

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.



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.*

