parents and children. Choose words that are important such as greetings, soothing words, “yes/no” and “bathroom”; words that will help children communicate their physical needs and will help them to feel comfortable and cared for.
- Have translated materials available for parents. Provide information as needed, but also make sure that translated materials are visible and accessible so parents can access information and resources for themselves.
- Keep some extra clothing on hand in case the child has an accident due to behaviour regression or the parent does not bring what is required (e.g., socks, weather-appropriate clothing).
- Be prepared to do frequent head counts and/or divide a large group into smaller groups for supervision.

Adapting Your Space:

- The entrances to programs can often be busy and overwhelming. Try to minimize clutter and create a welcoming entry where families can gradually enter the program.
- Make sure you have a quiet area where children can retreat when they don't want to be part of the busy program. Make simple, attractive, age- and culturally appropriate books available in this area. Huge pillows with washable covers work well.
- Be sensitive to the possibility that a large amount of open space and too many activities may be overwhelming to the child.
- Avoid playing music all day long. Play only soothing music for a limited amount of time (10-15 minutes) each day. Too much background noise increases stress levels, which can make children irritable. It also makes it hard for them to hear and understand things being said to them when they are learning the new language.



CREATING A SAFE AND WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

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Adapting Your Program and Routine:

- Be flexible about routines and expectations and try to minimize transitions.
- Use visual schedules and clear, simple pictures to give children clues about what to do. This reduces stress for children and caregivers. For example, tape a photo of a toy on a toy shelf so the child knows where to put the toy when tidying up.
- When settling new children, remove toys that require too much supervision or that are hard to put away. Keep favourite toys and frequently used equipment out for extended lengths of time.
- Make sensory areas appealing and readily available (e.g., warm play dough). Do not use food in the sensory area and avoid water play for the first few weeks. For many children who have spent time in refugee camps, there have been food and water shortages and/or water may have been unsafe.
- Children should have a choice to participate in activities or not to (e.g., to come to a group time or use the toilet or sit for snack). Having a good non-punitive alternative to each activity is respectful.

Think about your program - Are there any triggers that you need to plan ahead for?

For example:

You run a childcare centre in a school and have a refugee child who has just started in your program. As usual, the 10:40 school bell rings. The child becomes upset. He cries and hides. You try to comfort the child but he doesn't settle down until his grandmother comes to pick him up almost an hour later. It may be that the bell triggered memories of traumatic events the child was exposed to. What could you have done to avoid this?

- *Think in advance about any loud sounds that happen regularly in your program.*
- *Talk to the parent ahead of time so that the parent can help to prepare the child.*
- *Have staff go to the child five minutes before the bell is scheduled to ring. Remind/warn the child that it is about to happen and support them to prepare for it. For example, ask "Do you want to cover your ears?" or "Do you want to sit on my lap?"*
- *If the bell signals a transition time, you might be able to find a way that the child can engage with and help with the transition. For example, he could ring a different bell or shake a maraca at the same time as the bell rings.*

NOTE: *The strategies suggested in this tip sheet are meant to help programs create a safe and welcoming environment for refugee families, but you know your program best. Use only the ideas that work for the unique challenges and strengths of your program and families.*



WELCOMING REFUGEE FAMILIES

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WELCOMING REFUGEE FAMILIES

Respect and genuine empathy go a long way toward building trust. After reflecting on any biases you may have and greeting the family with a smile, it's important to look for and build on the family's strengths. When caregivers see families as experts in caring for their children, families feel welcomed and valued. And when caregivers honestly seek to learn from families, a partnership may slowly develop.

This type of partnership between parents and caregivers can not only help to lessen the effects of separation anxiety and culture shock, but can also help caregivers to learn more about the child, including how to comfort them and how to integrate them into the program.

Increasing Comfort Levels:

- Assign one caregiver to interact with families at the start and end of the program to begin building a trusting relationship. Understand that some parents will need time to gain confidence and warm up to you.
- Make an effort to learn how to say “hello” or “thank you” in Arabic (or in the other languages spoken by Syrian families in your program).
- Learn and use the parent's name.
- Be patient. Promote settlement by gradually introducing changes to help the refugee child and family feel comfortable.
- Reflect on any biases you may have and rethink stereotypes.

Facilitating Communication:

- Provide parents with materials that are translated and/or written in simple English or with visuals. Recognize that not all families may be able to read Arabic, even though they may speak it fluently.
- Try not to overwhelm the parents with too much paperwork and registration information all at once. You may choose to modify your registration process to collect and provide information over time, with a focus on immediate needs, health and safety first. Think about the basic information that you need to be able to care for the child and gradually gather all other registration information.
- Speak about one topic at a time (e.g., one key point) and keep conversations short.
- Reduce language and add props and gestures to explain your needs. For example, hold up a diaper and show two fingers if you want the parent to bring an extra diaper tomorrow.
- Find out basic information about the child but avoid asking too many questions or being intrusive about their past.



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- Be aware of differences in nonverbal communication and communication styles. These can vary tremendously across cultures. Eye contact, physical space, touch, animation and voice tone are some of the differences that may lead to miscommunication and/or misunderstandings. For example, Syrians may communicate in an intense way; standing close, speaking in loud voices and using large gestures. In Canada, we might consider this to be rude or aggressive, but this is likely not the parents' intention.
- Share simple information daily on the child's activities, mood and achievements. Match your language to that of the family. Keep your speech simple and speak slower (but not louder) for parents with less English. Use consistent language and check for comprehension.
- Where possible, use an interpreter but be sensitive to the fact that some parents might not want to share personal information with anyone. Never use children as interpreters.

Drawing on the Parents' Expertise:

- Always try to find out about the parents' methods before imposing your own. For example, ask for their advice about how to help their child eat or use the washroom. Watch how the parent comforts the child so you can more closely imitate their actions. You can also ask the parent for suggestions on comforting their child.
- Focus on positives and what the child/family can do. For example: When you introduce the child and family, avoid saying "They don't speak English." Instead, say "This is Rasha. She speaks Arabic."
- Respect different methods of child-rearing, as well as family goals and knowledge. Consider your biases and understand that there is no one "right" way.
- Be aware that physical disciplining is an acceptable practice in Syria. Parents will need assistance in understanding different expectations in Canada.
- Respect efforts and celebrate successes with children and their parents

NOTE: *The strategies suggested in this tip sheet are meant to help programs welcome refugee families, but you know your program best. Use only the ideas that work for the unique challenges and strengths of your program, children and families.*



SUPPORTING REFUGEE FAMILIES THROUGH GRADUAL SEPARATION

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SUPPORTING REFUGEE FAMILIES THROUGH GRADUAL SEPARATION

Having to say goodbye can be difficult at the best of times, but it can be particularly painful for refugee families who may have experienced trauma. As a caregiver, you can support both parents and children by understanding separation anxiety and using strategies to help families learn to say goodbye.

The separation process may take anywhere from several days to several weeks and must be handled carefully. An abrupt or forced separation can be much more than just upsetting to the child—it can be harmful to their long-term development and can affect their ability to trust others.

Staff should have a plan in place that encourages parents to stay and participate in program routines and activities with their child in the beginning. This will help the child get comfortable with the program, caregivers and routines.

Key Principles for Easing Separation Anxiety:

- Allow time for gradual separation. Full separation can take longer for families who have experienced violence and trauma.
- Assign one consistent person to work with the parent and child. Consistency in staffing will provide refugee children and families with the opportunity to bond with one person on your team, helping them to build a trusting relationship.

Making a Separation Plan:

- Plan for separation anxiety and take the time to help children settle—but be flexible. Each child is unique and the ways to settle them will vary.
- Communicate a plan for gradual separation with the parent. Use an interpreter or do your best to support and build on simple language with gestures and props.

Involving the Parent:

- Help the parent find an area of the room where they feel comfortable (e.g., the literacy area) and encourage them to sit down and stay sitting until their child wants to explore other parts of the room. Sitting down helps the child understand that their parent will stay. From this secure anchor, they may gain more confidence to explore or watch others.
- While the parent is participating in the program with their child, observe their interactions. How does the parent comfort the child and how do they engage in play? Learn the words the parent uses for “washroom,” “water,” “hungry.” Observe how they feed their child.
- Gradually move closer and engage the child in play.



SUPPORTING REFUGEE FAMILIES THROUGH GRADUAL SEPARATION

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- Watch children's cues for readiness. When the child can play for five minutes on their own without needing the parent, they are ready for a first short separation.
- Start with short separations and gradually build up the time that children are separated from their parents.
- Suggest that the parent leave their coat. It helps to reassure the child that their parent will be coming back.
- Invite the parent to bring in a comfort object (e.g., a teddy or blanket) or a familiar object such as a scarf. The child can hold this item when the parent is away and it may help them to feel more secure.
- Help parents to understand that regression is perfectly normal. It's okay if their child regresses back to wearing diapers or wetting the bed. They have been through stress and trauma.

Things to Avoid:

- Advise the parent to avoid sneaking out when the child is distracted. This can confuse and frighten a child and can reduce the trust the child has with the parent. Stress the importance of saying goodbye.
- Avoid sending the child mixed messages. After a parent says goodbye to their child, instruct them to leave quickly and not to keep coming back for another hug.
- If a child refuses comfort from you as a caregiver, give them space. It's important to recognize that a child's rejection of comfort is a response to the stress they are experiencing and is not personal.

NOTE: The strategies suggested in this tip sheet are meant to help programs to support refugee families through first separations, but you know your program best. Use only the ideas that work best for the unique challenges and strengths of your program, the child and the family.



CARING FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN

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CARING FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN

Many refugee children will be unfamiliar with group care. There may be toys and activities that are totally new to them and they may need help to learn how to use equipment and do activities. Your program's limits and rules will also be unfamiliar and children will need time to adjust.

Children who have experienced trauma may be upset by loud noises, such as school bells and fire drills. By taking a patient, understanding and flexible approach, caregivers can help refugee children to manage these stressors and to settle successfully into their childcare programs.

Developing relationships and trust with the refugee children in your care:

- Pay attention. Learn to recognize signs of distress in the child.
- Be consistent. Consistently responding to a child's need for comfort creates a sense of security in the child.
- Be sensitive. Let the child know that you're aware of his or her distress and respond to it appropriately by providing comfort if the child will allow it. If the child will not accept comfort, be respectful of that. Back away and attempt to offer reassurance from a distance.
- Be accepting. Accept rather than judge or discount a child's emotional distress and discomfort.
- Provide comfort. If they will allow it, soothe and comfort the child when they are upset. Acknowledge the child's feelings in ways they can understand (e.g., "Aw. Bye-bye, Mummy" when a child is sad that their mother is leaving).
- Be honest. Start to build trust and develop an attachment with the child by reassuring them. For example you could say, "I know you miss your mommy, but she will come back at lunch time."
- Learn a simple comfort phrase in the child's language and use it. For example, "Mommy back soon."

Adapting Interactions:

- Keep in mind that many refugee children were learning the language of their camp host country and now they are trying to learn yet another language here in Canada, so many children will be experiencing language confusion.
- Simplify your speech and use gestures and props to make your message clearer. Provide one concept at a time.
- Instead of using different words to describe the same thing (e.g., toilet, bathroom or washroom) pick one and use it consistently.
- Provide children with simple phrases that can help them get their needs met (e.g., "I want ____" or "Can I have ____?") and phrases that help them to socialize (e.g., "No," "Mine," "Don't touch," and "Can I play?")



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- Model good listening by giving your full attention to a child. Talk with children having them face you, away from distractions. Do a full squat to get down to their level and establish eye contact if the child is comfortable with this. Repeat some of what you heard to make sure you got it right.
- Deal with any discrimination immediately even if it is not intentional.
- Adjust your communication style for each child and parent that you interact with.
- Spend time communicating with every child and parent.
- Be aware that children may be sensitive to touch. Don't approach the child from behind and touch them on the back. Instead, approach them from where they can see you.
- Learn survival words in Arabic (or in the other languages spoken by the Syrian children in your program) so that you can pair them with the words in English. This will help the child to learn survival language in English.
- Use visual cues (like pictures and real objects) and gestures to assist with communication.
- Use a basic child-centred approach. Don't expect children to want to jump right into play. Be sensitive to each child's needs. If they need an adult, try to stay close by. If they need space to observe, give them space to do that.
- If you have a scheduled guest coming into your program, prepare the parent and child ahead of time. Let them know what they can expect and be sensitive to the child's experiences. For example, avoid visits from someone in uniform as they might trigger painful memories.

Routines:

- Minimize transitions and wait times.
- Be prepared to make accommodations in schedules and routines. For example, a child may need to nap outside of the usual scheduled quiet time.
- If you have another child in your program who speaks the same language, invite them to interact with the new child.
- Have a plan in case the child isn't ready to join in your routine.
- Find out how the parent does diapering/washroom routines. Try to do it the same way.
- Post washroom, diapering and handwashing routines. Use posters with visuals and that include Arabic.

Programming:

- Use non-verbal games that help children feel comfortable, like sorting and matching games or beanbag toss.
- Provide toys that are for a wide range of ages and skill levels. The children may be unfamiliar with the toys that are available or be more accustomed to playing with toys for other age groups.
- Demonstrate how to use the toys.
- Provide more small group activities (and fewer large group activities) so that all children have the option to participate.



CARING FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN

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- Provide opportunities for sensory play but avoid water play for the first few weeks and do not use food items. For many children who have spent time in refugee camps, there have been water shortages and/or water may have been unsafe. Try other sensory experiences instead, like sand, dough or clay.
- Provide dual language books. You can create your own by having a parent help you to translate the text, then writing it on a piece of paper and taping it into the book.
- Sing and make up songs using the child's name.
- Teach songs that have easy-to-learn verses and that use a lot of the same words that are used in the childcare room throughout the day.

An Idea for When a Child First Arrives:

Put a few small toys and sensory and creative items from your room inside a shoebox. When a child first arrives, if they are not quite ready to join the larger group, you can give them the shoebox and provide them with a quiet space to explore the items inside. Observe the child. Notice what they like best and what they seem drawn to. What are their interests? This will help you to get to know the child and to engage with them further. It might even help you to engage them with other children in the program! Whatever toy or activity they seem drawn to can be extended into the larger group when the child seems ready to start interacting more with the other children. You might also find that the child becomes attached to the shoebox and the items inside. If so, provide the child with his/her own shoebox that has special things that they like. It may be comforting for them to know that their box is there for them when they need it.

Adjusting your Expectations:

- Remember that refugee children may have been through trauma and many of them have had no schooling for years.
- Try not to judge challenging behaviour. The child may seem withdrawn or hyperactive. Both are normal given what they have been through. (See the Guiding Children's Behaviour tip sheet.)
- Expect that the food that is served will be unfamiliar. Model food handling (how to eat and what to eat) for the child.
- Be sensitive about asking parents to bring food for their child. They may not have the money to do so or may not know where to buy the food or what to buy. Think about adapting what you're serving rather than asking parents to bring food.
- Watch for and respond to signs of culture shock. (See the Helping Refugee Children Cope with Stress section.)

Things to Avoid:

- When the child first arrives, minimize the use of language unless you speak the child's language or the child understands some English.
- Do not pressure children to participate in activities. Allow the child freedom to roam the room or to choose their own activity. Children may need to play repetitively with toys they're comfortable with.



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- Do not ask too many questions and avoid unnecessary questions about potentially sensitive topics.
- Avoid too many transitions. If the child is engaged in an activity, don't make them leave it to go do something else.
- Try not to ask too many questions about what the child is doing. Instead, describe their actions while adding animation to your voice.
- If child is missing an article of clothing, don't ask the child why they don't have underwear or socks.
- Consider removing toys that require too much supervision or that are hard to put away. Keep favourite toys and frequently-used equipment out for extended lengths of time. You may be surprised at how much richer the play is with fewer things.
- Avoid toys with loud sharp bursts of noise, as they may startle and upset children.
- If possible, avoid fire drills, loud speakers, school bells and other potential stress triggers like flicking the lights on and off and loud commanding voices. If these stress triggers cannot be avoided, always prepare children at least five minutes before a loud noise will occur.

NOTE: *The strategies suggested in this tip sheet are meant to help programs to care for refugee children, but you know your program best. Use only the ideas that work best for the unique challenges and strengths of your program, children and families.*

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GUIDING REFUGEE CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

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GUIDING REFUGEE CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

Refugee children entering a childcare program will have varying behaviours. Some may become aggressive (e.g., hitting others or throwing toys), while others may become very passive and unable to initiate play. Some may even seem fine at first but may later display signs of shock or trauma.

It is wise to observe parents as they enter the program to see how they react to their child's behaviour and to ask them about their child's behaviour at home. You might notice that older siblings care for a young child and have authority. Sometimes a grandparent or father has the ultimate authority, while in other situations the mother plays this role. Other families may have had a nanny or other hired help care for their children while they worked and may not have developed a strong authoritarian role themselves.

Recognizing the Reasons for Inappropriate Behaviour:

- Children may have difficulty controlling their behaviour if they are tired or hungry, anxious, over-excited or bored.
- They may be imitating behaviour seen in older siblings.
- They may be re-enacting violence witnessed in the camp, while fleeing or during the war.
- They could be reacting to a parent's mood or a tense home situation.
- They may feel frustrated when they don't feel understood and there is a language barrier that keeps them from expressing themselves.
- Trauma and extreme culture shock or separation anxiety may also result in problematic behaviour (e.g., a child hurting themselves, catatonic rigidity and lack of response to sounds).

A gradual, sensitive separation from the parent will help ease the child's anxiety and will make extreme reactions to separation (e.g., vomiting, screaming, flailing) less likely. Reliable routines and consistent caregivers help children anticipate events and will also increase comfort.

12 Steps For Guiding Behaviour:

1. Analyze your interaction with the child. Look for any bias you may have. Do you expect inappropriate behaviour? How is the child getting your attention?
2. Observe the child closely. When is the child at their best? What happens just before difficulties occur? What makes up the child's range of reactions (e.g., biting, hitting, pushing)?
3. Change the environment. If a child displays aggressive or hyperactive behaviour, remove hazards from the room. Allow lots of time for active play. Provide some protected areas for those not comfortable with the very active child.



GUIDING REFUGEE CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

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4. Be as consistent with your responses and routines as possible. Structure and routine can be very important to a child who has been through many disruptions.
5. While being consistent is important, it's also important to adjust your expectations. Do not expect the child to sit for a 20-minute circle. Instead, provide him/her with alternative activities.
6. Gather information from the family. Does the family experience behaviour difficulties at home? Are these behaviours long-term? What behaviour limits are used at home? Are they consistent? Realistic? Are there any other signs of trauma or culture shock? How does the child get attention at home? Learn key phrases in the child's first language to help with culture shock.
7. Shadow the child. Give constant supervision. If possible, have the same caregiver with the child. If a child shows extreme aggression, watch when the child approaches others so that you can intervene early to protect them.
8. Make the child's interactions more positive. Direct the child to the desired behaviour. Model desired language to start play. Set up an interesting activity for the child that will attract other children and help make the interactions successful. Look at the child's face and posture to see their reaction to approaching children.
9. Help the child develop their listening skills. Use language in playful, positive ways with lots of gesture, animation and demonstration, but limit the amount of language used to prevent burnout. Turn off the CD player and other noises for better listening. Use language to describe what you are about to do (e.g., "I'm going to change your diaper now.")
10. Use positive reinforcement. Every time the child interacts successfully with others, give positive feedback. Continue to do so even when the behaviour has improved.
11. Play games and do activities that reinforce each child's positive skills. Let each child be the centre of attention at times.
12. Work with the family. Talk with the family regularly about how you are handling the situation and encourage them to provide feedback. Ask the parent to help by:
 - o explaining child care rules at home in their native language,
 - o keeping you informed about any issues at home,
 - o telling you if their child has been ill or stressed,
 - o ensuring they bring the child into the room to settle them.



GUIDING REFUGEE CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

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How to Handle Sensitive Issues:

- Check your biases and don't make assumptions.
- Listen first, then talk. Ask families how they see the issue.
- Be less agenda-driven/task-oriented. Ask open-ended questions.
- Get information ahead of time so you are sure it is accurate and complete.
- Have at least two positives for any one negative issue. Make it a discussion.
- Handle one pressing issue at a time and look for different perceptions, solutions.
- Keep each communication short. Interact a lot without an agenda.
- Be positive about families' strengths.
- When appropriate, offer a few options and don't expect conformity.
- Don't expect another person to see it as you do.
- Support the family to make gradual changes.

NOTE: The strategies suggested in this tip sheet are meant to help programs to guide children's behaviour and support the refugee families in your care, but you know your program best. Use only the ideas that work best for the unique challenges and strengths of your program, children and families.

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CULTURE SHOCK

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CULTURE SHOCK

Even young refugee children experience culture shock, and every child will experience it in their own way. By learning to recognize the signs of stress and culture shock, and responding appropriately, you can help refugee children and families to build their resiliency, thereby assisting them in coping with life’s challenges today and into the future.

Recognizing and Responding to Culture Shock

Possible Signs of Culture Shock	Response
<p>PHYSICAL SIGNS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becomes ill easily (e.g., upper-respiratory infections, low-grade infections or weight loss) • Tires easily/Has difficulty sleeping/ Needs frequent sleep • Is listless, lacks energy or is unable to sit still/ Has increased nervous habits (e.g., nail biting) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage family to keep the child home if they begin coughing or showing signs of a cold. • Encourage family to practice cold and flu prevention (e.g., dressing their child for the weather, washing hands frequently, having a balanced diet and getting lots of sleep). • Allow the child to sleep more often and for longer periods. • Encourage families to provide outlets for active play. • Ensure you make time for active play in your program.
<p>EMOTIONAL SIGNS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extreme anxiety on separation • Loss of emotional control • Emotional display is more volatile or more passive • Regressive behaviour (e.g. wetting pants, sucking thumb) • Withdrawn or apathetic • Unable to engage in play • Remains in one area of the room • Waits for instructions from caregiver • Lacks focus, easily distracted • Displays different behaviour at home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure a gradual separation and assign one consistent caregiver for the child and family. • Move in more rapidly if the child seems aggressive. • Provide outlets for emotional expression. • If the child is staying in one area, bring toys to them or guide them to another area. • Create a “safe haven” where children can retreat to when they are not ready to engage in play. • Encourage the child to join in activities but do not require it.



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<p>SOCIAL SIGNS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependent on one caregiver • Prefers to play alone – fearful of others or unaware of them • Remains rigid when picked up • Aggressive OR very passive in their play with others • Has difficulty forming relationships with others. May avoid eye contact • Observes others for long periods of time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow time to observe others. Model language and play strategies. • As the child grows more confident, encourage broader interactions. • Help build friendships by engaging two children in play and then gradually retreating. • Provide the words needed for social play. • Do not use complex phrases. • Use playful ways to engage the child. • Reduce expectations and pressure in play/ learning. • Encourage the family to use their first language at home. • Encourage all parents/caregivers that speak the child’s language to use it.
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NOTE: The possible symptoms listed in this tip sheet can have causes other than culture shock. Also, the strategies suggested are meant to help programs to support refugee families experiencing culture shock, but you know your program best. Use only the ideas that work best for the unique challenges and strengths of your program, children and families.

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HELPING REFUGEE CHILDREN COPE WITH STRESS

For refugee children and adults, the stress and trauma they have faced can interfere with daily routines and activities and can cause emotional struggles. This can be difficult for adults to handle, but it is even harder for children, who may not yet be able to identify all of their emotions, let alone have strategies to cope with them.

How to Recognize Stress in Refugee Children

A change in behaviour is usually the first sign of difficulty. Look for:

- Whining, clinging, poor listening, biting, kicking, crying
- Hair pulling/twisting, thumb sucking, daydreaming
- Fighting with peers and family
- Becoming restless, impulsive or overly-cautious
- Poor concentration, lack of appetite or excessive eating
- Frustration, sadness, oversensitivity
- Becoming forgetful, showing poor concentration, being easily distracted

8 Strategies for Helping Refugee Children to Cope With Stress

1. Give them tools to communicate their emotions: Show labeled pictures of children experiencing different emotions. You can then have the child point to the emotion they are experiencing.
2. Build relaxation time into your program: A quiet time or a short exercise opportunity, such as children's yoga, can help to alleviate stress.
3. Offer them activity choices: When a child makes a choice about which of two activities they would like to do, it empowers them to feel confident and encourages them to be purposefully engaged in their daily activities.
4. Give a child your full attention and understanding when they make attempts to communicate: This helps to build trust, which is essential to good mental health.
5. Provide familiar materials and demonstrate how to use materials that are new to them: Children may not be familiar with new foods, utensils, self-feeding, toys, art materials, books or sensory play. By demonstrating how to use new items or do new things, you will help to increase children's comfort levels.



HELPING REFUGEE CHILDREN COPE WITH STRESS

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6. Monitor the use of music in your child care program: Avoid having music on all the time. Children learning a new language need to hear the sounds and words that their caregivers and peers use to communicate. Loud music can also add to their stress.
7. Enhance the sensory materials in your environment: Use a variety of textures in all areas. Have a small pillow or soft blanket available for when children need a break from the busy classroom.
8. Provide options for story time: Have a number of different options available for quiet stories and for more active stories.

NOTE: The strategies suggested in this tip sheet are meant to help programs to support the refugee children and families that they work with. Use only the ideas that work best for the unique challenges and strengths of your program, children and families.

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SUPPORTING HOME LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

For newcomer adults, learning English is very important. It is their route to resettling, getting jobs and adapting to their new country. However, it is also important to encourage the family to maintain their home language.

Reasons to Maintain Children's Home Language:

- Reduces the stress of settling into the program.
- Helps to foster self-identification and pride.
- Connects children to extended family and their culture.
- When speaking English at home, sometimes errors in speech are passed along.
- All of the brain processing done to learn a home language is useful for learning a new one.
- Speaking more than one language increases a person's ability to learn future languages.
- Literacy in the home language builds literacy in every other language they learn.
- Bilingual children are more likely to have higher academic achievement.

Building a Foundation for Language Learning:

Let parents know how important it is to maintain a child's first language:

- The first language carries all the personal, family and cultural history, including songs and stories.
- It fosters much stronger bonding between parent and child.
- The first language carries more emotional tone and comfort.
- Emotions are more thoroughly and frequently expressed.
- Conversations happen more naturally and frequently.
- First language modeling is critical for second language learning.

Tips for Encouraging Home Language Maintenance:

- Maintain a child's home language through the initial adjustment period as much as possible. Use dual-language books or apply a few key word strips to book pages using the home language.
- Encourage parents to keep speaking their home language with their children.
- Allow and even encourage children to speak to one another in their own language in the program.
- If possible, ask parents for key words in Arabic (or the first language they speak). Write them down as they are pronounced and share them with all staff members who interact with that child.
- Take the time to learn some words in the child's first language to support early communication. Choose words that are important, such as greetings, soothing words, "yes/no" and "bathroom." Words that help children communicate their physical needs are especially valuable in making children feel comfortable and cared for.



SUPPORTING HOME LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

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Tips for communicating with refugee children when you do not speak the home language:

- Try not to overwhelm a child with too much language, but continue to speak with fewer words and simple language.
- Speak slowly. Pronounce each syllable clearly.
- Use body language. Children may not understand your words in English but may respond to gestures.
- Use single sounds, then words in English. English sounds may be unknown in a child's home language, and a foundation of strong letter-sound awareness will emerge.
- Use short sentences. It is easiest for children to imitate basic, three-to-five-word sentences.
- Make it functional. Use key phrases: "I want..." "Help me..." "Mine."
- Make it concrete. Saying the word 'ball' while holding a ball gives the child more information. Try not to focus on abstract concepts, such as manners.
- Avoid using too many descriptive words. Using only nouns and verbs in your sentences is effective for early learning.
- Use words to describe the child's play (e.g., "You put it in the box.")
- Face the child(ren) when talking. They need to watch how your lips form new words and sounds, along with your facial expressions, just like they did when moving from a babbling stage to words and sentences in their home language.
- Be attentive to children's speech and echo their words to reinforce their learning.
- Language modeling needs to vary according to age, understanding and interest.
- Play sound and word games. Have children listen to a sound recording and provide a choice of pictures they can match with the sounds. Try telling stories with only props and no books, or use books that have no words, but that have colourful pictures or illustrations.
- Use transition songs and other made-up songs to help children retain language.

Encourage Families to Speak their First Language at Home:

- Encourage parents to continue sharing chants, stories, songs and games with their child in their home language.
- Help them find ways to connect with other families who share their language. This will ensure that children hear their home language used at more advanced levels and in natural and meaningful ways.

NOTE: The strategies suggested in this tip sheet are meant to help programs support refugee families in maintaining their home language, but you know your program best. Use only the ideas that work best for the unique challenges and strengths of your program, children and families.



Resources for Working with Refugee Children and their Families



Settlement Services in Your Community

Settlement service providers, funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), are the experts in the provision of free services and resources for newcomers to Canada. Immigrant serving organizations are located in communities across the country. They provide free services that include, but are not limited to:

- language classes
- information about community services,
- help finding a job and a place to live
- assistance with filling out forms and applications.

These immigrant serving organizations have access to social workers and social service workers who speak Arabic—as well as many other languages. They also offer online and print publications, and are excellent sources of information and advice on living in Canada.

You can find contact information for immigrant serving organizations in your province and community [here](#).

[Welcome to Canada: What you should know](#) is a national newcomer welcome package that is full of helpful information, and many provinces also have newcomer information/welcome packages and Arabic resources that are specific to their region. Here you will find a list of province specific links that you might find useful:

British Columbia

[Welcome BC](#)

[Growing Roots: A Newcomer's Guide to Vancouver](#)

Alberta

[Welcome to Alberta](#)

[Welcome to Alberta: A Consumer's Guide for Newcomers](#)

Settlement service providers, funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), are the experts in the provision of free services and resources for newcomers to Canada.

Saskatchewan

Government of Saskatchewan - [Arabic information and resources for newcomer families](#)

[Regional Newcomer Gateways](#)

Welcome to Regina - [English/Arabic](#)

Manitoba

[Living in Manitoba: A resource guide for immigrant women](#)

Ontario

[Welcome to Ontario](#)

[Guiding Newcomers to Ontario](#)

[Settlement.org](#) - information and resources for newcomer families

[Settlement At Work](#) - information and resources for practitioners working with newcomers

Quebec

[Immigration Quebec](#)

New Brunswick

[Orientation Guide for newcomers to New Brunswick](#)

Newfoundland and Labrador

[Newcomers' Guide to Services and Resources in Newfoundland and Labrador](#)

[Association for New Canadians](#) - has a variety of resources

[Living in Newfoundland and Labrador: A Newcomers' Pocket Guide](#)

[An Immigrant Parents' Guide to the Newfoundland and Labrador School System](#)

[Central Labrador's Newcomer's Guide](#)

Nova Scotia

[A Newcomer's Guide to Halifax Regional Municipality](#)

[Newcomers' Guide to Nova Scotia Schools](#)

Living in Nova Scotia - A Guide for Immigrant Women - [English/Arabic](#)

[Nova Scotia Immigration](#)

[Welcome to Halifax](#)



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PEI

[PEI Association for Newcomers to Canada](#) - whole website is available in Arabic; includes [Online Guide for Newcomers](#) - available in [Arabic](#)

[PEI Newcomers Guide](#)

[Welcome to Prince Edward Island: A Guide for Newcomers](#)

Yukon

[Yukon Immigration](#)

Access to translated information about community services and resources:

[211](#) is Canada's primary source of information on government and community based health and social services. The following provinces have access to this service in a variety of languages:

- BC
- Alberta
- Saskatchewan
- Ontario
- Quebec
- New Brunswick
- Nova Scotia
- Nunavut

Winnipeg has a similar service available only in English and French. Call or visit [311](#).

CMAS Resources to support your work with Syrian refugee families

CMAS supports professionals who wish to better serve immigrant and refugee families through the development and delivery of training and resources.

CMAS understands the unique needs of newcomer families and works to develop high quality resources for them that not only contain the information they need, but that also speak their language—literally!

One of CMAS' most popular resources is [All About Child Care](#), a brochure that settlement service-providing organizations can hand out to parents to inform them of the rules and expectations of CNC programs. It is available in 20 languages, including [Arabic](#).



One of CMAS' most popular resources, All About Child Care, is available in 20 languages, including Arabic.

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Another resource that is used widely across the country is the [New in Canada Parenting Support Child Safety Series](#)—a series of newcomer-focused health and safety brochures that are available in English, French, Arabic, Cantonese, Korean, Mandarin, Farsi, Punjabi, Russian, Spanish, Tamil and Urdu. These easy-to-read brochures address safety issues that affect newcomers to Canada, including: [Dressing for Winter](#), [Fire Safety](#), [Home Safety for Children](#), [SIDS](#), [Swimming Safety](#), and [Street Safety](#).

CMAS shares the latest information on caring for newcomer children with professionals working in the field. CMAS maintains a comprehensive [website](#) that caters specifically to the immigrant child care community. The website is updated weekly with industry news and resources, ‘experts corner’ articles on hot topics in child care, informative videos and a variety of newcomer-focused child care resources that can be downloaded free of charge.

CMAS has recently prepared a research paper on [The Settlement Needs of Newcomer Children](#), and also works to develop specialized resources that combine their expertise with the practical knowledge of other experts in the field. Once such resource is a book called *Supporting the Settlement of Young Immigrant Children and their Families*. Written by newcomer-child-care expert and consultant Julie Dotsch, it is a comprehensive resource guide that covers topics ranging from managing culture shock to encouraging the use of a family’s home language.

Other resources to support your work with Syrian refugee families

Health and safety posters:

Posting important information for parents in Arabic shows that you value them and their home language and make families feel welcome.

- [Minnesota Department of Health](#) - provides resources/posters on a wide range of health topics in Arabic. Topics include:
 - [Wash your hands poster in Arabic](#)
 - [Be a germ buster poster in Arabic](#)
 - [Cover your cough poster in Arabic](#)

Learning welcoming phrases and common words in Arabic:

Learning a few words in Arabic and having resources for your program will assist the team to understand needs, communicate with families and work with the children. Burnaby Public Library’s Embracing Diversity Project audio/videos provides great resources that can help you learn the words and pronunciation of [Welcoming Phrases in Arabic](#), a list of [100 Common Arabic Words](#), and [Arabic Songs](#). CMAS has also created a helpful tip sheet of [15 Arabic Words](#) that you can use in your program.



The New in Canada Parenting Support Child Safety Series—a series of newcomer-focused health and safety brochures that are available in 11 languages, including Arabic

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Working with Refugee Children and Families:

- [Talking Points](#) (allows you to send parents text messages in English, and have them automatically translated into multiple languages. Parents can also reply back in your own language)
- [Resource Guide for Working with Children with Refugee Experience](#)
- [Cultural Competency: What it is and why it matters](#) (a paper that provides an overview of the importance of cultural competency)
- [Growing up in a New Land](#) (a booklet providing strategies on working with newcomer families)
- [Caring For Kids New To Canada](#) (for health professionals working with immigrant and refugee children)

Learning about Syria:

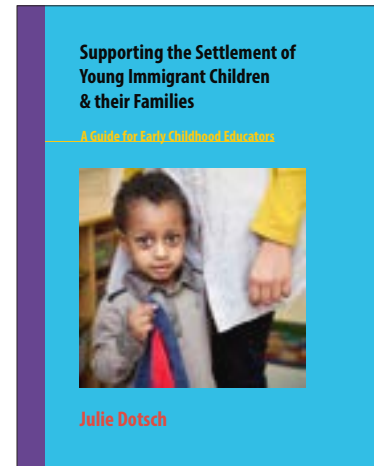
- The Future of Syria: Refugee Children in Crisis - [English/Arabic](#)
- [Refugees from Syria](#) (a background paper that provides indepth information on Syrian refugees)
- [The Educational and Mental Health Needs of Syrian Refugee Children](#)
- [The Educational Experiences of Refugee Children in Countries of First Asylum](#)
- [Shifting Sands: Changing Gender Roles Among Refugees in Lebanon](#)

Supporting Home Language Maintenance and Second Language Learning:

- [Mylanguage.ca](#) (provides information on supporting home language)
- [Bilingualism in Young Children: Separating Fact from Fiction](#)

Books:

- [Stand Together or Fall Apart: Professionals Working with Immigrant Families](#) - Judith Bernhard
- [Linguistically Appropriate Practice](#) – Roma Chumak-Horbatsch
- [Supporting the Settlement of Immigrant Children and Their Families](#) - Julie Dotsch (contact [CMAS](#) for copies)
- [Welcoming Newcomer Children](#) - Judith Colbert
 - [Welcoming Newcomer Children](#)
 - [Child Health Across Cultures](#)



Supporting the Settlement of Immigrant Children and Their Families - Julie Dotsch

Resources to Give to Parents - Arabic

Parents need access to information that will help them to settle in Canada. It can be overwhelming to receive information all at once or during the busy arrival/departure parts of their day. Providing print information in Arabic provides an opportunity for parents to read information over time and at their leisure.

NOTE: Please be aware that some of these resources are from other countries and may have contact information (telephone numbers) that are not relevant to the families that you work with. Review the resources before you use them to see if they are helpful, and delete any phone numbers that are not relevant.

- [New in Canada Parenting Support](#) - Series of brochures available in Arabic
 - [Dressing for Winter](#)
 - [Fire Safety](#)
 - [Home Safety for Children](#)
 - [SIDS](#)
 - [Swimming Safety](#)
 - [Street Safety](#)
- All About Child Care brochure - [English/Arabic](#)
- [NSW Family and Community Services](#) (Australia; has a variety of parenting resources in Arabic)
- [Growing Together Parent Handouts \(Arabic\)](#) (a workbook resource focusing on mothers dealing with depression, anxiety, trauma and other challenging life circumstances)
- [Arabic Perinatal Fact Sheets - Trillium Health Partners](#)
- [Arabic Information for Newcomers with Teenagers](#) (Australia; information to help parents of other cultures support their teenage children)
- [Best Start Resources in Arabic](#) (booklets on parenting and giving birth in a new land)
- [West Coast Child Care Resources Arabic Resources for Parents and Caregivers](#) (brochures on topics such as choosing child care and settlement)
- [Welcome Here Multilingual Resources for Parents](#) (set of 10 information sheets on parenting - in Arabic and English)



- [About Kids Health in Arabic- Sick Kids](#) (offers translated resources about child health and family quality of life to make it more accessible to newcomers to Canada, and to families and health care providers around the world)
- [Alberta Network for Safe and Healthy Kids - Arabic](#) (resources to help parents and caregivers better understand infant crying and learn strategies on how to deal with stressful crying situations)
- Healthy Living for Families: Helping you with Healthy eating and Physical Activity at Home - [English/Arabic](#)
- Canadian Public Health Agency - [Caring for You and Your Baby](#) - Arabic
- Heretohelp - [Postpartum Depression Fact Sheet](#) - Arabic
- “Our Families Can Talk About Anything” Newcomer Family Project handouts - [English/Arabic](#)
- Parent Tip Sheets - [English/Arabic](#) (U.S.; series of one-page tip sheets to encourage parents to read with their child from infant through grade 3)
- [Get Up & Grow Brochures](#) (Australia; Arabic parent resources on topics like [Food ideas for busy parents](#), [Getting out and about outdoor active play](#), [First foods: Food provided by the early childhood setting](#) and [Positive eating practices](#))
- [Welcome Here Family Resource Canada](#) (Arabic parent resources on topics like [Building Active Habits](#), [Change Waiting Time to Play Time](#), [Connecting Through Stories](#), and [Promoting Positive Behaviour](#))
- [Alberta Human Services](#) (Translated written and audio family violence resources have been developed and are available to order free of charge)





*Care for Syrian Refugee Children: A Program Guide for Welcoming Young
Children and Their Families*

Produced by CMAS

Funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

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Supporting Child Care in the Settlement Community / Soutenir les services de garde d'enfants dans la communauté d'accueil