

Guiding Refugee Students

Strategies for School Counselors



Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (BRIA)
New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance

Refugees

A refugee is someone who flees their native country because of fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion.

Some refugee children have witnessed terrible violence, and have lost friends and family.

They may have been living in the middle of

- war
- political oppression
- constant violence
- torture
- famine
- religious persecution.

“I research the countries or refugee camps that my students come from. It helps me to understand some of their behaviors and concerns.”

Refugees have managed to escape, but often without family members and personal belongings. They have gone through several levels of approval before gaining permission to resettle in the United States.

“If you ask ‘Where do you come from?’ some refugee children may not know because they have moved around a lot or have lived in a refugee camp.”

Refugee students are usually enrolled in an English language learners program until it is determined that they are also able to start attending academic classes. They learn English and start building friendships quickly when they can interact with their American peers and experience social emersion.

“For students with refugee backgrounds, school can be a key protective factor in the journey to become competent young adults (*Teaching Refugees with Limited Formal Schooling*, 2013).”



Previous Education

Previous schooling experience for refugee students can range from no education at all to the disruption of a rigorous education. Even if refugee students have attended school, it may have been in a refugee camp, where resources can be extremely limited.

Although there may be some information available about the background of the refugee students, it may be difficult to determine their academic knowledge and abilities. Grade placement can be challenging, especially if an older refugee student has had minimal education.

Teachers of English language learners, with assistance from Refugee Resettlement Case Managers and interpreters, can assist counselors in assessing the academic and social background of refugee students.

“It seems to be easier for refugee students who haven’t experienced schooling. They fall right into our routines.”

- Inquire about previous schooling and English instruction, but also assess actual skills.
- Are the students literate in their native language?
- Does anyone in their household speak English?
- Have medical issues been addressed? Eyes examined?
- Have the students been tested for lead poisoning?
- Adjust placement and schedules after the students become more fluent in English.
- Class requirements can be confusing for any student, so keep checking in with refugee students and parents to make sure that students are on track for graduation.
- Some students will be in school until age 21 and will need considerable academic and emotional support to continue to remain in school.

“Do what you would normally do for a new student, but remember that *everything* could be new for refugee students. First make sure the students understand the lay of the land: hallways, lockers, lunch room, and ESL classrooms. Then have them sit at a desk, practice a locker combination, select lunch food, and go inside a restroom.”

“Find out from school district administrators where you can collaborate with qualified interpreters from the community. This is essential for communicating school procedures to the students.”

Mental Health

A range of mental health consequences are associated with violence, disruption of everyday life, and armed conflict, including elevated symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, and behavioral problems.

As a result, refugee students often have complex social and emotional needs. Keep in mind that they may have:

- ...experienced significant loss and may still be grieving.
- ...confusion about what they are experiencing emotionally, and be overwhelmed by all of the changes in their lives. Language issues can limit their ability to express emotions and concerns.
- ...been asked about their backgrounds and may not want to respond. It is not advisable to inquire about previous experiences since so many refugee students are not comfortable talking about sensitive topics and may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- ...undergone a series of changes in living arrangements and may be relying on exhausted, confused adults.
- ...to navigate school without parental support. The parents may feel uncomfortable in the school and rely on their children to figure out how schools operate.
- ...been brought to the United States to reunite with family members, sometimes after a long separation. They are not only adjusting to their new community and new school, but to their new family as well.

“In today’s conflicts, children assume the roles of casualties of war, soldiers of war, and survivors of war.
(Supporting Refugee Children: Strategies for Educators, 2011)”

“Refugee children will tell their stories when they are ready. Let it happen organically. Make sure students in a counseling group know how to listen with respect and sensitivity.”

Consider arranging a “newcomer program” that is specifically designed to assist refugee children in acclimating to their new school. The *Welcome to our Schools* program provides a curriculum for implementing a refugee program (<http://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/wtos.asp>).

Mental Health

- In some refugee cultures, mental health issues are not acknowledged or discussed. Or, because of limited education, there is minimal understanding of the psychology of human behavior. Refugees may see mental health issues as a weakness that casts a negative light or shame on the family. Refugee parents may be more willing to encourage their children to participate in counseling programs if the activities are school based.
- Set up opportunities for refugee children to discuss anger, sadness, worries, and other emotions by using case studies, demonstrated role plays, and pictures.
- Invite former refugees to speak to children about how they felt when they were adjusting to their new lives.
- Make sure teachers know the signs of PTSD.
- Teach coping strategies to children and their families.

“Despite the extreme adversity that they face, refugee students and their families demonstrate profound strength and resilience.”

“School personnel can be essential in identifying the mental health needs of refugee students and referring them for appropriate services, in some cases before psychosocial and mental health problems develop or worsen. School psychologists can provide direct interventions for this population, such as teaching effective ways to handle stress and providing support and guidance around issues of acculturation (American Psychological Association: *Working With Refugee Children and Families: Update for Mental Health Professionals*, 2009).”

The psychological difficulties that result from past experiences may affect refugee student’s learning and school performance. Poor behavioral or academic functioning at school may indicate that a child is struggling emotionally.

School psychologists can play a critical role in identifying refugee students in need of mental health services. They can evaluate education or trauma-related needs, and consult with school administration and staff regarding ways to support refugee students.

In order to conduct valid and meaningful assessment of mental health issues, school-based practitioners must consider the cross-cultural challenges when evaluating refugee students. Consider the impact of family beliefs about religion, gender, schooling, and other issues that could influence student responses.

Learning

- Some refugee students give less attention to studies because they are distracted by the resettlement process.

Classroom learning usually picks up once basic English is grasped and school procedures are understood.

- Sometimes the emphasis on social adjustment and learning the English language overshadows the fact that refugee students may have unique talents or interests. Or they may need an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Through one-on-one counseling sessions, mentors, and peer support groups, get to know the students as individuals. What looks like a learning disability may be the refugee students confusion about how to function in a school, fear of authority figures, health issues, or PTSD.

- Refugee students may not benefit from written translations because they are not literate in their own language. They may be unwilling to let teachers and counselors know, and may pretend to understand.

“I’ve had refugee students who have arrived without knowing any English but have graduated and have gone on to college.”

“Mentors! Recruit student mentors to guide refugee students in *all* aspects of the school day.”

Suggestions from School Counselors:

Refugee parents often miss parent-teacher conferences for a variety of reasons. They may not know that they are permitted to meet with teachers. They may be intimidated if they have limited education and/or do not speak English. Like many families, refugees often manage multiple jobs and share child care with other families in their community. They may find it difficult to arrange for time and transportation.

- Work with the local refugee resettlement centers to arrange for mentors and interpreters, and connect with refugee community leaders who can explain that parents are welcome in the schools.
- Try not to include students in the parent-teacher conferences, even if the students can translate. The school district should provide interpreters.
- Establish a “familiar face” that can reach out to parents on a regular basis. Former refugees who have adjusted to the new community can be valuable resources in building school-family relationships with newcomers.

“We’ve tried many different strategies to encourage refugee parents to come to the school. It takes time for them to feel comfortable, especially if they are still learning English. Keep reaching out.”

Counseling

School counselors are responsible for both the academic and psychosocial well-being of all students. They often have a significant caseload and a myriad of issues to address on a daily basis.

The counseling concerns of refugee students can vary considerably, and each child has to be viewed as a unique individual.

- In response to living in unpredictable environments and experiencing social conflict and emotional trauma, some refugee students may exhibit behaviors ranging from impulsivity to hypervigilance. Refugee students need constant reassurance and guidance so that they can not only become comfortable, but can learn how to cope.
- Most often, refugee students arrive in the United States with their parents or other guardian family members. A much smaller subset of refugee students enter the United States as unaccompanied minors, arriving without parents or caregivers. Most unaccompanied minors are placed in licensed foster homes or other licensed care settings. Counselors will often discover that school problems are linked to adjustment to new living arrangements.
- Many refugee students learn English before their parents, and serve as interpreters and negotiators for family matters, including health care, finances, and job seeking. Sometimes the parents of refugee students are distracted or depressed as they adjust to their new environment, so the students may need support as they try to balance home responsibilities and school.
- A refugee student's acculturative level should be taken into consideration when offered counseling. Careful questions regarding cultural beliefs and traditions can often provide an opening to discuss problems, and integrate the beliefs into counseling strategies. Tap into community-based services, especially those located in the local refugee communities.

"I encouraged Kwan to join the soccer program. That's when he started speaking English and making friends."

"Refugee students from different countries are not automatically comfortable with each other just because they have a shared experience. They still have language barriers, very different histories, and misconceptions about different cultures, including other ethnic groups from their own countries."

Counseling

“Find the refugee community leaders and connect with them. Invite them to the school. Ask them what their children need to succeed.”

- Refugee students may have limited experience with formal schooling, so they may work very slowly, appear to be disorganized, and have difficulty following instructions. Remind teachers that refugee students acquire listening and speaking proficiency more quickly than reading and writing, and are busy observing *how* to function before they actually *do* what is expected.
- Meet individually with refugee students who exhibit behavioral or emotional concern in the classroom. Involve interpreters, but don't be surprised if the student does not say anything. The fact that an adult in school cares about their well-being may be difficult for them to absorb, and their parents may not understand that counselors are available for support, not discipline.
- Organize an all-staff orientation about refugee students. Include cafeteria workers, bus drivers, custodians, and any other adults who will interact with refugee students. The *Welcome to Our Schools* program contains short PowerPoint presentations that can be used for these orientation sessions during staff and department meetings. (<http://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/wtos.asp>).

“Opening the minds of our American-born students to create a welcoming school that is free of xenophobia, racism, and bullying is easier said than done. I start with peer mentoring and work with the principal and ESL teacher to arrange for speakers, assemblies, and school rules that emphasize kindness and respect.”

“If it looks like a refugee student needs to stay in school beyond age 18 in order to finish, I am very straightforward about the requirements, and the importance of seeing it through.”



Counseling

- If adolescent refugee students are suddenly responsible for the well-being of their families, the power shift in the families can change. Refugee students may have to manage communication and social interaction for their parents. The result can be a responsible student – or it can be a student who is overwhelmed. They can become unreliable communicators. Help the students to build their own lives while providing assistance to their families.

“It is so hard to explain requirements like classes and testing. I try to keep it one step at a time.”

- Adolescent newcomers have a very limited time to learn English and complete required studies and tests before it is time to graduate. As a result, drop-out rates are considerably higher for high school refugee students. Emphasis should be on learning English to prepare refugee students academically and socially, and to expand their opportunities for employment.

- Stress the importance of completing high school in the United States. Show refugee students how they can prepare for the General Educational Development test (GED) as the alternative form of a high school degree.

- Some refugee students will seek new friends, even if the relationships are not healthy. They may be intrigued by gangs or students who act out in class or skip school. Help refugee students to understand the characteristics of positive friendships and behaviors.

“Explain Zero Tolerance rules and be specific.”

- Some refugee students, depending upon their cultural background, will have difficulty accepting mixed-gender classes and social interactions between girls and boys. They may have been taught that one gender is superior to another, or that verbal or physical abuse is acceptable. Explain expectations about behavior very carefully, clarifying what is acceptable in school and in American culture. See *Domestic Abuse and Refugees: Strategies for Building Healthy Relationships* for more information: <http://otda.ny.gov/programs/bria/wtos.asp>

- Refugee students who arrive in the middle of high school can start to build a work history by volunteering. Not only do they have the opportunity to interact with their new community and build relationships, they are also building a resumé.

“Even before students have mastered English, we teach job readiness skills, including work-based vocabulary.”

Refugee students can begin by volunteering with families in their refugee community where they know the language and can provide valuable assistance. Note that refugee students who volunteer are less likely to be bullied because they are involved in supervised activities.

Additional Resources

Trauma and Children

<http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/children-trauma-update.aspx>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

<http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/for-professionals>

A Guide for the Placement of Students Presenting Foreign Transcripts

www.healthinschools.org

Helping Immigrant and Refugee Students Succeed: It's Not Just What Happens in the Classroom

Welcoming and Orienting Newcomer Students to U.S. Schools

www.brycs.org

New York State Education Department: *Educating the Whole Child – Engaging the Whole School: Guidelines and Resources for Social and Emotional Development and Learning (SEDL) in New York State, 2011.*

www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/sedl/SEDLguidelines.pdf