



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?”)
- 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.
- 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.
- 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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